

4. Ibid., p. 108.
5. Ibid., p. 105.
6. Dolores Rosenblum, "Intimate Immensity: Mythic Space in the Work of Laura Ingalls Wilder," in *Where the West Begins: Essays on Middle Border and Siouland Writings* (Sioux Falls, S. Dak.: Augustana College Center for Western Studies), p. 74.
7. Ibid., p. 75.
8. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939), pp. 66.
9. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), pp. 4-45.
10. Zochert, p. 104.
11. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Joanna Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981); Christiane Fischer, ed., *Women in the American West* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977).
12. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 106.
13. Wilder, *The Long Winter*, p. 32.
14. Ibid., p. 197.
15. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), p. 226.
16. Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, p. 54.
17. Wilder, *The Long Winter*, p. 324.
18. Ibid., pp. 93-94.
19. Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, chap. 10.
20. Wilder, *The Long Winter*, p. 24.
21. Ibid., p. 9.
22. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), p. 49.
23. Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, p. 280.
24. Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, p. 46.
25. Ibid., p. 271.
26. William Anderson, *Laura Wilder of Mansfield* (De Smet, S. Dak.: Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, 1974), p. 12.
27. William Anderson, *The Story of the Ingalls* (De Smet, S. Dak.: Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, 1971), pp. 24-26.
28. Ibid., pp. 26-29.
29. Zochert, *Laura*, p. 188.
30. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943), p. 23.
31. Moore, "Laura Ingalls Wilder's Orange Notebooks," p. 117.
32. Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, p. 119.

Violence Against Women: Power Dynamics in Literature of the Western Family¹

MELODY GRAULICH

Here is a view of the western family horrifyingly at variance with the decent world of Ma and Pa Ingalls and their children. Yet there can be no doubt that wife and child abuse were as prevalent in the West as elsewhere.

"Somebody must say these things," and by saying them, Melody Graulich opens up an important topic for research. As she suggests, violence scars its victims not only physically but psychologically, causing permanent damage to daughters' views of the female role. The previous article suggested the usefulness of generational analysis; this article underlines that point and the need to consider all the relevant evidence, even the unpleasant. The importance of domestic violence as a theme in the literature of western women alerts us to look for its presence in other, nonliterary sources. As a result, we may rethink the theme of violence in traditional western history. Was there a connection between domestic violence, which remained hidden, and the celebration of rarer and more public displays of male violence?

"Somebody must say these things," wrote Mary Austin in 1932 as she prepared to give testimony about one of the most painful secrets of women's lives—violent abuse from a husband or lover. Recalling how a friend of her mother's came in the night "with a great bloody bruise on her face," Austin describes "the unwiped tears on [her] mother's face while the two women kept up between them the pretense of a blameless accident."² It is easy to understand why battered wives have kept up the pretense, why women have been reluctant to "say these things" to a society that has until recently covertly sanctioned wife abuse and has failed to listen to those women who did speak. But Austin is right when she suggests that though women may sometimes manage to intervene in individual acts of violence, as she did when she prevented a drunken husband from beating his pregnant wife, they will never stop woman abuse until they begin to speak about it and to analyze its causes.

Although recent data suggest that "more than half of all married women are beaten by their husbands," abuse of women has been an undercover subject in our society, an embarrassing "abnormality" to be concealed,



Jules and Mary Sandoz. Courtesy Mari Sandoz Estate.

and historical information has been difficult to find.³ Yet isolated voices in the wilderness, pioneer daughters like Austin, have realized the costs of concealment and focused on violence against women in their autobiographical narratives, demonstrating its centrality to their understanding of their mothers'—and their own—lives. I will examine four texts by western women writers which suggest that violence against women was commonplace in the American West: Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* (1935); Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* (1929); Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (written

in 1939, published in 1978); and Tillie Olsen's *Yonnodio* (written between 1932 and 1937, published in 1973).⁴ The radical conclusion of these writers—that violence against women is the result of patriarchal definitions of gender and marriage rather than of individual pathology—anticipates the analysis of the most recent feminist scholars.⁵ Their books explore not only relations between women and men, but also how watching her mother become a victim of male aggression affects a daughter's complex identification with and resistance to her mother's life. They reveal the struggles women face growing up female in a world where women are victimized and devalued.

The four writers treat violence against women as the widespread and inevitable consequence of the common belief that men have the right to dominate women and to use force to coerce compliance with their wishes. Abuse of women appears as socially acceptable, rather than aberrant, behavior. Sandoz refers to wife abuse as "every husband's right" (p. 412). Le Sueur offers a chorus of male voices: "Thataboy, they shouted from inside, that's the way to treat her. A woman's got to be struck regular like a gong. . . . Knock it into her" (p. 81). Smedley describes how her protagonist Marie "hated [her father] for attacking a woman because she was his wife and the law gave him the right" (p. 106). In these books husbands who beat their wives are not presented as mentally ill, nor is their behavior motivated by events in their personal lives or by their wives' actions, though these may trigger violence. The causes for their brutality are embedded in their society's attitudes about women and marriage and in its sanctioning of male power and authority.

Sandoz conceived her biography of her father, a notorious "locator" in frontier Nebraska, as "the biography of a community, the upper Niobrara country in western Nebraska," and she focuses on her family as representative pioneers (*Old Jules*, p. vii). Exploring the unequal conflict between men and women in the West, Sandoz shows through repeated example that women are often the victims of the West's celebrated freedom. She presents her father as the archetypal frontiersman, whose desire for absolute free will and freedom of action makes him in some ways romantic and heroic, America's much-discussed and well-respected rugged individualist. The frontiersman is usually presented in literature as having only the barest and most stylized relations with women. Sandoz focuses on her father's marriages, and most readers finish the book shocked at his violent treatment of his four wives. When his first wife disobeyed an order, "Jules closed her mouth with the flat of his long muscular hand"; when his second wife asked why he did nothing, "his hand shot out, and the woman slumped against the bench. . . . [Later] he pretended not to notice [her] swollen lip, the dark bruises on her temple, and the tear-wearied eyes." When Sandoz's mother, Mary, asked Jules to help do the farm work, he responded: "'You want me, an educated man, to work like a hired tramp!' he roared, and threw her against the wall" (pp. 5, 102, 199).

But Jules Sandoz is no more brutal than most other men in the book and is, in fact, most representative when he is beating his wives. Jules's con-

versations with his friends show that they believe women are to be used and controlled, their individuality of little consequence. The men mock and belittle women and make crude sexual comments. Sandoz makes it clear that Jules defines women as his society does: a woman is something to exploit; a man needs a wife to work, obey, and bear children. The laws and culture support his attitudes. Although the community knows which wives are victims of battering, it never interferes. The legal system, such as it is, sides with the male.

The economic system also helps institutionalize wife abuse by dictating women's dependence and forcing them to remain in violent marriages, as Smedley shows in *Daughter of Earth*. The "source of [Marie's] hatred of marriage" is her society's agreement that "a woman had to 'mind' her husband," primarily because he has "bought" her (pp. 66-67). Smedley focuses on the husband's traditional "property rights;" the marriage license is a certificate of ownership, giving men the right to beat and otherwise control their wives. Arguing that a woman's economic independence would give her some freedom, Marie describes a woman forced out of her "active, independent life" by her husband, who refuses to allow her to work and then abuses her when she is pregnant and unable to leave him. Marie believes (wrongly) that she can evade violence by remaining single. Yet she recognizes the economic pressures on women to marry and shows that it is nearly impossible for a woman to support her children alone. Comparing marriage to prostitution, Smedley sees the causes of violence in the unequal distribution of economic power within capitalist society and within patriarchal marriage.

Like Smedley, Le Sueur is a socialist, and in *The Girl* she creates representative working-class characters from pioneer backgrounds who have moved to the city. Le Sueur's women see violence as an inevitable part of sexual relations, a belief she suggests they inherit from their pioneer mothers. "Their experience of this world," she says in an autobiographical piece, "centered around the male as beast, his drunkenness and chicanery, his oppressive violence."⁶

Olsen, the fourth writer, presents family violence as the norm in her society, as her proletarian family moves from mining camp to tenant farm to the Chicago stockyards. Her most graphic and representative scene describes a sexual assault. Marital rapes also occur in the other books: Jules rapes his third wife, a mail-order bride who had met him only that day; the mother of *The Girl's* unnamed narrator is attacked by her husband when she refuses to sleep with him; and after overhearing her mother talking about a woman who was "forced," Smedley's Marie worries about the "hard, bitter weeping" she hears behind her parents' locked bedroom door (p. 78). Olsen makes the husband's expectations most explicit; the point of view belongs to the nine-year-old protagonist, Mazie:

What was happening? It seemed the darkness bristled with blood, with horror. The shaking of the bed as if someone were sobbing in it, the wind burrowing through the leaves filling the night with a shaken sound. And the words, the words leaping.

"Dont, Jim, dont. It hurts too much. No, Jim, no."
 "Cant screw my own wife. Expect me to go to a whore? Hold still." [p. 91]

Jim believes, as do the other husbands, that he has sexual rights to his wife upon demand, and he uses violence to achieve these "rights." Later Mazie finds her mother lying in blood on the kitchen floor. Four months after bearing her youngest child, Anna has miscarried.

In these books, women are victims of individual men, but in the larger sense they are victims of social and economic institutions, of gender expectations. The male characters are by no means wholly unsympathetic; they are often creative, energetic, and sometimes likeable. The writers are well aware that men are shaped by patriarchal expectations, that they too are victims of gender roles and of economic exploitation. But none of the authors forgets that her mother's life and character is far more circumscribed than her father's, and her mother's physical victimization is one of the most powerful results of the unequal power men hold over women.

Although the writers may briefly question whether a woman in any way "provokes" her husband's violence, they soon dismiss this possibility. They explore the mother's life not to discover the causes of violence—which they locate in patriarchal institutions and assumptions—but to show how it affects her character. Like all victims of violent attack, the women feel intimidated, vulnerable, and helpless. Their daughters describe the constant fear, the drudgery leading to illnesses and early death, the anger buried under compliance. Each daughter sorrows over her mother's lost beauty, that perennial symbol of a woman's value.

After years of having their personal dignity and control over their lives forceably taken from them, the mothers believe they possess no value. Their sense of self effaced, they become unable to acknowledge, let alone assert, their own needs. Le Sueur's narrator's "mama" has a "small frightened face"; she behaves "as if apologizing for everything, . . . as if she didn't want to bother anybody" (p. 35). Mazie's mother, Anna, whose husband "struck [her] too often to remember," becomes paralyzed, disappearing behind "the shadow curtaining her . . . eyes" (p. 15). Smedley's Ellie Rogers seems to her daughter to disappear, saying "I don't need nothin'. I don't go nowhere and I don't see nobody" (p. 113). Economically dependent women who are beaten for "demanding" household money from a husband who legally controls the family finances soon learn to reduce their needs, but Smedley also implies that the threat of violence causes Ellie to conclude that she herself is "nothing."

The beatings threaten the women with spiritual and literal death. Ellie's voice is "lifeless" when she speaks of her husband's threat to hit her with a rope, adding, "'Marie, . . . if he hits me, I'll drop dead!'" (pp. 105-106). Mary Sandoz tries to take control of her life through suicide:

Mary avoided crossing him or bothering him for help in anything she could possibly do alone. But there were times when she must have his help, as when the roof leaked or the calves had to be castrated. It took weeks of diplomatic approach to get him to look after the two bull calves before they were too big for her to handle

at all. And when she couldn't hold the larger one from kicking, Jules, gray-white above his beard, threw his knife into the manure and loped to the back door. "I learn the goddamn balky woman to obey me when I say 'hold him'" He tore a handful of four-foot wire stays from the bundle in the corner of the shop and was gone towards the corral, the frightened grandmother and the children huddled at the back window.

They heard the banging of the gate. Jules's bellow of curses. Then Mary ran through the door, past the children and straight to the poison drawer. It stuck, came free, the blood dripping from her face and her hand where she had been struck with the wire whip, the woman snatched up a bottle, struggled with the cork, pulling at it with her teeth. The grandmother was upon her, begging, pleading, clutching at the red bottle with the crossbones.

Jules burst in. "Wo's the goddamned woman? I learn her to obey me if I got to kill her!"

"You!" the grandmother cried, shaking her fist against him. "For you there is a place in hell!"

With the same movement of her arm she swung out, knocking the open bottle from the woman's mouth. . . . Then she led Mary out of the house and to the brush along the river. [p. 230-31]

Saved from death by her ties to her mother and her children, Mary manages to encourage Jules to mellow by giving up her own needs and choosing another kind of self-destruction. Even when Jules stops beating her, he has the power in the family: he controls the money; he refuses to consult her in any decision; he harasses her constantly; and he will not work. Without him, Mary possesses the strength to be independent but, married to him, she must squelch her character and her ambitions; she must bend to his authority and find ways to circumvent his power.

Like Ellie, who feels "silence settling more and more about her," Mary learns silence, as do the others (p. 113), including Olsen's Anna. "Once Anna had questioned [her husband] timidly concerning his work; he struck her on the mouth with a bellow of 'Shut your damn trap'" (p. 15); later he thinks "just let her say one word to me and I'll bash her head in" (p. 76). When a man responds to his wife's efforts to talk about family needs and problems only with verbal aggression and violence, this is a mode of communication. He "teaches" the woman who controls the relationship and shows her how problems will be "solved," and tells her what to think about herself. Powerless, separated from others, unheard, she has no way to validate her feelings. She has been successfully intimidated. The husband maintains his power over his wife through enforced isolation and silence, which contribute to her self-doubts and her sense of shame.

Like most historians of pioneer women, these writers suggest that the isolation is increased by the western way of life, where frequent moves and distant neighbors made bonds difficult to establish. Marie Rogers describes how her sister "went into the silence where all pioneer women had gone before her" (p. 92). The authors demonstrate women's recognition of their need of each other: most turn at some point to women friends and to their daughters or mothers, who are sometimes able to help. But the women often have few friends who might share their problems and let

them know they are not crazy, as they are often called, or to blame; those few who are willing to help are usually powerless and poor, like Marie's Aunt Helen. Isolation not only exacerbates their loss of selfhood; it also seems to increase their victimization. The West's dogged resistance to any interference with individual "freedom" and the western myths of individualism and violence may have further fueled the belief in the "sanctity" of the patriarchal family.

The authors stress the women's lack of alternatives to their entrapment by economic considerations and social attitudes. Mary Sandoz, "brought up in a tradition of subordination to man," has been rendered economically dependent, like the other mothers (p. 187). She has no money, and she has children; she cannot leave her husband. She also believes that divorce is shameful and that her children need a father; her culture has taught her that a violent home is preferable to a broken one. Ironically, it is husbands who often threaten to leave their wives—and do. Ellie cannot support herself and her family, and time and again her daughter watches her respond to her husband's abuse by begging him not to abandon them. Economically dependent and socialized to find satisfaction and value in ties to others, the wives struggle to make their relationships work. The women in *The Girl*, afraid of being left, attempt to bond men to them by sacrificing themselves; like the girl's mother, they have internalized society's dictum that the woman is responsible for creating a "happy" family and satisfying others' needs.

The writers imply that social expectations that women marry, become dependent, and bear and take primary responsibility for children lead to wife battering. Says Jules: "Women got to have children to keep healthy" (p. 110). Mazie's father, Jim, wonders "what other earthly use can a woman have" (p. 10). Although Mary tries to avoid pregnancy by nursing each baby for several years and the women in *The Girl* have many health-destroying illegal abortions, there is no effective birth control. Their husbands force sex upon them, then refer to the children as "your kids" and abuse them. While the fathers vary in their attention to the children, they do not take any major responsibility for their care, nor are they attached to them by bonds as strong as the mothers'. Some men leave the children without providing for them, but no woman considers this option, though without a man she often cannot provide for them herself. Their devotion to their children chains the women to abusive husbands and adds to their feelings of inadequacy and shame.

Like most researchers who believe that "both victims and perpetrators of family violence were often exposed to similar violence in their childhoods," these writers show that the children are shaped by violence, though it is difficult to separate the effects of wife abuse and child abuse.⁷ Certainly fear dominates their children's family lives. "Hidden far under the bed," the Sandoz children watch their father attack their mother and "cower . . . like frightened little rabbits, afraid to cry" (p. 231). Mazie's brother Will cries out in his sleep, "'dont hit me, Poppa, dont'" (p. 24). Le Sueur's girl's mother wants her daughter to marry a "good" man like papa,

who spent his life brutalizing his family, and the girl does notice that the man she picks is "like papa." Some daughters learn to hate men: after watching her mother being beaten, the girl's sister Stasia decides that she will never marry. Marie Rogers comes to the same conclusion.

As family violence teaches girls what to expect from men, it also influences boys' attitudes about and behavior toward women. One of the grisliest scenes in *Old Jules* concerns Mrs. Blaska, whose husband uses her love for her sons to coax her back after she dares to leave him. After she is found dead, "stripped naked, in the open chicken yard," her husband admits he whipped her. "She started to run away again, and handicapped by his crutch, he sent her sons to bring her back. They held her while he pounded her." (p. 412).

The Blaska boys, like many of the sons in these works, suffer from what Talcott Parsons has called "compulsive masculinity," characterized by aggression toward women who "are to blame."⁸ By the end of *Yonnonidio*, Mazie's brother Will becomes "sullen" and "defiant," having learned "a lust to hit back, a lust not to care" (p. 71). The books demonstrate that violence is circular: society's devalued view of women and implicit support of male domination cause violence, while men learn to further devalue women through watching them being beaten. Recent feminist theorists who argue that gender identity is based on a child's relationship to the mother show how traits that these earlier writers link to violence are formed in childhood. Carol Gilligan has suggested that, because boys must separate from their mothers to develop a masculine gender identity while femininity is defined through attachment, "male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation."⁹ The boys learn to reject women, but the books reveal a good deal more about how the girls attempt to deal with identifying with a victimized woman.

Sandoz, Smedley, Le Sueur, and Olsen focus on how the daughters resist, reject, and come to understand themselves through their mothers' lives. Some suffer from what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia": the fear "of becoming one's mother, . . . the splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage."¹⁰ Rich argues that daughters often see their mothers as standing "for the victim in ourselves," as "having taught compromise and self-hatred," as "the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence" are passed on (pp. 238, 237). While the authors do not find wholly adequate solutions to this blurring and overlapping of their own and their mothers' personalities, they also do not resemble the daughters Rich describes who find it "easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (p. 237). Partly by identifying these forces, the daughters in these books resolve their feelings about their mothers in various ways. In a sense, each book bears testimony to the daughter's inability to separate herself from her mother and to her belief that her mother's life had value.

The daughters find themselves torn between their attraction to their fathers, whom they see as creative and colorful figures, and their recognition of themselves as women who may be destined to occupy their mothers' roles. Describing their characters' fascination with their fathers' storytelling, each author writes of key moments in her childhood when her father chose her as audience. Says Sandoz, ". . . the most impressive stories were those told me by Old Jules himself," and she believes these stories helped create her own narrative skill (*Old Jules*, vii-viii). Marie Rogers thinks she is her "father's daughter," partially because "he told me stories when I sat by his side. . . . [To] him, as to me, fancy was as real as sticks and stones. . . . [but my mother] never believed in imaginin' things" (p. 57). Loving her father's stories, Mazie thinks that "daddy knowen everything" and tries to model herself on him by listing what she's "a-knowing": "words and words" (pp. 16, 12). The daughters often associate their own creativity with their fathers.

While these writers present working-class men as possessing limited power, they nonetheless connect the fathers with traits traditionally ascribed to the western male—and to men in general: independence, power, defiance, activity, cockiness, individualism, even freedom. Jules came west seeking "free land, far from law and convention," where he could "live as he liked," and Sandoz presents him as "a big man—crazy maybe, but big" (pp. 4, 398). Marie Rogers admires her father for daring "what no one else dared. . . . He was the living, articulate expression of their desires" (p. 23). "To be like him," she thinks, "was my one desire in life" (pp. 12-13).

And yet the daughters know they cannot be "like him" because they are women, as their fathers teach them. Jules says to his daughter, "'There is nobody to carry on my work. . . . If [Mari] was a man she might—as a woman she is not worth a damn'" (p. 418). Mazie tries to "force [her father] into some recognition of her existence, her desire, her emotions" (p. 16). Rejected by her father after his first son is born, Marie learns that there is "something wrong with me, . . . something too deep to even cry about" (p. 12). Judged inadequate because of their sex, these girls have difficulty developing self-respect.

They come to judge their fathers' lives in various ways; Le Sueur's girl, for instance, believes her "papa was a failure and mean" (p. 43), though she falls in love with another mean failure. All eventually see that the male's "superiority" carries with it traits and values they reject. The girls are drawn to the male world not so much because it is attractive as because they see their mothers' worlds as so limited and constricted; they do not want to grow up to be women. Marie Rogers thinks, "I would not be a woman, I would not" (pp. 148-49). Seeing as the central difference between her parents that her mother "preferred the smaller, the more familiar things, while her Jules saw only the far, the large, the exalted canvas," Sandoz presents her mother as possessing a qualified heroism, subordinate to Jules' visionary power (p. 191). She respects her mother who, like

other pioneer women, "made the best of the situation," but the mother's life was filled with situations to avoid, not to aspire to.¹¹

Many violent and sexual incidents suggest to the girls what it means to be a woman and demonstrate their ties to their mothers. Sandoz recognizes that she is identified with her mother and realizes what womanhood will bring her when Jules, unable to beat the pregnant Mary, "whipped [Mari] until he was breathless" (p. 279). She is confronted with the powerlessness of her sexuality when she is attacked by a convict her father boards; the father hides the man's offense, sexual assault on young girls. After witnessing her mother's rape, Mazie comes to realize her own sexual vulnerability. Some boys intimidate her from jumping with them onto ice trucks by making up a rhyme about how they see her "pants" and her "pie," and so Mazie becomes "clumsy": "No more for her that lithe joy, that sense of power" (p. 127). Marie Rogers describes how she first experiences her tie to her mother when they face together her father's assault: "A bond had at last been welded between us two, . . . a bond of misery that was never broken" (p. 107). Loving, pitying, and supporting her mother, who dies in her arms, she learns from her life the costs of sexuality: "Sex meant violence, marriage, or prostitution, and marriage meant children, . . . unhappiness, and all the things that I feared and dreaded and intended to avoid" (p. 181).

Perhaps because of the violence associated with marriage and sexuality, the daughters also associate children with entrapment, and they resent being forced to take responsibility for child care. (Le Sueur has quite a different point of view on this issue, to which I will return shortly.) "Never Jules or James, always Mari," thinks Sandoz, and she eventually confronts her mother: "'I should think you'd be tired of having babies—I'm tired of watching them—'" (pp. 296, 341). Mazie has a similar encounter with her mother:

"Why is it always me that has to help? How come Will gets to play?"
 "Willies a boy."
 "Why couldn't I get borned a boy?" [p. 142]

Thus, the daughter sometimes comes to feel that her mother is forcing her to take on her own devalued role. Faced with her subordinate status, she turns against herself; Marie Rogers "hated [herself] most of all for having been born a woman" and hated her brothers and sister for existing and making her feel responsible for them (p. 137).

Marie is so damaged by witnessing what it is to be a woman that she rejects positive traits associated with womanhood. "Love, tenderness and duty belong to women and to weaklings in general," she thinks, planning to "have none of them!" (p. 136). Yet Smedley suggests that such declarations are defenses against her feelings of guilt for "deserting" her siblings after her mother's death, and her guilt is evidence that she cannot escape her womanhood. She suppressed "the desire for love" because of the "perverted idea of love and sex that had been ground into [her] being" (pp. 182, 194). Marie believes that women's values lead inevitably to the

powerlessness of her mother's role. "Love and tenderness meant only pain and suffering and defeat" (p. 148).

Like Smedley, Le Sueur explores the consequences of women's capacity for emotional involvement with others and contrasts women's values with those of men, but the girl's conclusions about her mother's life differ markedly from those of Marie. Believing she will discover truths about her own identity through understanding her mother's experience, she goes to see her, hoping "she would tell me something" (p. 40). And she comes back "a different person":

I was into my mama's life for the first time, and knew how she all the time, chased like a pack of wolves, kept us alive, fierce and terrible. . . . Mama had a secret. She let me feel it, let me know it. [p. 45]

The girl thinks repeatedly of her mother throughout the book; her "secret," what she "has felt" and helps the girl feel, is her "fierce" attachment to others. When the girl realizes that her own ability to give birth and nurture life is her "treasure," she thinks, "I felt like mama" (p. 134).

In *The Girl*, Le Sueur creates a community of women whose united voices assert that women's devalued strengths—nurturance, vulnerability, interdependence—can and will prevail. Yet in reclaiming women's values and mythologizing their relationships with each other, based on the mother-daughter bond, Le Sueur denies the girl any radical analysis of the limitations in her mother's life, and she herself evades some problematical issues. As I have shown, there are serious threats in mama's lessons, drawbacks in her life. The girl's relations with men mirror her mother's, and Le Sueur can achieve her visionary end only by killing off her male characters, all of whom abuse women. But she does not envision women living without men, and, in fact, her women are obsessed with establishing relations with men and with having babies. She cannot empower women's values in a world in which male values dominate, so she cannot resolve a central issue her book raises: how to stop the abuse of women.

All of the daughters in these books are left with more questions than answers. *Daughter of Earth* ends with Marie still struggling with her profound sympathy and love for her mother and her rebellion against her role. After writing a woman's history of the West, hidden within a biography of her father, Sandoz turns, in her later histories, to the classic masculine West and its themes, to what she calls "the romantic days." Unable, perhaps unwilling, to identify with her mother's West, interested in heroism, individualism, and power, and encouraged by the historical establishment to write "epic" history, she never again gives a woman a starring role in her histories. Like the other writers, Sandoz presents a radical analysis of power dynamics in the western family, but she can find few solutions, in her work or in her life.

"Her tears, . . . they embittered my life!" says Marie Rogers (p. 32). "Mama wept all night," says the girl (p. 31). Mazie sees her mother's "head bent over her sewing in the attitude of a woman weeping" (p. 16). This is the image the daughters carry of their mothers. Seeking to break

out of the eternal mold of the weeping woman, they nonetheless find that they cannot—and will not—separate themselves from their mothers, whom they associate with life, with their very selfhood:

The fingers stroked, spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame—the old worn fragile bliss, a new frail selfness bliss, healing, transforming. Up from the grasses, from the earth, from the broad tree trunk at their back, latent life streamed and seeded. The air and self shone boundless. Absently, her mother stroked; stroked unfolding, wingedness, boundlessness. [p. 119]

Although she sees her mother's life as "so cruel, . . . so ugly," Mazie comes to feel the beauty in the world through Anna's nurturing. Olsen grows up to write a famous story, "Ironing," in which a mother meditates about her love for her daughter and her guilt over her inability to protect her from the pain of being a woman. It is a measure of the power and influence of their mothers that these authors attempt to re-examine, re-tell, and re-claim their lives.

Although some knew each others' work, Sandoz, Smedley, Le Sueur, and Olsen were not well-known authors before the feminist resurgence of the 1970s. As Dale Spender suggests, feminist writers throughout the century have analyzed and criticized the social structure, but their work has been largely overlooked (or worse, suppressed) by mainstream literary and social historians.¹² As woman abuse was invisible in our society, so was it absent from our literary canon. Few Americans have been willing to believe that the frontiersman or pioneer was a woman abuser; that the real Davy Crocketts, Natty Bumpos, Virginians, and Ben Cartwrights took for granted a patriarchal authority that sanctioned woman abuse; that the frontier's cherished freedom and individualism, which helped shape American history and culture, might encourage the violent domination of women. These four works implicitly demand a reassessment of western experience and the myths our culture has invented to explain it. Literature not only verbalizes the author's view of social reality, but it also may shape cultural attitudes. Had these women, who dared to break the silence about violence in women's lives, been heard and believed, wife abuse might have been recognized as a serious social problem long before the 1970s.

As many feminist critics have said, women cannot fully understand their own lives until they see their experiences explored in literature. Sandoz, Smedley, Le Sueur, and Olsen dared to write about their mothers' lives and their own because they knew their experiences were not unique; their books can help wives and daughters see the real causes of the violence in their lives and realize their ties to each other. To demonstrate this point, and to conclude my essay, I have chosen an unusual form: a personal digression.

I learned to digress from my grandfather, who may have learned it from Twain's Jim Blaine. Born in the Badlands of South Dakota, my grandfather drifted throughout the West. He rode buffalo, dated a girl named

Duckfoot Sue, and was a descendant of Geronimo—or, on alternate days, Sitting Bull. When accused, never by me, Gramps would say that while he never lied, it might be that he sometimes "pre-va-ri-cated"—and he would stretch out the word for its full ten-dollar value.

Wandering with me in the western mountains, telling his tall tales, my grandfather was the larger-than-life star in my childhood melodrama. As I grew up and recognized his failings and his alcoholism, I came to see him as a flawed visionary, trampled on by a seedy conformist society; as, in short, a quintessential western hero. His freedom-seeking, rebellious footprints led me directly to the field of American studies.

A few years after my grandfather died, my mother drank a little one night and told me some family stories I had not heard before. The climactic one chronicled what she said was a frequent occurrence in her childhood: my grandfather beating my grandmother. As she described, in detail, several beatings she remembered, she told me how she had felt responsible, powerless, embarrassed. It was awful to hear this. Pieces of me tore apart jaggedly and settled into new, uncomfortable relations to each other. The next day when I saw my grandmother, I was appalled to discover that I could not respond to my new information about her. I could not identify with her suffering. I felt only that I needed to understand what could have caused my beloved grandfather to do such a thing, and to find a way to explain and excuse him.

It was at least two painful, unresolved years later that I discovered *Old Jules*. Coming to understand Sandoz's confusion about whether to identify with her father or with her mother gave me, I thought, a way to explain my own feelings about my grandfather. I wrote an essay on Sandoz, and I presented papers in which I told about my family, thinking all the while of how "I learned to digress from my grandfather."

But I missed the point. My mother had told me secrets she and my grandmother had kept for thirty-five years, yet I used these secrets not to understand their lives, but to explore my grandfather and my identification with him. I did not conceal the story but, like Sandoz, I thought it was about the man, and I did not see that perhaps the story was really about the teller, "her father's daughter," my mother. Although I am a feminist, I rendered my mother invisible and thoughtlessly covered up her knowledge of the real costs of woman abuse. Sandoz, Smedley, Le Sueur, and Olsen showed me this, and I am grateful.

Notes

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I would like to dedicate this article to my mother, Gloria Graulich, and to my grandmother Mae Wilkerson.

1. This article is a condensation of a longer and more theoretical unpublished piece. Two other articles treat individual writers in more depth: "Every Husband's Right: Sex Roles in Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*," *Western American Literature*, May, 1983, pp. 3-20;

"For what is one voice alone': Separation and Connection in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*" (conference paper).

2. Mary Austin, *Earth Horizon* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), p. 142.

3. Reported in *Boston Globe* (6 June 1982), p. 17. See also Murray A. Straus, "Wife-Beating: How Common and Why?" in Murray A. Straus and Gerald T. Hotaling, eds., *The Social Causes of Husband-Wife Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), where Straus claims that "the true incidence for violence in a marriage is probably closer to 50 or 60 percent of all couples" (p. 31). While some nineteenth-century feminists certainly attempted to expose the widespread practice of wife abuse, it was not until the feminist resurgence of the 1970s that the subject received sustained attention. Recent western historians have looked for information about what Julie Roy Jeffrey calls "power dynamics" within the family, but they have discovered, as John Faragher says, that some "human concerns [are] too dangerous to commit to paper" (*Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* [New York: Hill & Wang, 1979], p. 63; and *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979], p. 47). In "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," Adrienne Rich has argued that women "have been complicit, have acted out the fiction of a well-lived life, until the day we testify in court of rapes, beatings, psychic cruelties, public and private humiliations" (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silences* [New York: Norton, 1979], p. 189). This feminist attack on the mythology of domestic tranquility is supported by researchers like Straus. I will adopt Rich's description of abuse as my definition.

4. Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1976); Meridel Le Sueur, *The Girl* (Minneapolis, Minn.: West End Press, 1978); Tillie Olsen, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (New York: Dell, 1974). Page numbers follow quotations in text. These authors frequently use irregular punctuation; it will not be noted. Rosemary Whitaker's "Violence in *Old Jules* and *Slogum House*," *Western American Literature* 16, no. 3 (November, 1981): 215-24, discusses violence in Sandoz's works without considering the implications of woman abuse.

5. See, for instance, R. Emerson and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 33, 24, where they argue that "to be a wife meant becoming the property of a husband, taking a secondary position in a marital hierarchy of power and worth, being legally and morally bound to obey the will and wishes of one's husband, and thus, quite logically, subject to his control even to the point of physical chastisement and murder," and that "men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in western society—aggressiveness, male dominance, and female subordination—and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance." See also Wini Breines and Linda Gordon, "The New Scholarship on Family Violence," *Signs* 8, no. 3 (Spring, 1983): 490-531; Susan Schechter, *Women and Male Violence* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); and Diana E. H. Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (Riverside, N.J.: Macmillan, 1983), in which she claims that, of the women she interviewed, one out of seven reported at least one incident of rape by her husband. Without the insights of these scholars I might have overlooked important issues within the texts I discuss.

6. Meridel Le Sueur, "The Ancient People and the Newly Come," in Elaine Hedges, ed., *Ripening: Selected Work, 1927-1980* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), p. 44. While *The Girl* is less strictly autobiographical than the other texts, this quotation suggests that Le Sueur created her universalized female characters from her own experience.

7. Breines and Gordon, "The New Scholarship on Family Violence," p. 516. Schechter believes that this is an oversimplification of a complex issue and presents some objections. It is true that some of the women in these books resort to violence. As our society has implicitly sanctioned wife abuse, it has also encouraged child abuse through the faith in "spanking" as essential to childrearing. As the wives and children in these books learn, violence works; it is an effective method of intimidation and control over those who possess less power.

8. Straus, "Wife-Beating," p. 88.

9. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Develop-*

ment (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 8. Gilligan bases her conclusions on the research of Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

10. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1976), pp. 237-38. Subsequent quotations in text are followed by page numbers in Rich.

11. Mari Sandoz, "Pioneer Women," unpublished essay excerpted in Mari Sandoz, *Hos-tiles and Friendlies*, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. 59.

12. Dale Spender, *There's Always Been a Woman's Movement in This Century* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1982). Of course, some historians and critics have argued for the inclusion of materials on women. David Potter is only one such example.