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Horse and Class in *True Grit*

Abstract: This essay returns to Jane Tompkins' original theory of horses in her 1992 book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* as a means of analyzing Charles Portis' 1968 novel *True Grit*, a work which Tompkins does not address. Arguing for a Marxist ideology critique of *True Grit* with a focus on the main character (and narrator) Mattie Ross and her horse named Little Blackie, the essay offers a critique of Tompkins' idea of the "material presence" of horses in American Western narratives.

Keywords: *True Grit*, Jane Tompkins, Little Blackie, materialism, ideology

"Then I saw the horse. It was Little Blackie! The scrub pony had saved us! My thought was: *The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner.*"
—Mattie in *True Grit* (214-215, emphasis in original)

1.

Appearing in 1992, Jane Tompkins' book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* includes a chapter on "Horses" (and another chapter on "Cattle") which, I believe, could certainly be considered one of the earliest interventions—particularly concerning popular American Western stories—toward what is now known as animal studies and/or posthumanism in contemporary literary and cultural theory.¹ Tompkins' elaboration of what she calls the "dynamic material presence" (94) of horses in Western narratives clearly preceded by many years such works as Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal*, and Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*.²

Tompkins' analysis of horses (89-109 [chap. 4]), like the rest of her book, is offered in what she seems to intend as a counter-"academic" rhetoric, thus also marking her text as representative of so-called "post-theory" in the American humanities.³ For example, in her introduction, while Tompkins can at one moment articulate her critical position that "there is nothing trivial about the needs [Westerns] answer, the desires they arouse, or the vision of life they portray" (10-11), at another moment she relaxes

1 In general, see Kalof, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*; Taylor and Twine, eds., *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies*; Nocella et al., eds., *Defining Critical Animal Studies*; Mishra, ed., *Bhatter College Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*; Vint, ed., *Science Fiction Studies*. For a distinctly Marxist viewpoint, see Faivre, "Fictions of the Animal; or, Learning to Live with Dehumanization," and Cotter et al., eds., *Human, All Too (Post)Human*.

2 See also the more recent anthology *Deleuze and the Animal*, eds. Gardner and MacCormack.

3 On "post-theory," see the anthology *Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism*, eds. Callus and Herbrechter, especially Donald Morton's essay, "Transforming Theory: Cultural Studies and the Public Humanities" (25-47).

herself, as if we are sitting in her living room, by talking about “the men I talk to” about Westerns as she was “trying *manfully* to write about Westerns, starting from zero and getting bleary-eyed in the process... I’ll never catch up” (15, emphasis in original).

This essay examines Tompkins’ arguments from the perspective of Marxist theory, about which she has nothing to say, despite her attentiveness to notions of “work,” “working people,” and the “work” of horses (14-15, 17, 90). In general, therefore, I am interested here in drawing out the class politics and ideology of a number of Tompkins’ most significant arguments concerning the horse in Westerns. In doing so, I will also attempt to test the reliability and limitations of her theory by looking in particular at Charles Portis’ 1968 novel *True Grit*, which features the life and death of “Little Blackie,” the horse owned by the main character and narrator, young Mattie Ross.

While Tompkins’ book does list a short quotation from *True Grit* in her second chapter on “Women and the Language of Men” (50) and even includes a full-page image of John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn (124), she does not discuss the story of *True Grit*. Portis’ novel was quickly adapted into the blockbuster 1969 movie starring John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn, Glen Campbell as LaBoeuf, Kim Darby as Mattie Ross, and Robert Duvall as Lucky Ned Pepper. In 2010, of course, *True Grit* was brought back to life with the Coen brothers’ version. My critique of Tompkins, however, is not simply based on the fact that she sidesteps Portis’ well known novel and the still more popular movie of 1969, although it is a curious omission. It is curious because Tompkins thinks and writes from a certain feminist viewpoint, and *True Grit* itself is often regarded as a “feminist Western”—written by a male author, nonetheless (see e.g. Muir; Tweedle).

In the tale, Mattie proves that she also, at the age of fourteen, possesses a “true grit” heroism of unrelenting determination and perseverance that is the equal of Rooster’s or LaBoeuf’s. As LaBoeuf himself argues *against* Rooster at a certain point, also reversing his own initially adamant and hostile opposition to Mattie’s insistence on riding along with them in the pursuit of the outlaw Tom Chaney, he proclaims, “She has won her spurs” (Portis 167). In any case, Tompkins’ avoidance of this story only serves to make way for an original analysis of it *in light of* her broader and more definite positions. One such position, as I mentioned, is the idea of the “material presence” of the horse.

2.

Tompkins argues that it is “the physical existence of horses above all that makes them indispensable in Westerns” (93-94). The “dynamic material presence” of horses is the signification of “their energy and corporeality,” which “call out to the bodies of the viewers, to our bodies,” thereby inviting us (as viewers or readers) to “be excited by their mass and motion,” to “vicariously be in contact with their flesh, feel their breath, sense their strength and stamina, [and] absorb the flow of force” (94) that horses represent in the storyline and its meaningfulness.

Why is this “material presence” so significant? Her explanation is that the “key to what horses represent” is actually “something very simple,” namely, the expression of

“a need for connection to nature, to the wild” (93) in the particular form and incarnation that the horse provides. The animality of the horse is not the calmness of “songbirds or running brooks” but instead is the presence of “power, motion, size, strength, brought under human control and in touch with the human body” (93). Thus the physicality of horses operates “to galvanize us,” Tompkins says, as “they symbolize the desire to recuperate some lost connection to life” (94) and “a longing for a different *kind* of existence” (93, emphasis in original). This different kind of existence is one in which “people have close physical contact” with “something they can touch, press against with their bodies,” something “alive, first of all, something big, powerful, and fast-moving,” and “[s]omething not human but [also] not beyond human control, dangerous, even potentially lethal, but ductile [i.e., readily led and influenced] to the human will” (93).

Tompkins’ reading actively unsettles the familiar inclinations of reading-as-a-consumer of cultural productions. In consumptive reading, although one obviously “notices” the horse as one of many other entities that make the Western tale a “Western” in the first place, the horse’s significance as a bearer of social meanings—to “stand for something larger” (92)—is usually not something taken very seriously. Her reading of the horse’s “dynamic material presence” involves a mode of inquiry toward explaining how and why the horse is “*socially* present” (92, emphasis in original) and yet, as she puts it, the human characters themselves who ride them “don’t pay them much attention, and as far as the critics are concerned they might as well not exist” (90); hence the oddly shifting “presence” of what she identifies as “this strange invisibility” of the horse as an (in)significant site of social intelligibility where “everything in the genre is hidden” (90).

She argues that this “strange invisibility” is the mark of the “paradox of horses” (92) in Westerns: “you can’t have a Western without them, visually they are everywhere, and symbolically they carry a tremendous payload, but the mind doesn’t count them... or give them... the time of day” (92). Thus, she goes on to say, “we never think about whether the horses are tired,” whether they “want to be galloping after the villains, or, if asked,” whether the horse “would choose” (92) to do the things they are called upon to do. With these postulations in mind, let us turn to *True Grit*.

3.

In chapter five of *True Grit*, Mattie is making her final preparations for what she variously sees as “the job” (Portis 92) to be done (for which she privately contracts with Rooster) as well as the “adventure” (94) and “journey” (111) to “avenge her father’s blood” (11) by tracking down her father’s killer, Tom Chaney. She has long considered Chaney to be “trash” (14, 180) and “riffraff” (16). According to Mattie, quoting the Bible from memory, “The wicked flee when none pursueth” (17). The Coen brothers elevate these guiding words of wisdom as an epigraph in the opening of their 2010 movie. It is during this time that Mattie returns to Colonel Stonehill’s office and corral, where she purchases the horse which she names Little Blackie, a “black one with white stockings in front” (90-91).

As one might expect, of course, the selection of a horse is not an arbitrary decision. But this is especially so in a social context where the ownership of a horse

reflects the owner's individual right to private property. Indeed, this issue of possession and ownership of a horse is one which Tompkins stresses, for "when the rider *owns* the horse," she says, "that is not a relationship among equals" (99, emphasis in original). Although the owner-rider may be gentle and regard the relationship as that of "pals" in closeness and partnership, the "actual relationship" makes the horse a "servant" (99). Mattie also considers Little Blackie to be her new "pal" (Portis 93) and "chum" (101). With Mattie, her choice not only involves an observation of this horse's demeanor and physical stature in general, but also the specific characteristic of his white forelegs.

In her confidently educated manner, she informs us that her father (Frank Ross) would never have owned a horse like this, having "more than one white leg" (90), because of a "foolish" (90) superstition among horsemen which holds that any horse with more than one white leg is "no good" (90). But Mattie consciously defies the proverb. Following some negotiation with Stonehill over the fair "market price" (91) for the horse, she buys Little Blackie for eighteen dollars. Mattie's disregard of the "foolish" superstition about horses with white stockings suggests her "grit" of independent-mindedness as well as her seeming devotion to purely rational decision-making and behavior; yet her rationalism is often insistently underlined by her characteristic mixing of legal and economic ("market") knowledge along with religious doctrine. These qualities are also demonstrably revealed in her highly determined, persistent, savvy wranglings with Stonehill the stock (animal) trader. As she pompously tells Stonehill, for example, "The good Christian does not flinch from difficulties," to which Stonehill replies that she is simply "wrongheaded" (92).

In terms of Tompkins' conception of the "material presence" of horses, Mattie's first encounter with Little Blackie does indicate the initial phase in the story where the "physical existence" of the horse calls the reader to become "vicariously... in contact" with his "mass and motion" and at least the potentiality of his "strength and stamina," his "flow of force." Little Blackie is chosen as the necessary non-human counterpart to Mattie's own "journey" beyond the ordinary boundaries of her safe home life and into the "wild" world in which the pursuit of Western justice demands "true grit." However, it is not merely the physical corporeality of Little Blackie's "flesh" and "breath" in relation with our reading "bodies" that constitutes the decisive *ideological* impact of this scene in which Mattie identifies with the horse.

Tompkins is obviously attempting to theorize the political and social meaning of the horse's "material presence." But her concept of the "material" is unreliable for the transformative politics of reading that Marx signals with his call for "revolutionizing practice": "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as *'revolutionizing practice'*" ("Theses" 61, emphasis in original). For Marx, the "reality" of "sensuousness"—including the literary or filmic representation of the horse—needs to be conceived not "only in the form... of *intuition [Anschauung]*" but more importantly as "*human sensuous activity, practice... human activity itself as objective [gegenständliche] activity*" in order to "grasp the significance of 'revolutionary,' of 'practical-critical,' activity" (61, emphasis in original).

In other words, Tompkins' concept of materiality is a rearticulation of bourgeois empiricism and experientialism mingled with "intuition." The "presence"

of “physical existence” that she emphasizes is distinctly (and politically) ironic when closely examined from the standpoint of Marxist *materialism* and *materialist dialectics*: she is postulating a “material presence” of corporeality which surreptitiously excludes and displaces the objective knowledge of the reality of social *class relations* and their determining influence on the political meaning of “experience.” The “presence” she is talking about is actually an updated extension of bourgeois “experience” as knowledge, which makes class consciousness *absent* and effectively invisible. This is ironic because in the “existence” of all social formations based on class division—particularly in the Western ideology which invariably calls on readers to “intuit” capitalistic class relations as “common sense”—class is never absent but instead is the fundamental material “logic” of social and cultural “life.”

The subtitle of Tompkins’ book is *The Inner Life of Westerns*. This is important because it suggests, in Marxist terms, the dialectics of studying the “inner life” of human consciousness in relation with the objectively knowable “outer life” of society’s material basis and organization. The material structure of society is reflected, among other ways, by the conflictuality of “law and order” as well as by the social role of horses in the “sensuous activity” of human and non-human labor (see Wright 34-58, 83-105). As Mattie suggests, the pursuit of the “wicked” requires not only “true grit” but also a good horse whose own “sensuous activity” makes the pursuit a “practical-critical” reality. But the “inner life” that Tompkins has in mind is an un-dialectical inner life which represses the development of class consciousness for “revolutionizing practice.”

As they elaborate their critique of Ludwig Feuerbach in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argue that the concept of revolutionizing practice is not “merely to produce a correct consciousness about an *existing* fact” (60, emphasis in original)—which is the essence of Tompkins’ reading—but rather, “for the real communist it is a question of overthrowing the existing state of things” (60), a “question of revolutionising the existing world, of practically attacking and changing existing things” (62). Through her theory of the horse, the question then arises as to how Tompkins can be read as calling for a changing of existing things, to borrow Marx and Engels’ words.

In the concluding pages of her chapter on horses, Tompkins argues that the horse—its “material presence”—occupies a symptomatic and subliminal site which is “integral to the work Westerns do” in transmitting to readers or viewers “a sadomasochistic impulse central to Westerns” (Tompkins 107), a “constant spectacle of the horse’s submission to human control... and sometimes killed before our eyes” (109). The next question that needs to be asked, however, is a *materialist* question: whence the “impulse”? Where does it come from? What is its “material” source? She says that there is an “ethos of domination” (106) in the horse-rider relationship, and one has “a sense of something bad going on” (107). But Tompkins does not seem to think that this “something bad” has much, if anything, to do with the integral workings of capitalist society’s material base and its necessary transmission—in the superstructural arena of culture—of legitimizing meanings in the Western ideology.

4.

As I pointed out, Tompkins' theory of the material presence of horses as "physical" existence, corporeality, body, flesh, breath, energy, and so on, is interrelated with two other issues: (1) although horses are "visually... everywhere" in Western stories, the human characters "don't pay them much attention," and hence they function as a "strange invisibility"; and (2) horses function symbolically as a "desire to recuperate some lost connection to life" and a human "longing for a different *kind* of existence."

In *True Grit*, while it is more or less true that the male characters (Rooster, LaBoeuf, Stonehill, and Lucky Ned Pepper) generally ignore their horses, the same certainly cannot be said of Mattie. From the very beginning of the tale, although she remarks that she had "never been very fond of horses" (Portis 13), Mattie is almost constantly "paying attention" to the presence of horses, whether it is her father's horse Judy, Tom Chaney's gray horse, Rooster's "big bay stallion" (105) named Bo, LaBoeuf's "shaggy cow pony" (105), or of course Little Blackie: "He was a pretty thing" (90) to whom she "talked softly" (93) as she rubbed his neck, "saying silly things" (104) to him. Horses are not "strangely invisible" to her, as Tompkins broadly theorizes. Indeed, from the very outset of Mattie's "true account of how [she] avenged Frank Ross's blood" (224), it is her father's own "scheme" to make a "cheap... investment" (12) in a string of Texas mustangs—to "breed and sell" (12) them—that sets Portis' entire story in motion. In any case, Tompkins' theory nonetheless enables us to recognize Mattie's attention to horses as an exception to the general proposition of the subliminal "paradox."

Is Mattie's attention to horses—especially Little Blackie—a sign in the narrative's symbolic code, which points us to the desire for "some lost connection to life" and a longing for some "different kind of existence"? Perhaps one might argue that Little Blackie becomes Mattie's substitute for her "lost connection" to her father's life; thus, the different kind of existence this fantasy envisions is one in which she returns to the way things were before the murder. However, as I suggested earlier, a more precise decoding of the "material presence" of Little Blackie for Mattie lies in her conscious recognition of the horse's two white stockings. To Mattie, Little Blackie's white forelegs mark him, according to cowboy superstition, as "no good" or perhaps unlucky. But Mattie deliberately rejects the folklore and chooses Little Blackie as her own.

Symbolically, choosing Little Blackie is Mattie's way of self-reflexively choosing—and allying herself with—the "outcast" horse. By this point in the tale, Mattie surely comprehends that she herself, being a "fourteen-year-old girl" (11), is also "naturally" marked by her sex/gender and age in the Western's patriarchal social order. She is an outsider, an unwanted and undesirable "presence" in the "wild West" world of law and disorder that is commanded by Rooster and LaBoeuf *as well as* by outlaws like Lucky Ned Pepper and his bandit gang-members. Despite the fact that Rooster and LaBoeuf are formally positioned on the opposite side of the law from the bandits, they (Rooster and LaBoeuf) nonetheless occupy an internally conflicted socio-economic space which necessarily includes their underworld counterparts. In the surface logic of Portis' story, the entire point of the "journey" is for us to witness the

“‘graphic’ writing” (43) of details and pontifications that signify Mattie’s disruption of the patriarchal Western order and her ultimate “success” *within* it as a youthful female with “true grit.”

All of this also requires that Mattie must have her own horse, and that *specific* horse is Little Blackie. It is no coincidence that Little Blackie himself is one of the “mustang” horses that her father originally bought from Stonehill. She buys the horse back from Stonehill, not with her father’s profit motive in mind but rather as a means to exact “Western justice” in a world—an “existence,” as Tompkins puts it—that alienates and confounds her.

In light of Tompkins’ theory, Mattie’s *exceptional* attention to Little Blackie (as well as other horses in general) is symptomatic and symbolic of her own conflictual position as an “outsider” on a journey of vengeance-as-justice within the patriarchal social (dis)order of the Western world. It is a world which in fact includes her own family, despite its appearance of serenity. Her family role as “little Mattie the bookkeeper” (178), as Tom Chaney himself mocks her, is only a thin cover for the fact that her father is the actual patriarch and owner of their home and considerable private property (480 acres), where he employs and exploits “tenant”-workers in the agribusiness of growing and selling cotton.

Mattie’s “paying attention” to Little Blackie reflects her longing for a “different kind of existence” where young females like herself are liberated from the rigid prejudices and institutionalized structures which effectuate the dominant political logic that they are “no good” for genuinely significant and fulfilling social roles. As she proclaims late in the novel, Little Blackie is the horse who “saved us” and proved that the “*stone which the builders rejected... is become the head of the corner*” (214-215, emphasis in original). In Tompkins’ terms, Mattie’s “desire” for a close connection with Little Blackie reflects her desire to claim or reclaim “some lost connection to life” in a developing set of circumstances where she refuses to be “rejected” as merely a “baby” (86) or a “shirttail kid” who will be “crying for [her] mama” (87), as Rooster tells her.

As I have been arguing, however, Tompkins’ “material” ideas about how to analyze the symbolic role of the horse in relation with the human “lost connection to life” or the “desire” for a “different kind of existence,” are neither materialist nor dialectical in the distinctly Marxist *class sense* of “revolutionizing practice”: a theorizing mode of interrogating the class politics and ideology at work beneath the surface logic of the Western story. Engels explains in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that the

materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view, the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in [people’s] brains, not in [people’s] *better insights into eternal truth and justice*, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch. The growing perception that existing social institutions are unreasonable and unjust, that

reason has become unreason, and right wrong, is only proof that in the modes of production and exchange changes have silently taken place with which the social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, is no longer in keeping. (Engels 42, emphasis added; see also Smith; Ebert)

In condensed form, this is exactly what Tompkins' "material" intuitions of desire and longing effectively make *absent* from her reading strategies. Although Tompkins' analytic conception is useful in directing our attention to the symbolic and symptomatic "presence" of "better insights into eternal truth and justice," as Engels says here, the vaguely abstract character of the "different kind of existence" she anticipates is actually a rearticulation of bourgeois intuition as a "growing perception that *existing* social institutions are unreasonable and unjust... and right wrong." Tompkins' reading is a class intuition masquerading as a classless "insight" that marginalizes the "revolutionizing practice" of class analysis. Engels signals this *kind* of revolutionizing class analysis here. It points us to the radically different *kind* of social existence and culture that this class analysis makes possible through the dialectics of "practical-critical" class consciousness, with the taboo argument for grasping the "final causes" of social injustice in the mode of production of material "life": namely, the capitalist mode of production, which is ever-present yet "strangely invisible" in the Western ideology.

For example, Tompkins' viewpoint does not offer the materialist conceptual grounding that is necessary for re-understanding the class politics of Mattie's identification with Little Blackie according to her theological revelation that he stands for the "stone which the builders rejected," just as she has also been socially positioned as the "rejected" one who goes on to prove her "true grit." The problem that is "silently" raised here, as Engels puts it, is that the politics of "rejection" subtly eclipses the wider, systemic question of why rejection is symptomatic of the existing social order itself: rejection from what?

If Mattie and Little Blackie prove to "the builders" that their rejections are unfair and unjustified—as they do through their different forms of "true grit"—then they become, according to Mattie's religious doctrine, the "head of the corner" (a foundation) of the same system from which they were previously rejected as "outsiders." This is an arche-reformist logic of individualistic inclusion, not a conscious "revolutionizing practice" that points to the need to reject and transform the social totality of the system itself. What's more, even when analyzed by means of Tompkins' theory of a desire for some "different kind of existence," Mattie's (political) logic obscures the objective fact—transmitted ideologically to the fictal narrative—that she, in a sense, "enlists" Little Blackie as the animal labor for her "adventure" within the pervasive Western code of individualized capture and revenge as the expression of law and order being endlessly restored: it has to be endlessly restored because the underlying mode of production and the contradictory social relations determined by it are never questioned. One finds the continual need to "adapt" these social relations, as Engels says, without overthrowing the mode of production itself. In *True Grit*, Tom Chaney's murder of Frank Ross is framed as a senseless moment of unreason, yet the margins of the frame also clearly articulate Chaney's desperate obsession with the loss of his wages as well as his bitter alienation from Frank and the tranquil common sense he embodies.

The revolutionizing practice of overthrowing the mode of production itself requires a decisively *other* kind of collectively organized “true grit” with a class-conscious social purpose that is materially “different” from the “graphic writing” of Portis’ story. To borrow Engels’ words, Mattie’s ideological role as the heroine with “true grit” is to show that she and Little Blackie are actually “in keeping” with a reformed regime of Western “rough justice” based on capital’s fundamental class structure of exploitative wage labor. Here is a “different kind of existence” where Mattie finds that she is able to buy her way into the business of hunting down the system’s criminal elements. As she insists to Rooster, “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?” (Portis 98).

5.

In fact, my Chinese students are often abruptly taken aback by Mattie’s highly individualistic, marketized conceptions of “getting justice.” This is because they have been educated to understand the goal of social justice in collective terms and certainly not in terms of buying one’s way into an “adventure” for revenge. While they have empathy for Mattie’s loss of her father and recognize the strength of her “gritty” ways, they critique the “different kind of existence” she seeks—to use Tompkins’ idea—as one which is intrinsically dehumanizing and vulgar. In addition, by slowly and carefully examining the rhetorical turns of the story, students learn to recognize how Portis goes out of his way to have Mattie appear at once sincere and unreflexively comical.

In sum, Tompkins’ argument that the horse’s “dynamic material presence” is part of a symbolic “desire” and “longing” to reclaim “some lost connection to life” is substantially limited as a theoretical framework for enabling a strong *ideology critique* of “life” based on the class structure that Westerns encode in their narratives. As Mattie protests to Lucky Ned Pepper, “My family has property and I don’t know why I am being treated like this” (183). Little Blackie may indeed be read as the horse whose tireless labor—and ultimately his death by sheer exhaustion—symbolizes Mattie’s “lost connection to life.” But the kind of class life that Little Blackie saves is most certainly not a “revolutionizing practice.” On the contrary, Mattie’s “desire” is the ideological longing of the bourgeois subject for her private property in a “true grit” world where the violence and alienation of capitalist social relations are relegitimized as the stuff of heroism.

From the Marxist materialist point of view, Little Blackie is the hero. To be more precise, he is a martyr hero because the “final cause” of his brutal death is labor performed in the interests of the ruling class. The revolutionary theory that connects readers with Little Blackie—especially in his death scene as portrayed so extravagantly in the Coen movie—is, to paraphrase Marx and Engels (*Manifesto* 76), that he has nothing to lose but the chains that oppress and exploit him. Instead, the “pretty thing” with white stockings loses his life.

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