

True Grit



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES PORTIS

After spending his childhood in a handful of different towns in Arkansas, Charles Portis graduated from high school and became a Marine. Fighting as a sergeant in the Korean War, he was discharged in 1955, at which point he attended the University of Arkansas and studied journalism. After college, Portis made money as a reporter for publications in Tennessee and Arkansas before starting to work for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, which employed him as the paper's bureau chief in London. However, he returned to Arkansas after only a short period, wanting to focus exclusively on writing fiction. In 1966, he published his first novel, *Norwood*, which received somewhat mixed but generally positive reviews. Two years later, he published *True Grit*, which was widely popular. After the success of *True Grit*, Portis didn't publish another novel until 1979, when he put out *The Dog of the South*, followed by *Masters of Atlantis* in 1985 and *Gringos* in 1991. He has not published a new novel since then.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the Civil War, a group of guerilla soldiers known as "Quantrill's Raiders" fought on behalf of the Confederacy under William Quantrill's command. At first, the group remained unrecognized by the Confederate Army. In their initial formation, Quantrill's Raiders were nothing more than a collection of pro-Confederate men who fought Union sympathizers in Missouri and Kansas, both of which were (more or less) under control of the Union at the time. In 1862, the Confederate Army recognized the group as an official part of the Confederacy, but this affiliation didn't last long, since Quantrill led his men into the abolitionist town of Lawrence, Kansas in 1863 and massacred roughly 200 civilians, all because the town had imprisoned women associated with the Raiders. Shocked by the Lawrence Massacre, the Confederate Army severed their ties with Quantrill and his band. Shortly after this incident, Quantrill's men began to branch off into groups of their own. One of these factions became the notorious group of outlaws known as the James-Younger Gang, which included the infamous bandits Cole Younger and Frank and Jesse James. In *True Grit*, Rooster Cogburn is a former member of Quantrill's Raiders and is well-acquainted with Frank James and Cole Younger, both of whom he eventually performs with in a traveling circus as an old man.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although it takes place nearly 100 years later, Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* shares certain characteristics with *True Grit*, as both novels deal with criminals making their way through the American West, with violence and hot pursuit running throughout both texts. In fact, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is also relevant when discussing *True Grit*, since it too considers western-style violence in the Civil War era. However, *True Grit* is considerably lighter and funnier than both of these novels, aesthetically resembling Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with its humorous account of misadventure.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** True Grit
- **When Published:** 1968
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realism, Western Fiction
- **Setting:** Fort Smith, Arkansas and the "Indian Territory" of the old American West
- **Climax:** After Chaney strikes LaBoeuf with a rock, Mattie grabs her revolver and shoots him in the head.
- **Antagonist:** Tom Chaney
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. *True Grit* has been adapted as a film twice. The first was released in 1969, was directed by Henry Hathaway, and starred John Wayne. The second came out in 2010, was directed by Ethan and Joel Coen, and starred Jeff Bridges and Matt Damon.

Serialization. Before its hardcover publication, *True Grit* was serialized by *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1968.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mattie Ross acknowledges that most people don't believe a fourteen-year-old girl is capable of avenging her father's death. Nonetheless, this is what she does after her father's murder. Planning to buy a group of ponies from a man named Stonehill, her father traveled from Little Rock to Fort Smith, Arkansas to make the deal. While Mattie stayed at home with her mother and two younger siblings, Frank Ross took along Tom Chaney, a man from Louisiana who appeared one day and asked for work. Taking pity on Chaney—a seemingly luckless man—Frank agreed to give him a job. When they arrived in Fort Smith,

though, Chaney acted wildly by gambling his money away. Afterwards, he flew into a rage, got drunk, and decided to go after the men who won his money. As he vowed to steal back his money, Frank tried to stop him. Chaney shot him and stole two **gold pieces** from him. He then ran to Stonehill's stables, where he clubbed a watchman in the face and made off with Frank's horse, Judy.

After her father's death, Mattie travels to Fort Smith and talks to the sheriff, discovering that the police are hardly doing anything to catch Chaney, who has run off with a notorious bandit named Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang, a group that recently robbed a mail train. The police believe Chaney and the gang have escaped into Indian Territory, where they have no jurisdiction. As such, Mattie decides to hire Rooster Cogburn, a marshal the sheriff says is ruthless. He also tells her that Rooster will be in court the following morning. Mattie then tells Yarnell—her father's employee who accompanied her to Fort Smith—to travel back to Little Rock with Frank's body while she stays in Fort Smith.

That night, she stays at the same boarding house where her father and Chaney stayed. The next day, she visits Stonehill and asks him to buy back the ponies, but he refuses, saying the deal has already been made. Mattie threatens to bring him to court, but he doesn't take her threat seriously. Eventually he realizes that she and her lawyer—Lawyer Daggett—will build a strong case, and after much haggling, Mattie convinces him to buy back the ponies and to pay for the horse that Chaney stole, since it was on Stonehill's property when Chaney took it. Begrudgingly, Stonehill agrees to pay her \$325 as soon as she produces a letter from Daggett outlining the terms of the deal.

Mattie goes to the "telegraph office" and sends a message to Daggett. Later, she goes to the courthouse and watches Rooster Cogburn testify against Odus Wharton, the last surviving man of criminal family. Rooster has killed so many Whartons that Odus's lawyer portrays him as unnecessarily violent. While he's on the stand, Rooster explains that he and his longtime partner, Potter, came upon the last three Wharton men shortly after the criminals murdered a man and robbed him. According to Rooster, he and Potter approached with their guns drawn, but the Whartons attacked, so they had to shoot. Potter was killed in the fight. As for the Whartons, Rooster killed two of them and brought Odus back to Fort Smith. Eventually, the judge decides to continue the hearing the next day, giving Mattie a chance to catch up to Rooster, and she asks him to hunt down Chaney. Before accepting the offer, Rooster invites her to have dinner.

Over dinner, Mattie explains the details of the case. Rooster is familiar with Lucky Ned Pepper and is tempted to take the case, but he remains hesitant, since he isn't sure if Mattie really has money. Later that night, Mattie goes back to the boarding house, where she remains for several days because she falls ill. Just when she's starting to feel better, a Texas Ranger named

LaBoeuf moves into the boarding house and tells her that he too is looking for Chaney. He explains that Chaney is only a fake name for a criminal named Theron Chelmsford, whom LaBoeuf has been tracking ever since he killed a senator and his dog in Waco, Texas several months ago. Glad to hear that someone else wants to find Chaney, Mattie informs LaBoeuf that she's hiring Rooster, and LaBoeuf considers joining forces. However, it soon becomes clear that LaBoeuf wants to bring Chaney back to Texas, which Mattie dislikes, since she wants her father's killer to hang in Fort Smith. Their conversation ends in an argument.

Lawyer Daggett's letter arrives, so Mattie closes the deal with Stonehill. She then visits Rooster, gives him a down payment, and informs him that she'll be coming with him. He rejects this at first but soon sees she won't be deterred. The next time Mattie sees him, though, he's sitting with LaBoeuf, who says he can make more money if he helps bring Chaney to Texas, since the senator's family has promised a large reward. Rooster switches sides, teaming up with LaBoeuf instead of helping Mattie.

Returning to Stonehill, Mattie buys back one of the ponies (whom she names Blackie) and sets out early the next morning, knowing Rooster and LaBoeuf are planning on beginning their journey on a small ferry. When she boards the boat on Blackie, though, Rooster and LaBoeuf instruct a deckhand to escort her back onto shore, at which point the ferry pulls away. The deckhand leads her to the top of a hill, but she tricks him and rides away, steering her horse through a narrow part of the river and thrashing through the water until she's on the other side. Seeing this, LaBoeuf and Rooster gallop away, but she chases them until they suddenly stop and take her off Blackie, at which point LaBoeuf whips her with a switch. After a while, Rooster takes pity and orders LaBoeuf to stop, but LaBoeuf doesn't listen, so Rooster pulls out his gun, and the Texas Ranger finally relents.

As Rooster, LaBoeuf, and Mattie venture on, they learn that Lucky Ned Pepper and two other outlaws were seen at a store called McAlester's three days before. After a day of hard riding and a night on the uncomfortable ground, the trio comes upon a manmade dugout the following evening, where they find two criminals acquainted with Ned Pepper. Their names are Quincy and Moon, and Rooster ends up shooting Moon in the leg in order to get the two to cooperate. As Moon slowly bleeds out, he tells the trio that they saw Ned and his partner Haze two days before. To quiet him, Quincy cuts off four of his fingers, at which point LaBoeuf shoots Quincy in the neck, killing him. Before Moon dies, he says that Ned and Haze are planning to come back to the dugout sometime that night to eat dinner and pick up a group of horses that Moon and Quincy stole, which are currently standing out in the woods. Moon dies, and Rooster instructs Mattie and LaBoeuf to tidy up the dugout and restoke the fire so that it looks like there are people inside. The

trio then splits up, with LaBoeuf hiking up one ridge and Rooster and Mattie hiking up another, waiting for Ned and his group to return. The plan, Rooster explains, is to trap them in the dugout, which is set into a V-like formation between the ridges. When the outlaws finally arrive hours later, though, Ned shoots his gun in the air, and this startles LaBoeuf, who returns fire, missing Ned but hitting his horse. As the outlaws scatter, Rooster and LaBoeuf fire at them, killing Haze and a younger criminal while the others escape. LaBoeuf sustains a minor injury to the shoulder when one of the bandits shoots at him and shatters the stock of his rifle.

As the sun rises, the trio makes its way to McAlester's store with the bandits' horses and the two dead criminals. From there, they set out once again, riding for an incredibly long time as Rooster drunkenly leads them to where he thinks the bandits have gone. After the longest day of Mattie's life, they finally go to sleep in an area Rooster claims is four miles from Ned Pepper's gang. The next morning, though, Mattie finds herself face-to-face with Tom Chaney when she goes to get water from a stream. She confronts him but he doesn't take her seriously, even after she turns her father's old pistol on him. Just as he's telling her to come with him, she shoots him in the stomach. Her next shot misfires, and Chaney manages to grab her and bring her up the other side of the stream before LaBoeuf and Rooster can save her. A shootout takes place between the two groups, but Rooster and LaBoeuf are forced to retreat, shouting to Ned that they'll leave as long as he doesn't hurt Mattie.

Ned takes Mattie to the bandits' camp atop a small hill. Before long, they see Rooster and LaBoeuf riding away, and they begin to relax, even divvying up their shares from their most recent train robbery. Once this is done, Ned decides everybody will leave except for Chaney and Mattie, since Chaney's horse got away when Mattie shot him. Although Chaney feels betrayed, Ned tells him to take Mattie to a certain place, where he can drop her off and secure a horse for himself. With this, he and his cronies ride away. After a moment, Mattie throws a pot of hot water on Chaney and starts to run, but Chaney catches her and hits her on the head with his pistol. Just then, LaBoeuf appears and holds Chaney at gun point, having snuck up the backside of the hill. Looking down, Mattie sees Ned Pepper and his gang riding on the plain, where Rooster suddenly appears and charges them at full speed, shooting while holding the reins with his teeth. He manages to best everyone but Ned himself before toppling over, his horse falling atop him. Ned approaches Rooster and prepares to kill him, but LaBoeuf takes aim from the hill and shoots Ned where he stands.

Mattie and LaBoeuf celebrate this fantastic shot, but Chaney clubs LaBoeuf over the head with a rock, sending him to the ground. Mattie grabs her gun and shoots Chaney in the head, but the force of the shot sends her toppling backward, and she falls into a large pit that Chaney previously claimed was full of

rattlesnakes, though she doesn't see any. Still, she discovers that her arm is broken and that the bottom half of her body is lodged in the mouth of a bat cave that extends even farther down. Just as she's about to fall through completely, she hears Chaney's voice and realizes he's still alive, though his body comes flying down into the pit when Rooster appears several moments later. When Chaney's body hits the ground, he crushes an old human skeleton lying nearby—a skeleton full of hibernating rattlesnakes, which suddenly slither all around Mattie, eventually biting her in the hand. Just before she's about to lose consciousness, Rooster propels himself down and grabs her, and LaBoeuf hoists them out. From there, Rooster sets off with Mattie, riding Blackie back to Fort Smith while LaBoeuf stays with Chaney's body. Before they reach safety, though, Blackie dies of exhaustion, and so Rooster takes Mattie in his arms and runs.

Mattie spends a week at the doctor's, where they're forced to amputate her arm because of the snake venom. In the years after this adventure, Mattie hopes to see Rooster again but never manages to catch up with him, as he travels around the nation taking up odd jobs. Finally, she hears decades later that he's joined a traveling circus, but when she goes to see him, she learns that he died two days earlier.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mattie Ross – A fourteen-year-old girl from Dardanelle, Arkansas and the narrator of *True Grit*. Mattie is a strong-willed young woman who uses her intelligence and determination to succeed in a world where she is consistently undervalued. She comes to Fort Smith in the aftermath of her father Frank Ross's murder. Mattie takes her father's affairs into her own hands, convincing Stonehill to buy back the ponies he sold to Frank right before his death. Mattie also hires Rooster Cogburn to hunt down Tom Chaney, her father's murderer. She wants badly to bring him to justice, and her consistent drive for revenge defines her character for much of the book. When Rooster and LaBoeuf set off on the manhunt without her, Mattie buys a pony from Stonehill and follows them, forcing them to accept her presence, though LaBoeuf whips her with a switch until Rooster tells him to stop. Later, when the trio is about to embark on the hardest leg of their journey, Rooster tries to convince Mattie to stay behind, but LaBoeuf insists that she has "won her spurs." When she finally crosses paths with Chaney, she doesn't hesitate to shoot him in the stomach, but he still manages to capture her and bring her back to Lucky Ned Pepper's gang of outlaws. LaBoeuf comes to save her, and though his presence helps, she ultimately rescues *him* by shooting Chaney in the head after the outlaw hits LaBoeuf with a rock. The force of this shot sends her backward into a snake pit—where she breaks her arm and gets bitten by a

rattlesnake—but Rooster saves her and takes her back to Fort Smith, where her arm is amputated. Decades later, Mattie goes to see Rooster in a traveling circus but is sad to hear that he died two days earlier.

Rooster Cogburn – A hard-drinking, one-eyed U.S. marshal known for his “grit.” Rooster fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, though Mattie learns that he was part of Quantrill’s Raiders, a group of guerilla soldiers who used ruthless tactics to fight the Union and devolved into gangs of outlaws that included Frank and Jesse James. Now, Rooster works for the federal government, venturing into Indian Territory to track down outlaws. Because of his merciless reputation, Mattie hires him to capture Chaney, but Rooster decides to team up with LaBoeuf because he wants to share the Ranger’s reward money. Despite this betrayal, Rooster later advocates for Mattie by forcing LaBoeuf to let her accompany them on the journey. Rooster is quite familiar with the trails he, LaBoeuf, and Mattie need to follow in order to catch Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang (which includes Chaney), but he makes a grave miscalculation one night when he gets so drunk that he accidentally leads the trio straight to the outlaws instead of stopping four miles out. As a result, Mattie is kidnapped the next morning when she encounters Chaney. This forces Rooster to make a deal with Ned Pepper, saying that he and LaBoeuf will retreat as long as Ned doesn’t harm Mattie. At first, he remains true to his word, but then he loops back and faces Ned Pepper’s gang, impressively killing all of them but Ned himself, who is just about to triumph over Rooster when LaBoeuf shoots him from afar. Then, when Mattie accidentally falls into a snake pit, Rooster lowers himself down and saves her life, bringing her as quickly as possible to Fort Smith. Years later, Rooster dies of bad health while traveling with the outlaws Frank James and Cole Younger in a traveling circus.

LaBoeuf – A Texas Ranger working on “detached service” for the family of a senator whom Chaney killed several months ago. When LaBoeuf arrives in Fort Smith, he tells Mattie that he’s looking for Chaney, and Mattie tells him of her plans to hire Rooster. LaBoeuf suggests that he “throw in” with them, saying he needs a federal marshal to arrest Chaney in Indian Territory, but Mattie insists that Chaney be brought back to Fort Smith. This doesn’t sit well with LaBoeuf, since he’s been hired to bring the outlaw back to Texas. As such, he and Mattie start off on the wrong foot, and LaBoeuf goes behind her back to team up with Rooster, convincing him to ignore his deal with Mattie. When the two men set off on the manhunt, LaBoeuf finds himself overwhelmingly frustrated by the fact that Mattie follows them—so frustrated that he whips her with a switch until Rooster orders him at gunpoint to stop. Despite this initial show of contempt, LaBoeuf soon takes a liking to Mattie, insisting that she has “won her spurs” when Rooster later suggests that she stay behind on the last leg of the journey. A vain man who is disproportionately proud of his status as a

ranger, LaBoeuf ends up saving Rooster’s life by shooting Lucky Ned Pepper just before the outlaw kills the fallen marshal. As he celebrates this shot, though, Chaney—who is at his side—smashes him over the head with a rock, at which point Mattie shoots the criminal and subsequently falls into a snake pit. When all is said and done and Rooster has extracted Mattie from the pit, LaBoeuf stays behind with Chaney’s body while Rooster rushes Mattie back to Fort Smith.

Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford) – An outlaw with a black mark on his face who murders Mattie’s father, Frank Ross. Before Chaney kills Frank, Mattie’s family believes he’s simply a man from Louisiana who is down on his luck. Because of this, Frank Ross hires him and brings him to Fort Smith to help him buy a group of ponies. However, what the Rosses don’t know is that Tom Chaney is really a man named Theron Chelmsford who murdered a Texan senator several months ago and has been on the run ever since. The night after Frank buys ponies from Stonehill, Tom Chaney goes out drinking and gambling. When he returns to the boarding house where he and Frank are staying, he drinks furiously and decides to go after the men who won his money. On his way out, Frank tries to stop him, so Chaney shoots him in the head, steals two **medallions** from him, and runs to Stonehill’s stables, where he steals Lucy, Frank’s horse. He then flees town and meets up with Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang of outlaws, escaping into Indian Territory. Mattie, for her part, wants Chaney to be hanged in Fort Smith, but LaBoeuf tells her that he’ll be taking him back to Texas, where he will collect a handsome reward. None of this comes to pass in the end, since Mattie ends up shooting Chaney in the head after he briefly kidnaps her. The kickback of her old pistol sends her reeling backwards into a pit of rattlesnakes and bats, but she survives and ultimately accomplishes what she set out to do: avenge her father’s death.

Frank Ross (Mattie’s Father) – Mattie’s father, and a veteran of the Civil War. Traveling from Little Rock to Fort Smith to buy a group of ponies from Stonehill, Frank Ross stays with Tom Chaney—his employee who accompanied him—at a local boarding house, where Chaney eventually murders him because Frank tries to stop him from chasing down a group of men who bested him while gambling. This is the event that sets the plot of *True Grit* into motion, as Mattie vows to avenge Frank’s death.

Stonehill – A “stock trader” who buys and sells horses. On the day of Frank’s death, Stonehill sells him a group of ponies, letting them go for a low price because he’s having trouble finding buyers. When Mattie comes to Fort Smith in the aftermath of her father’s death, she asks Stonehill to buy back the ponies, since her family no longer needs them. At first, Stonehill refuses, thinking he’ll be able to stand his ground in a negotiation with a little girl. However, he soon sees that Mattie is clever and stubborn, driving a hard bargain and threatening to take him to court if he doesn’t cooperate. And though he

doesn't think she has a good case, he realizes that the courts would most likely favor "a widow and her three small children" over him, so he begrudgingly agrees to buy the ponies.

Lucky Ned Pepper – A notorious outlaw who leads a band of criminals, including Haze, The Original Greaser Bob, Harold Permallee, and Farrell Permallee. After killing Frank Ross, Tom Chaney falls in with Ned and his crew, escaping with them into Indian Country. During this period, Ned and his boys have just held up a mail train and are on the run, though it's worth noting that they're seemingly *always* on the run. In fact, Rooster has had a number of encounters with Lucky Ned Pepper, even shooting off the criminal's lip at one point. When Chaney encounters Mattie in the woods and forcibly brings her to the outlaws' camp, Ned Pepper shows a surprising amount of kindness, ordering Chaney not to kill her when he and the rest of the gang leave them alone, though this only makes Chaney angry because he understands that Ned is abandoning him. Shortly thereafter, Ned and the clan come upon Rooster, who charges at them and kills everyone but Ned himself before toppling over. As Ned approaches to finish Rooster off, LaBoeuf shoots him from the hilltop, killing him instantly.

Quincy – An outlaw whom Mattie, LaBoeuf, and Rooster find in a dugout in Indian Territory. Along with his companion Moon, Quincy is waiting for Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang, planning to give them a group of stolen horses to make their getaway easier in the aftermath of their mail-train heist. To get Quincy and Moon to come out of the hut, Rooster tells LaBoeuf to put a jacket over the chimney, which forces them to open the door, at which point Rooster shoots into the smoke, ultimately hitting Moon in the leg. Eventually, Quincy tells them they won't fight back, and the trio enters the dugout, where they question the men about what they're doing. When Moon starts to give them information about Ned Pepper, though, Quincy chops off his friend's fingers to silence him. Seeing this, LaBoeuf shoots Quincy in the neck.

Moon – An outlaw whom Mattie, LaBoeuf, and Rooster find in a dugout in Indian Territory. Along with his companion Quincy, Moon is waiting for Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang, planning to give them a group of stolen horses to make their getaway easier in the aftermath of their mail-train heist. To get Moon and Quincy to come out of the hut, Rooster tells LaBoeuf to put a jacket over the chimney, which forces them to open the door, at which point Rooster shoots into the smoke, ultimately hitting Moon in the leg. Eventually, Quincy tells them they won't fight back, and the trio enters the dugout, where they question the men about what they're doing. Although Quincy refuses to say anything about Ned Pepper, Moon is afraid that he's going to die, so he's more willing to cooperate, since Rooster promises to help treat his injuries if he gives them information. As he tries to do this, though, Quincy chops off four of Moon's fingers with a knife, at which point LaBoeuf shoots Quincy in the neck. In his final moments, Moon tells the trio that Lucky Ned Pepper

and his gang are planning to come to the dugout sometime that night to retrieve the horses that he and Quincy stole for them.

Captain Boots Finch – A Native American policeman in "the Choctaw Light Horse," which is the police force that strictly deals with Native American crimes in Indian Territory. Captain Finch is a good friend of Rooster's because of how much time Rooster has spent tracking outlaws throughout Indian Territory. As such, he's happy to tell him what he knows about Lucky Ned Pepper and his whereabouts when Rooster, LaBoeuf, and Mattie stop by to see him.

Lawyer Daggett – Mattie's family lawyer. When Mattie convinces Stonehill to buy back the ponies he sold to her father, she sends a telegraph message to Daggett explaining that she needs him to write out the terms of the deal so that Stonehill will be comfortable paying a child. Mattie believes wholeheartedly in Daggett's usefulness, often telling people that she has a "good lawyer" and that she isn't afraid to go to court. When Daggett responds to Mattie's initial message, he sends her what she needs but also implores her to come home, saying that her mother is worried. Before Daggett can come fetch her himself, though, Mattie leaves Fort Smith to accompany Rooster and LaBoeuf on the manhunt.

Mrs. Floyd – The owner of the boarding house where Mattie stays while she's in Fort Smith. Mrs. Floyd knows all about the death of Mattie's father, since Frank and Tom Chaney were staying in her boarding house at the time of the murder. Much to Mattie's dismay, Mrs. Floyd often speaks about the matter in front of the other boarders, despite the fact that Mattie would rather keep such details private. Mrs. Floyd also takes certain liberties because Mattie is a child, ultimately making her share a bed with an old woman named Grandma Turner even though Mattie is paying for her own room. Still, Mrs. Floyd is a kind woman who helps nurse Mattie back to health when she falls ill.

Odus Wharton – A criminal from a family of outlaws. Rooster has been chasing down the Whartons for a long time, killing most of them whenever he encounters them. On one particular occasion, Rooster tracks down Odus, C.C., and Aaron Wharton—the only three remaining male family members—right after they've just murdered a man and stolen his life's savings. Although Odus manages to stay alive, Rooster kills C.C. and Aaron because they attack him and kill his partner, Potter. Rooster then has to testify during Odus's trial, which is the first time Mattie hears him speak.

Yarnell Poindexter – An African-American man who works for Frank Ross. Yarnell accompanies Mattie when she travels to Fort Smith to claim her father's body. When she informs him that she won't be returning to Little Rock with him, he's hesitant to let her go off on her own, though he clearly understands that she's too strong-willed to be stopped. He tells her to be careful and agrees to ride the train home with the coffin.

Mattie's Mother – Mattie's mother, who is a relatively absent character. In the wake of Frank Ross's death, Mattie's mother stays at home in Little Rock with her two youngest children, sending Mattie and Yarnell to take care of family business in Fort Smith. Throughout her journey, Mattie knows that her mother must be worried about her, but this does nothing to stop her from pursuing Chaney. When Mattie has to get her arm amputated at the end of her adventure, her mother sits by her side despite the fact that she's not usually able to stomach such gruesome sights.

Blackie – Mattie's pony, which she buys from Stonehill. Blackie belongs to the group of ponies that Frank Ross bought from Stonehill just before dying, meaning that Mattie effectively sells Blackie back to Stonehill only to purchase him once again when she decides to go on the manhunt with Rooster. Mattie feels strongly for Blackie, who she sees as a loyal animal. When Rooster rescues her from the snake pit, he rides Blackie back toward Fort Smith, but the horse dies of exhaustion before reaching town.

Columbus Potter – A U.S. marshal, and Rooster's best friend. Potter and Rooster were both part of Quantrill's group of guerilla soldiers during the Civil War. Afterward, they escaped and went their separate ways, though their paths eventually crossed when Potter—by that time a marshal—picked up Rooster in connection to a murder. Instead of arresting him, though, he took his friend back to Fort Smith and helped him become a marshal himself. Potter is later killed when he and Rooster pursue Odus, C. C., and Aaron Wharton.

William Quantrill – The nonfictional leader of a pro-Confederate group of men who tore through Kansas and Missouri fighting Union soldiers and sympathizers. Quantrill is known for his violent ways, as he led his men in the infamous Lawrence Massacre of 1863, in which he and his men killed roughly 200 civilians. Although he doesn't talk much about it, Rooster belonged to Quantrill's group of guerilla soldiers.

Frank James – A nonfictional outlaw, and the older brother of the notorious Jesse James. Like Rooster, Frank James was part of William Quantrill's group of guerilla soldiers, who fought against pro-Union forces during and after the Civil War. As part of this group, he took part in the infamous Lawrence Massacre in 1863, in which roughly 200 civilians were murdered. Later, he and his brother lived as bandits, perpetrating a number of violent robberies. After Jesse died in 1882, Frank gave himself over to the authorities and spent less than two years in jail. In *True Grit*, Rooster works with Frank in his old age, as both men join a traveling circus because of their widely known reputations. When Mattie comes to visit Rooster at this circus, she meets Frank but calls him "trash."

Jesse James – A nonfictional outlaw, and the younger brother of Frank James. Like Frank and Rooster, Jesse was part of William Quantrill's group of guerilla soldiers, who fought

against pro-Union forces during and after the Civil War. However, Rooster tells Mattie that he doesn't remember meeting Jesse, though Potter tells him he was already quite vicious when he was part of Quantrill's gang.

Cole Younger – A nonfictional outlaw, and another member of William Quantrill's group of guerilla soldiers. When Mattie goes to the traveling circus to see Rooster, Cole tells her that he recently passed away. When he says this, he is polite and kind, and she sees him as a man who—unlike Frank James—has atoned for his moral wrongdoings.

The Sheriff – The head police officer in Fort Smith. The sheriff tells Mattie about her father's murder and gives her Frank's dragoon revolver. He also gives her Rooster's name when she asks for a list of the best U.S. marshals. Although the sheriff mentions Rooster's name, he concludes that he isn't actually the *best* marshal, since he's too mean and drinks too much. However, this description pleases Mattie, so she decides to find Rooster.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Grandma Turner – An old woman Mattie has to share a bed with at Mrs. Floyd's boarding house. Mattie doesn't like having to room with Grandma Turner, though she enjoys reading books to her when she's sick and they're both on a very strong "Bile Activator" medicine.

C.C. Wharton – Odus Wharton's brother, who is shot and killed by Rooster after he and his father, Aaron, attack him and kill his partner, Potter.

Aaron Wharton – Odus and C.C. Wharton's father, who is shot and killed by Rooster after he and C.C. attack him and kill his partner, Potter. Odus's lawyer Mr. Goudy reveals that Aaron's body was found in the fire, suggesting that Rooster must have dragged him there on purpose.

Judy – Frank Ross's horse, which Chaney steals after murdering him. Although Mattie tracks down Chaney himself, she never manages to find Judy.

Haze – One of the bandits in Lucky Ned Pepper's gang. Haze helps Ned rob a mail train shortly after Chaney murders Frank Ross. When Rooster, LaBoeuf, and Mattie corner Ned's group in front of a small dugout in Indian Territory, Haze is one of the few bandits to die.

Harold Permallee – A bandit who runs with Lucky Ned Pepper. According to Mattie, Harold is "simpleminded."

Farrell Permallee – A bandit who runs with Lucky Ned Pepper, and Harold Permallee's brother.

The Original Greaser Bob – A Mexican bandit who's part of Lucky Ned Pepper's gang of outlaws. To Mattie's great amazement, Greaser Bob manages to escape Rooster and LaBoeuf twice, lying down on his horse both times in order to avoid gunfire.

The Undertaker – An Irish man who asks Mattie to identify her father’s body. When Mattie does this, the undertaker takes advantage of her by charging an exorbitant fee to ship Frank’s body back to Little Rock, but Mattie decides not to argue.

Mr. Barlow – The state prosecutor in Odus Wharton’s trial. Mr. Barlow questions Rooster, giving him an opportunity to explain why and how he chased down Odus, C.C., and Aaron. Mattie sets down this interaction in her transcript of the trial, which is the first time she hears Rooster speak.

Polk Goudy – Odus Wharton’s lawyer, who cross-examines Rooster and suggests that he is unnecessarily violent, arguing that he has a personal vendetta against the Wharton family. Mattie sets down this interaction in her transcript of Odus’s trial, which is the first time she hears Rooster speak.

Judge Isaac Parker – The judge who presides over Odus Wharton’s trial. A man known for his ruthless but moral decisions, Judge Parker doesn’t tolerate any nonsense in his court, though he’s forced to prolong Odus’s trial by a day because Mr. Goudy’s cross-examination of Rooster takes too long.

Lee A Chinese man who owns a grocery store, in the back of which he plays cards with Rooster stays.

Although Chaney has committed many crimes over the years, none of these matter to Mattie, since she’s focused only on her father’s death. Because she wants Chaney to suffer specifically because of what he did to her father, she obsesses over the logistical details of his punishment, ultimately caring as much about this as she cares about catching him in the first place. When LaBoeuf first approaches her and suggests that he join Rooster Cogburn in his hunt for Chaney, Mattie makes her intentions clear, saying, “Well, it is nothing to me one way or the other except that when we do get Chaney he is not going to Texas, he is coming back to Fort Smith and hang.” By saying this, she expresses her desire to see Chaney die in the same town in which he killed her father. In turn, readers see Mattie’s emotional attachment to this case, as she yearns for a certain poetic justice regarding Chaney’s execution. She has invested herself so deeply in this vision of retribution that she rejects any other form of punishment. LaBoeuf, for his part, has been chasing Chaney for four months because of crimes he committed long before killing Frank Ross, including the murder of a Texan senator and his dog. For this reason, he simply wants to catch the man, but Mattie remains steadfast in her desire to see Chaney hang in Fort Smith, saying, “I want Chaney to pay for killing my father and not some Texas bird dog.” When she says this, it’s clear that she has already become unswervingly preoccupied with a very specific form of revenge, and her unwillingness to compromise only further demonstrates the kind of monomania that often comes along with this thirst for retribution.

Given her penchant for revenge, it’s unsurprising that Mattie hires Rooster Cogburn, a U.S. marshal known for his ruthless, uncompromising ways. Rooster agrees to track down Chaney because he wants to earn money, but it’s not hard to see that he’s well-acquainted with what it’s like to have a personal vendetta against someone. This becomes apparent when Rooster undergoes a cross-examination in court, which is the first time Mattie encounters him. As she watches, Rooster answers questions about his history with the Wharton family, a clan of criminals he has been tracking for years. Most recently, Rooster killed two of the remaining three Wharton men, and now Odus Wharton’s lawyer tries to demonstrate to the court that Rooster has used unnecessary violence because of his “bad blood” with the family. To that end, he uncovers the fact that Rooster not only killed two Wharton men without trying first to avoid violence, but also dragged one of their dead bodies into a fire—an act that illustrates his emotional investment in the case and his proclivity toward revenge. Later, when Mattie asks Rooster about this incident, he admits that he should have killed Odus (the one who got away), but that he was trying to bring him in alive to collect the reward money. “You will sometimes let money interfere with your notion of what is right,” he laments, making the morally backward insinuation that it’s better to kill a criminal than let him testify. Needless to say, this mentality resonates with Mattie, as it



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.



REVENGE

In *True Grit*, Portis demonstrates just how far people are willing to go for revenge. When fourteen-year-old Mattie Ross learns that her

father has been killed by Tom Chaney, she yearns for vengeance. As the novel progresses, she develops an uncompromising thirst for retribution, one that illustrates the extent to which revenge can consume a person. Unsatisfied with the idea of LaBoeuf—a Texas Ranger—arresting Chaney for a different crime, she insists that the criminal must understand that his defeat is the direct result of having killed Frank Ross. To ensure this, Mattie puts her life at risk by coming along on the manhunt, refusing to be deterred despite the rugged conditions of the journey and the dangers of tracking down a violent criminal. In turn, Portis illustrates how obsessive people can become when pursuing retribution, suggesting that the mere idea of revenge is often enough to dangerously overshadow a person’s sense of self-preservation.

Mattie wants to bring Chaney to justice, but on her own terms.

prioritizes revenge over legally regulated forms of justice. Although Mattie eventually succeeds in avenging her father's death, it's worth noting that her fixation on revenge has consequences. When she first sees her father's dead body, she makes a resolution to do everything she can to bring down Chaney. "I would not rest easy until that Louisiana cur was roasting and screaming in hell!" she declares. However, it just so happens that she doesn't "rest easy" even after Chaney's death, since when she takes aim and shoots him in the head, the blast from her gun is enough to knock her over, sending her into a pit, where a rattlesnake bites her hand. Because of this, her arm is amputated above the elbow. This, it seems, is the price she has paid for refusing to let LaBoeuf and Rooster track down Chaney according to their own plan. Unwilling to accept the idea of Chaney being executed in Texas, she has put herself in harm's way, thinking about nothing other than getting even with her father's killer. Her crazed preoccupation with vengeance has consumed her entirely, eclipsing any concerns she might have for her own physical wellbeing. Because *True Grit* is narrated by Mattie in a straightforward, boastful manner, though, Portis doesn't necessarily condemn this obsession with revenge. Instead, he simply presents a portrait of how strongly such convictions can take hold of a person, ultimately letting readers decide for themselves whether or not Mattie's sacrifice is worthwhile.



MATURITY, INDEPENDENCE, AND EXPECTATIONS

In many ways, *True Grit* is an examination of what people expect of children. Because Mattie is only fourteen years old, people repeatedly write her off, making inaccurate assumptions about her based on her age. This dynamic is compounded by the fact that she is a woman in the Wild West, where everyone believes only men are fit for danger and adventure. Despite these prejudices, though, Mattie remains undeterred by what people think of her, refusing to let her age and gender stop her from behaving independently and courageously—she even manages to leverage her unassuming position from time to time. In addition, the mere fact that she makes her way into Indian Territory and successfully carries out her revenge plot against Chaney is proof that she's capable of defying society's expectations. As a result, Portis suggests that age and gender are arbitrary indications of a person's worth or capabilities.

It is clear from the very beginning of *True Grit* that the society in which Mattie lives has certain assumptions about young girls—namely, that they are helpless and depend upon adults. "People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood," Mattie writes, outlining that, although she is a motivated and independent young person, very few people take her seriously. This means that a number of adults try to

take advantage of her when she comes to Fort Smith without a proper guardian. For instance, when she visits the undertaker to identify and collect her father's body, the man capitalizes on the fact that she is a child by overcharging her for the cost of shipping the coffin back to her home. Yarnell—a black man who used to work for her father—takes her aside and points out that she's getting ripped off, but Mattie sees no way around the situation, since she is young and Yarnell isn't a powerful white man, meaning that neither of them have power in the situation. "We will not haggle with him," she tells Yarnell, clearly understanding that it will be impossible to stand up to the undertaker. In this moment, then, readers see the frustrating reality that Mattie is at a disadvantage simply because of her age and gender.

Despite the hardships Mattie faces because of her youth and gender, there are certain contexts in which she can use society's expectations to her benefit. This is the case when she visits Stonehill, the man who sold her father a group of ponies just before his death. Because Mattie's father is dead, the family no longer has any use for the ponies, so Mattie tries to convince Stonehill to buy them back. This is a difficult deal to make, since Stonehill has been trying to get rid of the ponies for a long time, but Mattie surprises him by using her own disadvantages to her favor. "I will take it to law," she says when he refuses to buy back the ponies. "You must do as you think best," he replies, clearly assuming there's no "credence" in a threat from a little girl. "We will see if a widow and her three small children can get fair treatment in the courts of this city," she says, and he immediately becomes anxious, beginning to see that she might actually be able to harm him. What's fascinating about this moment is Stonehill's gradual realization that the very thing that made him think of Mattie as unthreatening—the fact that she's a young, fatherless girl—is exactly what would enable her to win a court case against him. This is a shrewd rhetorical move on Mattie's part, one that demonstrates her understanding of the world and, thus, her maturity. As such, readers see that she defies Stonehill's expectations of her by *embracing* those expectations and weaponizing them against him.

People underestimate more than Mattie's negotiation skills. Because she isn't a man, people assume she doesn't have what it takes to be bold. Crucially, Tom Chaney makes this grave miscalculation when Mattie finally finds him in Indian Territory. Having happened upon the criminal while he's giving water to a group of horses, she pulls a gun on him. Even though she certainly has the gumption to shoot him, she has had very little experience with guns, which is why she forgets to cock it. This gives Chaney an undue amount of confidence, reassuring him that Mattie isn't a true threat. In fact, he's so confident that he points out that she'll have to cock the gun if she intends to shoot him. When Mattie goes to do this, he coaches her, saying, "All the way back till it locks." Finally, she manages to prepare

the weapon, at which point she says, “You will not go with me?” In response, he arrogantly says, “I think not. It is just the other way around. You are going with me.” Throughout this interaction, he fails to recognize her resolve because he’s convinced that a young girl would never be able to shoot down a criminal like him. In other words, his failure to take Mattie seriously allows him to let his guard down and, as a result, she shoots him in the stomach. Once again, then, Mattie subverts expectations, effectively benefitting from the fact that people underestimate her. In turn, Portis intimates that although society might subject one to certain patronizing expectations, these expectations can actually present a person with an opportunity to empower themselves.



COLLABORATION, COMPANIONSHIP, AND LOYALTY

In *True Grit*, Portis pays special attention to the ways in which people band together to defeat mutual enemies. When Mattie—who wants nothing but revenge—hires Rooster to catch Tom Chaney, the cantankerous old U.S. marshal accepts her offer simply because he’s interested in making money. Similarly, LaBoeuf wants to catch Tom Chaney for his own reasons, meaning that each of the novel’s three central characters have their own motivations when it comes to the manhunt. However, they wind up working together to catch Chaney and the gang of outlaws with whom he travels, putting aside their individual agendas and exemplifying the power of collaboration. Portis uses this success story to suggest that it can be worthwhile for people to work together even when they have opposing motivations. And since Rooster eventually risks his life in order to save Mattie, Portis intimates that the very process of collaboration can also lead to genuine feelings of friendship and loyalty.

Mattie and Rooster’s relationship begins as nothing more than a transaction, since all Rooster cares about is earning money for catching Chaney. This impersonal arrangement doesn’t bother Mattie, who’s only interested in making sure her father’s death is avenged. As such, their companionship is based on the fact that they both want to achieve the same thing but for different reasons. It is because of the emotionally detached nature of this relationship that Rooster goes out of his way to emphasize that he doesn’t care what happens to Mattie herself, insisting that she shouldn’t accompany him on the journey because he can’t be bothered to protect her. “If you want this job done and done fast you will let me do it my own way,” he says, eventually adding, “What if you get sick [...]? I can do nothing for you.” This doesn’t matter to Mattie, since she is uninterested in friendliness and companionship. As long as Rooster helps her get what she wants, she doesn’t mind how he treats her. As a result, they decide to work together to find Chaney, each one accepting that their alliance has nothing to do with true companionship and everything to do with

convenience.

Unfortunately for Mattie, the impersonal nature of her arrangement with Rooster gives him no reason to remain loyal to her when LaBoeuf informs him that he could make more money if he brought Chaney to Texas. This, of course, is not what Mattie wants, but Rooster tries to convince her to go along with the new plan, clearly enticed by the idea of sharing LaBoeuf’s cash prize. “Well now, he might come in handy,” he says regarding LaBoeuf’s involvement, but Mattie insists that they don’t need the Texas Ranger’s help. Nonetheless, Rooster can’t resist LaBoeuf’s tempting offer, and though he has already agreed to help Mattie, he decides to change course. To justify this, he tries to act as if he isn’t betraying Mattie, pointing out that he will still be catching Chaney regardless of where he brings him. “You are being stiff-necked about this,” he says. “You are young. It is time you learned that you cannot have your way in every little particular. Other people have got their interests too.” This final sentence is worth noting, since it spotlights Rooster’s tendency to fend for himself above all else. In this moment, then, Portis suggests that Rooster is a man who doesn’t care about pleasing his companions or remaining loyal to other people. This also casts doubt on the notion that people with disparate motivations can actually work together successfully on a single task.

Although it might seem unlikely that Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf will be able to work together despite their conflicting interests, Portis intimates that it takes time for collaboration to take hold and transform into genuine companionship. This is made evident by the fact that Rooster eventually demonstrates his willingness to stand up for Mattie, despite his initial lone-wolf mentality. Shortly after Rooster and LaBoeuf set off on the journey without her, Mattie rides after them, and when she finally catches up, LaBoeuf starts whipping her with a small wooden “switch,” but Rooster interferes by pointing his gun at the Texas Ranger and ordering him to stop. In doing so, he reasserts his loyalty to Mattie, proving that he’s not quite as self-interested as he might seem. Even LaBoeuf soon comes to accept and appreciate Mattie’s presence, later admitting that she deserves to continue the manhunt with them when the going gets tough. In this way, the three characters put aside their contrasting motivations and work together to find Chaney, proving that it’s possible to work together toward a mutual goal even when each person has their own reasons for undertaking the task.

Portis also demonstrates the practical benefits of collaboration and loyalty, as each of the three characters escapes death because of their alliance. To this end, LaBoeuf saves Rooster’s life by shooting Lucky Ned Pepper (the leader of Chaney’s gang) from afar just as the outlaw is about to kill Rooster. As LaBoeuf celebrates this fantastic shot, Tom Chaney—who is at his side with Mattie—smashes a rock over his head. Before he can finish off the incapacitated Texas Ranger, though, Mattie

shoots Chaney in the head, thereby saving LaBoeuf's life. Unfortunately, the force of this shot throws Mattie into a snake pit, where she becomes lodged in the mouth of a bat cave and a rattlesnake bites her hand. Just as she's about to slip further down, though, Rooster propels himself into the treacherous snake pit, at which point LaBoeuf hoists them out. Although Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf's collaboration began because it was convenient, this moment of self-sacrifice and teamwork reveals that it has blossomed into a real sense of companionship—one that encourages them to protect each other. By tracking the development of this unlikely camaraderie, then, Portis suggests that simply going through the motions of collaboration often leads to very real—and valuable—connections.



VIOLENCE, COURAGE, AND INTELLIGENCE

The majority of the characters in *True Grit* celebrate a brutal kind of courage, one that has its roots in violence and aggression. In particular, people like Rooster and LaBoeuf are proud of their daring ways and even compete over who's tougher or who's a better marksman. In keeping with this, Portis demonstrates how important it is in the macho culture of the Wild West to prove oneself, something that can seemingly only be done by committing some grand act of strength or violence. Because of this investment in such a rugged form of bravery, the characters in *True Grit* often overlook the value of intelligence, believing that physical acts are the only marker of true courage and resilience. In turn, Mattie's cleverness allows her to make up for the fact that she's an inexperienced young woman who isn't necessarily physically capable of the same kind of reckless bravado as the men around her. And yet, she *does* exhibit physical bravery, combining her invigorated spirit with her intelligence to outwit her adversaries. As such, Portis implies that it's foolish to depend solely on the brutish "grit" that is so lauded in cowboy culture, ultimately indicating that acting bravely *and* intelligently is usually more effective than simply relying on violence and blind courage.

Mattie exists in a society that stands in awe of men who prove themselves through acts of violence. The people surrounding Mattie seemingly care more about whether or not a man has "grit" than whether or not he's a good person. In alignment with this, Rooster Cogburn enjoys a hallowed reputation as a feared and respected U.S. marshal simply because everyone knows he's ruthless. The mere fact that he works for the nation's federal government is a testament to how his history as a fearless man plays to his favor. After all, he used to be part of a gang of outlaws that terrorized the West in the final years of the Civil War, a group that LaBoeuf describes as "not soldiers at all but murdering thieves." And yet, in spite of his troubling personal history, Rooster remains a revered marshal. Mattie herself serves as a good representation of her society's

willingness to excuse violent transgressions, as she focuses exclusively on the benefits of Rooster's mercilessness. When Stonehill asks her why she has chosen to hire Rooster, she says, "They say he has grit. I wanted a man with grit." In response, Stonehill implies that the very same "grit" that attracts Mattie is what makes Rooster a dangerous, morally suspect man, but when he warns her against getting involved with such a character, she merely says, "The good Christian does not flinch from difficulties." By saying this, she embodies her society's belief that it's honorable to brazenly confront adversity.

At the same time, though, Mattie is capable of recognizing the negative aspects of her society's obsession with aggressive, hypermasculine displays of power. For instance, when Rooster and LaBoeuf start arguing about who's better at shooting, they do nothing but distract themselves from the more important task. "This is the famous horse killer from El Paso, Texas," Rooster tells his friend Captain Finch, making fun of LaBoeuf for accidentally shooting Ned Pepper's horse instead of Ned himself. This comment sets off a dispute in which each man tries to prove his marksmanship skills by throwing corn paddies and shooting at them in the air. "They drank whiskey and used up about sixty corn dodgers like that," Mattie writes. It's worth noting here that the group is supposed to be chasing after Ned Pepper and his gang, but they've distracted themselves by wasting food and trying to prove their superiority. "It was entertaining for a while but there was nothing educational about it. I grew more and more impatient with them," Mattie explains, and she finally tells them to stop. In this moment, readers see that, despite Rooster and LaBoeuf's respected reputations, their need to feel dominant only makes them behave stupidly, whereas Mattie is able to recognize their foolishness.

Mattie's intelligence not only helps her see through the useless posturing of her companions; it also allows her to get the best of people. When she combines her daring spirit with her quick-wittedness, she manages to carry out acts of bravery that rough-and-tumble men like Rooster could only accomplish through the use of brute force (which often only creates more trouble). For example, when she attempts to cross the river on a boat with Rooster and LaBoeuf at the outset of their journey, the two men instruct a deckhand to escort her back to land. Despite her protests, the deckhand leads her and her horse off the boat and up a large hill, but she doesn't give up. Instead of using physical aggression to challenge this man, she says, "Wait, stop a minute," pretending that there's something "wrong" with her hat. When he stops and turns to look at her, she kicks her horse into action and rides back down the hill, leaving him in the dust and leading the horse through a narrow part of the river. This is a perfect representation of the way she combines quick thinking with acts of bravery, since she gets the best of the deckhand by outwitting him, and then courageously steers her horse into the water, eventually reaching the other side of the

river before Rooster and LaBoeuf even come ashore. It is exactly this unyielding spirit that soon impresses LaBoeuf, who advocates for her when Rooster suggests she turn back toward the end of the journey. "I think she has done fine myself," LaBoeuf says. "She has won her spurs, so to speak." In this fashion, Portis conveys the message that a person need not turn to violence and brutish notions of "grit" to prove themselves. Rather, courage and resilience ought to be combined with intelligence, which is often undervalued in the cutthroat world of the American Frontier.



SYMBOLS

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



FRANK ROSS'S GOLD PIECES

Because Mattie wants to recover everything Chaney stole from her father, the two pieces of California gold the outlaw took from Frank's "trouser band" come to represent her undying desire to rectify her loss. Although the gold pieces are certainly less important to her than the idea of catching Chaney himself, she thinks rather frequently about finding them. After her first encounter with Lucky Ned Pepper's gang of bandits, she actually finds one of the pieces of gold, thereby enjoying a brief moment of triumph. However, she doesn't ever manage to track down the other one, even after killing Chaney. "I will say here that Judy was never recovered, nor was the second California gold piece," she writes at the end of the novel. "I kept the other one for years, until our house burned. We found no trace of it in the ashes." Combined with her failure to recover the final piece of gold, the fact that she eventually loses the one she *did* find suggests that it's impossible for a person to make up for true emotional loss with material goods. In other words, securing one of her father's gold pieces does nothing to make up for the fact that Frank Ross is dead. In turn, the gold pieces symbolize not only Mattie's quest to rectify what happened to her father, but the notion that it's not necessarily possible to ever *fully* recover from a profound personal loss.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harry N. Abrams edition of *True Grit* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood but it did not seem so strange then, although I will say it did not happen every day.

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford), Frank Ross (Mattie's Father)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening sentence of *True Grit*. From the very beginning of the novel, Mattie directs readers' attention to the fact that people don't think she's capable of "aveng[ing]" her father's death. Indeed, people don't "give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl" would be able to go on a long journey to track down her father's killer. Because she's a young woman, she doesn't fit the stereotype of a tough cowboy with "grit," which is the kind of person her community expects to carry out violent acts of revenge. By outlining these expectations, then, Mattie prepares readers to reconsider what it takes to successfully venture into the typically male-dominant world of the Wild West, where people champion brutal acts of bravery but have a hard time believing that such acts could be perpetrated by "a fourteen-year-old girl." What's more, Mattie recognizes that she defies society's expectations of little girls, admitting that it's "not every day" that young women like herself "go off in wintertime to" search for vengeance. In this way, she acknowledges the constraints her society places on her without letting them dictate her actions.

☞ Tom Chaney raised his rifle and shot him in the forehead, killing him instantly. There was no more provocation than that and I tell it as it was told to me by the high sheriff of Sebastian County. Some people might say, well, what business was it of Frank Ross to meddle? My answer is this: he was trying to do that short devil a good turn. Chaney was a tenant and Papa felt responsibility. He was his brother's keeper. Does that answer your question?

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), The Sheriff, Frank Ross (Mattie's Father), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mattie narrates the moment of her father's death, when Tom Chaney shoots him point-blank in the head. Having just lost a significant amount of money while gambling, Chaney rushed back to the boarding house where he and Frank were staying while they were in Fort Smith. He then got drunk and grabbed his gun, planning to go fight the men who won his money. When Frank tried to stop him, Chaney "shot him in the forehead." Mattie notes that this was completely uncalled for, since there was no true "provocation" on her father's part. In fact, Frank was only trying to *help* Chaney avoid trouble, knowing that he was going to cause a stir. Mattie sees her father as a very kind man, someone who was loyal to people like Chaney. "He was trying to do that short devil a good turn," she notes, adding that her father felt as if he were "responsib[le]" for Chaney because Chaney was his "tenant." As the novel progresses, readers will see the extent to which Mattie values this kind of loyalty, since she herself eventually benefits from others taking responsibility for her in dangerous situations.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ We went to the man's office and I signed some coroners papers. The charge for the coffin and the embalming was something over sixty dollars. The shipping charge to Dardanelle was \$9.50.


Yarnell took me outside the office. He said, "Miss Mattie, that man trying to stick you."

I said, "Well, we will not haggle with him."

He said, "That is what he counting on."

I said, "We will let it go."

Related Characters: Yarnell Poindexter, Mattie Ross (speaker), Frank Ross (Mattie's Father), The Undertaker

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Mattie visits the undertaker in Fort Smith with Yarnell to identify her father's body. After she sees the cadaver and feels enraged about what Tom Chaney has done, she has to face the scheming undertaker, who charges

her an unnecessarily high amount of money to transport Frank's body back to Dardanelle in Yell County. This is a good example of the ways in which people try to take advantage of Mattie because of her age. Indeed, the undertaker assumes that she's incapable of "hagg[ing]" with him, so he seizes the opportunity to make more money. However, he's wrong to think that Mattie *can't* haggle, since she's perfectly capable of recognizing when someone is treating her unfairly. In this case, though, she doesn't feel like advocating for herself. "That is what he counting on," Yarnell points out, but Mattie decides to "let it go." This is perhaps because she has just seen her father's dead body, so she's in no mood to engage in a petty argument. In this moment, then, readers see that Mattie carefully chooses when to stand up for herself and when to back down, which is in and of itself a sign of maturity.

☛ I did not mind sleeping with Grandma Turner but I thought Mrs. Floyd had taken advantage of me. Still, I saw nothing to be gained from making a fuss at that hour. She already had my money and I was tired and it was too late to look for lodging elsewhere.

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Mrs. Floyd, Grandma Turner

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis



After a long day of settling her father's affairs in Fort Smith, Mattie goes to the Monarch boardinghouse only to discover that Mrs. Floyd has put her in a shared room with an old woman named Grandma Turner. Despite the fact that she has paid a decent wage, she has to live in subpar accommodations, sharing a bed with a stranger. "I thought Mrs. Floyd had taken advantage of me," Mattie writes, implying that the owner of the boardinghouse wouldn't have given her such lousy living quarters if she were an adult. Once again, then, readers see that Mattie is often at a disadvantage because of her age, as people like Mrs. Floyd and the undertaker see her inexperience and youth as excuses to mistreat her. However, Mattie usually doesn't fight these kinds of petty injustices, perhaps knowing that it will be more trouble than it's worth to argue over where she sleeps. In turn, she actually demonstrates her maturity by exercising restraint, thereby proving her sensible nature.

Chapter 3 Quotes

“I said, ‘I have hopes that the marshals will get him soon. His name is Tom Chaney. He worked for us. I am trying to get action. I aim to see him shot or hanged.’”

“Yes, yes, well might you labor to that end,” said Stonehill. “At the same time I will counsel patience. The brave marshals do their best but they are few in number. The lawbreakers are legion and they range over a vast country that offers many natural hiding places. The marshal travels about friendless and alone in that criminal nation. Every man’s hand is against him there save in large part for that of the Indian who has been cruelly imposed upon by felonious intruders from the States.”

Related Characters: Stonehill, Mattie Ross (speaker), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

During this conversation, Stonehill sets the stage for the manhunt that Mattie is about to embark upon (though he doesn’t yet know she herself will be going along on the journey). When Mattie tells him that she has high “hopes” that “the marshals will” chase down Tom Chaney, he gives her sage advice, telling her to embody “patience.” This is because he knows the “vast” nature of Indian Territory, where outlaws like Chaney are “felonious intruders” upon the Native Americans who live there. As he goes on, he frames the area as a “criminal nation,” talking about it as a lawless place where violence runs wild because of the bandits who seek refuge in the “many natural hiding places” throughout the land. In this fashion, Portis gives readers a sense of just how difficult it will be for Mattie to avenge her father’s death. Given how hard it is to track down a criminal in Indian Territory, the fact that Mattie eventually succeeds in taking revenge on Chaney is a testament to her determination.

“I cannot make an agreement with a child. You are not accountable. You cannot be bound to a contract.”

“Lawyer Daggett will back up any decision I make. You may rest easy on that score. You can confirm any agreement by telegraph.”

“This is a damned nuisance!” he exclaimed. “How am I to get my work done? I have a sale tomorrow.”

“There can be no settlement after I leave this office,” said I. “It will go to law.”

He worried with his eyeglasses for a minute and then said, “I will pay two hundred dollars to your father’s estate when I have in my hand a letter from your lawyer absolving me of all liability from the beginning of the world to date. It must be signed by your lawyer and your mother and it must be notarized.”

Related Characters: Stonehill, Mattie Ross (speaker), Mattie’s Mother, Frank Ross (Mattie’s Father), Lawyer Daggett

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Mattie and Stonehill as they negotiate over the ponies Frank Ross bought from Stonehill just before dying. Insisting that Stonehill should buy back the ponies, Mattie threatens to take him to court if he doesn’t cooperate. At first, Stonehill finds this threat ridiculous, saying he “cannot make an agreement with a child.” Mattie then once more has to face the fact that she’s often at a disadvantage because of her young age. However, unlike the other times in the novel when adults try to take advantage of her, here she stands up for herself, ultimately showing Stonehill that her threat to sue him is credible. “Lawyer Daggett will back up any decision I make,” she assures him, framing herself as a powerful young woman who has sway over an influential lawyer. This frustrates Stonehill, who thinks it’s a “nuisance” to have to deal with Mattie in this manner. Nevertheless, he can’t deny the power she has over him, so he eventually relents, offering to pay her despite his initial refusal to “make an agreement with a child.” As such, readers see that Mattie is perfectly capable of advocating for herself, using her maturity and wit to outsmart adults who think they can treat her unfairly.

MR. GOUDY: How many, Mr. Cogburn?

MR. COGBURN: I never shot nobody I didn't have to.

MR. GOUDY: That was not the question. How many?

MR. COGBURN: Shot or killed?



MR. GOUDY: Let us restrict it to "killed" so that we may have a manageable figure. How many people have you killed since you became a marshal for this court?

MR. COGBURN: Around twelve or fifteen, stopping men in flight and defending myself.

MR. GOUDY: Around twelve or fifteen. So many that you cannot keep a precise count. Remember that you are under oath. I have examined the records and a more accurate figure is readily available. Come now, how many?

MR. COGBURN: I believe them two Whartons made twenty-three.

Related Characters: Polk Goudy, Rooster Cogburn, Mattie Ross (speaker), C.C. Wharton, Aaron Wharton, Odus Wharton

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place during Odus Wharton's criminal trial, when Rooster testifies against him. In this particular moment, Mr. Goudy cross-examines Rooster, ultimately trying to portray him as a needlessly violent man. To do this, he urges Rooster to reveal how many people he has killed in the four years he's worked as a U.S. marshal. At first, Rooster tries to dodge the question, disputing the semantic difference between "shot" and "killed" as a way of side-stepping the matter. However, this backfires, as it allows Goudy to suggest that he has "shot" so many people that it would be impossible to come up with a "manageable figure." Of course, Rooster is one of the heroes of *True Grit*, but Goudy is correct to point out his excessively violent ways, and this line of questioning invites readers to consider Rooster's flaws. Mattie, for her part, celebrates his ruthless spirit, which is why she hires him to track down Chaney. In fact, the entire culture of the Wild West champions this kind of brutal "grit." At the same time, though, there's no denying that Rooster is a merciless killer, and the mere fact that he works as a U.S. marshal doesn't necessarily excuse this violent behavior. As such, readers see that he is a complicated character, since he tracks down outlaws while behaving like an outlaw himself.

Judge Parker knows. He is a old carpetbagger but he knows his rats. We had a good court here till the pettifogging lawyers moved in on it. You might think Polk Goudy is a fine gentleman to look at his clothes, but he is the sorriest son of a bitch that God ever let breathe. I know him well. Now they have got the judge down on me, and the marshal too. The rat-catcher is too hard on the rats. That is what they say. *Let up on them rats! Give them rats a fair show!* What kind of show did they give Columbus Potter? Tell me that. A finer man never lived.

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn (speaker), Odus Wharton, Columbus Potter, Judge Isaac Parker, Polk Goudy, Mattie Ross

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Rooster speaks these words to Mattie in a conversation about Odus Wharton's trial. Going on a rant about the state of the judicial system in Fort Smith, he compares criminals like Odus to "rats," since he has just shot a rat that was eating cornmeal out of a sack in his bedroom. What he mainly takes issue with is the idea—set forth by Goudy during the trial—that U.S. marshals ought to refrain from shooting criminals. Indeed, Goudy publicly chastised Rooster for his tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. This, Rooster thinks, is a ridiculous stance, one that is similar to saying, "*Let up on them rats! Give them rats a fair show!*" And though his excessively violent outlook seems to lack a certain sense of morality or empathy, it's worth noting that he would most likely have a hard time bringing people like Odus to court if he didn't shoot at them—after all, the only reason he was able to capture Odus was because he "winged" him with a bullet. As such, Portis outlines the difficulties that come along with being a U.S. marshal in the Wild West, which forces a person to either embrace brutality or fail to do their job well.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"I want Chaney to pay for killing my father and not some Texas bird dog."

"It will not be for the dog, it will be for the senator, and your father too. He will be just as dead that way, you see, and pay for all his crimes at once."

Related Characters: LaBoeuf, Mattie Ross (speaker), Rooster Cogburn, Frank Ross (Mattie's Father), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford), Stonehill

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73



Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place between Mattie and LaBoeuf during their first encounter, when they discuss the fact that they're both looking for Tom Chaney. At first, Mattie is happy to hear that a Texas ranger is tracking Chaney, since this only makes it more likely that he'll be brought to justice. However, she soon discovers that LaBoeuf intends to take Chaney back to Texas, since he has been hired to do so by the family of a senator that Chaney killed. Having explained to Mattie that Chaney killed this senator and his dog four months ago, LaBoeuf suggests that he and Rooster should work together to bring the down the outlaw, but Mattie stops him, saying she wants Chaney to be brought back to Fort Smith, not Texas. When LaBoeuf asks her why it matters where Chaney is executed, she says, "I want Chaney to pay for killing my father and not some Texas bird dog." By saying this, she reveals her desire to see the poetic justice that would come along with hanging Chaney in the same town that he murdered Frank Ross, thereby demonstrating her emotional investment in his punishment. LaBoeuf, on the other hand, is motivated first and foremost by the money he stands to earn by catching Chaney. Without Mattie's emotional investment, he fails to see why it matters where Chaney is hanged. LaBoeuf and Mattie have very different motives for wanting to catch Chaney, though this doesn't stop them from working together later in the novel.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ Right around 9 o'clock I went to the stock barn and exchanged my release for three hundred and twenty-five dollars in greenbacks. I had held longer amounts in my hand but this money, I fancied, would be pleasing out of proportion to its face value. But no, it was only three hundred and twenty-five dollars in paper and the moment fell short of my expectations. I noted the mild disappointment and made no more of it than that.

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Stonehill

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mattie receives \$325 from Stonehill, whom

she has convinced to buy back the ponies he sold to her father before his death. Because she worked hard to make this deal go through—negotiating with Stonehill despite his initial unwillingness to make an "agreement" with a child—she expects to feel a "pleasing" sense of fulfillment when she finally holds the cash. However, she finds herself disappointed, thinking that the bills are "only three hundred and twenty-five dollars in paper." This sudden let-down perhaps has something to do with the fact that she has become obsessed with something else, something that can't be monetized: revenge. Having fixated on the emotional victory of avenging her father's death, she finds that a stack of money does little to satisfy her. This is an important moment to note, considering that LaBoeuf—and, to a certain extent, Rooster—wants to catch Chaney for the monetary reward he'll receive by doing so. For Mattie, this kind of financial gain pales in comparison to the moral and sentimental satisfaction of bringing Chaney to justice. Readers thus see that her motives for pursuing Chaney are much different than those of her companions.

☞ Goudy will claim the boy was provoked and he will tell a bushel of lies about me. I should have put a ball in that boy's head instead of his collarbone. I was thinking about my fee. You will sometimes let money interfere with your notion of what is right.

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn (speaker), Odus Wharton, Polk Goudy, Mattie Ross

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rooster talks to Mattie about the outcome of Odus Wharton's trial, telling her that Mr. Goudy has gone to Washington, D.C. to talk to the president in the hopes of refuting Odus's sentence. Rooster is worried that Goudy will "claim the boy was provoked" and that he'll "tell a bushel of lies" in order to challenge the verdict. Because of this, Rooster wishes he had killed Odus when he had the chance, revealing his belief that it's better to simply do away with criminals than give them a chance to lie. This is a rather unsettling viewpoint, as it prioritizes violence over the legal system's rules regarding due process. Rather than giving Odus Wharton a chance to argue for his own innocence, Rooster would prefer to "put a ball in [his] head." In fact, the only reason he *didn't* do this is because bringing in criminals

while they're still alive fetches him more money as a U.S. marshal. "You will sometimes let money interfere with your notion of what is right," he admits. This is an interesting thing to say, for it suggests that Rooster actually believes killing a criminal is the "right" thing to do. His violent worldview even factors into his sense of morality, once again illustrating that he is a complicated character who employs ethically flawed methods in order to do what he thinks is "right."

☞ "Yes, a splendid inducement. Well, perhaps it will all work out to your satisfaction. I shall pray that you return safely, your efforts crowned with success. It may prove to be a hard journey."

"The good Christian does not flinch from difficulties."

"Neither does he rashly court them. The good Christian is not willful or presumptuous."

Related Characters: Mattie Ross, Stonehill (speaker), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford), Rooster Cogburn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Stonehill and Mattie talk about her plan to ride into Indian Territory to catch Tom Chaney. When she tells him that she hopes to bring the outlaw to justice, he commends her determination, praising her for pursuing Chaney despite the difficulties she's sure to face. At the same time, he mentions that it will "prove to be a hard journey," clearly aware of how difficult and dangerous it is to venture into lawless lands with the intention of finding a violent criminal. Despite this warning, though, Mattie remains unfazed, saying, "The good Christian does not flinch from difficulties." However, Stonehill is ready with a wise retort, pointing out that "the good Christian" *also* doesn't "rashly court" "difficulties." Indeed, it's rather clear that Mattie has become so invested in the idea of avenging her father's death that she has cast aside any kind of rational worry, thereby "courting" danger without stopping to think about the consequences. What's more, the fact that she frames her bravery as something that makes her a "good Christian" suggests that she has romanticized her own courage, seeing it as something that makes her an admirable, honorable person.

☞ "I want him to know he is being punished for killing my father. It is nothing to me how many dogs and fat men he killed in Texas."

"You can let him know that," said Rooster. "You can tell him to his face. You can spit on him and make him eat sand out of the road. You can put a ball in his foot and I will hold him while you do it. But we must catch him first. We will need some help. You are being stiff-necked about this. You are young. It is time you learned that you cannot have your way in every little particular. Other people have got their interests too."

"When I have bought and paid for something I will have my way. Why do you think I am paying you if not to have my way?"

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn, Mattie Ross (speaker), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford), LaBoeuf

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Mattie tries to convince Rooster not to team up with LaBoeuf, who has just told him that he can earn a large sum of money if he brings Chaney to Texas. When Rooster asks why Mattie cares where Chaney is hanged, she tells him that she wants "him to know he is being punished for killing" Frank Ross, not for killing a Texan senator and his dog. Like LaBoeuf has already done, Rooster tries to convince Mattie that it doesn't *matter* where Chaney is "punished," as long as he is caught and brought to justice. After trying to appeal to her in this way, he also points out that she is being "stiff-necked," blaming this stubbornness on her youth. "It is time you learned that you cannot have your way in every little particular," he says, patronizing her by acting as if she doesn't know how to handle herself in adult transactions. However, it's worth noting that—although Mattie is certainly being rigid about this—she *did* pay him to bring Chaney back to Fort Smith. As such, she isn't the one behaving poorly in this transaction, a fact that renders her the somewhat more mature person in this situation.

Chapter 6 Quotes

“In my country you can ride for days and see no ground water. I have lapped filthy water from a hoofprint and was glad to have it. You don’t know what discomfort is until you have nearly perished for water.”

Rooster said, “If I ever meet one of you Texas waddies that says he never drank from a horse track I think I will shake his hand and give him a Daniel Webster cigar.”

“Then you don’t believe it?” asked LaBoeuf.



“I believed it the first twenty-five times I heard it.”

“Maybe he did drink from one,” said I. “He is a Texas Ranger.”

“Is that what he is?” said Rooster. “Well now, I can believe that.”

LaBoeuf said, “You are getting ready to show your ignorance now, Cogburn. I don’t mind a little personal chaffing but I won’t hear anything against the Ranger troop from a man like you.”

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn, LaBoeuf, Mattie Ross (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place when Mattie, LaBoeuf, and Rooster set up camp for the first night of their journey. Although Mattie wants to prove to her two companions that she’s tough, she can’t help but complain about having to fetch water from a stream, since she has to carry the heavy bucket back up a difficult slope. Exhausted, she complains that she won’t go down to get more, adding that the water tastes bad. Hearing this, LaBoeuf tells her she should feel lucky just to have access to water, since he himself is used to going for days without finding any potable water. He then brags about being a Texas Ranger, saying that he has “lapped filthy water from a hoofprint.” When Rooster makes fun of him for saying this, readers see the strange ways in which these two men display their vanity, as Rooster challenges the one thing LaBoeuf loves most: his image as a valorous, hardy, and respected Texas Ranger. In the rugged world of *True Grit*, this is the ultimate insult, since people like LaBoeuf and Rooster want to be seen as tough, so disparaging their authority counts as much more than “personal chaffing,” ultimately challenging their egos.

“That is hard to believe.”

“What is?”

“One man riding at seven men like that.”

“It is true enough. We done it in the war. I seen a dozen bold riders stampede a full troop of regular cavalry. You go for a man hard enough and fast enough and he don’t have time to think about how many is with him, he thinks about himself and how he may get clear out of the wrath that is about to set down on him.”

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn, Mattie Ross (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Mattie and Rooster. As they sit on a ridge above a small manmade dugout and wait to ambush Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang, Rooster tells Mattie stories about his personal history, when he was often on the wrong side of the law. In one particular story, he insists that he faced down seven men at once, riding his horse straight at them with the reins in his teeth and a gun in each hand. When Mattie tells him that this is “hard to believe,” she addresses the absurd nature of the Wild West’s extremely violent culture, ultimately suggesting that people like Rooster present themselves as more aggressive and fearless than they actually are. By calling attention to the unlikelihood of Rooster’s story, Mattie—and, in turn, Portis—invites readers to consider the fact that society propagates ridiculous notions of “grit,” ones that are often out of touch with reality. However, Rooster insists that he’s telling the truth, asserting that it’s possible to win unlikely battles simply by embracing an especially aggressive mentality. Indeed, he upholds that a person only needs to create the illusion of “wrath” in order to scare away others, an idea that actually supports his story while also aligning with the idea that such brazen displays of courage are often just that—displays.

●● I thought it was in LaBoeuf's favor that his first shot had struck and killed Lucky Ned Pepper's horse. If he had been shooting from panic would he have come so near to hitting the bandit chieftain with his first shot? On the other hand, he claimed to be an experienced officer and rifleman, and if he had been alert and had taken a deliberate shot would he not have hit his mark? Only LaBoeuf knew the truth of the matter. I grew impatient with their wrangling over the point. I think Rooster was angry because the play had been taken away from him and because Lucky Ned Pepper had beaten him once again.

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Lucky Ned Pepper, Rooster Cogburn, LaBoeuf

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mattie considers the fact that LaBoeuf shot Lucky Ned Pepper's horse instead of Ned himself. After having waited throughout the night for Ned and his gang to arrive, LaBoeuf accidentally destroyed the ambush by firing his rifle too soon. Because of this, Rooster chastises him, shaming him for missing and suggesting that LaBoeuf must have fallen asleep. He guesses that LaBoeuf started awake when he heard Ned Pepper fire his revolver into the air, and then fired too soon. LaBoeuf, for his part, claims that he simply didn't have time to find a good angle. As Mattie weighs the likelihood of this excuse, she realizes that "only LaBoeuf [knows] the truth of the matter." This is a rather mature conclusion, since it helps Mattie realize that it's not worth "wrangling over the point." It's possible that LaBoeuf fell asleep, but arguing about why he missed the shot won't change what happened. Rooster and LaBoeuf, however, focus solely on upholding their own personas as courageous, capable, and fearsome men, and this keeps them from casting aside petty arguments in order to forge onward.

●● "No, I am going along," said I.



LaBoeuf said, "She has come this far."

Rooster said, "It is far enough."

I said, "Do you think I am ready to quit when we are so close?"

LaBoeuf said, "There is something in what she says, Cogburn. I think she has done fine myself. She has won her spurs, so to speak. That is just my personal opinion."

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn, LaBoeuf, Mattie Ross (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

After Mattie, LaBoeuf, and Rooster travel to McAlester's in the aftermath of the botched ambush at the dugout, Rooster has a change of heart, suddenly telling Mattie that she should stay while he and LaBoeuf complete the last leg of the journey. This is because he thinks this final portion will be especially dangerous. Having just been in a gun fight with Mattie at his side, he most likely realized how dangerous it is to bring a child on a manhunt. Despite Rooster's reservations, though, Mattie remains determined to see the matter through, and even LaBoeuf suggests that she deserves to accompany them. "I think she has done fine myself," he says. This is noteworthy, since he was the one who first objected to the idea of her coming on the manhunt. "She has won her spurs, so to speak," he adds, a notion that underlines the extent to which LaBoeuf appreciates people who are willing to face danger. At this point in the novel, he has seen not only that Mattie is capable of keeping up with him and Rooster when they ride, but also that she isn't upset by violent situations (as evidenced by her relative composure during the dugout ambush). In turn, Portis suggests that anyone can prove themselves in the violent world of the Wild West, regardless of gender or age.

●● LaBoeuf pulled one of his revolvers and got two dodgers out of the sack and tossed them both up. He fired very rapidly but he only hit one. Captain Finch tried it with two and missed both of them. Then he tried with one and made a successful shot. Rooster shot at two and hit one. They drank whiskey and used up about sixty corn dodgers like that. None of them ever hit two at one throw with a revolver but Captain Finch finally did it with his Winchester repeating rifle, with somebody else throwing. It was entertaining for a while but there was nothing educational about it. I grew more and more impatient with them.

I said, "Come on, I have had my bait of this. I am ready to go. Shooting cornbread out here on this prairie is not taking us anywhere."

By then Rooster was using his rifle and the captain was throwing for him. "Chunk high and not so far out this time," said he.

Related Characters: Rooster Cogburn, Mattie Ross (speaker), Captain Boots Finch, LaBoeuf

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

After Mattie, LaBoeuf, and Rooster set out for the final leg of their journey, they stop for a moment so that Captain Boots Finch can catch up with them. After Captain Finch gives Rooster some news, he asks if LaBoeuf is the one who shot Lucky Ned Pepper's horse, and Rooster jumps in, making fun of LaBoeuf for missing the outlaw. Captain Finch then points out that Rooster himself has missed Ned on a number of occasions, so Rooster decides to try to prove himself by throwing a "corn dodger" into the air and shooting at it. This then inspires LaBoeuf to do the same, though LaBoeuf throws *two* dodgers, clearly trying to one-up Rooster. At this point, the three men start competing with one another, wasting food and trying to prove that they are good marksmen. As Mattie watches this, she grows "more and more impatient," knowing that this silly contest is only keeping them from chasing down Ned's gang. Interestingly enough, though, she soon sees that the three men aren't competing anymore, but simply having a good time with one another. When Rooster tells Captain Finch to "chunk high and not so far out," readers see that the men have stopped trying to one-up each other. In fact, they start collaborating, trying to help one another hit two dodgers before they hit the ground. With this, Portis provides yet another snapshot of the ways in which animosity and competition can sometimes grow into a sense of camaraderie.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ I said, "If you refuse to go I will have to shoot you."

He went on with his work and said, "Oh? Then you had better cock your piece."

I had forgotten about that. I pulled the hammer back with both thumbs.

"All the way back till it locks," said Chaney.

"I know how to do it," said I. When it was ready I said, "You will not go with me?"

"I think not," said he. "It is just the other way around. You are going with me."

I pointed the revolver at his belly and shot him down. The explosion kicked me backwards and caused me to lose my footing and the pistol jumped from my hand.

Related Characters: Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford), Mattie Ross (speaker), Frank Ross (Mattie's Father)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mattie finally corners Tom Chaney. Having gone to get water, she finds him on the other side of a small stream, so she takes out her revolver and points it at him. When he says he won't come with her, she informs him that she "will have to shoot" him, but he clearly doesn't take her seriously, saying, "Oh? Then you had better cock your piece." The fact that he offers her this advice indicates that he doesn't really believe she's capable of firing a gun at another human. This is because he has made the assumption that a little girl doesn't have what it takes to commit an act of violence. But—as readers already know—Mattie defies what people expect of little girls. Therefore, Chaney's confidence in this moment is a grave miscalculation, one that costs him a hole in the stomach. At the same time, he is correct that Mattie has never done this before. To that end, she's not necessarily prepared for what she's about to do, which is why she ends up stumbling when the revolver fires, losing her grip on the weapon and rendering herself vulnerable. Portis thus once again spotlights Mattie's ability to subvert what people think of her, though he also acknowledges that her inexperience can still put her at a disadvantage.

●● The bandit chieftain made no reply. He brushed the snow and dirt from my face and said, “Your life depends upon their actions. I have never busted a cap on a woman or anybody much under sixteen years but I will do what I have to do.”

I said, “There is some mix-up here. I am Mattie Ross of near Dardanelle, Arkansas. My family has property and I don’t know why I am being treated like this.”

Lucky Ned Pepper said, “It is enough that you know I will do what I have to do.”

Related Characters: Lucky Ned Pepper, Mattie Ross (speaker), LaBoeuf, Rooster Cogburn, Frank Ross (Mattie’s Father), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

After Mattie fails to kill Tom Chaney, he brings her up the other side of the riverbank, delivering her to Lucky Ned Pepper. Once she’s trapped with the bandits, Ned negotiates with Rooster and LaBoeuf, telling them that he’ll kill her unless they ride away within five minutes—so Mattie’s life depends on her two companions. When Ned says, “I have never busted a cap on a woman or anybody much under sixteen years but I will do what I have to do,” readers see that he won’t hesitate to follow through with his threat if that is what it takes for him to survive. Considering that Rooster has already made his aversion to negotiation known, this doesn’t necessarily bode well for Mattie—after all, Rooster is the kind of man who prefers to work things out in an aggressive, violent manner. Now, though, Mattie’s life “depend[s]” upon whether or not he can restrain himself from acting rashly.

●● Who was to blame? *Deputy Marshal Rooster Cogburn!* The gabbing drunken fool had made a mistake of four miles and led us directly into the robbers’ lair. A keen detective! Yes, and in an earlier state of drunkenness he had placed faulty caps in my revolver, causing it to fail me in a time of need. That was not enough; now he had abandoned me in this howling wilderness to a gang of cutthroats who cared not a rap for the blood of their own companions, and how much less for that of a helpless and unwanted youngster! Was this what they called grit in Fort Smith? We called it something else in Yell County!

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Lucky Ned Pepper, LaBoeuf, Rooster Cogburn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Mattie thinks this to herself as Rooster and LaBoeuf ride away, leaving her with Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang of bandits. Although Ned would certainly have killed her if Rooster tried to storm the camp and save her, Mattie can’t help but feel jilted by the fact that Rooster so easily abandons her with these dangerous criminals. After all, she hired him specifically because he was supposed to have the kind of “grit” that would enable him to take on an entire group of lawless miscreants, so to see him leave her behind is a true shock. Angry, she thinks about how his “drunkenness” has led her into this terrible situation, since he was drinking when he took Mattie and LaBoeuf to this particular area, which he claimed was four miles away from where Ned’s gang would be. Furthermore, he put “faulty caps” in her gun when he was drunk back in Fort Smith, which is why Mattie was unable to defend herself when Chaney came rushing at her in the creek. Mattie is mad not only because of Rooster’s lack of courage, but because of his failure to support her as a trustworthy, reliable companion.

●● I hurriedly cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger. The charge exploded and sent a lead ball of justice, too long delayed, into the criminal head of Tom Chaney.

Yet I was not to taste the victory. The kick of the big pistol sent me reeling backward. I had forgotten about the *pit* behind me!

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Lucky Ned Pepper, Rooster Cogburn, LaBoeuf, Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Right after LaBoeuf shoots Lucky Ned Pepper from afar, Chaney catches LaBoeuf by surprise by bashing his head in with a large rock. Acting quickly, Mattie points her revolver at Chaney and sends “a lead ball of justice” into his head, finally fulfilling her desire to avenge her father’s death. However, the fact that she doesn’t get to “taste the victory” is worth noting, since it provides insight into the nature of revenge. When the “kick of the big pistol” sends her “reeling

backward” into a snake pit, readers see that violent acts often have consequences, even when they’re carried out in the name of justice. Indeed, Mattie ends up sacrificing her own safety in order to kill Tom Chaney (though he isn’t even finished off by her bullet). Focusing only on her unyielding desire for revenge, she fails to pay attention to the danger to which she has exposed herself. This has been the case for the entire journey, as her mere presence in Indian Territory is risky. Because she only cares about retribution, though, she has cast aside her worries, thereby putting herself in harm’s way. In turn, Portis illustrates the ways in which an obsession with revenge is often detrimental to a person’s wellbeing.

☞ The lawyer had blamed Rooster for taking me on the search for Tom Chaney and had roundly cursed him and threatened to prosecute him in a court action. I was upset on hearing it. I told Lawyer Daggett that Rooster was in no way to blame, and was rather to be praised and commended for his grit. He had certainly saved my life.

Whatever his adversaries, the railroads and steamboat companies, may have thought, Lawyer Daggett was a gentleman, and on hearing the straight of the matter he was embarrassed by his actions. He said he still considered the deputy marshal had acted with poor judgment, but in the circumstances was deserving an apology.

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Tom Chaney (Theron Chelmsford), Rooster Cogburn, Lawyer Daggett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

After Mattie’s arm is amputated, Lawyer Daggett criticizes Rooster for exposing her to danger. When Mattie hears about this, she tries to convince Daggett that it’s because of Rooster that she’s even alive. “I told Lawyer Daggett that Rooster was in no way to blame, and was rather to be praised and commended for his grit,” she says, suggesting that Rooster’s “grit” is what “saved [her] life.” And though Lawyer Daggett accepts this and personally apologizes to Rooster for blaming him, it’s worth noting that it was ill-advised of Rooster to bring Mattie with him on a manhunt. This is why Daggett still thinks that “the deputy marshal [...] acted with poor judgment”—after all, Mattie is still practically a child, regardless how much gumption and strength she shows. Yet, at the same time, it’s rather

admirable that Rooster let Mattie prove herself, since people so often write her off because of her age and gender. Once again, then, Rooster emerges as a complicated man, one who often tries to do the right thing in the wrong way.

☞ These old-timers had all fought together in the border strife under Quantrill’s black standard, and afterward led dangerous lives, and now this was all they were fit for, to show themselves to the public like strange wild beasts of the jungle.

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), William Quantrill, Rooster Cogburn, Frank James, Cole Younger

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mattie considers men like Rooster, Frank James, and Cole Younger, all of whom “led dangerous lives.” Having heard that Rooster is in a traveling circus, she decides to attend, wanting to see him after twenty-five years of separation. When she gets there, she can’t help but think about the strange existences these men now lead. They can no longer live like dangerous outlaws full of violent aggression and brazen courage. Instead, they’re forced to make spectacles of themselves, appearing in public “like strange wild beasts of the jungle.” By examining this rather sad and anticlimactic existence, Portis suggests that the fearsome “grit” that people like Rooster work so hard to cultivate as young men ultimately amounts to very little. This is because this tough-guy persona doesn’t actually have much substance to it, since it’s mostly an outward display of aggression and foolhardy courage. And these traits, Portis intimates, are not the kind of qualities that create fulfilling lives.

●● I know what they said even if they would not say it to my face. People love to talk. They love to slander you if you have any substance. They say I love nothing but money and the Presbyterian Church and that is why I never married. They think everybody is dying to get married. It is true that I love my church and my bank. What is wrong with that? I will tell you a secret. Those same people talk mighty nice when they come in to get a crop loan or beg a mortgage extension! I never had the time to get married but it is nobody's business if I am married or not married. I care nothing for what they say. I would marry an ugly baboon if I wanted to and make him cashier. I never had the time to fool with it. A woman with brains and a frank tongue and one sleeve pinned up and an invalid mother to care for is at some disadvantage, although I will say I could have had two or three old untidy men around here who had their eyes fastened on my bank. *No, thank you!*

Related Characters: Mattie Ross (speaker), Rooster Cogburn

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is drawn from the penultimate paragraph of *True Grit*, when Mattie is explaining what her life is like after Rooster dies twenty-five years after their adventure. Because she still thinks fondly of him, she has his body moved and buried in her “family plot,” a decision that attracts quite a lot of attention from her community. “I know what they said even if they would not say it to my face. People love to talk,” Mattie notes, implying that her fellow townspeople most likely think she was in love with Rooster. “They think everybody is dying to get married,” she writes, acknowledging that her status as a middle-aged single woman is—at the time—rather out of the ordinary. However, she “care[s] nothing for what” people say, choosing to lead her life the way she wants. In this matter, Mattie proves once again how comfortable she is with defying society’s expectations, this time accepting the fact that not everyone will understand or approve of the way she moves through the world.



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.

CHAPTER 1

Mattie Ross admits that not many people believe a little girl can “leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father’s blood,” but this, she says, is what she does shortly after her fourteenth birthday, when Tom Chaney, an outlaw with a black mark on his face, kills her father, Frank Ross, in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Chaney also steals Frank’s horse, Judy, along with \$150 and **two pieces of California gold**. Explaining the details of this murder, Mattie notes that her father took Chaney on as an employee because he felt bad for him, since Chaney seemed down on his luck. As such, he hired him to work on his land in Yell County, Arkansas, though this was the worst mistake of his life.

Mattie explains that her father decided to travel on horseback to Fort Smith to buy a group of ponies from a man named Stonehill, who was selling the animals for a low price. Intending to train the ponies and sell them for profit, Frank went with Chaney to Fort Smith, carrying an old “dragoon pistol,” \$250, and the **two gold pieces**, which were wedding gifts from Mattie’s grandfather. After making the deal with Stonehill, Frank and Chaney stayed in the Monarch boardinghouse. That night, Chaney went out and gambled away a large sum of money. Furious, he returned to the boardinghouse and got uproariously drunk, at which point he grabbed his gun and rushed outside to hunt down the men who’d won his money. Frank saw this and rushed out behind him, but when he tried to stop him, Chaney shot him in the head.

Continuing the story of her father’s death, Mattie notes that Chaney took a moment to rob Frank’s corpse, taking the remainder of his money and his **two gold pieces** before running to Stonehill’s barn, knocking out the watchman, and stealing Frank’s saddle and horse, Judy. He then set off into the “darkness,” riding away at a quick pace although nobody chased after him.

Right away, Portis draws attention to Mattie Ross’s fixation on revenge. From the very first sentence of True Grit, Mattie focuses on “aveng[ing] her father’s blood.” In doing so, she acknowledges that people don’t think young girls are capable of violence, meaning that she’s well aware she’s defying society’s expectations. Readers thus see from the very beginning of the novel that Mattie is not only an independent young woman, but one who fully comprehends the ways in which she shatters stereotypes.



In this section, Mattie outlines the context surrounding her father’s death, making it clear that Chaney killed Frank Ross in a merciless, unjust manner. It is because Chaney behaved so unfairly that Mattie wants to bring him to justice, clearly feeling that it’s unacceptable to let such an immoral man escape without paying for his actions.



Not only does Chaney kill Frank for no good reason, he also goes out of his way to rob him as if he’s merely someone to be taken advantage of. Despite the fact that Frank has showed him nothing but kindness, Chaney treats him with scorn, demonstrating a profound lack of loyalty.



CHAPTER 2

Because Lawyer Daggett—the family attorney—is out of town at the time of Frank’s death, Mattie is the one to go to Fort Smith to settle her father’s affairs. Accompanied by Frank’s employee Yarnell Poindexter, she sets off on the train, leaving behind her mother and two younger siblings. When she and Yarnell arrive, they go to the sheriff’s office but discover that everyone in town is at a public hanging, so they make their way to spectacle. Although Yarnell insists they should simply wait until after, Mattie senses that he wants to see the hanging, so she tells him they will go to the event and not tell her mother.

When Mattie and Yarnell find the crowd, they see three condemned men on a platform, and they listen to them pronounce their final words. The first man insists that the only reason he’s about to die is because he “killed the wrong man,” believing that he wouldn’t have been “convicted” if he murdered the correct person. The second condemned man expresses religious remorse, saying, “I have repented my sins and soon I will be in heaven with Christ my savior. Now I must die like a man.” The final outlaw implores the audience to think about his wife and children, admitting that he doesn’t know what will happen to them in his absence. “You see what I have come to because of drink,” he says, urging parents in the crowd to raise their children to follow a better example. With this, the three men fall to their death.

Mattie notes that one of the three outlaws doesn’t die right away, since the noose doesn’t break his neck. He struggles for the better part of an hour. After attending the execution, Mattie and Yarnell go to the town’s undertaker to identify Frank’s body—a task that is emotionally difficult for Mattie, especially after watching such a gruesome hanging. Nonetheless, she courageously looks at her father’s body and thinks, “What a waste! Tom Chaney would pay for this!” She then vows that she won’t “rest easy until that Louisiana cur” is “roasting and screaming in hell.” Seeing her strong emotional response, the undertaker tells her she can kiss Frank goodbye, but she simply says, “No, put the lid on it.” He then overcharges her to ship the body back to Yell County, and though Yarnell points this out, Mattie says, “We will not haggle with him.”

By this point, it’s clear that Mattie is a remarkably independent child, one who isn’t afraid to take matters into her own hands even (or perhaps especially) in a time of personal tragedy. The mere fact that she travels to Fort Smith without her mother to settle Frank’s affairs is a testament to her maturity. Furthermore, her willingness to watch a public hanging suggests that she’s not squeamish when it comes to death—a trait that will prove valuable.



The three condemned men represent three different attitudes when it comes to justice and retribution. Whereas the first man appears unrepentant, the second readily accepts his wrongdoings and expresses his sorrow, framing his punishment as a religious matter. The third one, however, is the only one who seems to fully believe in justice, as he not only accepts that he deserves to die, but also attempts to do a greater good before he’s killed. To that end, he tries to help parents keep their children from following in his footsteps, ultimately using himself as an example of what happens when a person behaves immorally. Given that True Grit is a novel about righting wrongs, this scene is important to note, as it undoubtedly factors into Mattie’s developing sense of justice and revenge.



It becomes clear that Mattie’s desire to bring Chaney to justice is becoming something of a fixation, as she won’t be able to “rest easy” until he’s “roasting and screaming in hell”—a rather strong and violent sentiment. It’s also worth noting that Mattie recognizes that the undertaker is taking advantage of her. When she chooses not to “haggle” with the man, she demonstrates her ability to show restraint, clearly understanding that she’s at a disadvantage because she’s a young girl accompanied by a black man, which means that neither she nor Yarnell have the societal power to stand up to an immoral white man like the undertaker. By simply refusing to haggle, she maintains her sense of pride and composure even in a potentially humiliating situation.



After the undertaker's, Mattie visits the sheriff, who tells her Chaney has crossed into Indian Territory after linking up with a notorious outlaw named Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang of miscreants. Ned, Chaney, and the boys recently robbed a mail train and are on the run because of that, too. "I have no authority in the Indian Nation," the sheriff says. "He is now the business of the U.S. marshals." When Mattie asks the name of the best marshal, the sheriff tells her about three men, one of whom is Rooster Cogburn, though the sheriff says he's a "pitiless," hard-drinking man and thus concludes that he isn't the best. Nonetheless, Mattie asks where she can find him, and the sheriff says he'll be in court the following day because they're "trying" a criminal he recently caught. Having delivered this information, the sheriff gives Mattie her father's pistol.

Mattie convinces Yarnell to let her stay in Fort Smith. Although Yarnell is hesitant at first, she tells him that her mother knows she can look after herself. "Tell her I will be stopping at the Monarch boardinghouse," she says, and Yarnell finally agrees to ride home with Frank's body. That night, Mattie goes to the Monarch and meets the proprietor, Mrs. Floyd, who says she doesn't have a free room but agrees to let her stay anyway, putting her in the same bed as an old woman named Grandma Turner. All night, Mattie tosses and turns in a fight for the blankets, but Grandma Turner always steals them away. Feeling as if Mrs. Floyd has "taken advantage" of her, Mattie spends the night shivering against the cold, though she finally gets up and fetches the blankets her father left behind in the boarding house.

CHAPTER 3

The next day, Mattie goes to the courthouse and asks a deputy about Tom Chaney, finding herself extremely disappointed when she learns there's a long list of people the marshals plan to pursue before going after Chaney. Because Rooster Cogburn's trial hasn't started yet, Mattie goes to Stonehill's barn, where she finds the group of ponies her father bought. Making her way into the back office, she meets Stonehill, a small man who expresses his condolences regarding Frank Ross's death. Mattie tells him that she's hoping to hire a marshal to track down Chaney, and he says, "Yes, yes, well might you labor to that end. At the same time I will counsel patience. The brave marshals do their best but they are few in numbers." Going on, he points out that there are too many outlaws and too many "natural hiding places" in Indian Territory.

"Indian Nation" is the general term for the area that was allocated to Native Americans after they were forced to give up their land to the United States government at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In True Grit, characters refer to this area as a lawless place, since only U.S. marshals are able to make arrests in "Indian Territory" and, as a result, bandits take run there to hide. This is why Mattie wants to find a marshal. Not only that, but she wants to find a ruthless marshal, someone like Rooster Cogburn who is "pitiless." This, it seems, will ensure that she's able to properly avenge her father's death.



Mattie's insistence upon staying in Fort Smith once again reveals her independence. However, her surprising maturity doesn't keep people from taking "advantage" of her, as even Mrs. Floyd jumps at the opportunity to give her a bad deal simply because she's a child. Mattie is quite aware of this dynamic, however—an important thing to keep in mind, as it will soon become clear that she picks and chooses when to let such matters slide and when to put her foot down.



Mattie is so focused on avenging her father that she doesn't think about how hard it will be to actually find Chaney. Other people aren't necessarily as eager to catch him, since he's clearly a dangerous man and they don't have personal vendettas against him. This is why Stonehill "counsel[s] patience," though Mattie is too hell-bent on her dream of revenge to heed this advice.



Getting to business, Mattie tells Stonehill that she wants to sell back the ponies her father bought, but Stonehill says this is “out of the question.” When Mattie points out that her family no longer needs them now that her father’s dead, Stonehill notes that the deal has been made and that he has “already lost money” on the ponies, so he doesn’t like the idea of taking them back. Switching course, Mattie says she wants him to pay her \$300 for the loss of Judy and her father’s saddle, since both were stolen off of Stonehill’s property, making him responsible for the loss. Stonehill laughs at this and says that he can’t be held responsible for such events. “I will take it to law,” Mattie says, to which Stonehill replies, “You must do as you think best.”

“We will see if a widow and her three small children can get fair treatment in the courts of this city,” Mattie says. This, in turn, begins to make Stonehill uncomfortable. “You have no case,” he says, but Mattie tells him that Lawyer Daggett will help convince any jury that she does. “Where is your mother?” Stonehill asks, saying he doesn’t like negotiating with children, though Mattie assures him he won’t “like it any better when Lawyer Daggett gets hold” of him. Having cornered Stonehill, she says that Daggett will “back up any decision” she makes and that he can send a telegraph confirming this arrangement. With this, Stonehill makes several low offers to buy back the ponies, but Mattie holds her ground, aggravating Stonehill until he agrees to give her \$325 once Daggett sends an official letter outlining the particulars.

After negotiation with Stonehill, Mattie goes to the telegraph office and sends a message to Daggett, telling him the terms of the deal and asking him to inform her mother that she’s all right. Then—after taking a short nap—she goes to the courthouse, where she squeezes into the back with a number of other spectators, all of whom want to see Rooster Cogburn testify against Odus Wharton, a well-known criminal he recently wounded and brought to jail. Mattie explains that the judge presiding over the case is a well-known man named Judge Isaac Parker, a strongly principled individual who isn’t afraid to sentence criminals to death. Indeed, some people even call his court “the Parker slaughterhouse.”

When Mattie threatens to sue Stonehill, it’s obvious that he thinks she’s bluffing. Unintimidated by this young girl, he patronizingly tells her to do what she thinks is “best,” clearly confident that nothing will come of her determination. Like the undertaker and Mrs. Floyd, then, he tries to take advantage of her because of her age and gender, refusing to help her in the aftermath of her father’s death.



Mattie recognizes that Stonehill isn’t taking her seriously because of her age and gender, so she references the fact that a jury will take pity on “a widow and her three small children.” In this way, she turns her own disadvantage into an advantage, leveraging this dynamic until Stonehill has no choice but to admit that she has power over him. Whereas Mattie lets the undertaker and Mrs. Floyd treat her like a child, in this moment she cunningly demonstrates her maturity and independence, challenging Stonehill’s expectations of her.



In combination with the public hanging, this scene at the crowded courthouse suggests that Mattie lives in a society that celebrates violent forms of revenge and justice. In the same way that the spectators were eager to see the execution of three criminals, they now congregate to witness what will become of Odus Wharton, clearly finding entertainment in the idea of the courthouse acting as a “slaughterhouse.” Readers thus see that the environment in which Mattie exists champions crude forms of justice, tacitly condoning violence as a legitimate form of moral retribution.



Mattie presents a transcript of Odus's trial, which also happens to be the first time she lays eyes on Rooster Cogburn, a fat middle-aged man with one bad eye. When he takes the stand, the state prosecutor, Mr. Barlow, asks Rooster to explain what he was doing on November 2nd. Rooster embarks on a story, saying that he and a group of other marshals were taking a "wagonload of prisoners" from "Creek Nation" to Fort Smith when a boy told them that a man and his wife had been robbed and that the wife had been murdered. Rooster says he and his partner, Potter, left the wagon and rode their horses to see what the boy was talking about. When they arrived, they found the husband lying on the ground with a gunshot wound.

Continuing his story, Rooster says the dying man told them that "two Wharton boys" had come to rob them and that they murdered his wife when she tried to run. At this point, the Wharton boys forced the husband to tell them where he kept his money, and then they took off with his life's savings. Sure enough, Rooster and Potter found an empty hiding place that was just big enough for a jar of money. They then waited at the scene of the crime for the other marshals to catch up with the wagon, at which point they decided amongst themselves that Rooster and Potter should be the ones to chase down the Whartons.

Rooster tells the court that he and Potter found Odus and C. C. Wharton with their father, Aaron. All three of them were standing by a stream and cooking hogs over a fire. Quietly, Rooster and Potter approached, but when they asked to talk to Odus and C. C., Aaron grabbed an ax and started yelling at them. Rooster backed away while urging Aaron to put down the weapon. "While this was going on C. C. Wharton edged over by the wash pot behind that steam and picked up a shotgun that was laying up against a saw-log," Rooster tells the court, adding that Potter saw this but didn't act quickly enough, as C. C. shot him before he could react. Rooster shot C. C., and when Aaron took a swipe at him with the ax, he shot him, too.

Rooster says Odus ran through the creek, so he shot him, though the bullet only "winged" him. Rooster cuffed Odus to a tree and tended to Potter's wounds, then went to Aaron Wharton's cottage and asked his wife questions, but she refused to talk. Nonetheless, he found the stolen jar of money. Potter died of septic fever six days after returning to Fort Smith. When Rooster finishes this story, Odus's lawyer, Mr. Goudy, cross-examines him, asking how many people he has shot in the four years he's been a U.S. marshal. "Shot or killed?" Rooster asks, to which Goudy says, "Let us restrict it to 'killed' so that we may have a manageable figure." In response, Rooster estimates "around twelve or fifteen," but when Goudy reminds him that he has "examined the records," he admits it's probably closer to 23.

In keeping with the fact that everyone around Mattie is seemingly obsessed with violence, it becomes more and more clear as True Grit progresses that crime and brutality are seemingly ever-present in this area. The fact that Rooster comes upon yet another gruesome crime when he's on his way from rounding up a number of criminals is a testament to just how lawless and dangerous it is in these parts—a fact that would scare Mattie if she weren't so fearless and focused on revenge.



Considering that Chaney killed Frank Ross when he was on his way to get his money back, it's worth noting that the Wharton boys are driven to violence by their greediness. Indeed, it becomes obvious in this moment that most of the criminals in True Grit are interested first and foremost in money, using their greed to justify their violent behavior.



As Rooster testifies before the court, he presents the story of a botched negotiation. When he tells the judge what happened between him and the Wharton family, readers see how quickly the situation escalated. Rather than talking through the problem, the Wharton family immediately turned to aggressive brutality, something that led to nothing but death and misfortune. This is an important dynamic to remember as the novel progresses, since Mattie inevitably finds herself facing similarly violent men.



Although it might seem reasonable that Rooster shot at the Wharton boys given the circumstances, Mr. Goudy successfully frames him as an unnecessarily violent man, the kind of person who resorts to aggression too quickly. After all, the fact that he has killed 23 people in only four years is rather astounding, suggesting that he values physical brutality over peaceful negotiation. Though this is certainly not the mark of a moral man, it's easy to see that this mentality might appeal to Mattie, who wants to find someone who won't hesitate to punish her father's killer.



Pointing to the fact that Rooster has killed 23 people, Mr. Goudy suggests that he's a dangerous person. What's more, he implies that Rooster has a personal vendetta against the Wharton family. To make this clear, he tells the court that Rooster shot Aaron Wharton's eldest son the previous Spring. "This assassin Cogburn has too long been clothed with the authority of an honorable court," Goudy says. Going on, he asks Rooster why he had to defend himself against the eldest Wharton, eventually demonstrating to the jury that Rooster approached the young man in the middle of the night with his gun drawn. Similarly, he gets Rooster to admit that he already had his gun out when he first came upon Odus, C. C., and Aaron.

Mr. Goudy asks Rooster to go through the exact details of his encounter with Odus, C. C., and Aaron. Rooster explains that he started backing away when Aaron advanced upon him with an axe, estimating that he moved roughly sixteen feet away while Aaron slowly pursued him. However, Goudy points out that Aaron was found with part of his body in the fire, meaning that Rooster lied about backing away or that he purposefully dragged him into the flames after killing him. Rooster awkwardly suggests that perhaps the hogs moved him into this position, and before Goudy has a chance to truly refute this, Judge Parker declares that—because the cross-examination has taken so long—the court will reconvene the following day.

Mattie watches as people file out of the court, noting that Odus Wharton's face looks "hardened in sin." Finally, after everyone has left, Rooster exits the courthouse and Mattie catches up to him, saying, "They tell me you are a man with true grit." As he tells her to speak louder, he tries to roll a cigarette, but Mattie takes it and rolls it for him, eventually telling him she's looking for Tom Chaney and that she needs "somebody to go after him." At first, Rooster responds by simply asking where Mattie is from and suggesting that she go home to "help with the churning." However, Mattie ignores this, plowing on to say that the government will pay Rooster two dollars to catch Chaney and ten cents for each mile he travels. "On top of that I will pay you a fifty-dollar reward," she says.

Again, the fact that Rooster prioritizes violence over negotiation is not a necessarily attractive quality, but it will likely resonate with Mattie. She also probably appreciates that he has a vendetta against the Wharton family, since she herself is so fixated on the idea of revenge. As such, Portis presents Rooster as a flawed man while simultaneously preparing readers to see him as one of the novel's heroes, refusing to cast judgment on the fact that he's so violent.



When Goudy reveals that Aaron's body was found in the fire, it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that Rooster put him there on purpose. This demonstrates the personal investment Rooster had in killing Aaron. Once again, this is something that will appeal to Mattie, as she understands what it feels like to have a personal vendetta against a criminal.



Rooster's initial reaction to Mattie's presence aligns with the disparaging way people treat her because of her age. Thinking she's nothing more than a wayward youngster, he fails to take her seriously. She then cuts to the chase by telling him she'll pay him \$50 if he catches Chaney—a reward that is far higher than what he would receive from the government. When she does this, readers see that she understands how to get a person's attention, essentially demonstrating her maturity by tapping into the greed that motivates the people around her.



Rooster is impressed by Mattie's thoroughness. When he asks what she has in a little sugar sack she's carrying, he's astonished to find her father's pistol, saying, "By God! A Colt's dragoon! Why, you are no bigger than a corn nubbin! What are you doing with that pistol?" She tells him that the gun was her father's and that she plans to use it to murder Tom Chaney "if the law fails to do so." Turning to the matter at hand, Rooster says he doesn't believe that Mattie can actually come up with \$50, but she assures him she'll "have it in a day or two." She asks him if he knows of Lucky Ned Pepper, and he says he's well-acquainted with him. "I shot him in the lip last August down in the Winding Stair Mountains," he says. "He was plenty lucky that day."

Mattie mentions that Chaney is running around with Lucky Ned Pepper's gang, but Rooster isn't ready to discuss the details of this case. Instead, he invites her over for dinner, saying they can "talk it over and make medicine," though he still doesn't believe she has \$50. They go back to where he lives, which is in the back of a grocery store run by a Chinese man named Lee. After dinner, Mattie watches Rooster and Lee play cards while Rooster drinks whiskey, and every time she asks if he's made up his mind about the case, he tells her not to rush him. "If I'm going up against Ned Pepper I will need a hundred dollars," he says, adding that he'll want fifty in advance. "You are trying to take advantage of me," Mattie says, to which Rooster replies, "I am giving you my children's rate."

As Rooster and Lee continue to play cards, Mattie falls asleep, waiting for Rooster to walk her back to the Monarch. When she wakes up, Rooster is playing with her father's pistol. Drunkenly pointing it at a rat, he says, "I will try this the new way." He then whispers to the rat (which is eating from a sack of corn meal) pretending that he has a "writ" to arrest it for stealing from Lee. When the rat doesn't stop eating, he shoots it. Mattie scolds Rooster for wasting her "loads," but he makes fun of her by suggesting that she wouldn't know how to load the gun even if she did have more ammunition. He then loads it with his own bullets, which he keeps in a box full of mismatched ammo.

"You can't serve papers on a rat, baby sister," Rooster drunkenly pontificates. "These shitepoke lawyers think you can but you can't. All you can do with a rat is kill him or let him be. They don't care nothing about papers." Continuing on in this manner, he laments the fact that the legal system has been flooded with lawyers who want to protect "the rats." "Let up on them rats! Give them rats a fair show!" he says, mocking these lawyers. As he rambles on, Mattie walks outside with the assumption that he'll follow her to escort her home, but she realizes after a while that she's alone. After stopping for a moment to get her "bearings," she finds her way back to the Monarch, crawling into bed and noticing that she has a cough.

This is the first time Mattie expresses her willingness to kill Tom Chaney herself "if the law fails" to bring him to justice. In turn, readers see the extent of her personal investment in this case, as she's willing to commit a grand act of violence just to avenge her father. And though Rooster seems to take her a bit more seriously when she says she'll pay him, he clearly still underestimates her, as he goes on about how she's "no bigger than a corn nubbin."



Once again, Mattie recognizes that an adult is trying to take advantage of her because of her age. This time, though, she addresses the matter, showing Rooster that she isn't so naïve that he can simply overcharge her without her noticing. Although this doesn't necessarily help her overcome Rooster's wily ways, it at least makes it less likely that he'll try to snub her in the future, since he now knows that she's mature enough to acknowledge when someone treats her unfairly.



Again, Rooster disparages Mattie because of her age, suggesting that she doesn't know how to care for and operate a pistol. Readers have no idea at this point whether or not this is actually true, but it's obvious either way that Rooster is making an unfair assumption about her.



When Rooster waxes poetic about "serv[ing] papers" to rats, readers see how frustrated he is by the idea of giving criminals a chance to prove their innocence and possibly escape. Rather than treating such people fairly, Rooster would rather shoot first and ask questions later. And though Mattie finds this rant annoying in the moment, it is precisely because Rooster thinks this way that she wants to hire him in the first place, since she—like him—is uninterested in anything but taking revenge upon her enemies. The fact that she ends up walking back to the boarding house alone at night is yet another testament to her mature sense of independence.



CHAPTER 4

Mattie is sick when she wakes up the next morning. Thankfully, Mrs. Floyd takes care of her and gives her a medication called “Dr. Underwood’s Bile Activator,” which has a relaxing effect. For the next two days, she stays in bed, reading to Grandma Turner as they both take the Bile Activator. In one particular book, Mattie reads about a young British girl who can’t decide between two men. “She made trouble for herself because she would never say what she meant but only blush and talk around it,” Mattie notes. While she’s laid up with her cold, Mrs. Floyd goes to the post office twice a day to look for the letter from Lawyer Daggett.

After her second day of rest, Mattie feels well enough to attend dinner at the boardinghouse, where she meets a new resident named LaBoeuf (who pronounces his name like “LaBeef”). LaBoeuf is dressed in impressive holsters and the trappings of a fancy cowboy, and he guesses Mattie’s name, telling her that he saw her mother two days earlier. “I would like to have a confidential conversation with you,” he says, indicating that they should talk after dinner. Butting in, Mrs. Floyd starts talking about Frank’s death, speaking extensively about the matter even though it’s a private affair. After the meal, LaBoeuf and Mattie sit in the living room and talk about Chaney, who LaBoeuf reveals is really a fugitive named Theron Chelmsford, a man who shot a Texan senator and his dog four months ago and has been on the run ever since.

LaBoeuf informs Mattie that Chaney ran away from Waco, Texas after killing the senator, going to Monroe, Louisiana and then moving from there to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, at which point he finally went to Frank Ross’s farm. Mattie tells LaBoeuf that she’s searching for Chaney, too, saying that she is going to hire Rooster Cogburn to track him down in Indian Territory. LaBoeuf likes the sound of this plan, suggesting that he might team up with Rooster because he needs a U.S. marshal to capture Chaney, since he doesn’t have any jurisdiction in Indian Territory. He also adds that it would be good to have Rooster Cogburn’s authority, since it would be a shame to finally get Chaney back to Texas “only to have some corrupt judge say he was kidnapped.”

It’s unsurprising that Mattie finds it hard to sympathize with a character who “never say[s] what she mean[s],” since Mattie herself has no problem articulating exactly what she wants. Indeed, the mere idea of leading such a passive life is absurd to Mattie, since she is so independent and decisive.



When LaBoeuf tells Mattie that Chaney is actually a criminal who has been on the run for four months, he creates a broader portrait of the man, one that reveals his true nature as a historically violent and aggressive person. Indeed, the fact that Chaney killed not only a senator but his dog too suggests that he’s merciless and cruel.



In this scene, LaBoeuf proposes an alliance of sorts, suggesting that a certain sense of collaboration might prove mutually beneficial for him and Mattie. They’re both after the same person, and though they have different reasons for pursuing Chaney, there’s no denying that they both want to see him brought to justice.



Mattie tells LaBoeuf that he'll have to talk to Rooster about joining forces with him. "It is nothing to me one way or the other except that when we do get Chaney he is not going to Texas, he is coming back to Fort Smith and hang," she says, but LaBoeuf only laughs, suggesting that it surely must not matter where, exactly, Chaney hangs. However, Mattie says it's important to her that the outlaw die in Fort Smith, at which point LaBoeuf says he stands to earn a lot of money if he brings Chaney back to Texas. "You said yourself they might turn him loose down there," Mattie points out, but LaBoeuf promises to shoot him himself if this happens. "I want Chaney to pay for killing my father and not some Texas bird dog," Mattie replies.

LaBoeuf says he plans to talk to Rooster himself, but Mattie lies and tells him that the marshal is in Little Rock for the next several days. Becoming frustrated, LaBoeuf criticizes Mattie for meddling in matters about which she knows nothing, suggesting that she should go back home to her mother. As a retort, Mattie pokes fun of the fact that LaBoeuf hasn't caught Chaney even after four months of chasing him. "Earlier tonight I gave some thought to stealing a kiss from you, though you are very young, and sick and unattractive to boot, but now I am of a mind to give you five or six good licks with my belt," LaBoeuf seethes, though Mattie keeps her cool, saying, "One would be as unpleasant as the other."

CHAPTER 5

Mattie goes to the post office the next morning and receives the letter from Lawyer Daggett, which includes a "notarized release" outlining the deal with Stonehill. It also includes a note from Daggett, in which he expresses his support but says he wishes Mattie would let him handle such matters. He urges her to come home, saying he will expect her on the first train back to Yell County. He also tells her about her father's funeral, and she becomes angry when she learns which preacher delivered the ceremony. "If you want anything done right you will have to see to it yourself every time," she notes.

When Mattie goes to Stonehill, she finds him in bad shape. "My malaria is making its annual visitation," he tells her. He tries to write her a check, but she insists upon having cash, so he says he'll have to wait until his bank opens. Mattie returns to the Monarch for breakfast, during which Mrs. Floyd asks her if she received Daggett's letter. This line of questioning annoys Mattie, since Mrs. Floyd explains to LaBoeuf that Mattie has sold back a set of ponies to Stonehill—a piece of information Mattie would rather keep private. After the bank opens, she returns to Stonehill's barn, and he pays her the full amount. As he does so, he laments the fact that he ever came to Arkansas, saying that he was told it was supposed to be "the Chicago of the Southwest" but that he's only had bad luck.

When Mattie says that she wants Chaney to die in Fort Smith, her emotional investment in the case emerges. Rather than simply wanting Chaney to be punished, she has built a very specific idea of how this should happen, ultimately craving the poetic justice that would come along with Chaney dying in the same town as her father. She is only interested in revenge, whereas LaBoeuf is interested in the reward he'll receive if he catches Chaney and brings him back to Texas.



Again, an adult patronizes Mattie because of her age and gender. This time, LaBoeuf tells her to go home to her mother, assuming that—because she's young—she shouldn't be out on her own. However, Mattie defies such expectations and holds her own in verbal disputes like this one, as made evident by her clever retort to LaBoeuf. She proves that she's quick-witted and unintimidated by men like LaBoeuf, who incorrectly assume they can get the best of her because she's a little girl.



When Mattie says, "If you want anything done right you will have to see to it yourself every time," readers recognize her independent nature. Indeed, this sentiment is the same impulse that drives her to take the Chaney situation into her own hands. It is also the same worldview that gives her the confidence to execute deals like the one she makes with Stonehill—a deal that she's finally able to finalize, now that Daggett's notarized letter has arrived.



Because Mattie is young, Mrs. Floyd feels no need to show discretion when it comes to her personal affairs. This annoys Mattie, since she has made an enemy of LaBoeuf and thus doesn't want him knowing the details of her personal life. It's also worth recognizing that her deal with Stonehill has now gone through, thereby proving that she's quite capable of engaging in adult transactions.



Mattie visits Rooster, who is still in bed. He complains about having to “follow all the regulations laid down by Uncle Sam,” including writing up “fee sheets” so the government will pay him. Changing the subject, Mattie says she read in the paper that Odus Wharton is going to be hanged, and Rooster explains that the execution will take place in January, though Goudy is “going to Washington city to see if President Hayes will not commute the sentence.” He then complains that Goudy will tell lies about the case. “I should have put a ball in that boy’s head instead of his collarbone,” he says. “You will sometimes let money interfere with your notion of what is right.”

Not wasting any more time, Mattie takes out \$50 and shows it to Rooster. After going over the terms of their deal again, Rooster agrees, at which point Mattie asks if they can leave that afternoon. Hearing this, Rooster jolts upright in bed, saying, “Hold up. You are not going.” Nonetheless, Mattie tells him that this is simply part of the deal, adding that he has “misjudged” her if he thinks she’s “silly enough” to give him \$100 without making sure he upholds his end of the deal. Still, Rooster says Mattie will slow him down. “What if you get sick again?” he asks. “I can do nothing for you.” Despite this, Mattie remains undeterred, saying that she has been “coon hunting” and knows how to be “out in the woods all night.” “We sat around a big fire and Yarnell told ghost stories,” she says. “We had a good time.”

Rooster says Mattie will be “crying” for her mother if she comes with him, but she argues, saying, “I have left off crying, and giggling as well.” She then tells him to make a decision. “They told me you had grit and that is why I came to you,” she taunts, and when he says he should slap her, she suggests that he’s incapable of doing so, at which point he jumps toward her but only spills his coffee. Grabbing his “fee sheets,” Mattie holds the papers above the stove and threatens to burn them. Hearing the commotion, Lee bounds into the room, but Rooster tells him to leave, saying, “Everything is all right. Sis and me is making medicine.” When they’re alone again, Rooster says he can’t leave town until he finishes his expense reports.

During this conversation, Rooster expresses the morally unsettling idea that it’s better to simply shoot a criminal in the head than let him testify in court. Because U.S. marshals get paid based on whether or not the criminals they bring in are alive, he purposefully avoided killing Odus, but now he wishes he had ended the boy’s life. In turn, readers see once again that Rooster is seemingly more interested in taking revenge on his enemies than in anything else—including money.



Although Mattie is very independent and capable of acting like an adult in many situations, she inadvertently reveals her naivety when she compares a manhunt to a “coon hunting” excursion. Needless to say, these two activities are very dissimilar, since raccoons don’t try to kill their hunters. Furthermore, Mattie talks about telling “ghost stories” around a campfire, thereby implying that pursuing Chaney might even be “a good time.” For the first time readers see that, despite her admirable maturity, Mattie is still quite inexperienced.



It’s obvious that Mattie isn’t quite as mature as she thinks, but she’s quite capable of holding her own. She proves her ability to outsmart grown men, as she threatens to burn Rooster’s “fee sheets.” In doing so, she makes up for the fact that she wouldn’t stand a chance in a physical fight against Rooster. Readers thus see that what she lacks in physical strength she makes up for in intelligence and resourcefulness—traits that will come in handy if Rooster lets her accompany him on the manhunt.



Sitting down, Mattie fills out Rooster's expense reports, writing them out neatly and thoroughly. When she finishes, Rooster is blown away, saying that Potter—who used to fill out the sheets—was never so thorough. Mattie then gives Rooster \$25 and promises to pay another \$25 when they set out. They agree to leave first thing the next morning, planning to cross over into Cherokee Nation on a ferry. Next, Mattie goes to Stonehill's barn and buys back the best looking pony, whom she names Blackie. During the transaction, she mentions that she'll be traveling with Rooster, and Stonehill says, "How did you light on that greasy vagabond?" Going on, he says, "Report has it that he rode by the light of the moon with Quantrill [...]. I would not trust him too much."

When Mattie does such a good job filling out Rooster's expense reports, she proves to him that she has worth despite the fact that he sees her as just a little girl. Rather than depending upon physical prowess, she uses her brain to her advantage—something Rooster often fails to do, judging by the fact that he tends to shoot people before even trying to negotiate. In fact, it's this ruthless mentality that accords with Stonehill's warning about him. When Stonehill says that Rooster used to ride with Quantrill, he reveals that Rooster hasn't always been on the right side of the law, since William Quantrill's group of guerilla soldiers in the Civil War were known for their excessively violent, racist, and unorthodox methods. By giving readers a brief look into Rooster's troubling history, then, Portis suggests that his violent tendencies run deep.



When she returns to Rooster's later that evening, Mattie finds him sitting with LaBoeuf. Rooster tells her that LaBoeuf is also after Chaney, but Mattie says she already knows this, saying she has already turned him down. However, Rooster insists that having LaBoeuf could "come in handy." Realizing that Rooster intends to take Mattie with him on the manhunt, LaBoeuf expresses his disbelief, then points out that he could make more money if he helped him bring Chaney to Texas, since the senator's family has offered a reward of \$1,500 for him—dead or alive. This, LaBoeuf says, is on top of a \$500 reward for delivering Chaney alive to the Texas officials. LaBoeuf offers to split the \$1,500 with Rooster if they bring Chaney in alive. If they have to kill him, he says, he'll offer Rooster a third of that money.

Rooster is normally motivated by revenge, but Chaney hasn't done anything to him. As such, it seems likely that he'll accept LaBoeuf's offer, since there's no denying that he also wants to earn as much money as he can. This, it seems, is how things work in Mattie's society, where people go after criminals not because they want justice, but because they want to get rich.



Rooster asks Mattie why she objects to the idea of LaBoeuf bringing Chaney back to Texas. "We will be getting him all the same," he points out, but Mattie says she wants Chaney to "know he is being punished for killing" her father. And though Rooster assures her that she can tell this to Chaney himself when they catch him, she remains steadfast. "You are being stiff-necked about this," he complains. "You are young. It is time you learned that you cannot have your way in every little particular. Other people have got their interests too." Still, Mattie says she expects to "have [her] way" when she has "bought and paid for something." LaBoeuf says that Mattie won't be coming along regardless of what happens. This angers Rooster, but LaBoeuf points out that he would be putting Mattie in danger by taking her, so he backs down.

As he tries to convince Mattie to ease up, Rooster points out that Chaney will be brought to justice regardless of what happens to him after he's arrested. However, Mattie is unwilling to see things this way, since she's too fixated on revenge to believe that it's "all the same." When he points out that "other people have got their interests, too," he alludes to the fact that he could make more money if he brings Chaney to Texas, thereby indicating that he will most likely betray their original agreement.



Mattie demands that Rooster give her back her down payment, but he has already spent it. Though he promises to reimburse her after the trip, she knows he's lying. She leaves in a rage, going back to the Monarch, gathering her belongings, and telling Mrs. Floyd that she'll be gone for a few days. Going back to Stonehill's barn, she asks if she can sleep in the back office because she wants to "get an early start" the next day. When Stonehill agrees, Mattie arranges to have the watchman prepare Blackie an hour before dawn and to wake her up.

Early in the morning, Mattie rises and mounts her horse, putting her father's pistol in a sugar sack and tying it to the saddle. She then rides to the ferry, which she knows Rooster and LaBoeuf are going to use to cross the river into Indian Territory. After waiting for them to appear, she boards the boat while still riding Blackie. However, LaBoeuf calls to a deckhand and asks him to lead her off the ferry, and he obliges, taking her back onto shore and walking her up a large hill despite her protests. Defeated, she watches the ferry pull away, but at the top of the hill she says, "Wait, stop a minute." When the deckhand halts, Mattie pretends there's something "wrong" with her hat. As he turns to see what she means, she turns Blackie around and gallops back down the hill.

At the narrowest section of the river, Mattie steers Blackie into the water, and though the current is strong, she manages to thrash through to the other side, beating the ferry across. When the ferry finally docks, LaBoeuf and Rooster come ashore and stand ahead of her, discussing what they should do. Then, without warning, they gallop away, so she chases them. For multiple miles, they try to lose her, but they can't quite manage to shake her, as she stays just behind them. Sometimes, though, they ride over the peak of a hill, at which point she loses sight of them. As she crests one of these hilltops, she realizes they aren't on the road ahead of her, but then they jump out of the bushes and block her path. Having finally stopped her, LaBoeuf dismounts his horse and grabs her off of Blackie.

Throwing Mattie to the ground, LaBoeuf starts whipping her with a switch. "I am going to stripe your leg good," he says. After a while, Mattie begins to cry, though "more from anger and embarrassment than pain." Turning to Rooster, she says, "Are you going to let him do this?" Watching the scene, Rooster puts out a cigarette and says, "No, I don't believe I will. Put your switch away, LaBoeuf. She has got the best of us." However, LaBoeuf refuses to stop, saying, "She has not got the best of me." Rooster yells at him to stop, but he doesn't listen. "I am going ahead with what I started," LaBoeuf says, and Rooster unholsters his revolver, points it at him, cocks it, and says, "It will be the biggest mistake you ever made, you Texas brush-popper." LaBoeuf begrudgingly unhands Mattie.

It's unsurprising that Rooster decides to side with LaBoeuf, since he himself doesn't have a personal vendetta against Chaney. Although he can appreciate Mattie's desire to exact revenge, he is focused on his own "interests," which are—in this context—primarily financial. Since working with LaBoeuf will earn him more money, then, he turns his back on Mattie.



When Mattie tricks the deckhand into letting go of her and Blackie, she uses her intelligence to her benefit. As such, she once again proves how useful it is to be quick-witted in the rugged world of the Wild West, where everyone around her seemingly relies on grand displays of power and aggression to get their way.



Mattie's determination is evident in this moment, as she directs herself into a body of running water. As a result, readers see how serious she is about joining the manhunt, wanting badly to be there when Rooster and LaBoeuf take down Chaney. However, there's no changing the fact that she's inexperienced when it comes to things like horse chases. In keeping with this, Rooster and LaBoeuf eventually get the best of her.



For the first time in the novel, Rooster reveals his sense of loyalty to Mattie, demonstrating that he actually cares about her, despite his hard exterior. Even though he turned his back on her in order to make more money with LaBoeuf, he now stands up for her, proving that he won't let anyone push her around—including LaBoeuf.



CHAPTER 6

Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf ride long past “dinnertime,” but Mattie tries hard not to complain. Finally, they stop at a small store on the river, where they have dinner. During this short break from riding, Rooster speaks to the owner of the store and then asks two boys who have been hanging in front of the shop to ferry him, Mattie, and LaBoeuf across yet another river, where they get off and ride along a thin, overgrown path. In addition to a decent dinner of fish, the trio has gained information from their stop at the store, since the owner told Rooster that Lucky Ned Pepper was last spotted at a store named McAlester’s, which is near the train tracks.

Accompanying Ned were two criminals, “a robber called Haze and a Mexican.” Armed with this information, Rooster says they should try to find Ned’s gang before they escape the area.

Rooster and LaBoeuf decide they should ride another fifteen miles before going to sleep, since they’re roughly sixty miles from McAlester’s. The idea of riding so far before setting up camp dismays Mattie, and she can’t help but groan. “How do you like this coon hunt?” Rooster says, but she tells him not to watch out for her, insisting that she’s doing fine. LaBoeuf then asks Rooster if Chaney was seen with Ned Pepper, and Rooster says that he wasn’t at McAlester’s, though he’s certain he was with the gang during their robbery of a mail train several days ago.

When the trio finally reaches a stopping point for the night, Mattie is exhausted. After shakily bringing up a bucket of water from the stream, she declares that she won’t do it again, saying she’s too tired and that the water tastes bad. Hearing this, LaBoeuf chastises her for complaining, saying she’s lucky to be “traveling in a place where a spring is so handy.” Going on, he says that in Texas a person can travel for a long time without seeing water. “I have lapped filthy water from a hoofprint and was glad to have it,” he brags, and Rooster makes fun of him for the comment, saying that all Texans claim they’ve drunk from a hoofprint. When Mattie tells Rooster that LaBoeuf is a Texas Ranger, he simply makes fun of the man, disparaging his Texan vanity. In turn, LaBoeuf speaks disdainfully about U.S. marshals.

After they eat some of the “corn dodgers” that Rooster brought along, Mattie asks the men if they’d like to hear her tell the story of “The Midnight Caller.” “One of you will have to be ‘The Caller,’” she says, but neither of them takes her up on this offer. She puts her bedding on the ground and tries to sleep, though she finds it difficult because she’s uncomfortable on the hard soil. The next morning, she wakes up to find snow coating her face, and Rooster says that if it continues to snow, they’ll have to “take shelter” later that night.

Almost immediately, Mattie seems to realize that this manhunt will be nothing like “coon hunting,” as she tries hard to stifle her complaints about how tired she is. Once again, then, readers see that her overall lack of experience is at odds with her maturity and unshakable willpower, both of which are what make it possible for her to forge onward. And though the group now has some information about the general whereabouts of Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang, it perhaps dawns on Mattie that finding them will be harder than she originally thought, since doing so will require a lot more tiresome riding.



Again, Mattie’s inexperience and youth make it difficult for her to keep up with Rooster and LaBoeuf. At the same time, the mere fact that she continues to act tough is a testament to her willpower, as her resilient spirit challenges Rooster and LaBoeuf’s assumptions about what she’s capable of enduring.



Even though Rooster and LaBoeuf have agreed to team up to catch Chaney, this doesn’t mean they like each other. In fact, it’s quite clear that their companionship is based solely on their mutual interest, leaving them free to insult one another. Both men are clearly vain about their reputations and levels of “grit.”



Mattie’s offer to tell Rooster and LaBoeuf a scary story reminds readers once again that she’s quite young. Wanting to believe that her experience “coon hunting” is applicable to the manhunt, Mattie clings to childish campfire games. This journey is much bleaker than anything she’s ever done, however, so she simply goes to sleep, though even this isn’t as easy as she would have thought.



Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf ride all day through the snow, having trouble finding the path. While stopping at a river for a moment, LaBoeuf sees a turkey and kills it, fastening it to his saddle and taking it along. Later, Rooster accepts that they won't get to McAlester's before nightfall, so he directs the group to a small manmade "dugout," a cave-like structure set into "the narrow end of a V-shaped hollow or valley." When they arrive, they see smoke coming from the chimney and a light shining beneath the door. Rooster gets off his horse and approaches with his rifle, stomping so he'll be heard. Soon enough, the door opens, and a man asks who's there. When Rooster says he's with a group of three and looking for shelter, the voice says there's no room inside and slams the door.

Taking off his coat, Rooster tells LaBoeuf to climb onto the ridge and drape it over the dugout's chimney. This fills the structure with smoke, and the door swings open to the accompaniment of two "fiery" shotgun "blasts." Pointing his rifle into the dugout, Rooster returns fire, and Mattie hears a "yelp of pain." "I am a Federal officer!" Rooster shouts, asking who's inside. When the man tells him to "keep riding," he recognizes the voice, identifying him as an outlaw named Quincy. Rooster says, "Quincy, I know it is you! [...] This is Rooster Cogburn! Columbus Potter and five more marshals is out here with me!" He threatens to burn down the cottage if he and whomever he's with don't come outside.

Quincy says his partner, Moon, can't come out because he's been shot in the leg. Nonetheless, he drags him outside and surrenders, at which point Rooster and LaBoeuf search them and confiscate their weapons. They then take them back into the dugout and give Moon a handkerchief to tie above his leg wound. Inside, they find a pot of food over a bed of coals, and Rooster notices that it's quite a large portion. "Was you boys looking for company?" he asks, but Quincy simply says the meal is supposed to serve as both dinner and breakfast. Cutting to the chase, Rooster asks if Quincy has seen Ned Pepper, but Quincy pretends he's never heard that name.

Seeing that Quincy won't give him any information, Rooster zeroes in on Moon, telling him that his leg will have to be amputated if they don't take him for help soon. He promises to take Moon to McAlester's if he gives him information about Ned Pepper. Just as Moon starts to talk, though, Quincy tells him to be quiet. During this interaction, LaBoeuf goes outside and looks around. When he returns, he tells Rooster that there are six horses in a nearby cave, and it soon becomes clear that Quincy and Moon stole them. As Rooster continues his interrogation, the entire group sets to work preparing the turkey LaBoeuf shot, and Rooster even lets Quincy use a knife to cut the frozen bird into manageable pieces.

For the first time, Mattie finds herself in a potentially dangerous situation. As Rooster advances upon the unknown men in the small structure, readers might notice that she doesn't back away or wish she were elsewhere. Even this small fact demonstrates her bravery and maturity, as she once again defies the assumptions people normally have about children.



The fact that Rooster recognizes Quincy's voice is noteworthy, since it gives readers a sense of how well-traveled he is in Indian Territory. This is partly why Mattie hired him, having sensed that Rooster's history as a ruthless and well-known U.S. marshal might come in handy while tracking down Chaney.



It's rather suspicious that Quincy and Moon have made so much food just for themselves, especially considering the fact that they shot at the trio before Rooster and LaBoeuf got the best of them. As such, when Quincy claims to have never heard of Lucky Ned Pepper—one of the area's most well-known bandits—it appears rather obvious that he's lying to protect his companion.



Quincy's insistence that Moon remain quiet suggests that the two men have important information about Ned Pepper. Quincy clearly wants to remain loyal to his bandit friend, however, which is why he stops Moon from talking. Strangely enough, Rooster lets Quincy work with a knife, perhaps thinking that this will put the man at ease and thus encourage him to tell the group what they need to know.



While the others cook, Moon drinks whiskey to dull his pain. Looking at Mattie, he asks why she's there, and she tells him she intends to catch Tom Chaney. She also tells him she has a "good lawyer" who can help him if he cooperates, but Quincy tells Moon to stop talking to her. Hearing this, Mattie says she doesn't like the "look" of Quincy, and he tells her she's one to talk. LaBoeuf points out that they should separate Quincy and Moon, since Quincy is keeping Moon from speaking freely, but Rooster insists that Moon is "coming around." Finally, Moon admits that they saw Ned Pepper and Haze two days ago. "Don't act the fool!" Quincy erupts. "If you blow I will kill you."

"I am played out," Moon tells Quincy. "I must have a doctor. I will tell what I know." Reacting to this, Quincy swings his knife down onto Moon's hand, cutting off four of his fingers. Seeing this, LaBoeuf shoots Quincy in the neck, and Mattie dives to the ground. Moon is "bleeding terribly from his hand and from a mortal puncture in the breast that Quincy gave him" on his way to the ground. Knowing he's going to die, Moon tells Rooster that he saw Ned and Haze two days ago at McAlester's. He also says they're planning to rob another train and that they'll be coming back to the dugout to retrieve the stolen horses, exchanging them for their tired ones to make a speedier getaway. After imparting this information and asking Rooster to give his belongings to his brother, Moon dies.

After searching Quincy's corpse, Rooster finds one of Frank Ross's **gold pieces** in his pocket, delighting Mattie. Anticipating the arrival of Ned Pepper and his cronies, Rooster tells LaBoeuf to hike up onto one of the opposing ridges while he and Mattie climb up the other. Before they do this, they tidy up the dugout and make it look like there's someone inside, intending to lure the bandits into the cottage, effectively trapping them in the "V-shaped valley." "There is nothing in this plan but a lot of killing," LaBoeuf says, but Rooster ignores him, saying that this is how they must treat Ned and Haze, both of whom will always put up a fight because they know they'll be hanged if they're arrested.

Once they're atop the ridge, Mattie asks Rooster about his life before he was a marshal. He explains that he has done a number of jobs and then talks about his time during the Civil War, when he fought in Missouri. He says he lost his eye in Kansas City and would have died if the notorious bandit Cole Younger hadn't "crawled out under a hail of fire and pulled" him to safety. He then says that Cole doesn't deserve the reputation he has, insisting that Jesse James is the one who committed the violent act for which everyone holds Cole accountable. When Mattie asks if Rooster knew Jesse James, he says that he doesn't remember him, but that Potter claimed he was in the same group as them. He does, however, remember Frank James, who was quite vicious.

In this moment, readers see that Quincy is trying to remain loyal to Ned Pepper. In fact, he's so loyal to Ned that he's apparently willing to harm his other companion. Quincy cares more about protecting Ned than helping Moon stay alive, since Moon might bleed to death if he doesn't receive medical attention. In turn, Portis intimates that Ned Pepper must be a very powerful and dangerous man, since Quincy is clearly so afraid of betraying him.



Quincy demonstrates his unswerving loyalty to Ned Pepper in this scene by killing Moon. What's strange about this moment is that he stabs Moon in the "breast" on his own way toward death. This means Quincy isn't protecting Ned just because he's afraid of him, but because he wants to; knowing he's going to die anyway, he still works to keep Ned out of harm's way. As such, readers see that the bandits in True Grit have a certain inherent respect for powerful and violent men like Ned Pepper.



Once again, Rooster unabashedly exhibits his aggressive nature, making no effort to hide the fact that he's willing to shoot first and ask questions later. Although this is a troublingly violent way of going about this job, it's worth noting that there are most likely very few other ways to successfully catch a wily bandit like Ned Pepper (and, in turn, Chaney). In the brutal world of the Wild West, Rooster's mercilessness emerges as one of the only ways to bring criminals to justice.



In this section, Portis provides insight into Rooster's personal history, confirming that he has lived the life of a lawless man who rode alongside notorious (nonfictional) criminals like Cole Younger and Jesse and Frank James—the same kind of men whom he now hunts down as a U.S. marshal. Once again, then, Portis presents Rooster as an imperfect character, allowing readers to struggle with the cognitive dissonance that arises because of the fact that Rooster is simultaneously one of the novel's heroes and a violent man with questionable morals.



Mattie points out that Rooster is working for the “Yankees” now, and he acknowledges that things have “changed.” After the war, he and Potter surrendered to the Union and were given a “one-day parole and told” to “report back” the next morning. However, they heard that a “Kansas major [was] coming in that night to look over everybody for bushwhackers,” and since they themselves were considered “bushwhackers,” they fled. On their way, they robbed a group of soldiers, and Potter went to Arkansas while Rooster went to Illinois, where he lived under a fake name, married a widow, had a son, and opened a restaurant. After a while, though, his wife tired of his ways and left him, taking along their son. At this point, Rooster shut down the restaurant and went to Texas to hunt buffalo.

Mattie tells Rooster she’s heard rumors that he was a bandit, and though he refutes this claim, he admits that he has robbed “high-interest banks,” though he suggests that he was “doing a good service,” adding, “I never robbed no citizens.” Still, though, he found himself on the run at one point when he was living in New Mexico. Speaking of this period, he tells a story about riding straight at seven armed men with the reins in his teeth, shooting them with both hands as he went. “I guess they was all married men who loved their families as they scattered and run for home,” he says, but Mattie doesn’t believe him. Nevertheless, he continues to tell absurd stories as she begins to fall asleep.

At one point, Rooster tells a story about shooting at a malicious man and getting caught by two marshals, one of whom turned out to be Potter, who pretended not to know him and took him back to Fort Smith. Instead of arresting him, he got Rooster a job as a marshal. “Well, there is no beat of a good friend,” Rooster says.

Mattie snoozes as Rooster talks on and on. Finally, he shakes her awake and points to Ned Pepper and his gang, who have just appeared before the dugout. There are six of them, but Mattie can’t see their faces to know whether or not Chaney’s with them. Stopping before the dugout, Haze calls out for Quincy. When he receives no reply, the gang becomes suspicious. After stopping to think for a moment, Ned takes out a revolver and shoots it three times in the air. Suddenly, a shot sounds out from LaBoeuf’s ridge, and Ned’s horse falls to the ground. This creates a commotion, as LaBoeuf continues to shoot at the bandits and Rooster joins in, swearing at LaBoeuf for acting too soon. The bandits fire up at the ridges while scrambling to remount their horses.

In the years leading up to and following the end of the Civil War, “bushwhackers” were guerilla soldiers who fought on behalf of the Confederacy, terrorizing Union sympathizers and tearing violently through the country. What’s perhaps most uncomfortable about Rooster’s involvement with such people is that it means he most likely wanted to protect the institution of slavery, though perhaps he was merely interested in the raucous outlaw life that this existence would have provided (though this would be a flimsy excuse for fighting against the abolition of slavery). Regardless, Portis once again unearths Rooster’s flaws, showing readers that he is an imperfect man who has lived the same kind of violent and thieving life as the people he now pursues as a marshal.



When Rooster tells this unlikely story about defeating seven men at once while riding a horse without using his hands, readers see how important it is for him to feel courageous and powerful. This is because he exists in a culture that champions violence and physical displays of bravery.



Rooster’s story about Potter makes sense of the loyalty he showed Mattie when LaBoeuf whipped her with a switch. Rooster is a man who appreciates the value of “a good friend,” knowing that loyalty is an important trait to embody, since he himself benefitted from Potter’s camaraderie and kindness.



Just when Rooster, Mattie, and LaBoeuf finally locate Ned Pepper and his squad, their inability to effectively collaborate with one another keeps them from properly ambushing the outlaws. Although Rooster’s plan might have worked, LaBoeuf’s eagerness to take down Ned creates nothing but chaos, effectively ruining the trio’s entire strategy. In this way, Portis shows readers that a hotheaded act of violence can interfere with an otherwise good plan.



Amidst the excitement, Haze is killed and Ned Pepper is left stranded without a horse, though a young bandit turns around and rides over to him. Just when he's about to pull Ned onto the horse, though, LaBoeuf shoots the young man, at which point Ned jumps into the saddle and rides away while another bandit—named The Original Greaser Bob—hangs off one side of his horse for protection, successfully escaping in this stylized manner. When the fighting ceases, Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf collect the remaining horses, and Rooster yells at LaBoeuf for his premature shot, though LaBoeuf is distracted by the fact that his shoulder has been wounded. Apparently, a bullet shattered the stock of his rifle, which sent splinters into his skin.

As LaBoeuf and Rooster argue, LaBoeuf claims that he couldn't see very well and was in the process of moving to a better vantage point when Ned shot his revolver into the air. Thinking the fighting had begun, he took the first shot possible. Despite this story, Rooster accuses him of having fallen asleep and then startling awake when he heard Ned's gun. Interrupting their dispute, Mattie urges them to do something of use, and LaBoeuf suggests that they pursue the bandits. Rooster, on the other hand, wants to take the horses and fallen criminals back to McAlester's to "establish a prior claim to any reward" they might get for them, thinking that other marshals will soon try to take credit for what happened.

After searching the saddle bags on Haze's horse, Rooster finds ammunition for the kind of rifle that Chaney shoots. "Thus we had another clue," Mattie writes. "But we did not have Chaney." She then tends to LaBoeuf's wound before the trio sets off for McAlester's. On the way, they hear from passersby about the train robbery at the Wagoner's Switch, where Ned Pepper's gang killed two train employees, stole from the safe, and robbed the passengers. When they're not talking about the heist, LaBoeuf tries to discuss the war with Rooster, saying how badly he wanted to be on the front lines, though he was so young that he only got to work in the "bullet department" of the Union army for six months before the war ended. Rooster remains tight-lipped about this topic.

Because of LaBoeuf's overzealous shot, the ambush amounts to very little, since neither of the bandits who die during the skirmish are the ones the trio is interested in catching. Rooster, LaBoeuf, and Mattie's lack of group coordination—along with LaBoeuf's trigger-happiness—has cost them a valuable opportunity.



Mattie's continued focus on the manhunt stands in stark contrast to Rooster and LaBoeuf's pointless arguing. While the two men waste time blaming one another for what happened, Mattie refuses to lose sight of what actually matters: catching Ned Pepper and Tom Chaney. Once again, her desire to exact revenge remains unflappable.



The fact that LaBoeuf was disappointed not to serve on the frontlines of the Civil War underlines the extent to which he glorifies violent acts of bravery while ignoring the many downsides of such brutality. Furthermore, when he reveals that he fought for the Union, Mattie learns that he and Rooster were on opposite sides of the war. Combined with the fact that Rooster fought with an outlaw gang of guerilla soldiers, this is certainly why Rooster doesn't want to talk about the war with LaBoeuf.



Eventually, Rooster lets it slip that he fought with “Captain” Quantrill. “*Captain* Quantrill!” LaBoeuf says, but Rooster warns him to let the matter go. Sensing a fight developing, Mattie interrupts and distracts the two men by talking about the horses the bandits left behind. Before long, the trio reaches McAlester’s, where LaBoeuf sees a young Native American man who has some “medical training” while Rooster and Mattie visit Rooster’s friend Captain Boots Finch, who commands the Choctaw Light Horse, a group of policemen who exclusively handle Native American crimes. Captain Finch tells them that Ned recently came through with Haze and the Mexican gangster known as The Original Greaser Bob. He then agrees to take care of the dead bandits’ bodies and to collect a reward for the recovered horses, saying he’ll split the earnings with Rooster, who plans to continue chasing down Ned Pepper.

Rooster urges Mattie to stay behind while he and LaBoeuf continue the manhunt, insisting that this portion will be the hardest. “No, I am going along,” Mattie insists, and even LaBoeuf says, “She has come this far.” Still, this doesn’t convince Rooster, so LaBoeuf adds, “I think she has done fine myself. She has won her spurs, so to speak.” Giving up, Rooster agrees to let her come, and the trio leaves at noon, riding fast toward the area Rooster thinks the bandits have fled.

After forty minutes of “hard riding,” the trio stops and sees that Captain Finch is chasing after them. When he reaches them, he delivers a message, saying that Odus Wharton apparently broke out of jail that morning. Mattie notes that Rooster doesn’t seem upset by this news. Rather, he is mildly tickled to hear that Odus has behaved so badly, since this means Goudy—his lawyer—won’t be able to convince the president to help his case. This will be a huge “expense loss” for Goudy, which makes Rooster quite happy.

After delivering his news about Odus, Captain Finch looks at LaBoeuf and asks if he’s the one who shot Ned Pepper’s horse. “Yes,” Rooster replies, “this is the famous horse killer from El Paso, Texas. His idea is to put everybody on foot. He says it will limit their mischief.” Angry that Rooster’s making fun of him, LaBoeuf offers an excuse, claiming he didn’t have time to find a “rest” upon which to steady his rifle. Finch tells him not to feel bad, since many people have missed Ned, including Rooster himself. “I reckon [Rooster] is on his way now to missing him again,” Finch jokes. Hearing this, Rooster finishes off a bottle of whiskey, throws it in the air, and shoots at it—completely missing. When the bottle hits the ground, Rooster fires at it several times before finally hitting it.

LaBoeuf is astounded to hear Rooster refer to William Quantrill as “Captain” because Quantrill is notorious for his cruel and lawless ways. Once more, then, readers see that Rooster is a complicated man, one with whom it’s hard to sympathize because of his personal history. Mattie’s ability to predict trouble between Rooster and LaBoeuf is yet another testament to her maturity and social intelligence, which—in many ways—renders her smarter and more useful than her two companions.



Although LaBoeuf originally sees Mattie as nothing more than a nuisance, he now appreciates her company, believing that she has proved herself by sticking with them through such trying situations. In turn, Portis implies that simply going through the motions of collaboration often leads to true companionship and loyalty.



Again, Portis suggests that Rooster cares first and foremost about taking revenge on his enemies, not about legal forms of justice. As such, he’s happy when Odus Wharton breaks out of jail, since this means that he has ruined his own case and thus made Goudy’s life significantly harder. Rather than focusing on the fact that a criminal is now on the loose, Rooster concentrates on this small feeling of vindication, reveling in the idea of Goudy’s misery.



This conversation underlines just how much these men care about presenting themselves as sharp-shooting tough guys. Rooster feels he has to prove himself when Finch makes fun of him. This is because the culture he lives in prizes ultra-masculine ideas of courage and self-worth, making him feel like he has to be an able marksman if he’s going to get any respect from his peers.



As Rooster reloads his gun, he claims that Lee has been selling him bad “shells,” and LaBoeuf says, “I thought maybe the sun was in your eyes. That is to say, your eye.” To defend himself, Rooster grabs several “corn dodgers” from his saddle, throws one in the air, shoots at it, and misses once again. On his next try, he finally hits it, prompting LaBoeuf to try to the same thing, except that he throws two dodgers in the air, though he only hits one. At this point, Captain Finch joins in, and the three men become obsessed with the idea of shooting two dodgers before they hit the ground, though none of them succeeds for a long time. Finally, Finch hits two while using a rifle instead of a pistol, but Mattie tells them to focus on the task at hand: catching Ned Pepper and his gang.

Having gotten distracted by the marksmanship competition, Rooster has started drinking heavily. He doesn’t let up as they resume the ride, becoming so drunk that he babbles to himself about his past. Mattie isn’t sure if he knows she and LaBoeuf are listening, though she suspects he likes the idea of them paying attention to his long-winded stories as he leads them toward Ned Pepper. At one point, he even falls off his horse. The trio rides long into the night until Rooster finally declares that they’re most likely four miles away from the bandits. They stop for the night, and Mattie is so tired that she quickly falls asleep on the ground.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Mattie wakes up after Rooster and LaBoeuf and scales down a bank toward a small creek to get some water, taking her father’s pistol with her just in case. When she reaches the stream, she sees a man giving water to a group of horses on the other side. “*The man was none other than Tom Chaney!*” she writes. Before she can run away, Chaney turns around and points a rifle at her, saying that he recognizes her as Frank Ross’s daughter. When he asks her what she’s doing so far from home, she puts her hand in her empty water bucket and brings out her father’s dragoon revolver, saying, “I am here to take you back to Fort Smith.” She also says there’s a large group of “officers” just up the hill, but he assures her he won’t come with her.

Once more, Mattie is the most mature person in the group, even though she’s only a fourteen-year-old girl. Uninterested in her companions’ display of vanity, she continues to concentrate on her desire to avenge her father’s death, thereby proving not only her maturity, but also the extent to which she has fixated on the idea of revenge—an idea that has seemingly consumed her.



Rooster’s flaws begin to come to the forefront of the narrative as the trio rides toward Ned Pepper’s gang. Mattie should have expected that he might act erratically, given everything she’s heard about him (and given the nature of his turbulent personal history), but this is the first time that his shortcomings truly hinder the others, though Mattie has no choice but to blindly trust him as he leads her and LaBoeuf toward the criminals. She puts her faith in him even though he’s incredibly drunk, a fact that demonstrates a newfound trust in their companionship.



Finally, Mattie catches up with Chaney. It is fitting that she’s the one to stumble upon him, since her thirst for revenge is what drives the novel. Unsurprisingly, she has no problem pulling a gun on him, once more revealing her courage and “grit,” both of which Chaney probably doesn’t expect. Mattie doesn’t pay attention to whether or not she’s safe, instead focusing on what she came to do: bring down Tom Chaney.



"If you refuse to go I will have to shoot you," Mattie tells Chaney. "Oh?" he responds. "Then you had better cock your piece." Looking down, Mattie sees she hasn't prepared her pistol, so she cocks it using both thumbs. "All the way back till it locks," Chaney coaches. When she asks once more if he's going to come, he says, "I think not. It is just the other way around. You are going with me." Mattie then shoots him in the side of the stomach. When she does this, however, the force of the shot makes her stumble, and she loses hold of the revolver. Scrambling to retrieve it, she hears Rooster and LaBoeuf calling her name, and she yells to let them know where she is. Meanwhile, the other bandits shout from atop the opposite bank.

"I did not think you would do it," Chaney says, adding that he thinks he has a broken rib. In response, Mattie reminds him that he killed her father, and he admits that he "regret[s] that shooting." "I was drinking and I was mad through and through," he says. "Nothing has gone right for me." Just then, he reaches for a large piece of wood, and Mattie pulls the trigger once again, but the revolver doesn't fire, since the "hammer snap[s] on a bad percussion cap." When she reloads, the same thing happens. By the time she's trying to load it once again, it's too late, since Chaney throws the piece of wood at her, sending her down to the ground. He then approaches and picks her up, "slapping" her, "cursing" her father, and stealing her gun.

On the way back to his side of the river, Chaney grabs two of the horses with his free hand, dragging them along with Mattie as Rooster and LaBoeuf run down to the river, though they're too late. Ned Pepper's cronies also run toward the river, beating Rooster and LaBoeuf, at which point a shootout takes place. Once atop the hill, Chaney delivers Mattie to Ned, who asks who's on the other side of the river. "Marshal Cogburn and fifty more officers," she says, but he threatens to beat her if she lies again, so she tells him it's Rooster and another man. He then puts her on the ground and places his foot on her neck, yelling, "Rooster, can you hear me? You answer me, Rooster! I will kill this girl!" After a moment, Rooster yells, "The girl is nothing to me! She is a runaway from Arkansas!"

Ned asks Rooster if he should kill Mattie, and Rooster tells him to do what he thinks is "best." In response, Ned tells him to leave, saying, "If I see you riding over that bald ridge to the northwest I will spare the girl! You have five minutes!" Rooster says five minutes isn't enough time and tells Ned there will be other marshals coming soon, though he offers to "mislead them for six hours" if Ned gives him Chaney and Mattie. When Ned refuses this offer, though, Rooster agrees to retreat.

When Chaney instructs Mattie how to cock her pistol, he does so in a patronizing way, clearly assuming that she doesn't have the courage to shoot him. This is a miscalculation, of course, since Mattie is someone who defies what society expects of little girls—and she shoots Chaney in the stomach without hesitation. She still isn't very experienced when it comes to handling weapons, however, which is why she finds herself discombobulated by the blast of the gun.



Chaney is shocked that Mattie shoots him, since he assumed that a little girl wouldn't have the "grit" necessary to fire at a grown man. However, he still manages to get the best of her, though only because her pistol misfires. It's worth noting that this isn't Mattie's fault—in fact, one could argue that Rooster is the one to blame for this, since he wasted Mattie's bullets while shooting the rat in Lee's grocery store in Chapter 3. When he reloaded her gun, he did so from a box of mismatched ammunition, evidently filling it with bad rounds.



Although Rooster has already proved his loyalty to Mattie, in this moment Portis throws the legitimacy of that loyalty into question. On the one hand, it's most likely the case that Rooster has to say he doesn't care about Mattie in order to successfully navigate this negotiation with Ned. On the other hand, it's also possible that Rooster is telling the truth—after all, he is a complicated man who might not actually care about his friendship with a young girl. In this way, Portis raises the tension and invites readers to question the strength of Mattie and Rooster's bond.



It's worth keeping in mind that Rooster isn't necessarily used to negotiating with criminals. Instead, he usually uses brute force to defeat them, coming into dangerous situations with his gun already drawn. In this scenario, though, he has no choice but to try to reason with Ned—something he's clearly not very good at, though this is a particularly difficult dilemma to navigate using words alone.



While Rooster and LaBoeuf leave, Ned Pepper brings Mattie to the bandits' camp, which is in a small clearing atop the hill. As he leads her there, Mattie passes the "simpleminded" outlaw Harold Permalee and The Original Greaser Bob. At the campsite, Chaney sits by the fire, inspecting his bullet wound while Farrell Permalee—another bandit—tends to his injury in a brusque, unsympathetic manner. As soon as Chaney sees Mattie, he springs up and dashes toward her, saying he's going to strangle her. "No, I won't have it," Ned says, fending him off and forcing Mattie to sit by the fire, where she eventually asks for—and receives—some bacon. She then explains to Ned that Chaney killed her father and stole his horse. "If I had killed him I would not now be in this fix," she says. "My revolver misfired twice." "They will do it," says Ned.

Hearing Mattie and Ned's conversation, Chaney claims he was "shot from ambush," and when Mattie says this is a lie, he throws a stick into a nearby pit and says, "There is a ball of rattlesnakes down there [...] and I am going to throw you in it." In response, Mattie points out that Ned—his boss—won't let him, so Chaney reminds Ned that it has been five minutes and there's still no sign of Rooster on the northwest ridge. Unbothered, Ned says he'll give Rooster and his companion more time. He then asks Mattie questions about what she has been doing with Rooster, eventually falling into idle conversation about his own affairs, telling her in an offhanded, friendly manner about his recent train robbery. After a while, Farrell points out Rooster and LaBoeuf, who are riding away on the ridge with Blackie walking behind them.

Until this moment, Mattie hadn't stopped to consider that Rooster and LaBoeuf might actually abandon her. "Was this what they called grit in Fort Smith?" she wonders. "We called it something else in Yell County!" As the bandits prepare to leave, Ned forces Chaney to stay behind. Since one of their horses ran away when Mattie shot Chaney, Ned tells him that he'll send someone to "fetch" him later. "I want you to wait here with the girl. You will be out by dark. We are going to 'The Old Place' and you can meet us there," he says. Mattie says she doesn't want to stay with Chaney, who she's certain will kill her, but Ned assures her this won't happen, telling Chaney that if he hurts Mattie he won't get his share of the money from the train heist.

Rather surprisingly, Ned doesn't treat Mattie unkindly. He's rather cordial and casual with her, even going out of his way to protect her from Chaney's wrath. This is perhaps because he doesn't have a personal or emotional investment in what's happening. Mattie is simply a piece of collateral, something he can use to ensure his own safety, so he has no problem treating her with respect, whereas Chaney wants to kill her because she shot him. In this moment, Portis shows readers the cyclical nature of revenge, demonstrating that Chaney (whom Mattie wanted to take revenge on) now wants to take revenge on Mattie, creating a circle of violence and retribution.



The fact that Chaney is embarrassed to have been shot by Mattie spotlights the ways in which men in the Wild West cling to vain notions of toughness and masculinity, wanting to present themselves as untouchable and ruthless rather than vulnerable. When Mattie shoots him, she not only defies society's expectations of a little girl, but also challenges Chaney's macho persona.



In the same way that Rooster and LaBoeuf's loyalty to Mattie has apparently amounted to nothing, Ned Pepper clearly has no problem abandoning Chaney. By outlining this dynamic, Portis shows that violent and supposedly courageous men like Rooster, LaBoeuf, and Ned Pepper are often disloyal companions.



Before they leave, The Original Greaser Bob asks Ned Pepper to divvy up their earnings. Resentfully, Ned obliges, doling out cash to his partners. He then opens the bag of registered mail they stole and finds a number of checks inside. Because he can't read very well, he asks Mattie if these checks are worth anything, and she tells him they *would* be valuable if they were signed by the intended recipient, whose signature happens to be printed in a different spot on the checks (since he's the president of the bank). Ned then forces her to forge the signature using a stick and a mixture of saliva and gunpowder, and though she's hesitant to break the law, she feels confident nobody will accept such poorly signed checks, so she obeys his orders. Having settled this matter, Ned and the rest of the bandits leave.

Sitting by the campfire with Chaney, Mattie heats a can of water, saying she wants to wash the dirt off her hands. When he threatens to throw her in the snake pit after she insults him for being dirty himself, she reminds him that Ned Pepper won't pay him if he hurts her. "I fear he has no idea of paying me," Chaney admits. "I believe he has left me, knowing I am sure to be caught when I leave on foot." He then decides to think over his options, telling Mattie to stop talking and threatening to kill her if she interrupts him. As he ponders his situation, Mattie grabs the can of hot water and throws it on him, dashing away as fast as she can. However, he catches up to her right as she reaches the edge of the clearing.

Chaney hits Mattie over the head with his pistol so hard she thinks she's been shot. Just then, though, she hears LaBoeuf's voice. "Hands up, Chelmsford!" he shouts, climbing up the backside of the hill with his rifle pointed at Chaney. "Everything is against me," Chaney says, letting Mattie go. As he puts his hands up, Mattie grabs her pistol out of his belt, and LaBoeuf steers him toward a place on the hill where they can see a wide-open meadow, where Ned Pepper and the other bandits appear in the distance as they ride away. Soon Rooster emerges before them, blocking their path. After confirming that Mattie is all right, he tells the other outlaws to stand aside while he deals with Ned, but Harold, Farrell, and Greaser Bob refuse to do so.

Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang are tough, frightening men, but their power is diminished by the fact that they lack certain kinds of basic intelligence. Indeed, their train heist would be somewhat worthless if it weren't for Mattie, who's smart enough to identify that the checks they stole are worth quite a lot of money. Of course, their ignorance still gets the best of them, since it's highly unlikely that they'll be able to cash these checks. But since they don't know this, they think they're going to be rich, completely unaware that their brutal tactics have all been for nothing.



In this moment, Mattie combines her quick-thinking nature with her bravery, using both violence and intelligence to get the best of Chaney. This, it seems, is a rare combination in True Grit, which is a novel generally populated by people who rely solely on physical displays of aggression. She isn't quite fast enough to escape Chaney, but this doesn't change the fact that her original plan is a good one.



LaBoeuf and Rooster's triumphant return proves that they actually are loyal to Mattie, who they clearly see as a valuable companion who they can't simply leave behind. What's more, their refusal to leave also spells out their determination to bring Ned and Chaney to justice, aligning their thirst for revenge with Mattie's. LaBoeuf's crafty decision to hike up the backside of the hill also demonstrates the power of combining intelligence with courage rather than simply using brute force. If LaBoeuf and Rooster had simply charged at Ned and his gang when they first kidnapped Mattie, it's obvious they wouldn't have been successful.



Rooster asks Ned if he'd like to be killed now or to wait until he's hanged in Fort Smith, but Ned only laughs. Rooster puts his horse's reins in his teeth, takes out two revolvers, and rides directly at the four bandits, shooting as he goes. First, Harold falls to the ground, followed by Farrell. In a characteristically stylistic manner, Greaser Bob lies flat on his horse and rides "wider than the others," thereby making off with his cash reward. Rooster takes several shotgun "pellets" in the face and around his shoulders, but these are minor injuries. However, his horse is "mortally struck," and when Rooster tries to keep riding, he topples over, trapping Rooster beneath him as Lucky Ned Pepper approaches. Ned's arm has been shot, but he's otherwise in good shape, and he menacingly advances upon the fallen marshal.

Just as Ned Pepper is about to kill Rooster, LaBoeuf crouches, aims, and shoots the outlaw, killing him where he sits in his saddle. "Hurrah!" Mattie celebrates, but Chaney grabs a large rock and smashes it over LaBoeuf's head. Seeing this, Mattie grabs her revolver, points it at Chaney, and sends a bullet into his head. Reeling once again from the gun's kickback, she careens backwards into the snake pit, falling all the way down and getting lodged in a "small hole" at the bottom like a "cork in a bottle." Because her arm is broken, she's unable to scramble out of this hole, which she soon discovers is the opening of a bat cave, as bats begin to fly about her legs.

Mattie calls out for LaBoeuf but receives no answer. Moment by moment, she slips a little further into the bat hole, realizing that she needs to find something to "wedge" between herself and the walls of the cave. Looking around, she sees a blue shirt, so she reaches for it, thinking she might be able to ball it up and use it to plug herself more sturdily in the hole. When she pulls at it, though, she realizes it's attached to a skeleton. Nevertheless, she grabs the bones and tries to twist off the hand. As she does so, she notices a swarm of rattlesnakes in the corpse's chest cavity, realizing that she has "disturbed their sleep in their curious winter quarters." Still, she manages to break off the skeleton's arm, which she uses to fend off snakes before propping it against her side as a "wedge" in the hole.

Unlike LaBoeuf—who uses a crafty method of sneaking up on Chaney—Rooster attempts to defeat Ned and his gang with nothing but foolhardy bravery and brute force. This is the kind of absurd display of courage that the broader culture of the Wild West celebrates. And though it's impressive that Rooster manages to take down two of his enemies (and lends credence to his earlier boast about shooting men while holding the reins in his teeth), he ultimately fails. As such, Portis implies that the brazenly violent mentality that people like Rooster covet is often ill-advised and dangerous.



Finally, it seems, Mattie has avenged her father's death. However, she hardly gets to enjoy this moment, as she soon finds herself injured and stuck in a very precarious situation. In this way, Portis intimates that Mattie's fixation on revenge has certain repercussions, ultimately causing her to ignore her own safety. The author suggests that acts of violence often come with consequences, as shooting Chaney in the head only creates more trouble for Mattie.



As Mattie's predicament becomes worse and worse, readers might begin to sense that none of this would have happened if she had simply held Chaney at gunpoint. After all, the only reason she's in this snake pit is because she shot Chaney. Eager to eliminate him, she failed to think of her own safety despite the fact that she already knew from shooting him the first time that the force of the blast would send her reeling. It again becomes clear that Mattie's obsession with revenge leads her into trouble.



“Help!” Mattie yells. “There are snakes and skeletons down here!” “I warrant there will be another one before spring!” comes Chaney’s voice, and Mattie realizes he isn’t dead yet. She then hears Rooster as he smashes Chaney’s head in with the butt of his rifle and kicks him into the pit. Chaney’s body careens downward and lands on the skeleton, enraging the rattlesnakes, which slither out and swarm around Mattie. Although she tries to avoid it, a baby snake bites her in the hand. Before long, Rooster belays down and LaBoeuf hoists them both up by tying the rope to Blackie. By the time she’s out of the pit, Mattie is weak and loopy, and Rooster scoops her up and tells LaBoeuf that he’ll send help once he takes Mattie to a doctor. With this, he sets off on Blackie with Mattie in his lap.

Rooster pushes Blackie hard throughout the journey. Eventually, the poor horse slows down, but Rooster continues to whip it despite Mattie’s protests, even cutting into Blackie’s back to drive him forward. Before long, though, Blackie collapses and dies, so Rooster takes Mattie in his arms and runs. At one point, they come upon a group of men with a wagon, which Rooster steals. When they finally reach Fort Smith, Rooster carries Mattie into the doctor’s house, where she remains for over a week. When her hand balloons up and turns black, the doctor amputates it “just above the elbow” while Mattie’s mother sits by her side. “I very much admired my mother for sitting there and not flinching, as she was of a delicate temperament,” Mattie notes.

Rooster visits Mattie twice while she recovers, telling her that a group of marshals came to rescue LaBoeuf but that he wouldn’t leave until he had retrieved Chaney’s body from the snake pit, into which he himself descended because nobody else was willing to do so. After stopping at McAlester’s and having a doctor attend to his head wound, LaBoeuf set off for Texas with Chaney’s corpse.

Mattie writes a check for Rooster for the remaining \$75 of his fee and asks Lawyer Daggett to send it to him. When she asks him to do this, Daggett tells her he chastised Rooster for bringing her on the manhunt, but Mattie tells him Rooster should only be “commended for his grit” and that he saved her life, so Daggett personally delivers the check and issues an apology to Rooster. As for Mattie, she sends Rooster a letter inviting him to visit her sometime, and though he says he’ll stop by the next time he brings criminals through the area, he never does. “I will say here that Judy was never recovered, nor was the second California **gold piece**,” Mattie writes. “I kept the other one for years, until our house burned. We found no trace of it in the ashes.”

Once again, the value of companionship and loyalty comes to the forefront of the novel. Although Rooster and Mattie originally teamed up as part of a business transaction, their journey has brought them together, creating a sense of loyalty so strong that Rooster is willing to risk his own life to save Mattie. In this way, Portis once more illustrates the fact that simply going through the motions of collaboration can often lead to genuine companionship.



That Mattie loses her arm suggests that there are certain consequences that come along with violent acts of revenge. Still, she seemingly has no regrets, remaining courageous and tough in spite of everything. When her arm gets amputated, she doesn’t think of herself, concentrating not on the pain, but on her mother. By behaving so stoically during her amputation, then, she exhibits the same kind of “grit” she so admires in people like Rooster, clearly wanting to embody the brutal resilience that her society celebrates.



LaBoeuf won’t rest until his job is over. Whereas Mattie’s only goal was to avenge her father’s death by killing Chaney, LaBoeuf’s goal is to transport him back to Texas, which is why he refuses to leave the scene of the murder until he has retrieved Chaney’s body.



Though it’s true Rooster saved Mattie’s life, it’s also true that he probably should have tried harder to keep her from coming on the journey in the first place. Regardless of Mattie’s gender and resolve, there’s no denying how crazy it was to let a child come on a manhunt, which is certainly why Daggett criticizes Rooster. On another note, the fact that Mattie never “recover[s]” the second piece of her father’s gold is an indication that revenge simply can’t bring back what a person has lost, even if it makes that person feel better about the aftermath of that loss.



Three weeks later, Rooster kills Odus Wharton in a “duel,” stirring up yet another controversy because he also shoots two other men who are with Odus. Because these men aren’t “wanted by the law,” Rooster is forced to resign as a marshal, at which point he moves with Potter’s widow to San Antonio, Texas to work as a “range detective for a stockmen’s association.” Over the years, Mattie receives bits of information about Rooster, eventually learning 25 years later that he has joined a traveling circus. Her little brother sends her a newspaper advertisement of the show, which is a “Wild West” spectacle including Cole Younger and Frank James. “HE RODE WITH QUANTRILL! HE RODE FOR PARKER!” the clipping boasts, claiming that Rooster can “amaze” audiences with his marksmanship. Upon seeing this, the adult Mattie travels to Memphis to attend the show.

On the train to Memphis, Mattie wonders if Rooster will recognize her. When she arrives, she sees the “show train” sitting at the train depot, so she walks over to greet Rooster, finding Cole Younger and Frank James themselves sitting on the edge of a car. When Mattie approaches, Younger stands up and politely introduces herself while James remains seated with his hat on. Younger informs Mattie that Rooster died two nights earlier of natural causes. “We had some lively times,” he says, and Mattie thanks him for the information. As she leaves, she turns to James and says, “Keep your seat, trash!” She notes that it’s now widely known that James shot a man whose murder was pinned on Cole Younger. “As far as I know that scoundrel never spent a night in jail, and there was Cole Younger locked away twenty-five years in the Minnesota pen,” Mattie notes.

Mattie—who now owns a bank—makes sure Rooster’s body is moved to Yell County, where she buries him in her family plot with a headstone that shows his name and the epitaph “A RESOLUTE OFFICER OF PARKER’S COURT.” Although this makes her fellow townspeople gossip about how she’s a lonely, “cranky old maid,” she pays no heed, noting that such people “think everybody is dying to get married.” She, however, has no desire to do this, instead devoting herself to other matters, saying, “I love my church and my bank. What is wrong with that?” Concluding her story, she writes, “This ends my true account of how I avenged Frank Ross’s blood over in the Choctaw Nation when snow was on the ground.”

Whereas Mattie’s life of adventure ends when Chaney dies, Rooster continues to lead a violent existence. After all, he’s already back to his reckless ways only three weeks after the incident with Chaney and Ned Pepper, suggesting that this is the only way he knows how to live. It makes sense, then, that he would join a circus with Cole Younger and Frank James as an old man. Unable to continue his ways into old age, he has no choice but to rehash his raucous years. Luckily for him, his society celebrates the kind of violent existence he led, so he’s able to monetize his reputation as part of a circus act.



Cole Younger and Frank James are nonfictional outlaws who—like Rooster—were in William Quantrill’s dangerous group of guerilla soldiers during and after the final years of the Civil War. Despite her own comfort with violence and revenge, Mattie is a very principled person, which is why she respects Younger for treating her politely but scorns Frank James for being a dishonest man who never went to jail. Cole Younger isn’t a morally good man, but Mattie appreciates the fact that he has served his time. According to her, then, a person can make up for their wrongs by paying for them through personal sacrifice. This aligns with her commitment to revenge, which is a way of forcing a person to atone for past mistakes. In this moment, it becomes clear that Mattie never cast a negative judgment on Rooster because she most likely believed that he had made up for his previous moral shortcomings.



Mattie ends her story with an assertion of her own independence. At the age of 39, she still pays no attention to what society expects of her, deciding that she doesn’t need to get married in order to lead a fulfilling life. And though it’s been quite some time since her journey into Indian Territory with Rooster and LaBoeuf, the fact that she is still telling the story 25 years later suggests that her preoccupation with revenge continues to consume her.





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