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Vocabulary Comparison in Works of American Prose: An Interdisciplinary Analysis Using Word2vec

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1. Introduction

Rapid and unceasing advancement of computer technology and the on-going digitization of massive linguistic data have enabled researchers to devise various methods to process natural languages. Among them are the use of neural network technology to improve the accuracy of machine translation (Wu et al., 2016), and the quantification of lexicon through vectorization of word sequences, known as word embedding (Levy and Goldberg, 2014). These methods are quite unfamiliar to the field of literature and have not been fully applied in exploring the linguistic features of fiction and other types of literary works. However, it is also true that some scholars have attempted to bring big data into the field of literature—Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013) is a noteworthy and controversial example of such an attempt. By reading what the numerical data sorted from much wider texts indicates, our reading of literature can, Moretti insists, gain greater accuracy and objectivity. In other words, his philosophy is that we need to give up conventional close reading techniques and “distance” ourselves from the text in order to get a better picture of the broader literary map. Although Moretti succeeded in generating intense discussion over possible big data analyses in the field of literature, his own methodologies leave room for literature to be explored through the use of linguistic quantitative analysis.

This study thus aims to compare two literary corpora picked and sorted by era, examine them using a quantitative approach, and clarify some of their literary characteristics. In addition to a basic word frequency analysis and character-

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istic word analysis (later referred to as “keyword” analysis), this study adopts a word embedding methodology in order to introduce a new, interdisciplinary perspective to literary studies.

2. Data

To conduct a quantitative analysis, two types of corpora were constructed. Since it is not possible to include all literary works, we picked twenty-six literary texts of prose categorized under realistic novels/stories (see appendix for details). These texts were divided into two groups based on the era in which they were published: a pre-war corpus and a post-war corpus containing literary works published before and after World War Two (1939–1945). To examine the transition of the collective consciousness reflected in these literary works, it was considered effective to place the Second World War between the two corpora as a milestone because it was through the victory of the Allied forces in this war that the United States earned its position as a “superpower” in world politics, and this created a significant change in its domestic situation socially and economically.

If a digital text version was available, it was included in either corpus. Otherwise, paper versions were scanned and then OCRed using ABBYY FineReader ver. 11. The digitalized texts were checked manually for misspellings caused by false recognition. Microsoft Word was employed for this purpose; words underlined in red were checked for consistency with the original versions and corrected if they were wrong.

As a result, the pre-war corpus contains 1,795,660 words whereas the post-war corpus includes 1,712,091.

3. Methodology

Conventionally, a literary analysis involves interpreting a text by reading it closely with reference to other related materials such as literary theories, the historical background, the author’s biography, and precedent criticisms of the text. One of the pivotal studies that introduced a linguistic approach to this kind of literary analysis was published by Leech and Short in 1981. Pointing out the difficulty of a stylistic investigation into an entire piece of prose, which usually refers to the “problem of how to select—what sample passages, what features to

study” (Leech and Short, 1981, p. 2), they proposed a comprehensive theory of prose style to cover and explore a much wider scope of work. However, Moretti (2003) problematized the canonization of certain works or the method of selection of works for analysis. In order to avoid what he criticized as overgeneralization surmised from a limited selection of well-known works, he focused on a quantitative result sorted from a wider range of prose works—although his explanations for the results are often derived from his interpretations of only a few of them. However, there is no doubt that these studies did open up new possibilities for interdisciplinary approaches toward literary studies.

Undoubtedly, the traditional approach of close reading is one of the essential methodologies for careful analysis. However, a corpus-based approach could be a strong complement—not a replacement—to the qualitative approach in that it provides concrete evidence for research observations, most of which tend to be based on an accumulation of the close readings and interpretations conducted by individual scholars. It is also possible for corpus-based methodology to detect new characteristics that may have been overlooked by scholars. In this study, three types of quantitative analysis were conducted to reveal the characteristics of the pre- and post-war corpora.

First, we started by counting the frequency of words in each corpus. Although word counting seems to be a basic method, it enables us to capture the overall picture of each dataset in terms of lexical characteristics. Since the size of the pre-war corpus is almost identical to that of post-war corpus, we employed raw frequencies without normalizing the size of each corpus.

Second, keywords were extracted from each corpus using the AntConc software.¹ This software not only provides a useful interface for searching a word from text files, but also allows us to make a keyword list instantly based on a statistical measure.² AntConc outputs keywords³ in descending order of statistical significance, revealing the distinctive vocabularies in each corpus.

1 <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>

2 We used Log-likelihood score for keyword extraction. Please visit <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html> for more details.

3 Keywords are words with a frequency that is unusually high in comparison with a certain norm (here the norm is Log-likelihood).

Finally, we used word2vec (Mikolov et al., 2013). Despite being a breakthrough in the field of Natural Language Processing, word2vec has not been a dominant methodology for exploring literary works in terms of vocabulary characteristics. Word2vec enables us to find synonymous words by considering the entire corpus as an input and assigning a vector to each word that appears in the corpus using a neural network. The scope of the present paper does not extend to explaining the details of word2vec; however, we may infer that it is a methodology used to find words that are similar in terms of context, based on their cosine similarity. Using the *gensim* package in Python (size = 200, window = 10, min-count = 5), we constructed word2vec models by assigned each word to a vector, for the pre- and post-war corpora. When entering these corpora into the word2vec program, all the words are converted to lower case and spaces are inserted before non-alphabetical signs—such as commas and periods—to ensure the identity of a word in any context. Through this procedure, for example, “Chair” and “chair,” are both read out “chair” in the end.

The question then arises: “what is the advantage of using word2vec for analyzing literature corpora, or why is it beneficial to find synonymous words from each corpus?” Word2vec allows us to list words that are similar in terms of the context in which the target word appears. For example, word2vec would list “bench,” “sofa,” and “seat” as synonyms for the word “chair” from the corpus based on the context of someone sitting on something. Unlike traditional approaches, which have dealt with syntagmatic words, this feature makes it possible to sort out linguistically paradigmatic words from each corpus. Therefore, by looking at what words come up as synonyms for the target word in the corpus, and how different they are between the two corpora, we can determine how the context in which the target word appears has transformed over time. As noted earlier, the advantage of this method would be to provide more extensive and quantitative evidence to support or strengthen the arguments formed by individual studies.

4. Results

4.1 Word frequency

We created frequency lists for each corpus using AntConc. The following are the top 20 words shown in order of frequency:⁴

Pre-war corpus:

the, and, to, a, of, he, in, was, i, it, she, that, you, his, her, had, s, with, on, they

Post-war corpus:

the, and, a, to, i, of, he, in, it, was, you, s, that, his, she, on, t, n, at, with

It turned out that 180 of the top 200 words are common to pre- and post-war corpora. This shows the similarity in the word distribution between the two corpora. However, there are 20 words unique to either corpus, which may indicate some characteristics of the datasets.

Pre-war corpus:

bunny, work, mr, mrs, home, young, ai, dad, ma, every, always, tom, money, must, saw, girl, felt, great, jurgis, paul, wanted

Post-war corpus:

before, eyes, away, long, its, while, first, much, day, house, these, will, another, boy, street, toward, really, place, john, hands, being

These lists show that words related to the concept of family such as “home,” “dad,” and “ma,” are remarkable in the pre-war corpus, but they are not found in the post-war corpus. Although it is well-known that American novels of the 1920s and after often depict a collapse of the traditional values such as “family” or “house-hold” (Fisher, 1999), the concept and its value is still discussed in the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, none of these words appear in the post-war corpus’ frequent word list, and thus the concept of family seems to be off the table in post-war American fiction.

4.2 Keyword analysis

Next, keywords are extracted using the keyword function of AntConc software based on the log-likelihood score. The statistical measure enables us to

4 Contracted forms are treated as a separate word. For example, “he’s” is divided into two words “he” and “s.”

find words that are significantly prominent in either corpus regardless of their frequency. This often results in listing proper nouns (names of people, places, institutions etc.), because they are usually unique to each story. More importantly, however, the list can also include some noteworthy words that reveal their hidden features, and which cannot be identified by a mere glance at the frequency lists. The following are the top 20 keywords of each corpus listed in the descending order of the log-likelihood score.

Pre-war corpus:

cowperwood (2445.751), had (2130.317), clyde (2061.639), bunny (1672.545), of (1475.593), was (1275.607), mrs (1092.906), her (1083.063), mr (1073.441), jurgis (1009.573), ma (993.719), as (976.831), ai (967.492), to (878.311), dad (872.207), aileen (837.846), babbitt (793.559), george (781.414), roberta (770.963), fulkerson (745.656)

Post-war corpus:

i (3607.939), my (2012.318), sherman (1897.957), billy (1558.556), is (1323.529), grady (1259.136), emmett (1200.693), cody (1028.55), salomon (1001.294), ezra (969.285), horse (941.041), kramer (926.699), sam (833.959), okay (826.283), what (795.35), rawlins (788.986), someone (728.723), me (725.059), asks (708.482), says (686.554)

As expected, proper nouns are dominant in both lists. It is also confirmed that words related to “home,” such as “ma” and “dad,” are keywords for the pre-war corpus. More significantly, it should be noted that first-person pronouns such as “i,” “my,” and “me” are listed as keywords for the post-war corpus. This feature indicates the recurrent appearance of “I-statements” in the corpus, which obviously resonates with one of the literary traits of post-war American novels called “Me-ism”—a narratological mindset in which the narrator puts him/herself in the center of the narrative world to grasp and narrate events closely relating to him/herself.

4.3 Analysis using word2vec

Finally, we examined each corpus using word2vec. As seen in Section 3, word2vec can list words that are “similar” to the target word based on the cosine similarity score. Before discussing the results of the target word “money,” let us consider the results of “would” and “two” for each corpus. This is partly to illustrate how word2vec works, as well as to show that the corpora are balanced in terms of functional words and thus suitable for comparison using word2vec. Table 1 shows the results of the auxiliary verb “would” for each corpus. Although the order of the words is not identical, eight out of ten words are common to both corpora (the words in italics are unique ones in each corpus). The same tendency is observed in Table 2, which shows the results for the numerical “two” (seven out of ten words are common to both corpora).

Table 1
The List of Synonymous Words for “would”

pre-war corpus			post-war corpus		
rank	word	cosine	rank	word	cosine
1	might	0.840	1	might	0.794
2	should	0.821	2	could	0.787
3	must	0.787	3	should	0.784
4	could	0.738	4	must	0.750
5	able	0.686	5	may	0.692
6	wanted	0.648	6	<i>needed</i>	0.687
7	<i>expected</i>	0.640	7	will	0.660
8	<i>ought</i>	0.639	8	<i>d</i>	0.655
9	may	0.624	9	wanted	0.649
10	will	0.613	10	able	0.644

Table 2
The List of Synonymous Words for “two”

pre-war corpus			post-war corpus		
rank	word	cosine	rank	word	cosine
1	three	0.888	1	three	0.928
2	four	0.828	2	four	0.856
3	six	0.789	3	five	0.835
4	five	0.782	4	six	0.808
5	<i>several</i>	0.762	5	seven	0.803
6	<i>minutes</i>	0.749	6	ten	0.784
7	ten	0.733	7	<i>boys</i>	0.762
8	<i>twelve</i>	0.733	8	thirty	0.741
9	thirty	0.720	9	<i>nine</i>	0.740
10	seven	0.719	10	<i>eight</i>	0.740

In order to examine the transformation of the economy in the social context before and after the World War Two, we preliminarily chose economy-related vocabularies such as “money,” “risk,” and “business.” Among them, the word “money” appears in all of the 26 books in the corpora with relatively high frequency, and we thus selected it as the target word. For the current analysis,

we selected top 10 words from each corpus with frequency more than or equal to 20 in the order of cosine similarity so that no rare words are picked up. The results are as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
The List of Synonymous Words for “money”

pre-war corpus (money: 1204)				post-war corpus (money: 848)			
rank	word	cosine	freq	rank	word	cosine	freq
1	pay	0.754	517	1	interest	0.716	232
2	chance	0.752	347	2	market	0.713	340
3	fight	0.725	215	3	bonds	0.713	393
4	work	0.713	1682	4	pay	0.712	262
5	job	0.709	621	5	business	0.707	486
6	paid	0.705	282	6	change	0.705	251
7	trouble	0.704	441	7	deal	0.702	270
8	dollars	0.688	720	8	job	0.701	371
9	food	0.677	247	9	problems	0.700	110
10	enough	0.676	800	10	ideas	0.699	69

The word “money” shares a context with vocabularies such as “work,” “job,” “dollars,” and “food” in the pre-war corpus; and with “interest,” “market,” “bond,” and “deal” in the post-war corpus. This suggests that the word “money” in the pre-war corpus often symbolizes the solid medium of exchange for tangible goods and labor, whereas it tends to be associated with the idea of fictitious capital in the post-war corpus.

This contextual shift of the word “money” in American novels actually corresponds to the change in the financial services industry in post-war US society. In her interdisciplinary criticism, Neculai (2015) brings her expertise on US finance to her reading of contemporary American fiction and argues that the huge impact of the fast-growing FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) industry in the mid-1980s transformed New York City into a “transactional urban space where fictitious capital could best thrive.” As Neculai notes, the American novelist, McInerney (1984), explores the fictionality of finance through the medium of

fiction. The literary critic Finch (2015) also discusses the fictionality of finance in the US novels of the 1970s and after, pointing out that Ellis' 1991 novel *American Psycho* (one of the post-war corpus novels), "takes the experience of financial unreality and historicizes and socializes it." Thus, our observation from Table 3—which indicates the change in the significance of the word "money" from a solid, real medium of exchange to a soft, fictitious currency—clearly helps cement Finch's argument. At the same time, Neculai's article suggests that this observation can be applied to other works outside the post-war corpus as well.

5. Concluding Remarks

Let us recapitulate the three findings discussed in this paper. First, we reviewed the word-counting result in the pre-war and post-war corpora. In the former, family-related vocabularies appear as some of the most frequently used words, but this is not the case in the latter corpora. This contrast implies an interesting transition of family values in the twentieth-century literary world. In the pre-war corpus, family issues seem to occupy a secure place in fiction; although, as Fisher (1999) has noted, it is common understanding that American novels after the 1920s often deal with disintegration of American families. However, the results of the post-war corpus hint that the household is not discussed as the main subject of narratives after World War Two.

Second, we used the keyword function of AntConc to extract keywords that frequently appear in one of the two corpora, but not in the other. The noticeable outcome is the frequent use of first-person pronouns in the post-war corpus, which is not seen in the pre-war dataset. This narratological trait certifies the frequent appearance of "I-statements" in the fiction of that era, and it bears all the hallmarks of "Me-ism," which emerged in the American culture of the 1970s.

Finally, we employed the neural-network-based application, word2vec, to survey synonyms of our target word ("money") in each corpus. This helped us examine how the context of the word "money" has been transformed over the twentieth century. In the pre-war corpus, "money" exists within the lexicon that represents the tangible exchange of values—such as labor and salary, or a product and its price. In contrast, "money" in the post-war corpus is firmly tied to the concept of fictitious capital, which transformed the industrial structure of post-war

America. This distinction between the two corpora contributes to the fortification of literary criticism that insists that some post-war writers depict the mental machinery of their characters as a reflection of this fast-evolving financial industry.

To conclude, the three findings drawn from the corpus-based methodologies are lexically substantial enough to motivate us to attempt to explain their significance. Our interpretations do not contradict but provide numerical, and thus more objective, evidence for the relevant literary criticism. Moreover, as we have seen in the example of “money” and the transition of its context, this corpus-based approach also poses a possible new argument for current understandings in the field of literature. In short, the application of this quantitative approach to conventional literary studies can be quite an effective strategy for reinforcing the significance of existing criticism and, at the same time, exploring the unknown aspects of closely read fiction.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Pre-war corpus (1,795,660 words)

Title	Author	Year
<i>The Jungle</i>	Upton Sinclair	1906
Jurgris Rudkus, a young Lithuanian working-class immigrant, settles in turn-of-the-century Chicago with his teenaged wife Ona. Though he is initially determined to work hard and build a better life, the horrendous working environment gradually ruins their lives.		
<i>Winesburg, Ohio</i>	Sherwood Anderson	1919
This book tells the story of George Willard, a young journalist working for the local paper in Winesburg, Ohio, and his neighbors. Growing tired of this small town, and saddened by his mother's death, Willard decides to leave Winesburg for good.		
<i>The Age of Innocence</i>	Edith Wharton	1920
Newland Archer, a rich young lawyer in New York, becomes engaged to May, an innocent, beautiful girl from a distinguished family. Initially, he enjoys his New York upper-class life, but the appearance of Ellen, May's free-spirited cousin with mystique, is so refreshing to him that he gradually falls for her.		
<i>Main Street</i>	Sinclair Lewis	1920
Carol Milford, who studied sociology in college, becomes a librarian in Saint Paul, Minnesota. After marrying a doctor and moving to his hometown, she grows disappointed with the town's conservatism, but is also motivated to reform the community through her progressive vision.		
<i>Babbitt</i>	Sinclair Lewis	1922
George F. Babbitt, a middle-aged realtor in the Midwestern city of Zenith, with a faithful wife and three children, is successful in business and socially ambitious, but eventually he tires of the American dream. To escape from the conservative society and his own loneliness, he finds comfort in a bohemian woman, Tanis Judique.		
<i>Barren Ground</i>	Ellen Glasgow	1925
Dorinda Oakley, a 20-year-old girl from Virginia, was born to a poor farmer family. After losing her fiancée, she leaves the town for New York, where her romance with a young doctor starts. After he proposes to her, she turns him down and goes back to her hometown to rebuild her family's farm using her knowledge of scientific agriculture, which she studied in New York.		
<i>Oil!</i>	Upton Sinclair	1927
Focusing on the life of Bunny Ross, the son of an independent oil tycoon, who encounters Paul, an advocate for laborers' rights, this novel describes the social tension between industrial capitalism centered on oil and labor movements in early twentieth-century America.		

<i>The 42nd Parallel (U.S.A. trilogy, vol. 1)</i>	John Dos Passos	1930
This book mainly relates the stories of five young Americans after the Spanish-American War. Fainy McCreary, one of the five, is a printer for a shady publisher in Chicago, but leaves to loaf around the states and then moves to Sacramento, where he works for a printing house run by an Italian anarchist.		
<i>As I Lay Dying</i>	William Faulkner	1930
Anse Bundren and his children are a poor family in a rural Mississippi town, untouched by any economic benefit of the Roaring Twenties. In the course of their travel to Jefferson for the burial of their late mother Addie, various problems in their family are revealed.		
<i>1919 (U.S.A. trilogy, vol. 2)</i>	John Dos Passos	1932
The story revolves around a group of Americans during World War One. One of them is a sailor named Joe Williams, who grew up in a dingy household in Washington, D.C. After leaving the navy in Buenos Aires, he roams around the cities and ports, indulging himself in debauchery. Although he keeps contact with his sister Janey, who established herself in life as a secretary to a powerful man, she actually feels ashamed of him.		
<i>The Big Money (U.S.A. trilogy, vol. 3)</i>	John Dos Passos	1936
The story develops around a set of Americans in the Roaring Twenties. Charley Anderson from Fargo, North Dakota, hops from job to job, but somehow lands himself a job as a chief engineer and large stockholder at an airplane manufacturer in New York. Although he makes huge speculative gains and marries the daughter of a prominent businessman, his drinking problem recurs and gnaws at his life.		
<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	John Steinbeck	1939
The young Tom Joad, once convicted of murder and now on parole, returns home from prison and learns that his family in Oklahoma was forced to leave their farm in the midst of the Great Depression. Joining the family, Tom travels west on Route 66 to seek work in California. On route, he hears many stories from people in similarly harsh situations.		

Post-war corpus (1,712,091 words)

Title	Author	Year
<i>Ratner's Star</i>	Don DeLillo	1976
Billy Twillig is a 14-year-old boy born to a third-rail inspector for the New York subway system. Having obtained the first Nobel Prize in mathematics, he joins a think tank where scientists attempt to decipher a signal seemingly coming from outer space.		
<i>Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant</i>	Anne Tyler	1982
Pearl Tull is an old, sick single mother of three children in Baltimore in the late 1970s, and her middle-aged children Cody, Ezra, and Jenny are at her deathbed. Each of them reflects on their memories of their family, which span the decades from the 1930s to the 1970s. Pearl's long-lost husband Beck also comes to visit them, and Ezra tries to organize a family dinner after the funeral.		
<i>Cathedral</i>	Raymond Carver	1983
This is a collection of short stories. "Cathedral," one of the stories, is about an unnamed narrator and a blind man, Robert, who visits his home. Robert is his wife's friend, but the narrator initially feels a bit awkward spending time with him. When Robert asks him to describe cathedrals on the TV and he attempts to this, the narrator's awkwardness melts away and the experience opens his own eyes.		
<i>The Barracks Thief</i>	Tobias Wolff	1984
Phillip Bishop, a teenager in Seattle, grows tired of his dysfunctional family. To get away from his hometown, he enlists in the army in the midst of the Vietnam War with no serious consideration. Sent to an airborne division at Fort Bragg, he becomes friends with Hubbard and Lewis, newcomers just like him. Serving as the guards of an ammunition dump, they start to build a bond.		
<i>Less Than Zero</i>	Bret Easton Ellis	1985
Clay, a wealthy 18-year-old Los Angeles native now in college in New Hampshire, returns to his hometown for Christmas and experiences its decadent party culture, which was once very familiar but is now quite alien to him.		
<i>In Country</i>	Bobbie Ann Mason	1985
Samantha Hughes (known as Sam) is a Kentucky teenager, living in the 1980s Kmart culture, whose father was killed in an unclear situation during the Vietnam War. To face her father's death and the history of the war, Sam decides to travel to Washington, D.C.		
<i>The Sportswriter</i>	Richard Ford	1986
Frank Bascombe, a 38-year-old sportswriter, is an ordinary guy living in a New Jersey suburb. Though seeming to enjoy his comfortable but mediocre life, he secretly struggles with his faded dream of writing novels and is still in mourning for his late son.		

<i>The Bonfire of the Vanities</i>	Tom Wolfe	1987
Sherman McCoy, a successful bond trader on Wall Street, and his mistress Maria Ruskin accidentally run over a black man with Sherman's car. A journalist, Peter Fallow, provides coverage of the accident, and from then on McCoy's life starts to fall apart.		
<i>Liar's Poker</i>	Michael Lewis	1989
In this non-fiction book, Michael Lewis introspectively and critically describes his Wall Street experience as a young bond salesman at Salomon Brothers in the 1980s, where mortgage-backed bonds and junk bonds stirred up a phenomenal trading frenzy.		
<i>American Psycho</i>	Bret Easton Ellis	1991
Patrick Bateman, a young, wealthy investment banker, lives his yuppie life to the fullest in late-1980s New York. His rapidly growing desires to consume drinks, drugs, and beautiful clothes quickly turns into a pathological urge to secretly torture and murder the women around him.		
<i>All the Pretty Horses (Border trilogy, vol. 1)</i>	Cormac McCarthy	1992
In 1949, John Grady Cole, a 16-year-old from San Angelo, Texas, learns that his beloved grandfather's ranch will be sold. Being raised by a family of Mexican descendants who worked on the ranch made John bilingual in Spanish and English. Instead of moving to town, John decides to travel to Mexico with his friend Lacey Rawlins by horseback.		
<i>The Crossing (Border trilogy, vol. 2)</i>	Cormac McCarthy	1994
This story, set before and during World War Two, revolves around the 16-year-old cowboy Billy Parham from Hidalgo Country. Billy sets a trap and catches a she-wolf, but her untamed nobleness deepens his empathy for her and prompts him to take the risk to cross the border and return her home.		
<i>Independence Day</i>	Richard Ford	1995
Frank Bascombe, once a sportswriter but now a middle-aged, small-scale real-estate agent in 1990s New Jersey, has to manage his busy Fourth of July weekend. The weekend is packed with appointments: with his ex-wife, with his seriously troubled son, with his girlfriend, and with his tenants and clients.		
<i>Cities of the Plain (Border trilogy, vol. 3)</i>	Cormac McCarthy	1998
In the early 1950s, John Grady Cole, 19, and Billy Parham, in his 30s, are working at a ranch that is going downhill because of the post-war military policies, in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Passionately in love with a young prostitute, Magdalena, John tries everything he can to liberate her from the brothel and marry her. Though Billy helps John, the brothel's owner kills Magdalena and fatally hurts John.		