

16 | *Book Learning: Angle of Repose  
as Literary History*

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*This great, incoherent, amorphous West! Who could grip the spirit  
and the essence of it, the luster and the wonder, and bind it all,  
definitely and sanely, within the covers of a printed book?*

Jack London

Near the end of *Angle of Repose*, Susan Ward packs up a box of books during yet another move. Among them is a volume called *Household Poets*, so well read that its cover has been replaced with western calf. According to Susan's grandson and the novel's narrator, Lyman Ward, Susan carries the book in her heart and mind as well: "It is difficult," he says, "to imagine Grandmother having to respond to the great moments of her life without all that poetry that she and Augusta had read together."<sup>1</sup> Unlike his dyslexic father, Lyman shares his grandmother's reading habits and her love of books, and his thoughts and feelings, too, are shaped by the books he has read. When to his secretary Shelly, who dubs herself "Modern Reader," Lyman exclaims, "I never liked Whitman," his cranky response is provoked by the lines, "Let the paper remain on the desk/Unwritten, and the book on the shelf unopen'd!" (519, 515).

In a stereotypical western, Whitman's lines might stand as a fitting epigraph, the credo of the rough-and-ready hero, but *Angle of Repose* is a "new" western historical novel, rethinking western myths. Stegner offers a re-vision of the supposedly anti-intellectual West by telling western history as literary history, by filling his novel with opened books, conversations about reading, and references to a host of late-nineteenth-century writers, artists, and literary traditions, from Howells's *Harper's* to Leslie's *Illustrated Magazine*, from Dante and Tolstoy to Artemus Ward and Joaquin

Miller, from Margaret Fuller to Mary Murfree, from Mary Cassatt to Thomas Moran.<sup>2</sup> The novel originates in literary history, based as it is on the writings of a real literary figure, Mary Hallock Foote, the model for Susan Ward. Almost every one of the literary quotes or details discussed in this essay is factual and can be historically traced.<sup>3</sup> The literary conversations and references swirl on many levels around Susan and Lyman, themselves both prominent interpreters of the West. When Lyman says of his grandmother's Leadville cabin in 1879, "[T]here assembled . . . an extraordinary collection of education, culture, talent, eloquence, reputation, political power, and intellectual force," he might also be describing *Angle of Repose*, which gathers literary figures and facts into a cultural history of the early American West, written by two scholars in the "old" interdisciplinary American Studies tradition, Lyman and Stegner (252).

Indeed, Stegner's technique in the novel is best described in images borrowed from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who sees human behavior as explicable only within a "thickly described" culture.<sup>4</sup> In layer after layer of cultural references, Stegner lays down what he calls the "accumulated deposits" of Susan's life, which eventually turn her "into a Western woman" (104). Culture, says Geertz, is made up of "webs of significance" we ourselves have spun, in which we sit suspended (Geertz, 5). Stegner uses a similar image: Glimpsing two letters the Kiplings sent to his grandmother in 1890 to thank her for illustrating a story, Lyman thinks, "How many lines an alert life has its hands on at once, even in exile! Grandmother sat like a spider with her web all around her, spun out of her insides" (520). To mix Geertz's metaphors, most of this essay will explore the way Stegner creates Susan Ward out of cultural deposits and follow the literary lines that make up her web, focusing on the role books, reading, and literature play in her western life in the 1870s and 1880s.

Like those "letters from Whittier, Longfellow, Mark Twain, Kipling, Howells" on Lyman's study wall, Susan's story is framed by Lyman (20). He, too, sits at the center of a cultural web. Twentieth-century western historians are as shaped by their reading and their literary legacies as nineteenth-century women writers. As we watch Lyman writing his book, *Angle of Repose* becomes a story about interpretation, adding a further layer to Stegner's description of the power and value of literary

and cultural traditions, "the maps of human experience," as Lyman says late in the novel (512).<sup>5</sup>

In his use of literary history in *Angle of Repose*, Stegner follows Lyman's borrowed literary advice: "'Don't tell me too much,' Henry James is supposed to have said, when some anecdote vibrated his web and alerted him to the prospect of a story. 'Don't tell me too much!'" (524).<sup>6</sup> Stegner mentions the scandal around Susan's friend Clarence King but doesn't tell us what it was; he leaves it to us to know what kind of fiction Cable wrote or what "Bierstadtian peaks" look like or how Margaret Fuller might have influenced Mrs. Elliot. "Modern readers" who don't recognize the legacy of Bronson Alcott and Fruitlands, Hawthorne and Brook Farm can still read Susan's story with insight, as Shelly often does, but as Lyman says, "'If you're going to be a literary critic you're going to have to learn to read what's there'" (272). *Angle of Repose* attempts to capture readers in the web of our enduring literary heritage, to turn us into literary historians.

As *Angle of Repose* shows, we all have our literary influences. I learned to write from a cherished creative writing teacher, Arthur Gallegos, who taught at Salinas High School the years Stegner taught at Stanford. I still remember his advice: Describe the rooms your character lives in and make a list of the books on his shelf.

*Angle of Repose* is an ambitious novel: Stegner builds a library around Susan Ward. To revise a Hemingway line Stegner quotes approvingly, books are not interior decoration, they are architecture; Stegner presents Susan's reading as framing her sense of self, her profession, her marriage, and her life.<sup>7</sup> Stegner also makes room on the shelf for Susan's writing. Through his portrayal of Susan and his analysis of her evolution as a western writer, Stegner examines key questions about literary influence and power in the late nineteenth century, questions that seem especially insightful for a book published in 1971: what it means to be a woman writer in the late nineteenth century; how the West was portrayed; the difficulties of trying to write about the West; the influence of eastern and European writers; the way important writers in their own time slide into their angle of repose as "minor" figures; the influence of magazines and magazine editors on literary production and taste; the relationship between regionalism and local color; the tensions between romanticism and realism; the way certain writers come to speak for a region or become

associated with a single idea; the connections between art, literature, and other kinds of intellectual activity; the effort to create a distinctive American literature and language; the differences between public and private self expression.

These are just some of the strands of Susan's web, and they crisscross throughout the book in complicated ways. Like contemporary critics, Stegner sees literature as doing cultural work, even in the Far West. By embedding Susan in thick cultural description, he brings Lyman's reading of her life, and his own, into conversation with key writers and texts of our tradition, thereby creating a western story that speaks to and with the dominating eastern culture, identifying influential themes in American literary history, and showing how the present echoes the past.

Susan's chosen art form identifies her as a reader: She is an illustrator. Her talent is responding to and interpreting words, and eventually she will become a writer herself. By the time we meet her, she has earned commissions from some of the foremost writers of her time—Longfellow, Stowe, Hawthorne, and others. (Her commission to illustrate *The Scarlet Letter* is particularly important, as we shall see.) "Thanks to the prominence" of Susan's friend and colleagues, Lyman "can find some of them in the histories of art" or literature, in "memoirs and reminiscences" (35). Stegner uses the voices of writers to bring Susan to life within her web of intellectual associations. "John Greenleaf Whittier said she was the only girl he knew who could conduct a serious discussion of the latest *North American Review* while scrubbing her mother's floor" (26).<sup>8</sup> Stegner presents Susan as an insider in a tightly interwoven group of literary and artistic figures, a significant part of the cultural conversation.

When Susan moves west, Stegner packs her bags, literal and metaphorical, with books. One of her extended family's major activities is reading aloud, from books and the magazines in which Susan soon begins to publish. With little to do in Boise Canyon, the young engineers turn to bookbinding as a hobby. The West can maintain its cultural ties to the East with portable books and magazines that can easily traverse the continent, but Susan all too frequently finds herself talking *only* with books and on paper. When her husband grows increasingly silent and her marriage is threatened, she can, as Lyman puts it, tighten "her drown-

ing woman's grip on culture, literature, civilization by trying to read *War and Peace*," but she has no one with whom she might discuss the book (421). Frank Sargent gives her a gift of a handbound volume of Tennyson, but his greater gift is his interest in literary discussions. She loves him because he "loved books, loved talk" (450).

Will Susan's "starved desire" "for talk" prevent her from ever becoming a westerner (104)? Early in the novel Lyman frames this question with a borrowed literary metaphor he presents as Susan's, used in a letter to Augusta, a metaphor he believes shadowed her life: He wonders whether Susan "clings forever to the sentiment" that "not even Henry James's expatriates were so exiled as you?" (24). Yet he comes to believe that his "cultivated, . . . talkative, talented" grandmother became a westerner, learned a western vocabulary, began to borrow her metaphors not merely from literature but also from life, and in many ways pioneered western literature (104). As the West claims Susan, so does it accept her love of books and of literary conversations as crucial parts of its history. Indeed, Stegner implies, these themes become central to later western literature. Consider, for instance, a scene from Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, one of the most influential books about the West.

In one of many conversations about books, Molly Wood and the Virginian talk about George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*. Although Molly believes it is a "great work," her precocious pupil counters that while it may be a "fine book," "it will keep up its talkin'. Don't let you alone." His opinion is confirmed when Molly tells him it was written not by a man but by a woman: "'A woman did! Well, then o' course she talks too much.'" Despite his mythic reputation as the strong, silent type, the Virginian does plenty of talking himself, and he too responds profoundly to books. He prefers a novel by a Russian that Wister leaves unnamed; the plot that the Virginian so identifies with, that makes him "pretty near" cry, belongs to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.

Because *The Virginian* was written some twenty years after the historical setting of *Angle of Repose*, a conversation about books and reading in *Angle* makes the reader feel caught in Lyman's Doppler Effect: We hear an echo of something that's actually coming toward us. Like Molly Wood, Susan Ward discovers in her boyish mate "unexpected capacities":

*Even literature. She wanted to talk to him about Daniel Deronda, about which she and Augusta had been having a chatty and I must say tedious correspondence as they read it simultaneously. But he was impatient with George Eliot. He said she wanted to be both writer and reader—she barely got a character created before she started responding to him and judging him. Turgenev, on the other hand, stayed out of his stories, he let you do your own responding. (122)*

Although he never mentions *The Virginian* directly, Stegner's clear echo of the novel suggests that he claims it as part of the "usable past" he has so often argued western writers need. Wister offers Stegner a literary legacy where easterners-turning-western use reading to understand themselves, their relationship, and their lives, and where the evolving relationship between a man and a woman is a central part of the story. Unlike Wister, Stegner focuses more on Turgenev's technique than his plot; through his creation of Lyman and his use of literary history, he finds a way to let his readers do their own responding. I would argue, for instance, that Stegner expects his readers to recognize another literary legacy here which unites past and present, the western male's stereotypical impatience with talkative women, and to see the issue in more complex terms than do the *Virginian*, *Oliver*, or even *Lyman*.

Initially the parallels between Molly and Susan may seem to suggest that Lyman is casting Susan in a classic western role associated with bookishness, the schoolmarm, mated to a man who, with just a little book learning, proves to be an instinctively better reader. Influenced as he is by his own reading, Lyman does *audition* Susan for such familiar roles. When he mentions *Huckleberry Finn*, for instance, we recognize the kinship between Susan and the Widow Douglass; both are civilizing women who want their kids to go to school and hang out with the right kind of friends. Yet Susan is complex, contradictory, multidimensional because Stegner shows us Lyman trying out so many different literary contexts and roles—as Isabel Archer, Hester Prynne, Massaccio's Eve—in which to understand her. Literary allusions are presented as postulations, speculations, sometimes fluid and changing, sometimes too rigidly controlling interpretations.

One example suggests the thickly layered ways in which Stegner shows

Lyman and Susan attempting to understand her evolving sense of her western life through literary comparisons. Lyman's attitudes about the usefulness of "eastern" reading are filled with contradictions. While he believes his grandmother's view of her life as "in exile" demonstrates that she is dominated by eastern ways of seeing, he also borrows that supposedly faulty metaphor himself, and he later turns again to that most eastern-looking writer: "A sort of Isabel Archer existed half-acknowledged in Grandmother, a spirit fresh, independent, adventurous" (317). Yet the old world Isabel encounters bears little resemblance to Susan's new world, as Susan recognizes. When Thomas Hudson offers her as a perfect "new model" for Henry James's "American Girl," Susan rejects the role with an interesting adjective: "I'm not sure I could stand being attenuated in Mr. James's fashion" (355). She believes that she has more weight, substance, and ambition than Daisy or Isabel, the characters for whom James was best known in 1881—and Stegner leaves his readers pondering the differences between Isabel's choices and Susan's. Susan knows that James could not tell her western story, that her kinship is to the writer's style, not his characters, as she makes clear in expressing her frustration at trying to write about the West from a woman's point of view: "Her [Leadville] story . . . was silly when told from the woman's point of view . . . It was as if Mr. James should write a dime novel" (360). James is an offstage presence in the novel, certainly out of place in the West, yet his characters and his style still offer Susan, Lyman, and readers ways to speculate and speak about Susan's western experience.

Many of Stegner's literary facts point to our efforts to understand the world through the literature we have read and the complexities of that process in the early West. Well read as she is, Susan has encountered the West in literature. The hanging she nearly witnesses in Leadville "was more or less the sort of thing she had learned to expect in mining camps from reading Bret Harte or *Leslie's Illustrated Magazine*," although her initial "anticipation of a romantic Bret Harte stage ride" in California proves foolish (240, 81). She is pleased to meet Samuel Clemens and no doubt reads his fiction in her beloved *Century*, but her husband tries to "protect" her from the kinds of experiences he writes about. Susan tries to borrow from both, writing a romantic/melodramatic Leadville novel and adopting a "colorful and humorous" tone for her travel writing, but

neither mode suits her or seems to capture *her* western experience (228). She knows of no woman who writes about the Far West until she meets Helen Hunt Jackson, another easterner, in Leadville. It is up to Susan to discover her own western story and attempt to write it in her own words.

Lyman has a tangled and often contradictory response to the influence of reading on Susan's life. He often uses his own reading to provide conceptual frameworks or descriptions, apparently believing he can sum up the East in a literary shorthand by saying that Susan lives in an "Edith Wharton version of New York" (54). Yet he believes much of Susan's reading offers her flawed ways of understanding her western life. He particularly scorns the influence of the "household poets," although he enjoyed reading the volume with his grandmother when he was a child. He sees Susan's responses to the "great moments" of her life as shaped by the poetry she and Augusta read together, and smiles in a superior fashion when he writes of Susan, hurt and longing for Augusta, gathering "healing herbs . . . from all the literary gardens where she habitually walked" (92). (Tempted by other stories, Lyman finds bitter fruits in his western garden.) He holds the fireside poets responsible for blinding his grandmother to the "real" West: She has "gentility in [her] eye like a cinder" (95). The cinders are apparently an eastern legacy; Lyman wonders "if there was a time when the East and all that Edith Wharton gentility had been lived out of her" (25). (This anachronistic reference, like many others, clearly originates in Lyman's own reading.) Yet Lyman also insists that Susan's gentility, always associated with books, can be transported to the West and has a welcome place there: "There are several dubious assumptions about the early West. . . . [that] it was rough, ready, and unkempt, and ribald . . . whereas in fact there was never a time or place where gentility, especially female gentility, was more respected" (135). Although the books and the gentility are "inherited through the female line," Lyman accepts them as defining his contemporary western masculinity (314). In fact, Lyman has spent most of his life in studies and libraries, and given his interests in marriage and domesticity, he might be described as a "household historian."

Not all eastern reading is irrelevant to western experience. Lyman acknowledges that an eastern poet can capture a western feeling. Susan remembers her whole life the clear spring morning she went riding in the

high Colorado mountains with Pricey, who suddenly recites, "Oh, tenderly the haughty day/Fills his blue urn with fire," a line Stegner reveals to be Emerson's some one hundred pages later (249). But he believes romantic poets and painters constrain Susan's vision.

*The rural picturesque was not only an artistic manner with her, it was a passionate conviction. She had been weaned on the Romantic poets and the Hudson River school, and what the West had so far taught her was an extension of those: beyond Bryant lay Joaquin Miller, beyond Thomas Cole spread a vast wild grandeur supervised by Bierstadtian peaks. It was never the West as landscape that she resisted, only the West as transience and social crudity. (274)*

The picturesque does provide an aesthetic response and vocabulary to recognize the West's "wild grandeur." Yet as the references to the contrived and conventional Miller and Bierstadt imply, Lyman finds the picturesque an inadequate response to the West.

The work of Emerson, Cole, and Bierstadt variously speaks to one of the themes Stegner looks at from many angles, the view of many nineteenth-century artists and painters, best expressed by Emerson: We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. Stegner is of many minds about this subject. He does not present the West as provincial; as we have seen, books by Eliot, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Kipling, and many others travel to the West and speak to readers there. Stegner's West is part of an international cultural network, and he explores threads of influence. Yet he also addresses one of the persistent questions of American literary history: How to tell a distinctive American story, in an American idiom; and he shows us characters—both Susan and Lyman—debating how to write about regional American experience. In a conversation about this subject in New Almaden, Susan wants to talk with her cultured foreign visitor about "the relations of the Dusseldorf painters to the Hudson River school" and "the advantages and disadvantages of studying art abroad, in the midst of cultural traditions different from and of course much richer than your own." But the Baron shares Emerson's view, saying that the "only thing an American could learn abroad was technique, that he must deal with New World subject matters if his art

was to have integrity." His assessment of her eastern drawings suggests that Susan's training does prepare her to capture the West: He believes her drawings, filled with "sensitivity to local character and landscape," "could not have been made by anyone but an American artist" (114). Lyman too sees his grandmother as an "American artist," but much of his narrative explores her struggles to draw and write about her western experience.

In her letters and earliest published writing, Susan inevitably turns to what Lyman calls "literary landscape painting" and to the literary versions of the picturesque, local color writing and travel writing (94). Susan knows the work of a number of writers who use the techniques of local color, writers who explore a region sympathetically but generally from a removed narrative vantage point—Kate Chopin, Mary Murfree, George Washington Cable. (Of course, Susan also has other reasons for reading Chopin.) These forms of writing, in Lyman's view, only further her sense of being an outsider in the West. Susan writes as a traveler entering an exotic region filled with quaint and charming characters. When Thomas Hudson first asks her to write for *Scribner's* as a "western correspondent," her response that "'he ought to get Mr. Harte or Mark Twain'" suggests simultaneously that she sees them as engaged in writing about the West from the same "outsider" position and that western territory, unlike so much local color writing, belongs to men (127). She writes with detachment about others' lives and her own, unable to accept her deeper feelings about the West, which can only be expressed "rudely."

*For a time she lay phrasing the day's experiences in colorful and humorous fashion, as if for the pages of Century, and almost persuaded herself that under the rough and ridiculous circumstances of life in the Rocky Mountains, there was something exciting and vital, full of rude poetry: the heartbeat of the West as it fought its way upward toward civilization. (228–29)*

Throughout the West Susan hears this same heartbeat; visiting her husband's mine, she calls it a "pulse . . . the stone heart of the mountain beating," but she's not sure she can understand its language (140).

Again and again Susan recognizes that beneath the surface of the "pic-

turesque" and the landscape, the West has something new to say to her, perhaps through her, and that she cannot find the right perspective or vocabulary. Overhearing a conversation between her husband and his assistant Hernandez, she sees that they speak a language she cannot, "every glance . . . loaded with meanings she had been protected from," about a life she cannot penetrate:

*Her drawings of Hernandez's two sisters for Mr. Howells and the Atlantic had shown them languid, slim, domestic, offering figs and native wine to a visitor, herself. She had dwelt not on the harsh life at whose insecure edge they lived, but on their grace, their dark and speaking eyes, the elegance of their dancing, the attractiveness of rebozo or mantilla over their hair, the feminine gentleness of their gestures and postures. In her indignation she almost wished those blocks back, so that she could send in their place something closer to the truth of mining camp lives. Yet how would she get close to those lives to draw them? She had lived in New Almaden nearly a year and had seen only its picturesque surface. (153)*

Struggling to replace ethnic stereotypes with a richer understanding, Susan wants to write about—or draw—what is beneath the surface of these women's lives; she knows her real subject is the lives of women, including her own. Perhaps one of the most startling aspects of Stegner's literary history, published in 1971, is the presence, indeed the centrality, of women. Lyman knows there "were plenty of women who could have provided [Susan] the models of a literary career," and he mentions several. Yet they are all easterners. Susan lives almost solely with men and associates the West with masculine activities. Lyman recognizes her dilemma. When she tries to write about Oliver's western life, she realizes she's writing about something she knows "nothing about," writing a story that sounds "silly when told from the woman's point of view," Mr. James's dime novel (360). "I have always to write from outside, from the protected woman's point of view, when I ought to be writing from within" (357). Yet despite Oliver's desires to protect Susan from the rougher aspects of western life, he encourages her and helps her to write from within.

In the mythic West, the men know "nothing about" literature, but as

we have already seen in the Eliot/Turgenev debates, Stegner attacks this myth. Although Susan perceives Oliver as sitting "silent, diffident, and inferior, listening to the literary and artistic jargon," Oliver has quite a lot to say in private (69). He and Susan first meet in a library; she first admires him "standing with head bent, reading, his back to her" (39). He may be an "incurable" westerner, but he is also a reader. An inventor and surveyor, Oliver argues always for originality and independence of thought. He takes Susan into unfamiliar territory, the mine, and expands her vocabulary: "'I'd take out that stuff about Olympian mountains and Stygian caverns of the mine. That's about used up, I should think'" (127). When she tries to read her experience in classical and highly symbolic ways, Oliver's words echo in her mind: "Inevitably she thought of Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice, and up on top Tregoning, Charon of this vertical Styx; but the thought of how silly it would sound to speak that thought made her blot it out. About used up, I should think, Oliver might say" (139). Oliver helps Susan to write in a "spirit of discovery" (127).

Yet he has his own models. His contribution to the portable Ward library are volumes of the King survey, "six pounds to the book, the concentrated learning of King, Prager, Emmons, the Hague brothers, . . . who had been Oliver's guides and models" and who appear as characters in the novel (248). Throughout *Angle of Repose*, Stegner suggests that in order to understand the West, we must understand its intellectual life more broadly, recognize points of intersection, and borrowings, between different disciplines and epistemological approaches. Stegner makes this point on many levels. In the broadest sense, we see Lyman, a historian, drawing from literature, art, geology, engineering, and popular culture to understand Susan "thickly." In a much narrower example, we see Susan leaving her "Stygian caverns" and mining her husband's technical language for fresh metaphors grounded in western experience. "Angle of repose," after all, is Susan's metaphor, not Lyman's. (Actually, it is Mary Hallock Foote's, and she deserves credit for it.)

This vocabulary becomes Lyman's legacy from his grandfather and grandmother.<sup>10</sup> Sympathetically recognizing the effect on his grandmother's art of having to support her family, he writes, "She mined and irrigated every slightest incident, she wrote and drew her life instead of

living it" (399). An even more significant passage shows how he inherits both the language and the "spirit of discovery": "My grandparents are a deep vein that has never been dug. They were *people*" (22). Lyman also recognizes that in writing about mining and the influence of eastern capital on the West, Susan identifies key themes of western history, the kinds of themes he explores as an award-winning historian himself. Susan has little faith in her fiction, but when she manages to "work into" her widely read magazine writing the "terror" of the miners' lives and some questions about "what sort of promise the New World gave" them, she raises the kinds of questions Stegner pursued in *Joe Hill* (149, 144). Susan's plots might be contrived, but she receives fan letters from miners about her technical accuracy.

Susan herself mined two western veins, drawing and writing. Although her western illustrations were well received, Susan's marriage to Oliver handicapped her artistic career, which depended on the close contacts with writers necessary to illustrators, and the chance for study abroad.<sup>11</sup> But her move west turned her into a writer, even a pioneer, by providing her with a new territory to explore. Lyman speculates that she started to write because in the West she was "starved . . . for talk" (104). Hard-working, ambitious, talented, she became an original writer, praised and supported by such luminaries as William Dean Howells. Susan's work was forgotten by subsequent generations, but Lyman knows how significant it was in forming the East's early view of the Far West. In the magazines Stegner suggests were so influential during the period, easterners met western women, children, parents, and engineers in Susan's illustrations and stories before Remington's and Wister's cowboys entered the picture. Although he shares Susan's view that her work is flawed, Lyman values her reading of the West. Looking back, we can see that Susan did mine her own new vein, and Stegner implicitly wonders why Susan's western themes were trampled by the runaway herd of the mythic West. (In fact, Stegner was the first to try to revive Foote's reputation by reprinting one of her stories in 1958.<sup>12</sup>) With its emphasis on women, family, home life, technology, links between East and West, the influence of eastern capital, and water and water rights, Susan's writing has more kinship with the "new" West than with the mythic West, whose stories Lyman and Stegner believe have been told and retold too long. Stegner

argues for the importance of Susan's point of view, the "woman's point of view," in our literary history.

No one supports Susan's writing or values her contributions more than Thomas Hudson, a character based on longtime *Century* editor Richard Gilder. In "the unhistoried vacuum of the West," he asks, "[w]hat does she do? She histories it, she arts it, she illuminates its rough society. . . . [S]he writes as well as Cable and draws better than Moran" (356). (His comparisons are perceptive, for Cable and Moran are both regionalists who intermingle romance and realism, a point I'll return to.) Through exploring the influence of Hudson on Susan's career, Stegner reveals the powerful role magazines and editors had in shaping American literary history and particularly the emerging view of the "unhistoried" West. Oliver recognizes, for instance, that his supervisor at the mine "doesn't want any sympathetic women around, especially if they write things for magazines" (149). Stegner's novel raises many interesting questions about this subject—the influence of illustrations, for instance, or how monthly magazines allow the far-flung westerners to keep up to date on the latest literary matters. Here is but one example.

Although Lyman's portrayal of Thomas Hudson is ambivalent, fraught with a western male's attitudes about effete intellectuals and the eastern literary establishment, he respects Hudson's work as an editor. "I wouldn't be surprised," he says, "if he found and published two thirds of the best literature of four decades" (54). One of those writers, of course, is Susan Ward, and Hudson puts her in good company. One of her stories appears in an 1885 issue of *Century Magazine*, which includes installments of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and *The Bostonians*. In what might appear to be an extraneous detail, Stegner points out that the issue contains chapters IX and X of *Silas Lapham*, yet like many of Stegner's literary facts, this detail validates Lyman's interest in "quirky little things that most people wouldn't even notice" and sets up an implicit conversation between and about books (211). Chapter IX explores the role of reading in American society. In it Tom Corey advises Irene Lapham which books to buy for the library in her new house; the celebrated authors he names, of course, appear in the pages of *Angle of Repose*. Irene, like her father, is less concerned with the authors than with the elegant bindings, but her sister Penelope expresses a familiar

view of George Eliot: "I wish she would let you find out a little about the people for yourself."<sup>13</sup> At the chapter's end Tom and his Brahmin father discuss habits of reading among the civilized and the "noncultivated." Later in the novel the book theme reappears when Howells examines the influence of a best-selling sentimental novel, *Tears Idle Tears* (called *Slop, Silly Slop* by the ironical Nanny Corey), on the actions of various characters.

Ever practical, Silas reads newspapers, and Howells recognizes the cultural work both newspapers and books do, even if his hero sees books largely as interior decoration. Serving a similar function as satiric props in Twain's Grangerford house, books and book learning are major themes throughout *Huckleberry Finn* too. Tom Sawyer is clearly a victim—and carrier—of what Twain called the Sir Walter Scott disease. (Lyman reads Scott with his grandmother but escapes infection.) Twain often associates books with "gentility," with hypocrisy, with efforts to exert power over others, and time and again he exposes characters unable to escape conventional, "borrowed" language (he would admire Oliver's advice to Susan) or other "false" literary inheritances. Both *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *Huckleberry Finn* show us characters wrestling with the influence books have on their lives; both novels explore the struggle between romance and realism in American culture, one of our most significant literary themes.<sup>14</sup>

Stegner recognizes that Susan has a voice in this conversation. Hudson, who decides to make Susan his "western correspondent" and to publish her work along with these great novels, who compares her to Cable and Moran, values her attempts to bring together romance and realism, to draw and write in "her key of aspiration arising out of homely realism" in a "spirit of discovery" about the West (21). Susan will carry not only books but also the great literary and intellectual debates of her time into the West. In many subtle ways Stegner explores the conflicts and the interdependence between the two dominant literary movements of the late nineteenth century and suggests that western literature evolves from the marriage of these two points of view and styles. In fact he marries them. Lyman continues his grandmother's project when he realizes what he's really exploring in his new vein: "A marriage. . . . A masculine and a feminine. A romantic and a realist" (211). Although Lyman



claims to believe that in writing about "a marriage" he is "not writing a book of Western history," Stegner knows better. In all his work, Stegner presents the West as characterized by apparently contradicting but actually overlapping desires for wilderness and civilization, for individualism and for cooperation, for "male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity."<sup>15</sup> As this last quote suggests, he often associates these values with women and men, affirming both viewpoints as "the legitimate inclinations of the sexes" ("Western Writer," 195). Marriage thus becomes a way for him to examine the interplay between, the wedding of, the West's key themes and convey its contradictory spirit.

In fact, western literature is replete with stories about marriage, among them Stegner's own epic, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and Wister's *The Virginian*.<sup>16</sup> Yet as our popular culture has hobbled and silenced the Virginian into a progenitor of the mythic western hero, the lonely male whose time is spent with horses, cows, Indians, and an occasional male sidekick, so has western literary history until recently circled around and around his campfire.<sup>17</sup> Stegner's most revisionary reading of western literary history is that it begins with trying to understand the relationship between a woman and a man and all it entails and symbolizes. While the hero who heads West to escape civilization has engendered, apparently spontaneously, numerous theories of American literature, Stegner is one of only a few critics who recognize that marriage can offer paradigmatic ways of thinking about American cultural studies. Through his focus on reading and interpretation, Stegner shows that this project is not easy for Susan, Lyman, his readers, or Stegner himself.

Although I would not want to imagine Stegner's response to this statement, in *Angle of Repose* he is an insightful and pioneering feminist critic. In the years following its publication in 1971 dozens of feminist scholars would follow his lead: They would rediscover "minor" women writers, argue for their significance, explore their artistic dilemmas, and define marriage as a crucial theme of late-nineteenth-century women's literature. (They would also rediscover women's intense relationships to each other and homosocial bonds, two themes Stegner recognizes but writes about with little sympathy.) *Angle of Repose* belongs on the shelf with the work of George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, Kate Chopin, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and Edith Wharton, writers Stegner men-

tions, and with Rebecca Harding Davis, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, all of whom wrote stories that explored a woman's conflict between her marriage and her art. Lyman discovers this story in the subtext of some of Susan's fiction but primarily in her letters, where she and Augusta "wrote each other a good deal about the contrary pulls upon a woman who was also an artist" (66). Only in her letters could Susan write from the inside about her marriage and her ambition, about birth control and sexuality, about her husband's drinking and her feelings of isolation and failure, about Frank and his role in her life. At about the time feminist historians were recognizing the different stories found in public and private documents and turning to diaries and letters, Stegner builds his narrative around Mary Hallock Foote's letters. (Historians Carroll Smith Rosenberg and Carl Degler would publish influential works of women's history soon after *Angle of Repose* appeared using the same letters, read in quite different ways.<sup>18</sup>) Perhaps because so many of them are borrowed from an impeccable source, Susan's letters are her most honest and authentic writing about her western life, telling a rich, complex, and very new western story, ironically "unpublished," yet one grounded in the literary past.

Although we, like Shelly, have to look over Lyman's shoulder to do it, Stegner lets us read many of Susan's letters on our own, read Susan's story from the inside. Through Lyman's narration, Stegner adds another layer to his thick literary description: We must dig through the accumulated deposits of the "prejudices, culture, scruples, likings, moralities, and moral errors" that he admits make him who he is (15). Lyman follows "Bancroft's advice to historians: present your subject in his own terms, judge him in yours" (475); this advice he might also have borrowed from his grandfather's reading of George Eliot, who "wanted to be both writer and reader . . . [who] barely got a character created before she started responding to him and judging him" (122). As these quotations suggest, Lyman's judgments are shaped by his reading and his cultural inheritances. His presence turns *Angle of Repose* into a story about interpretation, about how the myths of our literary traditions affect our readings.

Like Susan's, Lyman's reading frames his ways of looking at his world. Insightful and free-thinking in many ways, Lyman also has a rigid neck,

which allows him to look at some things in only one way. He challenges many western myths but he cannot escape others. He objects to Shelly's "half-assed interpretations" because she, like his son Rodman, comes to the story "all fresh from [her] own premises," but Lyman has his own premises, some unacknowledged, the "accumulation" of his years of reading (266, 18). As Stegner has said, "A literary tradition is a very complex thing . . . made up of many things, many of them below the level of conscious awareness" (Dillon, 59). Lyman is particularly influenced by a theme Stegner himself calls "pervasive" and "inescapable" in western literature: the conflict between "the freedom-loving, roving man and the civilizing woman" ("Western Writer," 195). Although the characters Stegner creates range well beyond these roles and really have much in common, this paradigm sometimes infiltrates Lyman's thinking. "You see," says Stegner, "what you are trained to see" (Dillon, 58). The "inescapable" theme leads Lyman to focus on conflict and estrangement, to see his grandparents' marriage as a "union of opposites" (212). Like so many female and male characters before them, they are a "woman who was more lady than woman, and a man who was more man than gentleman," that is, a woman defined by culture, a man by nature, each wanting "to be something [the other] resisted" (211-12).

While the "inescapable" theme is only one of the literary paradigms that affect Lyman, its role is significant because it so influences the negative conclusions he draws about his grandparents' marriage: He sees it as made up of two lines that never quite intersect or only come together in a "false arch." Despite his considerable love and admiration for his grandmother, he blames her more than his grandfather for the failure. The story he "extrapolates" as a climax to their marriage is also shaped by literary inheritances (436). To envision his grandmother finally giving up her gentility, becoming more woman than lady, he turns to his reading for models of female rebellion, sometimes using images that Oliver might say are "about used up." Susan becomes "Massaccio's Eve," tempted by desire and responsible for the destruction of Oliver's dream, for the ejection from the Promised Land. Susan's illustrations for *The Scarlet Letter* also offer Lyman another convenient model; in the wilderness women are tempted to rebel with their bodies, their rebellion a betrayal of the men who possess them and of social strictures that define civilization. In

his telling, Susan becomes an adulteress. In failing to see the potentials in Eden, she destroys those she loves: The guilt-ridden Frank (Dimmesdale), the revengeful and unforgiving Oliver (Chillingworth), and the innocent child plucked from a blooming rose bush. Although Susan and Oliver's marriage lasted, perhaps harmoniously, for many years beyond the deaths of Agnes and Frank, Lyman cannot move beyond seeing his story as centered around sexual estrangement and betrayal and all it symbolizes.<sup>19</sup>

Through his creation of Lyman as narrator, Stegner imitates the writer Oliver preferred, Turgenev, "who stayed out of his stories, . . . let you do your own responding" (122). Stegner provides Shelly, the "Modern Reader," to debate with Lyman over how to read Susan's story, and he expects his readers to join in the debate, to offer alternative readings. My reading of *Angle of Repose* as feminist criticism depends upon an assumption that Stegner expects his readers to read both with and *against* Lyman, to question his judgments and interpretations, a much debated point.<sup>20</sup> While his novel sometimes traps women and men within gender roles, through Lyman's interpretations, it also allows them to range beyond them, as readers question Lyman's readings and postulate their own. Read this way, *Angle of Repose* also resembles feminist scholarship, which has looked to what one set of editors called "the authority of experience" and sought to replace the idea of scholarly objectivity with an acknowledgment of our personal relationship to our subject matter.<sup>21</sup> Like Lyman, we bring our own bookbags when we interpret the past. Because my work in western literature in recent years has led me to explore the harmony between women's and men's yearnings and dreams and therefore to discover those moments in the stories I read, Susan's life and her marriage look very different to me than they do to Lyman; I'd rather find Susan's healing herbs than Lyman's bitter fruits in my western landscape. Such an alternative reading of the marriage, treated symbolically, yields a much more optimistic view of western history, a view which might emphasize that men and women share certain responses to the West, that communication is possible, that the West's opposed value structures have been too rigidly defined. I think Stegner would share this view.<sup>22</sup>

In his memoir, *Wolf Willow*, Stegner comments that "almost everything I got from books was either at odds with what I knew from expe-

rience or irrelevant to it or remote from it. Books didn't enlarge me; they dispersed me."<sup>23</sup> Yet still the boy Stegner re-creates, like Bruce Mason from *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, or the narrator of Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky* or innumerable other western literary youngsters, "read whatever books [he] could lay his hands on"—from Shakespeare to "Tarzan" to B. M. Bower to Cooper to the Sears Catalogue (26). Evidently the young Stegner had faith that someday the dispersal would end, that all those books could be brought together and made sense of, that they could speak to and of his western experience.

Stegner's reading dispersed him partially because Whitemud had no library. "We were not lucky enough to have in Whitemud one of those eccentric men of learning who brought good libraries to so many earlier frontier towns," he says, "and who lighted fires under susceptible village boys" (27). In Stegner's long career as writer, historian, and literary critic, he became one of those "eccentric men of learning." In *Angle of Repose*, he stocked our library shelves, brought the books into conversation with each other and with us, and made them relevant to the western past—and present.

*Except as we belong to a tradition and a community—and perhaps except as we bear some sort of constructive hostility to those bonds—we are nothing.*<sup>24</sup>

#### Notes

1. Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (1971; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1992), 182. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in text.
2. Wallace Stegner has written many more conventional pieces of literary criticism, including essays on Bret Harte, Willa Cather, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Bernard DeVoto, influential wide-ranging pieces like "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" from *The Sound of Mountain Water*, and talked at length in interviews about literature, as in the chapter titled "The American Literary West" in *Conversations with Wallace Stegner* on Western History and Literature, with Richard Etulain (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983). Using an image he might have borrowed from Stegner, Richard Etulain has noted "the open marriage of history and literature" in his work, but he means primarily that Stegner has "made notable use of history" in his fiction ("Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration," in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, ed. Anthony Arthur [Boston: G. K.

Hall, 1982], 159). Etulain and others have also noted that Stegner's westerners carry along "cultural baggage" from the East (158). I am suggesting that in *Angle of Repose* Stegner is writing a new kind of historical novel about culture, a literary history.

3. Most of the literary facts and references can be found in Mary Hallock Foote's letters and memoirs. Many of Stegner's themes also have foundations in Foote's work, including his interest in literary legacies. In "Mary Hallock Foote," James Maguire points out as a central theme in her work "the numerous allusions that strengthen the impression of a living cultural heritage, one that can be transported even to the western frontier." See Fred Erisman and Richard W. Etulain, eds., *Fifty Western Writers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 126.
 

Some critics have criticized Stegner for presenting a distorted view of Foote's life and, more significantly, borrowing phrasing, imagery, and even large chunks of her writing. See, for instance, Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, "Angle of Repose and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study," in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, 184–209. Foote deserves attention as a fine western writer and illustrator, and I find Stegner's realization of her importance and attention to her life and work, in the late 1960s, quite remarkable. I choose to see Stegner as using Foote's life and work to think seriously about the role of gender in western literary traditions.
4. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in text.
5. See Melody Graulich, "'The Guides to Conduct That a Tradition Offers': Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*," *South Dakota Review: Wallace Stegner Number 23* (Winter 1985): 87–106.
6. This anecdote is probably an oblique reference to this famous passage from "The Art of Fiction": "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative . . . it takes to itself the faintest hint of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations (first published in Longman's Magazine, [September, 1884]; reprint, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 2, 2d ed., ed. Baym et. al., 430–47).
7. Stegner quotes these lines in an interview with David Dillon, "Time's Prisoners," in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, 51. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations from this interview in the text.
8. In another telling literary historical anecdote, Stegner plays with the idea of the self defined in relationship to famous literary figures when Oliver describes his favorite cousin Mary Perkins's "story of her life." "She said she grew up the daughter of Lyman Beecher, and then became the sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and finally hit rock bottom as the mother-in-law of Edward Everett Hale" (41). Lyman sometimes believes Susan also loses identity in her relationships with her more famous friends, submerging her sense of self in her friendship with Augusta and Thomas Hudson, for instance.
9. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902; reprint, New York: Signet, 1979), 86–87.
10. Of course, this grounding of language in realistic, everyday experience is also a legacy from many of the American writers Lyman quotes, writers like Whitman, Twain, and Emerson, who

wrote in "The American Scholar": "If it were only for a vocabulary, the scholar would be covetous of action. Life is our dictionary. . . . I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. Life lies behind us as the quarry from whence we get tiles and copstones for the masonry of today. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the workyard made."

11. It's interesting to note that while Lyman knows of many women writers of the period, he says "hardly a one, unless Mary Cassatt, whom she apparently never met, . . . could have shown [Grandmother] how to be a woman artist" (317). Lyman does not appear to be very self-conscious about the model Cassatt would have provided for she made choices which many feminist art historians have identified as crucial to a successful artistic career for women: She moved to Europe and chose not to marry. Despite Lyman's pride in his grandmother's career, these are hardly choices he would want her to have made. Ironically, Stegner decides to end the nineteenth-century segment of his novel before the 1893 Chicago Exposition, where Mary Hallock Foote was a judge. She visited the famous Women's Building and saw the work of the many, many women artists of the period.
12. Mary Hallock Foote, "How the Pump Stopped at the Morning Watch," in *Selected American Prose: The Realistic Movement, 1841-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958).
13. William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (New York: Signet, 1980), 82.
14. Obviously these were major concerns for Henry James as well. Concerned as it is with women who choose to speak publicly, with women's relationships, and with women's "proper" roles, its title suggesting its links to region, *The Bostonians* also converses with *Angle of Repose*, but in ways outside the scope of this essay.
15. Stegner, "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," in *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York: Dutton, 1980), 195.
16. On this theme in western literature, see Melody Graulich, "Gettin' Hitched in the West," paper presented at the 100 Years of Western Literature conference in Laramie, Wyoming, in October 1992.
17. In an influential essay, Nina Baym has shown how "melodramas of beset manhood" dominated American Studies literary paradigms until recently, causing us to overlook other significant patterns ("Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Writers," *American Quarterly* 33 [Summer 1981]: 123-39). In fact, marriage is one of the most important themes in American literature written by both women and men, receiving relatively little wide-ranging attention except in recent feminist scholarship on women writers and in Allen Stein's *After the Vows Were Broken: Marriage in American Literary Realism* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1984).
18. For Smith-Rosenberg on marriage being less important to women's lives than female friendship, see Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *SIGNS* 1 (1975): 1-30. Carl Degler emphasizes the reciprocity rather than tension in the Footes' marriage. Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
19. Many critics have suggested that Lyman's interpretation of his grandparents' marriage is influenced by his personal life, by his own marital problems, and of course they are right. Yet

more subtly the novel shows that we are all invested in the stories we tell; whether there are direct correspondences to our lives or not, our stories are guided by our cultural inheritances, by those "maps of human experience."

20. For opposing points of view, see Sid Jensen, "The Compassionate Seer: Wallace Stegner's Literary Artist" and Audrey Peterson, "Narrative Voice in Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*," both of whom see Lyman as reliable, and Kerry Ahearn, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain and *Angle of Repose*: Trial and Culmination," who questions many of Lyman's interpretations (all three essays appear in Arthur, *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*). I see Lyman as insightful sometimes, short-sighted other times, like most of us, and wonder why any writer would call an entirely trustworthy narrator Lyman.
21. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards, *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977).
22. For a fuller discussion of how the "inescapable" theme infiltrates Lyman's thinking, see Graulich, "'The Guides to Conduct That a Tradition Offers': Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*."
23. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* (1962; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 26.
24. Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water*, 285. Wallace Stegner, "The Book and the Great Community," a talk given at a dedication of a Utah library.