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## **Reinterpretation of History: Representation of Jesse James, an American Outlaw in Popular Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

The myth of the Wild West or the frontier myth is one of the significant myths in American nation and culture. The frontier is the line that divided the civilized and non-civilized during the colonial expansion towards the West of the America. The American frontier existed throughout the colonial expansion in America and the literature, art and films developed it a romanticized myth of American history. There are two variations of the Wild West of America – the historical West in which farmers, prostitutes and criminals followed their happiness and the mythic West that was created as a result of American popular hero imagination.

Many legendary outlaws of the West were made romanticized heroes of the American popular culture and literature. One of the popular heroes of Wild West is Jesse James who has been represented in various films, biopics, novels and biographical literature as a legendary outlaw of the West. The present paper attempts to explore the life of Jesse James as it has been represented in various genres in order to understand how Jesse James fits into the popular hero imagination of the American West.

**Keywords:** Wild West, American Frontier, Popular Hero, Jesse James, Biography.

### **Introduction**

The notion of the American Wild West is associated with the notion of development and civilization in America. In the eighteenth century, the West was the site of population movements from numerous directions which resulted into rivalries between the natives and the

immigrants. Frontier was the line that separated the Wild West from the colonial expansion, as John C. Parish (1943) stated:

The westward movement is the tide, whereas the frontier is the line of breakers and white surf. Or, to change the metaphor, the frontier is the tip of a growing plant, the farthest point reached by the flowing sap, and the hope of the plant's continuous growth. (36-37)

Moreover, frontier is the edge of the westward expansion of colonialism. The concept of frontier refers to "a meeting point where two forces come up against each other, whether they be groups of human beings or such vague things as *civilization* and *wilderness* or *knowledge* and *potential knowledge*" (Forbes, 206). This American expansion in the West resulted into the subjugation of Indian people which caused the emergence of the Western outlaw. The figure of the outlaw has been romanticized in the popular culture as it is believed that these outlaws looted from the rich and gave to the poor.

Jesse James was one such outlaw of the American West who has been transformed into a legend through a vast representation in the popular media. Jesse James was born to Robert James and Zerelda Cole James in September 1847 and killed by Robert Ford in April 1882. During the Civil War, he along with his brother Frank James served Quantrill's gang. After the end of the Civil War, Jesse James and his brother Frank James became notorious as bank and train robbers. Sometimes they performed these robberies along with the other gangs including the Younger brothers' gang and the Miller brothers' gang. When Robert Ford murdered Jesse James, one of the most infamous outlaws of America, he inadvertently added glory to the increasing legend of Jesse James.

Even before his assassination, Jesse James absorbed the mass attention and the stories of his life and deeds were revolving around the country. Only a few presented an accurate version of Jesse James' life, while most of the narratives demonstrated a fabricated account of James' life. The life of Jesse James has been represented through various mediums which contributed for both history and legends. The factual details of Jesse James' life are subjects to history and has contributed for the historical documentation of the Western outlaws, whereas the story of Jesse James that people carry on through generations has developed a legend – the legend of Jesse James. Many of the fabricated stories of Jesse James' life were created through

newspapers, and soon after Jesse James became the subject of popular literature including dime novels and biographical films where these romanticized depictions established Jesse James as one of the popular heroes of America.

Many biographers wrote about Jesse James but most of these works delimited as much factual details as does the average Hollywood film. However, William A. Settle Jr. in 1966 published *Jesse James was his Name or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri* and provided the best possible accurate facts of the life of legendary outlaw. Settle argued that in order to comprehend Jesse James' life, it is significant to look how reality and myth affect each other. Further, Settle explained it, "[The James Gang's] efforts were indeed real; their crimes are of public record. The legend, however, is a different matter. In it fact and fiction are so entwined that it is difficult – at time, impossible – to untangle them" (Settle 02). Many consequent scholars and historians continued to build their accounts on Settle's points and now a vast range of best possible accurate accounts of Jesse James' life exist.

In order to explore the varied representation of Jesse James in popular literature and culture of America, the author will discuss Jesse James' representation in different genres. The discussion in the paper will be divided into three parts: the first part will examine Jesse James' representation in the newspapers; the second part will look into the earlier biographies how the life of Jesse James was distorted and the third part of the paper will discuss how the popular media including dime novels and biographical films have represented Jesse James and turned him into an American legend.

### **Jesse James, an American Outlaw: Representation in Different Genres**

Jesse James was one of the infamous outlaws of American history who could be called a living legend because he was already an icon when Ford assassinated him. After the end of the Civil War, many Southerners looked at Jesse James with a hope to resist against the North. He was seen as a 'Robin Hood' figure who robbed from the rich including banks and railroads and gave it to the poor. After the assassination, Jesse James was celebrated as a popular hero and a part the legendary Wild West. With the development of the notion of Wild West, James' legend grew more in the history and culture of America. From newspapers columns to the dime novels and films, the legend of Jesse James grew with each such production.

John Newman Edwards, who fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War always admired the guerrilla gangs of Missouri led by William Quantrill, especially the James brothers. After the end of the Civil War, Edwards joined *Kansas City Times* which advocated the Democratic Party, as a columnist. In one of his columns entitled “A Terrible Quintette”, Edwards demonstrated the life of the James and Younger brothers during and after the Civil War. He also included the details of the torture by Union soldiers upon Jesse James’ family. He also mentioned how Pinkerton and his detectives threw a bomb in Jesse’s house in which his mother lost an arm and his stepbrother Archie was killed (Edwards 27-39). By demonstrating these incidents of violence by the Union soldiers and the Pinkertons, Edwards anticipated that it will develop public sympathy for the outlaws. He began his column by putting Jesse James as:

A face as smooth and innocent as the face of a school girl. The blue eyes, very clear and penetrating, are never at rest. His form is tall, graceful and capable of great endurance and great effort. There is always a smile on his lips, and a graceful word or a compliment with whom he comes in contact. (Edwards 27)

In his another article, entitled “The Chivalry of Crime” (1872), Edwards introduced Jesse James as a Robin Hood figure who used to steal from the rich and gave to the poor farmers. In this article, Edwards proposed the notion of social bandit for the person who steals from the rich while looking at the James-Younger Gang’s criminal acts as an extension of the Southern cause. (Jarmuzewski 188.) Soon after Jesse James was killed in 1882, Edwards wrote a eulogy by saying “what a dastardly thing it was for James to be shot from behind, that the Ford brothers were cowards, and that Missouri’s governor, Thomas Crittenden, conspired with them in the assassination” (Settle 115). The portrayal of Jesse James as victim of the Civil War and his criminal activities as mythologies in the hands of Edwards became the foundations for the further depictions of the outlaw’s life in popular media.

One of the earlier biographies of Jesse James was *The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James* by Frank Triplett which was published a few week after Jesse James’ assassination. This biography received a great attention because of Triplett’s claim that this was the most accurate version of Jesse James’ life. The authenticity of this biography depends upon the interviews Triplett conducted with Jesse’s wife and mother. He also claimed to have letters from Jesse’s family which provided him the authority to publish the biography (Triplettxxxii-

xxiv). Triplett provides details of many robberies, but after every instance he claims that James brothers were not present during the robbery. He only provides a detailed account of Northfield robbery by the James-Younger gang in which all the members of these gangs were either killed or arrested, except James brother. Triplett attempts to glorify the escape of James brothers (Triplett 175-208). Further, by describing Crittenden's plot to get Jesse James murdered in the hands of Ford brother, Triplett depicts James as a victim of government's conspiracy. By doing so, Triplett elevated James as legendary outlaw of the American West (Triplett 249-262). Joseph Snell, the historian, described the biography by Triplett as "one of the most, it not *the most*, pro-James books ever written, even outstripping efforts of John N. Edwards" (Snell xvi).

Despite of these romanticized representations, Jesse James' family wished to tell their version of Jesse's life, but they couldn't find a wide stage to for the same until Jesse Edwards James, the outlaw's son came up with a biography of his father entitled *Jesse James, My Father* in 1906. He claimed this biography to be "The first and only true story of his [Jesse James'] adventures ever written" (James Jr. front cover). The claim of authenticity is questionable because when Jesse James was murdered, Jesse Jr. was only six years old and it is always doubtful how much the American outlaw told his son about his adventures and crimes to his son. Much of the information Jesse Jr. included in the biography was extracted from the stories he heard from his mother and other family members.

Further, Robertus Love published another biography titled *The Rise and Fall of Jesse James* (1920) which "is considered to be the best – as well as the first – serious biography of Jesse James" (Hughes 62). Love, in the biography examined and described Jesse James:

...a sympathetic figure...his book is essentially an apologia of the man. As a result, many began to believe that history was being unjust and unkind to poor Jesse. Almost overnight, the outlaw became the brave knight on the white charger. (Hughes 62)

One critics commented that "As a simplification and codification of the James legend, *The Rise and Fall of Jesse James* is the most important book ever written. This is the 'authentic version' not of the history but of the story of Jesse James" (Fellman xvi). The biography was much popular among the readers not only for the more factual details, but also for including a

great detail of dramatic details. Thus, turning this biography into a realistic depiction of Jesse James' life.

William A. Settle, Jr. through his book *Jesse James was his Name: Or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri* (1966) depicted the life and times of the American outlaw in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the major differences between Settle and other earlier biographers of Jesse James was that Settle depicted the life of Jesse James without any fabrication and only referred to the facts that he could validate. For instance, he dedicated only one and half page to the robbery scene at Northfield in September 1876 whereas spent rest of the chapter apprehending the Younger brothers and their prosecution as represented in the public records. As the James brothers managed to escape from the scene, so no reliable material was available on their activities (Settle 92-97). Though, Settle did not include the activities of James' brother, he commented on the effect of their criminal activities on others. From the above instance, it is clear that Settle did not wish to include any such incident for which he could not find reliable sources. Settle's depiction of Jesse James in this biography opened the way for other writers to deal with the life of this American outlaw. In the closing paragraph of the biography, Settle writes:

Although there have been a few attempts... to destroy the Robin Hood aspect of the James legend, it is apparent that it is too well rooted in American folklore to suffer serious damage. The forces that sustain it are far greater than any that would destroy it. Hence, the Jesse James legend will live on and continue to excite Americans with the exploits of their native Robin Hood. (Settle 201)

Thus, in the biography Settle did not support the legend of Robin Hood, but he believed that this popular hero has become so imbedded in American culture that it can never fade.

Ted P. Yeatman is another author who has provided more documented details about Jesse James in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by collecting personal letters, marriage certificates, and many other primary sources. He began his research on Jesse James in the 1970s and came up with a biography *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend* in 2000. This biography followed Settle's arguments and provided an insight into the mind of Jesse James through the use of primary material available. In the introduction of this book, Yeatman himself writes:

This book is intended as a supplement to Settle's impressive and pioneering volume. Settle encouraged my work on the Tennessee years of the James brothers, and...was to have written an introduction to the present book. (Yeatman 11)

For Yeatman, getting hold of the primary material on Jesse James was enough to represent his that side which has never been shown before and he did not provide any analysis of the evidences regarding the historical details of Jesse James. This lack of analysis provided the producers opportunity to manipulate these stories. But the biography by Yeatman was not sufficient to provide valid historical interpretation of the life of Jesse James. This encouraged other authors to attempt writing about the life of the American outlaw. Until the publication of *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* (2002) by T. J. Stiles, Settle's biography was the only James biography that offered the actual analysis of the history of American outlaw.

The use of 'Last Rebel' in the title signifies how Stiles attempted to depict Jesse James and how he related his work to other Jesse James. In the "Acknowledgement" section, Stiles writes: "I have taken Jesse James very seriously; rather than debunking him, I have found him to be more significant than perhaps even his admirers realize" (Stiles 397-398). Stiles explored some of the issues of Jesse James' life that have not been explored earlier. One of the elements of the James story, Stiles explored was the outlaw's connection to slavery system. James' mother, Zerelda Samuels had devoted to the institution of slavery and it was her pro-slavery politics that her family had to suffer in the hands of Union soldiers which pushed the James brothers into joining the Confederate soldiers and later William Quantrill as guerrillas. Thus, under the leadership of Quantrill, the James brothers developed themselves as outlaws. As they served as guerillas, so they were not treated equal to the Confederate soldiers. Moreover, the James brothers used their guerilla skills to secure their livelihoods. Hence, without Zerelda's passion for the institute of slavery, Frank and Jesse may not have become outlaws (Stiles 37-55). Further, Stiles opposes the idea of creating Jesse James as the 'Robin Hood' figure and proposes that instead of transforming James into a heroic figure, he should be treated as "a transitional figure, standing between the agrarian slaveholding past and the industrial, violent, media-savvy future, representing the worst aspects of both" (Stiles 391-392). This difference in opinion regarding Jesse James could not define any of the version of his life as the absolute narrative.



The illustrated stories called dime novels of the nineteenth century provided its readers a fantasy world that they had never seen before. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the American Wild West became that fantasy world and Jesse James emerged as one of its popular heroes. One of the most popular dime novel was *The James Boys Weekly*:

A weekly magazine for boys featuring the legendary adventures of Jesse James and his brother Frank, the leaders of a gang of outlaws who committed numerous bank and train robberies in the central states during the 1860s and 1870s. The stories are written by D. W. Stevens, a popular author who lived in 'James Country' and possessed a detailed knowledge of the historical incidents and geographical territory of which he wrote. ("James Boys Weekly," [http://suloas.stanford.edu/swprd\\_dp/pnpack.draw?pid=430](http://suloas.stanford.edu/swprd_dp/pnpack.draw?pid=430))

Many historians claim these dime novels as the main reasons for emergence of Jesse James legend. Historian William A. Settle argued that, "It is from these dime novels that at least two generations of American youth obtained their image of Jesse James" (Settle 187). Thus, these epic descriptions of Jesse James evolved as foundations for future filmmakers and other producers of popular media.

At the beginning of 1908, filmmakers and producers began relocating the life of Jesse James from the dime novels and biographies to the silver screen (Yeatman 368-369). The first known attempt to represent Jesse James on silver screen can be traced back to 1911. George N. Fenin and William K. Everson in their book *The Westerns: From Silents to Cinerama* (1962) states:

Some advertising posters for a western plugging *Jesse James* (1911) were heavily censored, and a writer, displaying his astonishing racism in print, commented that 'an Indian will walk miles to see bloodshed,' and that films and advertising which catered to dormant sadism of this type should not be encouraged. (qtd. in Hughes 65)

This statement suggests that this biopic of Jesse James did not romanticize him as a popular hero, rather depicted him as a hardcore criminal. Years later, Jesse James' son, Jesse Jr. released two back to back films – *Jesse James Under the Black Flag* (1921) and *Jesse James as*

*the Outlaw* (1921) which attempted to capitalize on his life. In 1927, another film featuring Jesse James' figure was *Jesse James* directed by Lloyd Ingraham which "whitewashed the old outlaw even more than did the Tyrone Power version of 1939..." (qtd. in Hughes 66) as stated by Fenin and Everson (1962). This film doesn't include any description of bank and train robberies and the only crime Jesse James commit in this film is a minor carriage hold up. In late-1930s, one of the famous producers of America at that time, Darryl F. Zanuck two Jesse James films – *Jesse James* (1939) and *The Return of Frank James* (1940) which developed a new trend of biopics in America that featured the western outlaws including Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid (Faragher & Hine 509). The screenplay of *Jesse James* (1939) was written by Johnson which disregarded the history completely and fabricated the story of Jesse James' life, but the filmmakers wanted to present it as a 'true story of Jesse James'. As Homer Croy reports:

They invited Joe Francis James, Jesse's granddaughter, to a private advance showing... After it was over they asked, 'How do you like it?' To which she replied, 'If he hadn't been named Jesse James... and ridden a horse, I would never have known he was my grandfather'. (qtd. in Hughes 68)

Though, this first impression of the film on Joe Francis James did not prevent her from endorsing the film. The film fabricated many major historical facts of Jesse James' life and even depicted the early death of his mother Mrs. Samuel. Jesse's mother, in reality died after thirty years of his murder. Her original name was Zerelda Cole while she married Robert James in 1841. Later, after having four children, she married Benjamin Simms and further, when Jesse was ten years old, she married Dr. Reuben Samuel. All these facts related to his mother were ignored in the film. The film provides no reference to Jesse's step-father and siblings. The explosion at James farmhouse in 1875 by the Pinkerton Detective Agency believing that Frank and Jesse James were inside, caused the death of their half-brother Archie and the amputation of right arm of their mother. Johnson, the screenplay writer of 1939 film included this incident, but a fictitious version that exhibits:

In the beginning of the film, Barshee, a Johnsonian character, is introduced was working for the St. Louis Railroad... He is buying up land for the railroad, cheating the farmers by offering only a dollar an acre for their land. The Jameses refuse to sell. Barshee and Jesse fight. Barshee...returns to the farm that night

and tosses a bomb. Mrs. James is brought out of the house, laid under a tress, and dies. Jesse vows vengeance on Barshee and the railroad for killing his mother. (Hughes 68)

Thus, the film depicts that the death of his mother motivated Jesse James to the path of crime and violence as a means of his vengeance. Many other biopics followed the footprints of *Jesse James* (1939) depicting the romanticized image of the American outlaw. One of these motion pictures which was also a remake of this film, was *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957) which contrary to *Jesse James* (1939) included the Younger brothers as well as the description of the Civil War. This motion picture attempts to create Jesse James' Robin Hood mythology by depicting the robbery scene where the James-Younger gang robs a banker who tries to shut out a Confederate widow's farm. This film was more factual than the 1939 film, as Hughes writes:

Even though Newman reportedly based his script on Nunnally Johnson's 1939 screenplay, he actually junked nearly all of its banalities and absurdities. The stepfather is brought in, the mother is allowed to live, and Frank is permitted to have the wife he married in real life. (Hughes 74)

Though the filmmakers and producers were trying hard to depict their films as factual representation of Jesse James' life, none of the films released before 1966 had used reliable material in their screenplays. The same view cannot be applied to the modern day producers and filmmakers. However, these new biopics are not completely accurate, their depictions of Jesse James is noteworthy. *The Last Days of Frank & Jesse James* (1986) and *Frank and Jesse* (1995) claim in their trailers itself that they are telling "The True Story" of Jesse James. The 1986 biopic, *The Last Days of Frank & Jesse James* begins with post-Civil War period when the James brothers were trying to lead normal lives, but could not. The film progresses with Jesse's death and Frank's trial and ends with Frank James settling in Creede, Colorado. As a result of the smaller scope, film could depict the historical facts more accurately than its predecessors. The second biopic *Frank and Jesse* (1995) can be viewed as mostly inaccurate, but one element of this film makes it different from the previous attempt and that is the role of media in Jesse James' story. There are various scenes in the film that depict the intention of media behind featuring Jesse James as the Robin Hood of America. It also introduced a character named Zack Murphy, a newspaperman, inspired from Newman Edwards' role in Jesse James' life. These are

some of the common traits of the modern production of Jesse James in motion pictures. Despite their claims of authenticity, these modern producers still use some fictional characters and story in order to depict Jesse James as a popular hero just to sell their films.

In 2001, Les Mayfield released a biopic *American Outlaws* which was criticised for being one of the most inaccurate versions of Jesse James' life. Historian T. J. Stiles commented,

A serious evaluation of the historical accuracy of *American Outlaws* is about as pointless as a discussion of the differences between bumper cars and highway driving...I have the impression that the screenwriters and director would be surprised to learn that Jesse James was an actual historical figure. (Stiles, "Movie Review: American Outlaws")

On the other hand, in 2007, Andrew Dominik came with another biopic *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* which has been termed as one of the more accurate version of James' life. One of the aspects that makes it more accurate is the reference to John Newman Edwards in the film.

By looking at these biopics, biographies, and dime novels it is clear that Jesse James will always be treated a legend and popular hero in American imagination, no matter how much efforts have been put into portraying him an outlaw and criminal. The films, or writings that depicted him as an outlaw or criminal could not get public's attention and appreciation, rather the scholars who have put Jesse James into the light of Robin Hood of America have succeed in selling their 'truth'.

## Conclusion

Jesse James has always been a popular subject to deal with for filmmakers, biographers, and writers, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century his popularity in America is same as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning with John Newman Edwards' newspaper representation through Frank Triplet's biography to dime novels and biopics, Jesse James has always been depicted as a legendary outlaw of America who fits into the American imagination of popular hero. William A. Settle as well as many other biographers and filmmakers have tried to differentiate between reality and imagination regarding James' life, while many of them have tried to develop Jesse James as a historical figure. On the basis of the above discussion, it can be said that it is not the

life and events around the figure of Jesse James that makes him relevant to the history of America, but how popular literature has operated Jesse James' life that makes him a legendary outlaw of American history.

Filmmakers, biographers, and many other artists continue to retell Jesse James' story in new and more exaggerated ways than before, but still their dealing with the history is mixed with fantasy and imagination. Though, Jesse James has remained the legend of American outlaw culture since long, it does not mean that the outlaw has to remain the primary subject of the popular literature that deal more with American popular hero imagination rather than reinterpreting the history.

Hence, in concluding remarks it can be said that the historians, biographers and filmmakers need to understand and utilize the medium of popular culture and literature in a more sensible and historically accurate way. Though, this step might not completely transform Jesse James's myth and legend, it can still make a difference in representation of history in popular literature.

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