# The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN CRANE

One of the most celebrated writers of American realistic, naturalistic, and impressionistic literature, Stephen Crane grew up in Newark, New Jersey, the youngest in a family of fourteen children. Crane inherited a love of writing from his father, a Methodist minister, and his deeply religious mother, both of whom wrote religious articles. At the age of fourteen, Crane wrote his first short story, "Uncle Jake and the Bell Handle." From 1880-1890, Crane attended both the Hudson River Institute and the Claverack College. He then transferred to LaFayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania and Syracuse University in upstate New York, but his studies lasted a mere two years. In 1891, he left college for New York City, where he worked for the New York *Tribune* and lived among the bohemian and downtrodden residents of the city's infamous Bowery district. Crane's firsthand experience with poverty in the Bowery influenced his first book, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), a searing tale of a girl's life in the slums that he published himself under a pseudonym. In 1895, Crane published his most famous novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, a work renowned for its realistic depiction of Civil War combat. Following the international success of *Red Badge*, Crane worked as a war correspondent in Greece covering the Greco-Turkish War. He then moved to England in 1897, where he continued to write, but his subsequent novels failed to match *The Red Badge of Courage*'s critical and commercial success. By 1900, Crane's health deteriorated, and in May of that year, he checked into a German health spa, where he died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Literary naturalism emerged as an outgrowth of realism. In literature, realism was a response to Romanticism, which emphasized the intense spiritual and emotional sides of human existence—often as experienced by the economic and social elite—as a means of experiencing the sublime, or greatness, in all things. Realism, by contrast, focused on the mundane, everyday experiences of common people. Naturalism built on realism's emphasis on the common and mundane by adding a philosophical position exemplified in the French writer Emil Zola's phrase "human beasts," which suggests that people are influenced and driven by their surroundings. The British naturalist Charles Darwin, whose work *On the Origin of Species* emphasized how environment shaped the development of organisms, also influenced naturalistic writers like Stephen Crane. Although naturalist writers often depicted the ignorance and poverty of human society in pessimistic shades, their work emphasized that the first step towards alleviating human suffering was to acknowledge and accept its existence.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Literary scholars consider Stephen Crane to be among the originators of American naturalism. Literary naturalism as a movement began in the late-nineteenth century (1865-1900). It applies the scientific principles of detachment and objectivity to depict how human beings are products of their environment, social conditions, and heredity. Naturalism is therefore both deterministic and pessimistic. Naturalistic writers like Crane downplay the idea of free will and instead present humans as victims of forces beyond their control. Naturalism is interrelated with realism (which focuses on literary technique), and Crane worked in both genres throughout his life. Other related works of naturalism include two of Crane's other acclaimed short stories. In "The Open Boat," a group of stranded seamen face the merciless ocean, while "The Blue Hotel" is another western story that centers on a man whose increasingly violent reactions to his surroundings lead to his premature death. Beyond Crane's work, Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire," which follows a man's doomed attempt to survive the brutally cold temperatures in the Yukon Territory, exemplifies the naturalistic theme of "man versus nature." Another work of the naturalistic genre, Frank Norris's novel *McTeague*, depicts how the forces of greed and jealousy destroy the life of a young California dentist. Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* likewise follows the ways unsavory social forces, such as poverty and licentiousness, influence the titular character Carrie as she tries to survive in urban America.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky
- **When Written:** 1897-98
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1898
- **Literary Period:** Realism and Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story, Western, Naturalistic, Realistic
- **Setting:** The train and Yellow Sky, Texas
- **Climax:** Jack Potter narrowly avoids a gunfight with Scratchy Wilson
- **Antagonist:** Scratchy Wilson
- **Point of View:** Third person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Life Partner.** In 1897, Stephen Crane met a woman named Cora Taylor, who owned a combination nightclub, hotel, and brothel in Jacksonville, Florida, called Hotel de Dream. Taylor became Crane's common-law wife despite her still being legally married to another man.

**True Commitment.** During his time as a reporter in New York, Crane worked "undercover" in the downtrodden Bowery district. He often dressed as a hobo and spent nights on the streets enduring freezing snow and drenching rain in order to realistically depict homelessness in America's biggest city.

## PLOT SUMMARY

A train heads west from San Antonio across the Texas plains to the small frontier town of Yellow Sky. Traveling in one of the train's **Pullman passenger cars** is Jack Potter, the marshal of Yellow Sky, along with **his bride**, whom he recently married in San Antonio. Both Potter and the bride are happy but nervous about their new status as a married couple. The bride is wearing a cashmere and velvet dress, and she worries that such pretty clothing is unbecoming of a rather common woman who is used to domestic duties such as cooking. Potter is also uncomfortable in his new black clothes, which contrast sharply with his weathered hands and modest status as a small-town lawman.

Despite the couple's anxieties, they enjoy traveling in the luxurious Pullman passenger car, and Potter in particular calls attention to the car's velvet, silver, glass, and burnished wood fittings. He also marvels at the train's ability to traverse across the vast Texas expanse in such a short amount of time. The train so enraptures Potter and the bride that they do not know that the black porter who is attending to them is mocking their provincial behavior as they gawk at their surroundings. Even as they enjoy the train ride, Potter worries that the townspeople in Yellow Sky might take offense to his decision to get married in San Antonio without first informing them about his plans. He is therefore eager to arrive in Yellow Sky quietly and without any welcoming fanfare, so that he and his bride can slip unnoticed to their new home and reveal their marriage later.

Meanwhile, at Yellow Sky's Weary Gentleman saloon, three Texans—a drummer and two Mexican sheepherders—sit at the bar. The barkeeper tends to the patrons while the rest of the town rests quietly as evening sets in. The drummer regales the other patrons with stories until he is interrupted by a young man who enters the saloon to exclaim that **Scratchy Wilson**—the town desperado and the last remaining member of the local outlaw gang—is drunkenly prowling the streets with two loaded guns. Upon hearing this news, the bar patrons grow silent and fearful, and the barkeeper swiftly bars the saloon's door and windows. The drummer asks who Scratchy Wilson is and why he inspires such fear. The patrons explain that Scratchy might shoot someone, and the only man who can stop him is Marshal Jack Potter, Wilson's long-time nemesis, who is away in San Antonio. The barkeeper tells the drummer that although Wilson is perfectly pleasant when sober, when drunk he poses a mortal threat to anyone who crosses his path because he is a "perfect wonder" with a gun.

As the men hole up in the barricaded saloon, Scratchy Wilson walks down Yellow Sky's main street. He wears a maroon flannel shirt and decorated boots, all made in New York. Fueled by too much whiskey, Wilson whoops and hollers into the night while brandishing his two revolvers, but the sleepy town responds to his belligerence with silence. He bangs on the Weary Gentleman's door and demands more drink, but he is unable to break in. Furious, Wilson decides that only his old nemesis, Jack Potter, will give him the fight he craves, so he heads to Potter's house.

When Wilson arrives at Potter's house, he is dismayed to find that his rival is not home. As Wilson hollers drunkenly, the marshal and his new bride walk towards Potter's house. When they arrive, they are surprised to find Scratchy Wilson waiting there. Wilson accuses Potter of trying to sneak up on him. He draws his guns on Potter and demands a shootout, but Potter tells the outlaw that he is unarmed. Wilson refuses to believe that Potter is unarmed, but Potter tells the outlaw that if he wants a shootout, he will have to shoot first. Still flustered, Wilson asks Potter why he is not carrying a gun. Potter informs Wilson that he is unarmed because he just returned from San Antonio with his new bride. When he introduces Wilson to the bride, Wilson is dumbfounded. Unable to process the fact that his long-time nemesis is now married, a deflated Wilson puts his revolvers back into their holsters and slinks away, his boots leaving funnel-shaped prints in the soft sand.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Jack Potter** – Jack Potter is the story's protagonist and **the bride**'s new husband. He As the marshal of the West Texas town of Yellow Sky, Potter functions as the story's hero and the antagonist of the drunken, gun-slinging frontier outlaw, **Scratchy Wilson**. The town residents respect Marshal Potter because he is cool-headed, refined, and dedicated to upholding the law, and Potter in turn, is dedicated to the town. At the beginning of the story, Potter is riding in a **Pullman passenger car** on a westbound train back to Yellow Sky after getting married in San Antonio. He is happy about his new marriage, but he is also apprehensive because he didn't tell anyone in Yellow Sky that he planned to wed. During his visit to San Antonio, Potter transforms himself from a Wild-West lawman into a refined married man, though he is still adjusting to this change. His worries about how the town will react to his

marriage suggests that Potter is not fully comfortable with his new status as a respectable married man and that his loyalty to the town is deeply rooted. Nonetheless, Potter looks forward to a quiet life at home in Yellow Sky, making him a symbol of change.

**The Porter** – The porter is a black man who waits on Jack Potter and **the bride** on the **Pullman car** en route to Yellow Sky. The porter enjoys observing the couple's obvious unfamiliarity with traveling in luxury and their nervousness as newlyweds. The porter's unspoken mockery of Potter and the bride reveals the latter two characters' inexperience with the middle-class married lifestyle they have adopted.

**The Drummer** – The drummer is a young patron at the Weary Gentleman saloon in Yellow Sky. He is a newcomer to the town who sits in the bar regaling other patrons with stories. Through the drummer's questions to the barkeeper about the danger **Scratchy Wilson** poses, readers learn more about Wilson, his role as the town's feared outlaw, and his relationship to Jack Potter.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**The Barkeeper** – The barkeeper tends to patrons at the Weary Gentleman saloon. He functions as an expository character who tells the drummer (and, by extension, readers of the story) about **Scratchy Wilson**.

**The Mexican Sheepherders** – The Mecian sheepherders are patrons the Weary gentleman saloon who flee out the back door of establishment once they learn that **Scratchy Wilson** may try to break into the saloon, emphasizing the very real threat that the drunken Wilson poses.

**The Young Man** – A resident of Yellow Sky who warns the patrons of the Weary Gentleman saloon that a drunken **Scratchy Wilson** is on the rampage.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### FRONTIER VS. CIVILIZATION

Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" is a story about the conquest of America's Western frontier by the refinery and civilization of the East. The story's only two named characters, the domesticated Marshall Jack Potter and the untamed outlaw, **Scratchy Wilson**, embody the dichotomies of the East and West, the new and the old, civilization and the frontier. First published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1898, Crane's tale came five years after the historian Frederick Jackson Turner published his influential "Frontier Thesis," in which he argued that the Western frontier fueled the dynamic growth of American democracy. Westward expansion into the untamed frontier forged the essential American character traits of rugged individualism, entrepreneurship, and colonial conquest over the frontier's "savage" native tribes. Thus, when the 1890 census declared that white Americans had effectively settled the frontier out of existence, Turner argued that the first great phase of U.S. history had come to an end. "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" encapsulates the closing of the frontier through the allegorical account of the newly married Jack Potter, traveling west across the Texas plains in the lap of industrial luxury back to the dusty town of Yellow Sky, which still retains trappings of the Old West. There, Potter vanquishes his old nemesis, Scratchy Wilson not with violence, but with evidence that Scratchy is a walking anachronism — that is, a relic of the West's wild frontier past.

Throughout the story, Potter's refinement contrasts with Wilson's Wild West abandon. Everything, from the clothes Potter and **the bride** wear, to the furnished **Pullman car** surroundings, suggests the luxury that civilized capitalism provides. Potter wears "new black clothes" while the bride wears "a dress of blue cashmere." Their coach contains "dazzling fittings" of "sea-greened figured velvet" and "shining brass, silver, and glass." Potter and his bride are the new American bourgeois. In contrast to Potter, whose calm manners match his dapper appearance, Scratchy Wilson appears as an untamed rowdy drunk, whose belligerence poses a mortal threat to patrons at the Weary Gentleman saloon. The barkeeper describes Scratchy as a living Wild-West anachronism — a violent, impulsive figure from another time. Scratchy is "a wonder with a gun [...] on the war trail" and "the last one of the old gang," a status about which he is entirely unaware.

Crane further emphasizes the dichotomy of civilization and the frontier by contrasting Scratchy Wilson's relative isolation with Jack Potter's role as a pillar of Yellow Sky society. Scratchy drunkenly stalks Yellow Sky's street at night, but his cries are met only with "walls of silence." Potter, however, is intimately connected to the residents of Yellow Sky—so much so that he worries that getting married without the town's consent might damage his status as "a prominent person." Scratchy's status as a forgotten relic of the conquered frontier leaves him whooping and hollering alone in the night, while Potter's role as the civilized keeper of law and order makes his return to Yellow Sky an anticipated event.

Scratchy Wilson's near total ignorance of his irrelevance in a newly tamed Wild West leads to a harsh awakening that the civilized East has conquered his rough-and-tumble world. In the story's anticlimactic ending, Potter faces Scratchy is what

seems like a classic Wild-West showdown, but rather than draw arms, Potter defeats Scratchy by revealing how the new America has passed him by. The sight of his old adversary in chivalrous, married bliss leaves Scratchy "a simple child of the earlier plains" who cannot appreciate the scope of his defeat. Potter does not need a gun because the fight is already over. Potter's refined masculinity triumphs over Scratchy's outdated frontiersman, and civilization has tamed the last wild frontier.

Frederick Jackson Turner characterized the conquest of the West as the East's attempt to "check and guide" the frontier. Fittingly, Potter manages to "check and guide" Scratchy rather than merely kill him, and Scratchy's defeat is notably devoid of violence even as bloodshed forged the old frontier world he embodies. Crane, however, imbues his ending with a fatalism that suggests a level of ambiguity over the triumph of civilization. The enduring, romanticized popularity of Wilson's "Wild West" frontier in the decades following Crane's story indicates that Jack Potter's civilization left something to be desired in the American cultural framework.

## DOMESTICITY, GENDER, AND FEMININE AUTHORITY

Throughout "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," **the bride** is the sole female presence who serves as a symbol of the nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity." In this ideal, industrial production relieved families of the burden of producing goods for home use. This development consequently relegated the genders into "separate spheres" in which men worked outside the home (the public sphere), while women tended to home and children (the domestic sphere). The home became the cherished site of family bonding and marital bliss—a retreat from the harsh outside world of work and politics. Although "separate spheres" was more an ideal than a reality, it nonetheless reflected a growing sense that the domestic environment—characterized by mass-produced goods (especially luxury items), designated gender roles, and middle-class values—represented a morally superior, female-dominated alternative to the male-dominated outside world. As a symbol of the cult of domesticity, the bride possesses a distinctly feminine moral authority that empowers her to offer an alternative setting, centered on marriage and children, to the male-dominated world of **Scratchy Wilson** and Jack Potter, which centers on reciprocal masculine conflict.

In "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," the titular bride plays a subordinate role to her husband, Jack Potter, reflecting the strict gender roles and standards of behavior that the cult of domesticity fostered. Nineteenth-century newspapers, magazines, women's journals, and pamphlets all promoted the cult of domesticity by encouraging middle- and upper-class women to set respectable moral standards of behavior, dress, and literary tastes, as well as promote the appropriately bourgeois consumption of mass-produced luxury goods. This plays out in the story, as the bride rarely speaks, and she acts with a "wifely amiability" while displaying a flush on her face that "seemed quite permanent." Like many women in the late-Victorian era, the bride becomes an extension of her husband's life. Similarly, when Scratchy Wilson confronts Potter and the bride in the story's climax, the bride fulfills the role of the stereotypically weak and frightened female. Her face turns "as yellow as old cloth," leaving her a helpless "slave to hideous rites"—that is, the rites of male conflict in the form of a shootout.

Yet the bride also possesses enormous power despite her gendered weakness. The cult of domesticity's elevation of middle-class women to social pillars of "moral strength and virtue" imbued them with power and influence both inside and outside of the household, even as it paradoxically characterized women as delicate, prone to fainting and hysterics, and physically and psychologically weaker than men. Through their marriage, the bride induces Potter to alter his entire lifestyle by transitioning from a rough-and-tumble, small-town marshal to a domesticated married man who wears "new black clothes." Later in the story, the mere sight of the bride—a symbol of the cult of domesticity—leaves Scratchy "like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world," meaning the female-led domestic sphere. Just as she transforms Potter's world, so does the bride render Wilson "a simple child of the earlier plains" whom the "foreign condition" of marriage and domesticity overpowers.

The cult of domesticity also intimately linked women to the consumption and display of fineries and other luxury items, which the bride's appearance and behavior on the train reflects. As keepers of the household, women were encouraged to purchase and collect luxury goods in order to transform households into warm, tender, aesthetically luxurious spaces. The bride fulfills this role when she displays with pride the new silver watch she purchased in San Antonio. Indeed, so connected were women to material luxury that women *themselves* served as ornamental luxuries, which men displayed to enhance their own status. The bride, though "not pretty" nor "very young" still presents herself in a blue cashmere dress with velvet trim, puffy sleeves, and steel buttons. She is an ornament for Potter to display both on the train, where she draws stares from the other passengers, as well as in the town of Yellow Sky, where Potter thinks that her arrival would warrant an appearance from the town's brass band.

The bride's importance as a symbol of feminine moral authority and ornamentation dovetails with her status as a harbinger of how the female-led domestic sphere is rapidly replacing spaces heretofore characterized by masculine conflict. At the beginning of the story, the train pulls the "**Great Pullman**" in which Potter and the bride travel. The Chicago-based Pullman Company manufactured luxurious sleeping cars known as "Pullmans" to bring the domestic comforts of home to train travelers. The "dazzling fittings" of the Pullman coach at which

Potter marvels literally transports the luxurious domestic sphere—along with the woman who runs it—across the Texas plains. Even before the bride's arrival in Yellow Sky, the feminine space has ironically already touched the town through Scratchy Wilson's clothes. He wears a "maroon-colored flannel shirt" made by women in New York City and boots with "red tops" and "gilded imprints" favored by "sledding boys" in New England. In West Texas, the last desperado, a symbol of the roughness and conflict of the male-dominated sphere, is clothed in a garment made by women, the safe keepers of domestic bliss. He also wears boots worn by children, women's domestic wards. The material fruits of mass-consumption that fueled the growth of the domestic sphere literally cover over Scratchy, the symbol of the old male-dominated Wild West. This powerful juxtaposition suggests the growing importance of feminine space and influence even in the most heretofore male-dominated settings.

## CHANGE VS. STASIS

"The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" highlights the conflict between change and stasis (a state of stability). Crane believed that humans were constant victims of powerful forces beyond their control. In "Yellow Sky," he depicts change as an invasive force that disrupts the lives of the story's main characters, as well as the environments they inhabit: the town of Yellow Sky specifically and the Western frontier more generally. Capitalist market forces disrupt the frontier remoteness of Yellow Sky by making it more settled like the East. Yet, **Scratchy Wilson** and Jack Potter each express ambivalence about the meaning of change, a point that reflects the more general air of ambiguity that Crane casts in his story. Change is as disruptive and inevitable as stasis is familiar, which makes it difficult for both Wilson and Potter to embrace fully.

The train, a powerful agent of change, sweeps across the Texas plains. The speed and power with which the machine travels indicate the unstoppable nature of the changes it brings to the frontier. The elements of the Texas countryside, mesquite and cactus, frame houses and trees, "were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice." The unstoppable power of the locomotive allows the East to devour the West. Like the locomotive, Potter himself has clearly chosen to disrupt the stasis of his life by getting married in San Antonio, but this brings lingering anxieties. Indeed, he feels that his decision to get married might not have been his at all, but instead "part of an unspoken form which does not control men in these matters." In Potter, Crane examines change as a force that men cannot really control.

Even more so than Potter, Scratchy Wilson prefers the familiarity of stasis to the threatening uncertainty of change. Wilson's character arc is of a man deeply committed to preserving the stasis in which he has a guaranteed role to play as Potter's chief antagonist—only to be overwhelmed by the inevitability of change. Ironically, given his discomfort with change, Scratchy, like Jack Potter, is himself an agent of change. Like the train barreling through the countryside, Wilson utterly disrupts the quiet stasis of Yellow Sky. Scratchy's liquor-fueled evening blustering in the town's main street is a demonstrative act of self-preservation. His performance is a public reminder of his role as the devil in Little Sky's paradise, a role he aims to keep playing. Fittingly, the name "Scratchy" derives from the phrase "Old Scratch," a longstanding nickname for the devil. The fact that Scratchy receives "no offer of fight" from anyone only drives him to reinforce his role as the devil to Jack Potter's lawman angel. This attempt to regain the stability of the two men's antagonistic relationship that ultimately changes Scratchy's life forever. When Scratchy Wilson arrives at Jack Potter's house, he hopes to rekindle the familiar conflict that has defined the two men's lives in Yellow Sky. Potter's mind, however, is on change. "Somewhere in the back of his mind a vision of the **Pullman** floated [...] all the glory of the marriage, the environment of the new estate." Potter is there to make a profound change as a civilized man who must confront his past in order to accept his "new estate."

Scratchy calls off the shootout because he realizes that without Jack Potter playing his traditional role as antagonist, Wilson's role as an outlaw no longer exists. While Scratchy embodies the devil himself, Jack stands in for an avenging angel. Jack's last name, Potter, references a potter's field, a graveyard for the indignant, the unknown, and criminals. Potter symbolically sends Scratchy to a potter's field by relegating his old nemesis to an afterthought in a world that has passed him by. Lacking a defined role on the conquered frontier, Scratchy Wilson's fate is to be a forgotten victim of vast changes beyond his control.

Throughout the story, both Jack Potter and Scratchy Wilson undergo changes that reflect their respective roles as symbols of the old and new order, the conqueror and the conquered. Although Potter remains somewhat wary of change, his getting married suggests that he does welcome change to some extent and will be able to adapt to it. Meanwhile, Scratchy seems to fade into obscurity, as he is unable to accept change, slinking away from the showdown upon realizing that his beloved antagonistic relationship has changed with the introduction of **the bride.** Crane, however, permeates the triumph of change over stasis with an ambiguous, even satirical undertone. Scratchy is really only the devil when he's drunk, a fact that downplays the overall threat he poses to the town. Potter might be an avenging angel, but it is only the presence of the bride, not Potter himself, that convinces Scratchy to lay down his arms. Change in Yellow Sky comes not with the bang of a gun, but with a placid resignation.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### PULLMAN PASSENGER CAR

The train pulling the "Great Pullman" car that carries Jack Potter and **the bride** across Texas from San Antonio to Yellow Sky is a symbol of Eastern civilization and the changes wrought by late-nineteenth century capitalism in America. By the 1890s, the railroad companies were among the wealthiest and most powerful corporations in the United States. They crisscrossed the vast continent, connecting the east with the now-conquered frontier. In "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," the train swiftly penetrates the wild plains of Texas, allowing the newly married Potter and the bride to bring the comforts of their new domesticated lifestyle to the frontier town of Yellow Sky. The Pullman Company of Chicago manufactured its famous luxury sleeper cars that carried passengers across the continent in the lap of domestic luxury. As Potter tells the bride, the Pullman car contains "dazzling fittings" of velvet, brass, glass, and silver." The Pullman literally and symbolically transports the comforts of an Eastern household into what once was the Wild West.

### THE BRIDE

Jack Potter's titular, unnamed bride symbolizes domestication—a product of the civilized advances of Eastern capitalism. At the beginning of the story, the bride is an ornamental addition to Jack Potter's new domesticated life. She wears "a dress of blue cashmere" with patches of velvet, "puff sleeves," and "steel buttons abound." Much like the **Pullman car** with its "dazzling fittings," the bride is well-adorned with luxury items over which Jack Potter marvels. She is the agent of domesticating change that transforms Potter from a sunburnt western marshal into a proper married gentleman, a transition that not only upends Potter's world, but **Scratchy Wilson**'s as well. Indeed, at the story's climax, Wilson does not even hear the bride speak. The sight of her alone is a powerful symbol of how domestication has rendered Scratchy's rough-and-tumble world outdated. He is unable to process how her femininity and domesticating presence has forever robbed him of his adversary and his beloved Wild West.

### SCRATCHY WILSON

The desperado Scratchy Wilson, the story's antagonist, symbolizes both the old frontier and stasis. Wilson is a relic of the legendary "Wild-West," unaware that he now lives beyond his own time in an era where Eastern civilization has conquered the Western frontier. As "the last one of the old [outlaw] gang" for whom Jack Potter is an "ancient antagonist," Wilson wants his world to remain unchanged. Wilson's drunken outbursts and propensity for violence render him a Wild-West caricature who harkens back to a time when laws were few, gunshots quelled disputes, and vast open spaces remained inaccessible to all but the roughest hombres. Scratchy's antagonistic relationship with Jack Potter provides a stasis that the outlaw finds familiar. Much like the devil (whose nickname, "Old Scratch," echoes in Wilson's own name), Scratchy thrives in constant conflict with Potter's angel of the law. In marrying **the bride**, reveals Wilson to be little more than an anachronism of the old frontier that Eastern civilization has conquered.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Open Boat and Other Stories* published in 1993.

### Part 1 Quotes

❝ The Great Pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward. Vast flats of green grass, dull-hued spaces of mesquite and cactus, little groups of frame houses, woods of light and tender trees, all were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice.

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 79

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the story's opening passage, a train rolls across the Texas plains, pulling with it the Pullman passenger car in which Jack Potter and the bride ride as they travel to the town of Yellow Sky. Here, author Stephen Crane immediately establishes the central theme of Frontier vs. Civilization through his realistic depiction of the vast landscape of the West—once so widespread and seemingly unconquerable—now being swept "into the east" at the speed of a locomotive. The train (the mightiest symbol of the late-nineteenth century industrial capitalism that dominated the eastern United States) acts as a devouring force, consuming the nature of the West. The Frontier's defining characteristic was its sheer geographical expanse,

yet eastern civilization is now able to traverse that expanse in a matter of days through the railroads. Thus, the conquering of the frontier now happens so swiftly and repeatedly (with each train schedule) that it sweeps the West into a "precipice" like rocks tumbling from a cliff. If the train is a devouring force, however, the Pullman is a replenishing force. This elegant sleeping car literally carries the fruits of eastern, domesticated civilization into the formerly Wild West. In the process, if offers an alternative world defined by the comforts of mass–produced goods, a female-dominated space, advanced technology, and the connection of the East to the West.

married man whose new status is more suited to a domesticated environment where he marvels at interior design.

The bride is the force that not only changes Jack's dress and demeanor; she also provides "the environment of their new estate." Although the fittings inside the Pullman Coach give Potter a feeling of ownership (of both his new environment and his new bride), the bride, is, in fact, the real owner of this new estate. Only her feminine presence justifies traveling in such domestic luxury, and only by marrying her does Potter even get to feel ownership in an entirely new, domesticated life whiten a female-dominated setting.

> To the minds of the pair, their surroundings reflected the glory of their marriage that morning in San Antonio. This was the environment of their new estate, and the man's face in particular beamed with an elation that made him appear ridiculous to the negro porter.

**Related Characters:** The Porter, Jack Potter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 80

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Jack Potter and the bride bask in the luxurious space of the Pullman car, "the environment of their new estate." This quote links together two of the major changes that take place in the story: Jack Potter's transition from Wild West lawman to married gentleman, and the bride's use of her feminine authority to replace formerly male-dominated spaces with a female-led domestic environment. The bride and the interior of the Pullman elate Potter in equal measure, as indicated in his beaming face and utter obliviousness to the porter's subtle mockery. Despite not being especially pretty or young, the bride entrances Potter, so much so that he significantly alters his life to marry her. The porter's mockery indicates that neither Potter nor the bride are accustomed to traveling, let alone living, in such luxury status. Their uncultured gawking at the Pullman's interior provides comedic fodder for the porter, but for the couple, and especially Potter, the sleeping car appropriately reflects "the glory of their marriage." In marrying the bride, Potter transitions his dress and demeanor, from a roughneck marshal whose weathered hands indicate a life in the outdoors, to a sharp-dressed,

> As a matter of truth, Jack Potter was beginning to find the shadow of a deed weigh upon him like a leaden slab.

**Related Characters:** Jack Potter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 81

**Explanation and Analysis**

Jack Potter and the Bride have finished their meal in the train's dining car, where several waiters helped guide the inexperienced couple along the many steps of the elegant dinner. Potter and the bride return to their coach, and Potter notices that the distance to Yellow Sky is growing shorter. This passage marks a key shift in Jack Potter's development as a character. His thoughts here indicate a profound uneasiness with the significant changes that his marriage to the brides entails. Despite his prior excitement over his marriage, he is also anxious and ambivalent about shifting away from the life he has known. His happiness notwithstanding, Potter worries about how the town will react to his secret marriage. So profound is his worry that it weighs on him "like a leaden slab," language that evokes the stifling heaviness of death through the slab tombstones that decorate western graveyards. In one sense, Potter's marriage does mark a death of sorts: the death of his previous role as protector of the town alone whose only other "partner" is the decidedly masculine figure of Scratchy Wilson. Potter now wrestles with the implication his marriage will have for his new life as both a protector of the town and of his new partner, the bride. Before Potter can be "reborn" through his marriage, however, he must first come to terms with the "shadow" that the former deed casts on

his previous life.

## Part 2 Quotes

Across the sandy street were some vivid green-grass plots, so wonderful in appearance, amid the sands that burned near them in a blazing sun, that they caused a doubt in the mid. They exactly resembled the grass mats used to represent lawns on the stage. At the cooler end of the railway station, a man without a coat sat in a tilted chair and smoked his pipe. The fresh-cut-bank of the Rio Grande circled near the town, and there could be seen beyond it a great plum-colored plain of mesquite.

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

Jack Potter and the bride are still twenty-one minutes from arriving in Yellow Sky by train. Meanwhile, in the town itself, across the street from the Weary Gentleman saloon, lie these "green-grass plots." This descriptive passage about the town's landscaping highlights how one of the story's major themes, the feminine authority to create new domestic spaces, has already influenced the town even before the bride arrives there. Here, town properties mimic the carefully manicured front-yard exteriors of middle-class homes back east (lawns that women would tend). Stephen Crane uses placid and cooling language in this passage to imbue it with a sense of restfulness and retreat. The plots are "wonderful" and "vivid" in contrast to the sands around them that are "burned" by the "blazing" sun. Meanwhile, at the "cooler" end of the nearby railway station, a man rests in a chair, smoking his pipe, suggesting that Yellow Sky is a place for relaxation. In contrast to the harsh natural surroundings, Crane depicts this section of Yellow Sky as cared-for in a manner similar to that of a middle-class household under the delicate touch and careful eye of a lady of the house. With its grass plots and nearby saloon for "Weary Gentleman," men can stop to gain respite from the outside world.

The drummer's tale was interrupted by a young man who suddenly appeared in the open door. He cried: "Scratchy Wilson is drunk, and has turned loose with both hands." The two Mexicans at once set down their glasses and faded out of the rear entrance of the saloon. The drummer, innocent and jocular, answered: "All right, old man. S'pose he has? Come in and have a drink, anyhow."

**Related Characters:** The Young Man (speaker), The Mexican Sheepherders, The Drummer

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

Yellow Sky remains sleepy and calm outside, and the inside of the town's Weary Gentleman saloon reflects this outside calm. At the saloon's bar sit six men. The only noise comes from the drummer, who recounts humorous tales to the other patrons. This quote marks the second major moment in the story where the untamed frontier clashes with the orderly calm of civilization: in this case, the arrival of Scratchy Wilson, the story's primary symbol of the Wild-West. Wilson breaks the town's silent calm and inspires immediate terror with the mere suggestion of his arrival. This passage also marks the first moment of external conflict in the story. Up until this point, the story has largely centered on happy and/or calm events without suggesting the possibility of violent conflict. Potter's marriage to the bride, the inside of the Pullman car, the outside landscape, the quiet saloon—all are relatively benign developments. News of a drunk Scratchy Wilson, however, instantly raises the specters of violence and bloodshed, so much so that all in the saloon become instantly quiet. The drummer is so lulled into comfort by the town's solemnity that he remains "innocent and jocular." He invites the young man to have a drink as the other saloon patrons either flee or hunch down in terror. This passage indicates that civilization has yet to vanquish at least one element of the frontier.

"You see," he whispered, "this here Scratchy Wilson is a wonder with a gun a perfect wonder—and when he goes on the war trail, we hunt our holes—naturally. He's about the last one of the old gang that used to hang out along the river here. He's a terror when he's drunk. When he's sober he's all right—kind of simple—wouldn't hurt a fly—nicest fellow in town. But when he's drunk—whoo!"

**Related Characters:** The Barkeeper (speaker), Jack Potter, The Drummer

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 84-85

**Explanation and Analysis**

After much commotion over the imminent arrival of Scratchy Wilson, the drummer has yet to receive from one of the other saloon patrons a sufficient explanation for why Wilson is so dangerous. This passage explains it, as when the barkeeper finally sits down with the drummer, he says that Scratchy Wilson is a relic of a violent frontier past that has largely vanished from the now-civilized town. Through the barkeeper's exposition, Crane reveals the crucial role that Jack Potter plays in maintaining Wilson's status as a symbol of an older time. Not only is Wilson "a wonder with a gun," but he is also "the last one of the old gang" that used to hang out by the river. With Jack Potter gone, the barkeeper continues, Wilson is free to go on drunken binges and terrorize the civilized people of Yellow Sky. Yet while Potter acts as Wilson's foil, he also prevents Wilson from moving on and recognizing that he is, in fact, an anachronism. By giving Wilson the repeated violent conflict he craves, Potter contributes to the desperado's status as a living relic. Even the barkeeper's wish for Potter to be there to deal with Wilson suggests that doing so would only ensure that the cycle of violence would continue and at least one element of the frontier would continue to intrude upon civilization.

## Part 3 Quotes

❝ A man in a maroon-colored flannel shirt, which had been purchased for purposes of decoration, and made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York, rounded a corner and walked into the middle of the main street of Yellow Sky. In either hand the man held a long, heavy, blue-black revolver. Often he yelled, and these cries rang through a semblance of a deserted village, shrilly flying over the roofs in a volume that seemed to have no relation to the ordinary vocal strength of a man. It was as if the surrounding stillness formed the arch of a tomb over him. These cries of ferocious challenge rang against walls of silence. And his boots had-red tops with gilded imprints, of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England.

**Related Characters:** Jack Potter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 85

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is how Crane introduces the character of Scratchy Wilson following several passages of buildup and anticipation over the desperado's arrival. Wilson makes his entrance by drunkenly hooting and hollering in the street. He is ostensibly a symbol of violent frontier masculinity: of a lone outlaw who stalks the street of a western town brandishing a gun, the latter being an inherently phallic symbol that Crane describes as "long" and "heavy." The space Wilson occupies in this passage is a masculine space, for it is outdoors and rife with the potential for conflict.

The careful attention Crane takes to describe Wilson's clothing, however, as well as the silence that meets Scratchy's public display, indicates that the advancement of eastern civilization has rendered Wilson's frontier masculinity outdated. Wilson's yells and cries ring through a "deserted village" and fly "over the roofs" like gusts of wind before the stillness "formed the arch of a tomb" over him. Much like the "leaden slab" of anxiety that weighed on Jack Potter as he drew closer to Yellow Sky with the bride, thereby foreshadowing the "death" of his former existence, here Crane also turns to morbid imagery. The "tomb" over Wilson indicates that Scratchy's display of frontier gusto is a kind of funeral march—a ceremony for a figure whose time has passed but whose ghost hangs on to fight another day. This passage also foreshadows Wilson's eventual fate at the hands of the bride's feminine authority. For all of his masculine posturing, Wilson wears mass-produced clothes, including a shirt made by women and boots favored by children. These elements of female-dominated domestic space are already encroaching on Wilson's person and chipping away at the frontier masculinity he so cherishes.

## Part 4 Quotes

❝ There was a silence. Potter's mouth seemed to be merely a grave for his tongue. He exhibited an instinct to at once loosen his arm from the woman's grip, and he dropped the bag to the sand. As for the bride, her face had gone as yellow as old cloth. She was a slave to hideous rites, gazing at the apparitional snake.

**Related Characters:** Jack Potter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 87

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote marks the start of the anticlimactic confrontation between Scratchy Wilson and Jack Potter. Having decided that only Potter will fight him, Wilson waits at Potter's house until he meets Potter and the bride returning from the train station. Up until this point, the conflict between Wilson and Potter has been dormant, yet here, Crane once again employs deathly imagery to indicate that this particular duel between the two men will be different. The sight of Wilson leaves Potter temporarily speechless, with his mouth a "grave" for his tongue. Crane's use of the word "grave" here foreshadows death, but this death isn't literal—it's just the death of the present state of Wilson and Potter's relationship.

Jack Potter's first instinct at the sight of Wilson is to drop his arm, as if he were to reach for his gun, yet his silence indicates deep thought: he has already decided not to fight Scratchy. The bride, however, does not know Potter's intentions, and is terrified at what she believes to be imminent bloodshed. Crane invokes classical imagery to characterize the bride's fear of violence between Potter and Wilson. The "apparitional snake" is a reference to a passage in Book 5 of Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid*, when Aeneas, the Trojan ancestor of the Romans, makes a ritual offering on his father's tomb. During the offering, Aeneas witnesses a snake slither out from the burial mound and devour the ritual objects. In *The Aeneid*, snakes are symbols of impending chaos, the very kind that the bride fears will ensue between Potter and Wilson. The "hideous rite" she fears to witness is the Western shoot-out, a violent, masculine ritual the ends with the loser's death.

> He was stiffening and steadying, but yet somewhere at the back of his mind a vision of the Pullman-floated, the seagreen figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass, the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil—all the glory of the marriage, the environment of the new estate.

**Related Characters:** Jack Potter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 87

**Explanation and Analysis**

Outside of his home, Potter contemplates how he will deal with the gun-toting Scratchy Wilson. As the bride watches in fear, Potter's stiff and steady body movements suggest a willingness to fight, but inside he ponders the broader implications of this confrontation. This quote represents his final decision to embrace change over stasis by highlighting all that he has to gain by refusing to take part in Wilson's violent ritual. In his mind, Potter recalls the Pullman car with all of its luxurious trappings, and he thinks back on his recent marriage to the bride. The bride and the Pullman represent the new life he has chosen, while Scratchy represents the life he has willfully laid to rest. Despite having reservations about his marriage throughout the story, Scratchy's demand for a fight forces Potter to choose the life of a married gentleman over that of a roughneck lawman who routinely tangles with the same outlaw. This decision reflects the new feminine authority that the bride exercises over Potter: in recalling the Pullman car's luxuries, she has instilled in him a preference for a female-led domestic space over the masculine world of violent conflict. Furthermore, because the Pullman's and its luxury trappings are products that represent the new dominance of eastern capitalist civilization, Potter has now fully chosen civilization over the savagery of the frontier.

> He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world. He moved a pace backward, and his arm, with the revolver, dropped to his side.

**Related Characters:** Jack Potter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 88

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Potter tells Scratchy that he is not carrying a gun because he is now married. A baffled Wilson ruminates over the idea of marriage before finally asking Potter if the bride is the woman he married. This passage marks a crucial moment in Scratchy's development as a character, for it is

the first time in the story in which he displays at least a partial self-awareness that something is amiss about his blustery frontiersman persona. Wilson's repeated fumbling over the thought of marriage, however, indicates that his new self-awareness only goes so far. Crane likens him to a "creature" permitted a glimpse of another world— the civilized world of marriage and the domestication that it entails—but he is denied full entrance into that world. Throughout the story, Wilson thrives in the male-dominated space of the frontier, where violence and wildness validate men's sense of worth. Now, unable to comprehend that the bride represents a female-dominated, domestic alternative to his masculine space, Wilson lowers his gun. This passage attests to the sheer power of the bride as a symbol of feminine power and authority: even as she freezes in terror, she continues to wield power over both men, power that influences their respective decision to retreat from their previous lives.

❝ He was not a student of chivalry; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains. He picked up his starboard revolver, and, placing both weapons in their holsters, he went away. His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand.

**Related Characters:** Jack Potter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 88

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Potter identifies the bride as the woman he married, Wilson tells Potter that he is calling off the shootout. The outlaw then holsters his guns and walks slowly away. This passage contains the story's climax (or, rather, anticlimax), as what initially seems to be an inevitable shootout ends without a shot being fired. This quote is full of symbolism. Scratchy, whose name recalls the term "Old Scratch," a nickname for the Devil, is banished from Potter and the bride's domestic paradise, much like Satan was banished from Heaven in the biblical Book of Revelation. There is also, however, the symbolism of marriage and family taking over the space previously occupied by the reckless male drifter. In this respect, Potter and the bride assume the role of mother and father to Wilson's unruly "child of the earlier plains" by punishing him into a state of irrelevance. Wilson, lacking the sophistication to comprehend the "foreign condition" of marriage, has no choice but to succumb to—rather than accept— his anachronistic status.

A certain level of ambivalence aside, change represents a type of death to both Potter and Wilson. Both men have experienced metaphorical deaths in the story through the change that interrupts the usual terms of their relationship, but only Potter, as a representation of the conquest of the frontier by eastern civilization, moves forward to new life. Wilson's fate (aside from irrelevancy) is unknown, but as he walks away, Scratchy leaves "funnel-shaped" tracks in the sand. The inverted funnel (with Wilson's toes marking the narrow point and his heals marking the wider base) was a popular symbol of madness in medieval art. With that last description, Crane suggests that irrelevancy may be too much for Wilson to handle.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### PART 1

A train rushes west across the Texas plains. From the window, everything appears to be "sweeping into the east," from the "mesquite and cactus" to the small clumps of "frame houses" dotting the landscape. Traveling in one of the train's **Pullman passenger cars** is Jack Potter and his new **bride**. Despite his weather-beaten face and hands, Potter is dressed elegantly in "new black clothes." The bride is not particularly "pretty" or "young," though she is dressed extravagantly in a dress of cashmere and velvet. During the train ride, she frequently looks at her puffy sleeves, which "embarrass her," since she is a simple, domestic woman.

*Crane uses the opening paragraph to establish two of the story's key themes. The power of the speeding train makes the distance of the Texas frontier seem small, indicating the unstoppable force of eastern civilization. The emphasis on the bride's and Jack Potter's new clothes indicates that both have undergone a significant change, while the bride's discomfort in her clothing reveals an underlying uneasiness with this change.*

Potter and **the bride** are both thrilled to be riding in the train and look forward to having the "Finest meal in the world" in the dining car. Before they leave their coach to eat, Potter excitedly points out all "the dazzling fittings of the coach" to his new bride, and she drinks in the "sea-green figured velvet" and "the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil." Their excitement about the train is compounded by their excitement about their new marriage, which took place that very morning back in San Antonio.

*Linking the luxurious Pullman car to the excitement over Potter and the bride's marriage establishes a connection between the bride and domestic furnishings. The connection helps mark the theme of women's influence expanding into traditionally male-dominated spaces: in this case, the frontier. This foreshadows similar moments later in the story.*

The black porter observes Potter and **the bride** in amusement, thinking them "ridiculous" in their wonder and obvious inexperience. As he serves the couple, the porter subtly makes fun of them, while other passengers glance at the couple "with stares of derisive enjoyment." Potter and the Bride, however, are too engrossed in each other and the lavish surroundings that "reflected the glory of their marriage" to notice that they are a source of bemusement to their fellow travelers.

*Potter and the bride are enjoying the beginning of married life together, and the porter's mocking of the couple's inexperience indicates that this is the first time either of them have been married. Crane's observation that the Pullman car reflects the glory of the bride and Potter's marriage is a crucial passage: it establishes that marriage not only gives Potter a spouse, but also a completely new lifestyle, over which the bride's influence looms large.*

The couple make their way to the dining car, where several black waiters wearing "glowing white suits" await them. One of the waiters steers them through every step of the meal. The waiter is merely doing his job, but his "ordinary deference" impresses Potter and **the bride**, who are not used to such a refined dining experience.

*The multiple steps the couple must take to consume their dinner indicates just how far the refinements of eastern civilization now reach into the western frontier. Potter and the bride learn to adapt, but not every character in this story is willing to take such a step.*

After the couple finish their meal, they return to their coach. Potter looks out the window and notices the Rio Grande, which apexes at the town of Yellow Sky. He becomes noticeably restless at the thought of reaching the town and feels "the shadow of a deed" weighing on him "like a leaden slab." He is, in fact, the marshal of Yellow Sky, "a man known, liked, and feared," and he worries that the residents may take offense at his decision to get married in San Antonino without first consulting anyone in the town.

*This is the first instance in which Potter expresses uneasiness over how his new marriage will change his life. The fact that the Rio Grande reaches its apex in Yellow Sky demonstrates Crane's use of naturalistic symbolism to illustrate Potter's fate. Like the river, he can run away from Yellow Sky, but just as the river has to flow back to the town, fate decrees that Potter must return.*

Although Potter knows that he has not broken any official rules, he is so devoted to the town that he feels like a "traitor to the feelings of Yellow Sky." He imagines how, if he had informed the town of his marriage, the town's brass band would play alongside a cheering crowd to welcome himself and **the bride** back to Yellow Sky. Instead, he resolves to slink off the train unnoticed to take the bride to his adobe home. Meanwhile, the bride notices that Potter is worried, but Potter tells her he is "only thinking of Yellow Sky."

*In the character of Potter, Crane explores the idea that change is a force beyond human control. Change can seem appealing (after all, Potter chose to marry the bride), but it can also have unintended consequences. Potter has already demonstrated that he is happy to be married, but he is unsure how the town will feel about his marriage, nor can he control how the town will feel.*

The train arrives at the station in Yellow Sky and the porter announces that Potter's home is nearby. The porter brushes off Potter's suit and hands him his bag, and Potter clumsily gives the porter a coin. The station agent notices that Potter has arrived and welcomes the marshal excitedly. Potter responds with a "hangdog glance" and a nervous laugh. As he and **the bride** head to the marshal's home, the porter chuckles behind them.

*When the train arrives at Yellow Sky, Potter realizes that there is no going back: through his marriage, he has become a very different person than he was when he departed for San Antonio. He is now a gentleman, the kind whose suit and bags get brushed off. His attempt to sneak the bride home only further cements the significant role she now plays in his life.*

## PART 2

Inside the town watering hole, the Weary Gentleman saloon, are six men: a drummer who is new to the town, three Texans, and two Mexican sheepherders sit at the bar. In front of the door, the barkeeper's dog lays lazily on the boardwalk. Across the sandy street from the saloon are "vivid green grass-plots" that resemble "grass mats used to represent lawns on the stage." Circling the town, the "fresh-cut" bank of the Rio Grande gives way to "a great plum-colored plain of mesquite." The town is largely placid and asleep, save for the patrons in the Weary Gentleman.

*Crane uses the calm environs of Yellow Sky to foreshadow a coming storm. His vivid descriptions of the neat grass plots, the manicured riverbank, and the restful saloon invoke the replenishing insides of a cozy home tended by a woman's touch. This former frontier town is now a quiet retreat, possibly too quiet.*

The drummer regales the other patrons with fantastic tales until a young man enters the saloon and proclaims that **Scratchy Wilson** is drunk and "turned loose with both hands." This news causes the two Mexican sheepherders to lower their glasses and quietly slip out the saloon's back entrance, while the remaining patrons become "Instantly solemn."

*This is the first mention of Scratchy Wilson, a crucial symbol of the untamed frontier. In contrast to the quiet repose of the town and the saloon, the young man immediately establishes Wilson as drunk and dangerous. He is an unhinged force for which the town is ill prepared.*

The perplexed drummer wonders about the "chapel-like gloom" that descends upon the saloon. He watches as the barkeeper locks, then bars the door, and pulls down the saloon's heavy window shutters. The young man tells him, "for the next two hours this town won't be a health resort." When the drummer asks if this portends a shootout, another patron warns that there will most certainly be some "good shootin,'" while the young man guarantees that a fight is coming. The drummer's curiosity piques. He asks again the name of the man who is causing so much fear, and the patrons answer in chorus, "**Scratchy Wilson**!"

*In the previous passages, Crane likened Yellow Sky to, in the young man's words, "a health resort"—hardly the traditional setting for a Western story. The looming threat of a shootout from Scratchy Wilson, however, suggests that some wild remains in this Wild West town. The young man admits as much when he warns that as long as Wilson is around, the town will certainly* not *be a health resort.*

The drummer unleashes a barrage of questions about **Scratchy Wilson**. "Will he kill anybody?" "Can he break down the door?" The barkeeper replies that Wilson has failed to break down the door before, but he warns the drummer to get low, as Wilson is certain to try to shoot his way into the saloon. As the drummer lies on the floor, the other patrons insist that Wilson is "out to shoot" and "out for trouble."

*The description of Scratchy Wilson as a man prone to violence presents a starkly different version of masculinity than the one Jack Potter displays at the beginning of the story. While Potter is mild, respectful, and devoted to the bride and the town, Wilson is loud, belligerent, and violent to anyone around him. These contrasting versions of masculinity suggest that the plot will eventually hinge on which type of masculinity survives at the end of the story.*

Only Jack Potter can stop **Wilson**, the patrons claim. They tell the drummer that Potter is the town marshal who "goes out and fights Scratchy when he gets on one of these tears," but unfortunately, Potter is in San Antonio. The chatter in the saloon dampens down to "mere whispering." Still flush with questions "born of an increasing anxiety and bewilderment," the drummer waits in silence for Wilson to arrive. The barkeeper pours a full glass of whiskey for a patron who promptly gulps it down, then takes up a Winchester rifle and motions for the drummer to hide behind the bar.

*This is the first time readers learn about the mutually reinforcing relationship between Wilson and Potter. That Potter is the only person in town capable of dealing with Wilson's drunken tears indicates that the two men need each other: as the outlaw, Wilson needs Marshal Potter as a foil and vice-versa. That their relationship has passed into contemporary town legend attests to its long history.*

The barkeeper tells the drummer that **Scratchy Wilson** is a "wonder with a gun" and "the last one of the old gang" that hung around the river. Although harmless when sober, the barkeeper adds, alcohol turns Wilson into "a terror." As the barkeeper laments that Jack Potter is not in town to deal with Wilson, he hears a shot in the distance followed by several wild "yowls." Scratchy Wilson is heading towards the saloon.

*The barkeeper crystalizes Wilson's role as a symbol of the now conquered frontier. The outlaw is the last of an "old" gang that has since gone away. Scratchy demonstrates his wildness through a series of yells that terrify the saloon patrons.*

## PART 3

**Scratchy Wilson** rounds a corner and struts right into Yellow Sky's main street. For "decoration," he wears a maroon flannel shirt made by Jewish women on New York's east side, while his red-topped boots with "gilded imprints" invoke "sledding boys" from New England. Brandishing a revolver in each hand, Wilson whoops and hollers into the night, but only silence responds. He stalks the town's windows and doorways like a "midnight cat" in search of prey, but hears only his own yells echoing through the night. There is "no offer of fight" from anyone.

*Scratchy Wilson is immediately presented as a character rife with contradictory gendered symbolism. He embodies a violent frontier masculinity (guns blazing as he looks for a fight), but his clothes invoke the influence of women and children from the civilized east. Wilson may be a desperado, but the presence of a feminine touch upon his body indicates that his wild public display is part of a broader last stand in which he tries, but fails, to avoid ceding his masculine space to women.*

Incensed at the lack of attention he receives in the street, **Scratchy** turns towards the Weary Gentleman, where he confronts the barkeeper's dozing dog. The dog, who "had not appreciated the advance of events," gets up and walks away until Wilson's yells inspire the animal to gallop. Scratchy makes sport of the dog's fear, forcing the poor animal to dodge multiple bullets before it scurries away.

*Here, Wilson's fulfills his foreshadowed role of the storm that disrupts the town's sleepy calm. The bartender's lazy, bewildered dog is a helpful stand-in for the town that is utterly helpless to do anything about Scratchy.*

Having finished tormenting the dog, **Scratchy Wilson** hammers the saloon's door with his revolver and demands a drink. Unable to break down the door, he sticks a piece of paper into it with a knife, then fires at the paper from across the street. He barely misses and, acting as if the town were his plaything, fires a rash of bullets into multiple windows. Wilson, however, soon gets bored shooting at dogs and saloons, and "the name of Jack Potter, his ancient antagonist, entered his mind."

*Wilson performs all kinds of violent acts on the town, but to no real end. Only Jack Potter can give Wilson the fight he craves. The town's utter silence in the face of Scratchy's posturing underscores how out of fashion the outlaw's frontier bravado is.*

Sensing that only Jack Potter can give him the fight he craves, **Scratchy Wilson** heads towards the marshal's house "chanting Apache scalp-music." When he arrives at the adobe dwelling, Wilson howls out multiple challenges mingled with "wonderful epithets," but hears nothing in return. After "churning himself into deepest rage over the immobility of a house," Scratchy pauses to reload his guns.

*Wilson's decision to make a "last stand" at Jack Potter's house comes with an underlying sense of doom. Crane's description of Wilson chanting "Apache scalp-music" is a reference to one of the many vanquished "savage" tribes that white settlers subdued while conquering the frontier, and whose ranks Wilson will soon join.*

## PART 4

While **Scratchy Wilson** rails outside Jack Potter's house, Potter and **the bride** walk "sheepishly" and "with speed" in the direction of Potter's dwelling. As they round the corner, they come face-to-face with Wilson, who ceases loading one revolver in order to draw and aim another one "straight at the bridegroom's chest." Potter reacts coolly, dropping his bag to face Wilson while the bride's face yellows, leaving her "a slave to hideous rites."

*The first time Scratchy Wilson and Jack Potter confront each other in the story will also be the last time they do so. Potter's cool reaction to Scratchy's threats indicates that he is used to them. Meanwhile, the bride plays the role of the stereotypically delicate Victorian woman: the threat of male violence petrifies her.*

As the two men face each other down at three paces apart, **Scratchy Wilson** accuses Jack Potter of plotting an ambush and warns his antagonist not to reach for his gun. He tells Potter that the time has come to "settle" with him, but Potter responds that he is unarmed. As he confronts Wilson, the image of the **Pullman** rail car fills Potter's mind, evoking thoughts of green velvet, silver, brass, glass, and gleaming wood—"all the glory of the marriage" and "the environment of the new estate."

*Here Crane appears to promise readers a classic Western shootout. Instead of going for his guns, however, Potter decides to fully embrace his new status as a married man. His thoughts turn to the Pullman, the symbol of his "new estate" and the authoritative role the bride now plays in his life. Fighting Scratchy means giving up all of this "glory," so Potter refuses to take Wilson's bait.*

A flustered **Wilson** accuses Potter of lying about his weapon and claims "there ain't a man in Texas" who has not seen Potter without a gun. Potter insists again that he is unarmed and dares Wilson to shoot him, adding that Wilson will "never get a chance like this again." Perplexed, Wilson again asks Potter why he does not have a gun. Potter informs Wilson that he is unarmed because he just returned from San Antonio with his new **bride**. However, had he known there would be "galoots" like Wilson prowling about when he brought the bride home, Potter says he would certainly have brought his gun.

*Scratchy Wilson aims to keep alive his long history of tangling with Jack Potter, and he expects Potter to act accordingly. This makes Potter's insistence that he is not carrying a gun perplexing to Wilson, because he has been primed to act out this rivalry with the marshal forever. For his part, Potter hints that he is tempted to abandon his new domestic life by admitting that, had he anticipated Scratchy's presence at his home, he would continue to tangle with the outlaw.*

Potter's marriage leaves **Scratchy** dumbfounded. As he glimpses the "drooping, drowning woman" at Potter's side, Wilson is "like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world." He asks if this is the lady that Potter married, to which the marshal answers affirmatively. "Married!" Wilson exclaims multiple times before deciding, "it's all off now." Potter responds that the shootout is only off if Scratchy deems it so.

*This climactic moment of the story is not only a duel between Potter and Wilson, but also a duel between Wilson and the bride. The bride's presence attests to the authority she has over Potter: after all, he abandons his old life with Scratchy for a new life with her. Wilson's outdated frontier masculinity is no match for the bride's domestic femininity.*

Still perplexed, **Scratchy** is left "a simple child of the earlier plains" who is unaccustomed to the "foreign condition" of Jack's marriage. A deflated Scratchy Wilson puts his revolvers back into their holsters and walks away. As he walks off, his boots leave "funnel-shaped" prints in the sand.

*The story's anticlimactic climax ends not with guns blazing, but with Wilson finally attaining some awareness of his status as a walking anachronism. Faced with a former antagonist who now refuses to participate in the ancient ritual of male violence, Wilson's fate echoes that of the frontier itself: a once wild place tamed by the inevitable forces of change.*

## HOW TO CITE

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