

ANALYSIS

Angle of Repose (1971)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“[When Lyman Ward pardons] his bitchy wife, his brash son and his gang-banging secretary, not every reader is going to feel that he has risen above his distaste for our times. Whatever the author intended, we’re more likely to see this last-minute reprieve as a perversion of character, a regrettable crumbling of a good, crusty character.”

Anatole Broyard

“Were the Old Times Really Better?”

Life (26 March 1971) 14

“It is cause for celebration in this age of pop and plastic—whether in the bookshop, the talking shop in Washington, or the food shop around the corner—to come once in a while upon the real thing. Here, for example, is a long, intricate, deeply rewarding novel by Wallace Stegner. It has been written seriously and deserves to be read seriously, not dynamically or speedily, though whether or not there are enough such readers still around—a form of the real thing in themselves—to assure Mr. Stegner the large audience he ought to have is an open but lesser question. What is important is that he was written an superb novel, with an amplitude of scale and richness of detail altogether uncommon in contemporary fiction.

Mr. Stegner ranges widely: in his settings—California, New York, the Dakotas, Idaho, Mexico; in his time span—from 1870 to the present; and in the number and variety of his characters. Yet what he has written is neither the predictable four-decker family saga, the Forsytes in California, so to speak, from the first sturdy pioneers even unto the fourth and declining generation—though to the superficial eye it may appear that he has done both. For all the breadth and sweep of the novel, it achieves an effect of intimacy, hence of immediacy, and, though much of the material is ‘historical,’ an effect of discovery also, of experience newly minted rather than a pageantlike re-creation.

Stegner’s method is to keep us up very close to his principal characters, close enough to hear, to see, to recognize, to understand and sympathize, as they reveal themselves to each other and to themselves: notably, from the first generation, Susan Burling, in her time a famous writer-illustrator, ‘some sort of cross between a humming bird and an earth mover,’ who leaves her genteel artistic circle in New York to marry and go West with Oliver Ward, from one ditched hope to the next, as he, a mining engineer, seeks his fortune; to the third generation, their grandson Lyman Ward, a historian, who is narrator, commentator, and interpreter of the action at one level, and participant in it at another.

It is Lyman Ward’s voice we hear first, for the strategy of the novel is to have us believe that we are reading what this middle-aged historian, the victim of a crippling bone disease that keeps him prisoner in a wheelchair, speaks to a tape recorder through the spring and summer of 1970 in the house Oliver and Susan Ward had built in Grass Valley, California, at the turn of the century. Deserted by his wife, patronized by his son, Rodman, a confident sociologist, he spends his time sorting out his dead grandparents’ papers (and their lives), feeding them onto the tape—in effect, bringing them and himself back to life. (One is reminded of the *Four Quartets* [T. S. Eliot]: ‘We die with the dying; / See, they return and bring us with them.’) All this is quite beyond sociology. Rodman disapproves: If the papers have any value, give them to the Historical Society and ‘get a fat tax deduction’; as for Pop, he should be sensible (that is, save Rodman tiresome anxiety) and let himself be ‘led away to the old folks’ pasture down in Menlo Park where the care is good and there is so much to keep the inmates busy and happy.

There is no reply Lyman can give to Rodman that that noisy young man would pause to listen to; but the tape recorder listens: ‘Fooling around in the papers my grandparents...left behind, I get glimpses of lives close to mine, related to mine in ways I recognize but don’t completely comprehend. I’d like to live in their

clothes awhile, if only so I don't have to live in my own. Actually, as I look down my nose to where my left leg bends and my right leg stops, I realize that it isn't backward I want to go, but downward. I want to touch once more the ground I have been maimed away from. In my mind I write letters to the newspapers saying Dear Editor, As a modern man and a one-legged man I can tell you that the conditions are similar. We have been cut off, the past has been ended and the family has broken up and the present is adrift in its wheelchair.... The elements have changed, there are whole new orders of magnitude and kind. This present of 1970 is no more an extension of my grandparents' world, this West is no more a development of the West they helped build, than the sea over Santorini is an extension of that once-island of rock and olive.'

Implacable and pessimistic, 'Nemesis in a wheelchair,' Lyman Ward begins his exploration of the past. But however bleak his expectation, he is historian enough to wait and see: he has no predetermined notion of what he will find—that life was different is not to say that it was automatically better—or indeed of what he will make of what he finds—a biography, a monograph, or mere historical doodling. Gradually other voices are heard on the tape: Susan's, in particular, in letters that are a triumph of verisimilitude, perfectly matched to Mr. Stegner's carefully rendered locales and social discriminations. As she and Oliver come into clearer focus—she perhaps the more vulnerable, but finally the more fascinating and memorable of the two—and as more and more of their extraordinary experience is brought into the foreground, the device of the recorder is discreetly modulated: for long stretches nothing is allowed to break the communication that has been established.

What is communicated proves to be of a different order than might have been anticipated from Lyman Ward's first bleak estimate. For what we see, what the historian sees, is the essential changelessness of human behavior; the relationship of the Wards, the strains of their marriage, the conflict of their deeply contradictory natures, transcends time and place. 'What interests me,' their grandson observes, 'is not Susan Burling Ward the novelist and illustrator, and not Oliver Ward the engineer, and not the West they spend their lives in. What really interests me is how two such unlike particles clung together, and under what strains, rolling downhill into their future until they reached the angle of repose where I knew them. That's where the interest is. That's where the meaning will be if I find any.'

And he does find a meaning—virtually on the final page—which joins, illuminates, and in a sense reverses the two parallel stories that have been deployed. But here let me abandon the conceit that the book of which I have been speaking is *by* Lyman Ward. For he, his grandparents, and all the other figures of the tale are created by Wallace Stegner; we are speaking of a novel, not history; and if Lyman Ward is moved by 'a sense of history,' his creator is moved by a sense of the past.

It is this dimension of time, an enrichment of the novel from Tolstoy onward, whose absence one notices in much contemporary fiction, thereby perhaps accounting for its peculiar flat-effect. Characters are deprived of any more biographical past than might emerge in an Encounter Group marathon; a cartoonlike absence of depth is deemed the suitable mode (perhaps it is) for a preposterousness or a minimum of event that in either case is deliberate and expressive of the thinned-out quality of contemporary life. In the passion for the Now, we are told, there is no place for the Past, which merely by being 'not-Now' becomes uninteresting.... Between art and life, past and present, the moment and its aftermath, Mr. Stegner reminds us, there are still connections to be made, and we are the richer for them. His novel stands out already; it may prove a landmark."

William Abrahams
"The Real Thing"
Atlantic Monthly
(April 1971) 96-97

"The artist realizes, as Lyman Ward does in *Angle of Repose*, that it is love and sympathy which makes him capable of reconstructing the lives of his grandparents. Lyman Ward is a good example of Wallace Stegner's idea of the creative artist. As he struggles with the problems of writing his grandparents' history, as he struggles with dying, paralytic body, as he struggles to behave properly towards his unfaithful wife, we see that Lyman has come to realize, 'that most lives are worth living even when they are lives of quiet desperation.' Lyman has come to realize that 'the point is to do the best one can in the circumstances, not the worst.'

Lyman Ward, unhappy with his present, turns to the past, searching for an angle of repose. As he studies his grandparents' lives he slowly recognizes what caused the slow decay of their marriage. He slowly compiles the 'cumulative grudges' which caused the decline and fall of their marriage. His grandmother, Susan Burling Ward, lived for the future all her married life, and 'what she resisted was being the wife of a failure and a woman with no home.' She looked for her angle of repose in the future, but it was not there, just as it is not in Lyman Ward's past.

The term 'angle of repose' is a geologic one which means the slope angle, about 30 degrees, at which dirt and pebbles stop rolling. But Susan and Lyman Ward are too alert to the possible figurative, human possibilities of the phrase to allow it to be a mere descriptive term for detrital rest. They both apply it to themselves. Lyman says Susan never achieved her angle of repose, 'as Grandmother's biographer, I'd have to guess she was never really happy after, say, her thirty-seventh year, the last year when she lived an idyll in Boise Canyon.' Susan Burling Ward was a proud, Victorian lady. Why wasn't she happy? Lyman thinks he knows. 'Because she considered that she'd been unfaithful to my grandfather, in thought or act or both. Because she blamed herself for the drowning of her daughter.... Because she was responsible for the suicide of her lover—if he *was* her lover. Because she'd lost the trust of her husband and son'....

But Lyman Ward could never figure out what the phrase 'angle of repose' meant for his grandmother, except that he knew the phrase was too good for mere dirt.... During a moment of depression in a nightmare dream, he once said it meant 'Horizontal Permanently.' Later he recanted this part of his dream.... Lyman begins to realize that those final years that Susan and Oliver Ward spent in Zodiac Cottage produced a 'false arch' between them. In some quiet, non-spoken, non-touching, non-kissing way, Susan and Oliver Ward had made a kind of angle of repose, an accommodation of sorts. While this may not seem like much, maybe, thinks Lyman, maybe this was all these Victorian people needed. But a false arch is not enough for grandson Lyman. He still searches with his hopeful geometer for the keystone.

Lyman Ward, a product of the twentieth century, needs to speak, touch, to kiss. A silent accommodation will be no angle of repose for him. With the inherited pride of his grandmother and the stubbornness of his grandfather, he continues his search for repose. As a historian, Lyman Ward looks at the past and the present, seeing the sharp contrasts between his grandparents' life and the present flower children like Shelly Rasmussen, his secretary-assistant. Lyman does not like the hippie cult with its utopian dreams 'because their soft headedness irritates me. Because their beautiful thinking ignores both history and human nature.' Also, Lyman thinks that his wife, Ellen, has become a victim of the casual fornicating of this generation.

Lyman notes the failure of previous utopian communities which the hippie generation unknowingly has copied. Brook Farm, New Harmony, Amana, the Shakers, the Icarians, the Oneida Colony, the United Order of Zion, all failed, and why? Depravity. Not that Lyman especially cares about utopian schemes or about reforming hippies; he just does not want to personally repeat failure. Shelly Rasmussen will not accept Lyman's historical argument: 'You're judging by past history.' 'All history is past history,' Lyman replies. 'All right.... But it doesn't have to repeat itself,' Shelly says. 'Doesn't it?' Lyman replies, well knowing by this time that his own history is in the final states of repeating his grandparents'. Shelly is not convinced; she does not believe history can teach her generation much. Shelly's crowd quotes Whitman and Thoreau to support their beliefs on nature, free love, meditation, communion, and communal living. Lyman the scholar rebuts, 'I never liked Whitman, I can't help remembering that good old wild Thoreau wound up a tame surveyor of Concord house lots.' Shelly does not understand the significance of this, 'What's that supposed to mean, that about Thoreau?'...

Lyman Ward has expressed his own situation. He simply cannot reject his wife as young Thoreau and the hippie cult reject the establishment. 'You can't retire to weakness,' Lyman says, 'you've got to learn to control strength.' Lyman must control his strength, not retire to weakness. He must not let his grandmother's pride or his grandfather's stubbornness keep him from making an accommodation with his wife. Ellen has made a mistake; she may have been living a life of quiet desperation; she may have a chemical imbalance; she may have been influenced by the present loose sex standards; she may not have relished the idea of living with a paralyzed grotesque for the next forty years.

Lyman Ward who has yet to figure out for sure why his wife ran off with his doctor, knows only this, he must not repeat his family's history. To stop the cycle, he will have to accept the false arch with its modified angle of repose and quit searching, quit hoping for the keystone. With this, the tape of the novel ends, but ends somewhat ambiguously with Lyman wondering, 'I lie wondering if I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather.'

But the ambiguity is not true ambiguity at all. After watching Lyman Ward wrestle with his wheelchair and his marriage problem for almost six hundred pages, the reader knows whatever else Lyman Ward is, he is kind, considerate; he is a gentleman. He will accommodate, he will accept a modified angle of repose, realizing that maybe this is 'as much as one can expect in this life.'

Mr. [Anatole] Broyard is wrong. Lyman Ward still strongly dislikes much of the 20th century life; his cultural tastes have not changed. But his dislike does not mean he should condemn those things or people he dislikes. Lyman knows what he dislikes, but he also knows what he ought to like. He ought to like whatever is honorable and proper. He ought to behave kindly. He ought to love the sinner (including himself) and hate the sin.... In spite of their calamity, Susan and Oliver Ward had set an example of civilized conduct. 'They respected each other. They treated one another with a sort of grave infallible kindness.' Lyman Ward follows his grandmother's advice and example. This is the least he and his wife, Ellen, can do for each other—be kind.

Lyman Ward learns that even though he tries never to behave beneath himself, personal disaster and heartbreak will probably still be his lot, but that his grandmother's Victorian principles (what Mr. Broyard calls 'standards of conduct') will guide and sustain him toward a life of muted joy. Lyman Ward is a good example of Wallace Stegner's creative artist. He is a common man who lives in the world, among people. He is a man who matures 'the strength of his imagination among the things of this earth.' He matures from a literary craftsman to an artist when he develops Pauline clarity, when he becomes a compassionate seer.

The primary aim of literary art, Stegner believes, is to celebrate the human spirit. Literature today, he also believes, has assumed much of the spiritual responsibilities traditionally belonging to religion. 'Literature has become for many of us...the source of wisdom and the receptacle of values.' Along with the wisdom and values, Stegner's theory of literature also includes an element of mysticism which traditionally belongs to religion.... The writer and the reader are...fishing in obscure depths; they are dealers in mystery. When the writer reveals to the reader the truth he has found, he is a seer; and Stegner quotes Conrad again, these revelations 'bind men to each other...bind together all humanity—the dead and the living and the living to the unborn.' The creation and understanding of a piece of literature are mystical experiences. This experience is a kind of private insight by which man gets a 'clear-eyed' view of the ambiguities or human life."

Sid Jenson

"The Compassionate Seer: Wallace Stegner's Literary Artist"
Brigham Young University Studies (Winter 1974) 248-62

"In *Angle of Repose* Wallace Stegner uses a narrative technique that is both older than Fielding and newer than Nabokov.... Like Nabokov's 'editor' in *Pale Fire* he molds his source material into his own creation, but while Nabokov's mode is satiric, Stegner paradoxically achieves an effect of solid Realism.... Perhaps the closest parallel to Stegner's method is that used by John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which the illusion of reality is challenged by the narrator.... Both Fowles and Stegner are concerned with questioning the assumption by moderns that contemporary attitudes toward life represent 'progress'; both suggest, through the device of exploring earlier modes of fiction, that earlier attitudes may also be valid. What interests me especially, however, is that while Fowles' readers are almost invariably aware of his pyrotechnics, Stegner's readers...willingly suspend their disbelief....

Stegner accomplishes this tour de force by creating in Lyman Ward a fictional narrator who is himself so believable that the reader comes to accept whatever conventions he dictates. Ward, confined to a wheelchair by a painful and crippling bone disease, finds therapy in recreating the lives of his dead grandparents from letters and papers found in their house in Grass Valley, California, where Ward himself

grew up. As his research progresses he records his findings on tape. He also records his own personal dilemma—his wife has left him and his son wants him to abandon his independence and enter a sanatorium. Within this narrative framework, Ward moves back and forth between past and present, stressing always his thesis that the present has a good deal to learn from the past.... Gradually longer passages of Susan's story are rendered by a third person narrator, but Ward's controlling voice is never entirely absent. Sometimes the narrative is punctuated by brief commentary, sometimes by long digressions, but it never continues for more than twenty pages or so without some intervention by the narrative voice. What makes Stegner's method unique here is that it combines with apparent ease a number of conventional modes which might not be expected to mix well....

Ward as narrator appears to break all rules of fiction by blithely moving from first to third person, interrupting his own omniscient narrator with pungent comments, and even discussing his own role in 'creating' scenes in the novel, yet all the while holding the reader so firmly in his spell that his machinations are largely unobserved. Just as form in poetry is inextricably linked to meaning, or ought to be, the narrative form of *Angle of Repose* is exactly suited to the need for a confrontation between the values of the past and those of today. The commentary in the novel is crucial to this purpose, as we can see at once if we try to imagine the novel without it....

The tale of the Eastern girl, artist and writer living in the unpolished West, is in itself rewarding and well worth a fictional retelling. What Stegner has given us, however, is not merely the frontier story but that story as perceived by a sophisticated twentieth century mind. Ward's witty, irreverent voice breaks in at odd moments, interrupting letters 'What, Grandmother?' he will exclaim when her letters to best friend Augusta sound gushingly romantic, addressing her directly ('Grandmother, take it easy, don't be a Victorian prude'), or, in a more serious tone, assessing his own desire to find that 'angle of repose' at which all detritus comes to rest....

Delivered by an omniscient narrator, many of his pronouncements would have an air of didacticism, but coming from Ward, whose own character is fully established in the novel, they emerge as the reflections of an incisive, amusing, and refreshingly unorthodox mind. His use of commentary freely mixed with third person narration is, however, only one aspect of Stegner's unusual technique in this novel... The narrator in *Angle of Repose* is a manipulator in the largest sense because he is dealing with actual source materials which he in turn molds into fiction. But instead of producing a finished product, an artifact called a novel which is then presented whole and complete, the narrator shares with the reader the process of creation. Stegner gains an effect of absolute immediacy through the device of the tape recorder—the novel has not already 'happened' and is now being 'told'; it is itself in the process of unfolding. The Lyman Ward who records the story is not recounting what happened last year or even last month; he is recording what he is thinking and feeling—and writing—at this moment. He does not 'know' at the beginning what the end will be. Almost half way through the novel, he is not even sure what kind of book he is writing....

It is essential not to confuse Ward with Stegner.... Lyman Ward's views very often coincide with those of Stegner; in this sense he is a... 'reliable narrator,' because his norms are in accord with those of the implied author. But the reader is clearly intended to see Ward as a dramatized character, subject to human frailty. He is embittered by personal loss; he valiantly clings to a productive life in the face of progressive physical paralysis. The reader is aware that the violent expression of his opinions is often dictated by physical or even more by emotional pain. He is admirable for maintaining his wry sense of humor despite such odds. The final measure of Stegner's achievement is that *Angle of Repose* is the creation of a narrator so convincing that he in turn creates and controls all the levels of fiction in the novel."

Audrey C. Peterson
"Narrative Voice in Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*"
Western American Literature
(Summer 1975) 125-33

"*Angle of Repose*, a new attempt to deal with his largest themes (Western history and us, the search for identity, the incorrigibility of Hope) on a large scale, represents a culmination. Holding this view, I disagree in part with Canzoneri's preference: [*The Big Rock Candy Mountain*] is in fact a once-in-a-lifetime book, and...it has not been and cannot be surpassed.' I would agree that the earlier novel contains more

youthful vigor, more immediate, vivid drama, and perhaps, as Canzoneri argues, it is the one 'in which Stegner's brand of Realism is most readily seen'.... But I believe that in terms of maturity and complexity and mutual reinforcement of idea and structure, *Angle of Repose* stand superior. It gains both unity and resonance (to say nothing of the bright and sassy personality of Lyman Ward) from its narrative style.... Lyman Ward believes we can learn from history, but convinced that he has no future of his own, and loathing the hippy culture (an extreme of historical blindness) in particular, and contemporary America in general, he decides to lose himself in the task of reconstructing the life and times of his genteel, pioneer grandmother, Susan Burling Ward....

To hold that Stegner employs his narrators as masks through which he can speak out is to deny that he possesses the imagination to create an intimate picture of anyone's mind but his own. He has of late been identified not only with Lyman, but also Joe Allston, the grumpy, argumentative narrator of *All the Little Live Things* who, like his creator, lives in the hills west of San Francisco Bay. If one doubts Stegner's word that he knows the difference between fiction and disquisition, there is abundant evidence in the texts to disprove any identification.

In the case of Lyman Ward, the superficial likenesses are misleading: both men are Bay Area Californians, retired professors, and writers of Western history. There the similarities end. Until the final page, Lyman Ward's head does not, literally or figuratively, turn. Wallace Stegner's does.... The last thing one expects to find in the writing of an author so given to realism as Stegner is an unreliable narrator, yet that classification, to a modest degree, describes Lyman and points out a change which began with Joe Allston, who knew himself less than he thought, and who in his aging years was surprised to find that he had much to learn. Likewise Lyman Ward, who misleads us, but no more, perhaps, than he does himself. Behind him Stegner cleverly manipulates....

The success of [his grandparents'] marriage will depend upon how well Oliver meets his wife's expectations for advancement in his engineering profession. Since Lyman knows that Oliver never achieved either fame or fortune, he tells the story with the smugness of a man who has made up his mind. Yet as confident as he seems, it soon becomes apparent that the 'biography' represents not the conclusions of an objective mind that has weighed all evidence, but rather the speculations and pre-judgments of a man groping his way along. We are witnessing the construction of a rough draft; his only sure courses are geographical and chronological. He knows that Oliver's attempts to gain a reputation in mining and civil engineering took the Wards to California, Colorado, Mexico, Idaho and back to California. He can tell the dates and name the people. But his façade begins to show cracks....

All of this testifies to Stegner's skill in uniting a variety of interests in a narrative that allows several searches to progress simultaneously—we are aware of Susan studying herself and her husband, fighting her chronic discontent; of Lyman above them, ordering their experience and attempting to judge them; and finally, ourselves above it all. We accept Lyman's account because although he can be dogmatic, we are reassured that her Victorian prudishness and desire for tangible success are not Lyman's inventions. He is remote enough from the events that we trust him despite vague misgivings; still, we watch him as well as the dead. Stegner chose right. Through Lyman he can introduce the 'objective' rendering of the Wards' life and gradually include the subjective theme of how the telling influences the teller. It is, of course, one of his (and Lyman's) favorite problems, the relationship of past to present.

Stegner, playing with what Nabokov fondly refers to as the 'astute reader,' has...aroused some suspicion about Lyman's motives in researching the Ward marriage.... Lyman believes that a knowledge of history gives perspective, making radicalism naïve. On these grounds, he rejects a multitude of contemporary movements from the aggressive social sciences to hippy communes. As his sermonizing continues, a suspicious pattern emerges—first, though his knowledge is extensive, he habitually overstates his case; second, he uses history like a club, directed always at others; and third, he is finally forced to admit that as his research and writing progress, he discovers (he may have known all along) that the Ward project is something more than a diversion, that he is looking for a specific answer to the problems of his own failed marriage, and not an answer that will repair it, but rather one that will justify his own conduct as honorable.

About a third of the way through the novel, Lyman's son comes as an emissary for his mother: Ellen Ward had run off with the surgeon who removed Lyman's diseased leg, and now she desires reconciliation. With characteristic bluster, Lyman rejects the idea. The attentive reader will later see the analogy between Lyman's and his grandfather's positions, and recall Lyman's admiration ('I refer my actions to his standards even yet.') Late in Lyman's account, we learn that Susan Ward, after more than a decade of wandering in the West, always aware and often ashamed of her husband's lack of culture and success, was unfaithful to him 'in thought or act or both' (we can never know for sure) with his best friend.

Here, the parallel Lyman wishes to make between his own marriage and his grandparents' is clear, and the narrative's early bias against Susan is explained. Lyman wants to believe that the Wards' only angle of repose was horizontal, the grave—that though they continued their marriage for nearly fifty years, Oliver never forgave her. Along with Lyman, the reader must judge the merits of Oliver's actions; independent of him, the reader should question Lyman's basic interpretation of the Ward marriage. Irony is the keyword to understanding Stegner's relationship with his narrator, and Lyman's notion that Oliver and Susan lived a kind of 'cold war' marriage for half a century should be regarded with suspicion.

Lyman would have us believe they were reconciled because he must believe it himself. In doing so, he ignores the implications of several facts in his own narrative: one, that Oliver, after the 1890 separation, built Susan the beautiful house she had long dreamed of and made the very symbol of a different angle of repose than horizontal (Zodiac Cottage is so impressive that Lyman intends to donate it to the National Trust); and two, even before construction began, he planted a rose garden to replace the one in Idaho he had grimly uprooted to punish her for what he interpreted as evident adultery. Later, he worked a decade to perfect a rose he named Agnes, after a long-dead child, victim of negligence or perhaps that same guilt. Lyman thinks it very significant that they never spoke of that rose in his presence, as though that proved the flower a symbol of wounds still festering. He also fails to mention that by the time he was old enough to remember much about his grandparents' relationship, they were nearly eighty; his conclusions of angles he justifies with the memory that they did not seem very warm toward each other.

Yet our doubts would not matter much to Lyman, who judges evidence as best he can. Because we watch him while he searches the past, we see his limitations, and he becomes, as Stegner would say, not an unquestionable authority, but another one of us.... He finally sees that Susan was not simply the victimizer in her marriage, but that there was a mutual lack of communication; mulish Oliver no more recognized his wife's discontent than Lyman saw Ellen's. By telling Susan's story in such detail, he has in effect lived Ellen's frustrations; his sympathy for Susan leaves him just one courageous, compassionate step from understanding his own life. If, in the end, he does not see everything—Oliver may have been a better man than his grandson suspects; he and Susan may have reached a separate peace—the old professor sees enough, for he considers facing a problem he himself had turned away from. He rests on his bed in the night, 'wondering if I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather,' finding continuity a comfort and a challenge.

Stegner has given him a stiff neck, a leg and a half, social theories both inflexible and incomplete, and a son named Rodman who tries to bully him into a rest home. Lyman, it seems to me, is Stegner's response to critics with tunnel vision, and perhaps represents some authorial self-parody as well; he shares many of Stegner's reservations about contemporary life, but illustrates the dangers of prescriptive vision. Anyone who identifies him with his creator becomes guilty of that sin. Near the end of the novel, Stegner's ironic stance proves hilariously clear: Lyman comments predictably upon the Freudian interpretation 'obvious' in Ellen's affair with the man who 'dismasted' him, and later experiences a wild parody of Freudian dreams—bare-chested, buxom Shelley undresses him, his stump rises, but the climax is an explosive urination. This is not merely surrealism, however; it relates some of Lyman's preoccupations and a preview of the encounter with his wife he fears but in the end resolves to face. Behind it all, I sense Stegner, smiling.

From Stegner's point of view, it does not matter that Lyman cannot unravel the full truth; history is by definition inexact, and he refuses to undercut his narrator by providing external authority to detail how and where Lyman might have guessed wrong. Much of the reading enjoyment, in fact, comes from speculating. Yet Lyman is a formidable intellect, and can sustain himself as a convincing voice despite his prejudices and the irony Stegner makes at his expense. He carries on his main function, to picture the West as it

probably was, with all its excesses and limitations, to view in Susan Ward the response of the cultural East (limited too, but significantly, she possesses resourcefulness and energy to rival her husband's), all without pandering to myths and stereotypes. The complexity and resonance of Lyman's 'straight' narrative are impressive, and yet another subject. That Stegner can present both the contemporary and historical Wests in the same narrative with such complete control implies significant artistic growth. He has learned the value of detachment from Western history, a lesson he claims has been too long ignored by novelists of the region."

Kerry Ahearn

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination*"
Western American Literature (Spring 1975) 11-27

"As Cyril Connolly once wrote...no writer should ever aim to write anything less than a masterpiece, and if Stegner in *Angle of Repose* did not quite succeed in this, his high aim gave the book much worth. With Mary Hallock Foote's letters, now mostly published, he had ample material to exploit, and this is his most consciously professional novel of history.

Its narrating character, Lyman Ward, is a crippled historian who had once won a Bancroft prize but who now in his declining years wants only to probe the life of his grandparents.... But his secretary, a bouncy young woman named Shelly, tends to laugh at what Lyman thinks tender in these lives of an almost prehistoric era; while for his son, Rodman, all such history is bunk. Rodman, a young sociologist, is perhaps too easy a target and Stegner may be overstating his case here, but as a historian who has seen the adverse effect of sociologizing (at the worst, eviscerating) the past, I share his prejudice. As the author writes caustically, 'Rodman, like most sociologists and most of his generation, was born without the sense of history. To him it is only an aborted science.... Stegner counterpoises in his narrator a Burkean respect for the historical organism.... Near the end of the book he says in a similar vein: 'God, those sociologists! They're always trying to reclaim a tropical jungle with a sprinkling can full of weed killer. Civilizations grow and change and decline—they aren't remade.'

Stegner's history of Susan Ward, talented Eastern woman on the frontier, and husband Oliver, talented engineer but slated to fail, is filled with tiny precisions about their times... There are many fine and varied descriptions... Stegner has plain historical savvy, which even some credentialed historians lack.... He emphasizes the interconnections between frontier notables that made the settlers of the West far less individualistic than is often supposed.... 'Contrary to the myth, the West was not made entirely by pioneers who had thrown everything away but an axe and a gun.' Moral leaders were always there to fight anarchic tendencies, and, despite myths, Stegner suggest 'there was never a time or place [the early West] where gentility, especially female gentility, was more respected.'

The author also senses the importance that novels once had as a guide to nineteenth century conduct. Their displacement by various media and the diffusion of new moral standards are important historical transformations—transformations the author understands very well. His Susan Ward acts as heroines of novels then acted, and these novels help preserve her from adultery, for many then dealt with unfulfillable love. Susan Ward, gay, charming, creative, is a person cramped by her time and place—by the frontier, by her husband, and by mores of the period. She sketches and writes in this backwater; she goes for a walk with another man and pays for it—her daughter drowns.

From then on her taciturn husband is almost totally silent. She stays; the main point is that she stays, *within* her time and place. Stegner, the novelist, might well have transposed her to more fertile ground; Stegner, the historian, could not do so. He wants the history to show through typical people bound by period and character.... If John Milton (of England) said the wise man refines gold from all kinds of books, *Angle of Repose* is a book containing enough such nuggets to make any man wise. One likes the factualness of Stegner's description quite as much as its sweep, and the quality of a writer-historian who misses neither the small nor the large, neither character nor structural background....

If anything mars the novel *Angle of Repose* it is in fact too *much* history. By this I mean not merely detail, but the long excerpts from Susan's letters that are meant to convey historical atmosphere. For the most part Stegner succeeds in doing that, but he should have deleted more pages. This is an age of

impatience and novelists must accommodate to that fact, if not acquiesce.... With a combination of Impressionism and Realism, and contrasting perspectives, this passage [Susan Ward standing over a mine] recalls the best of *Germinal* [Zola] or *Hard Times* [Dickens]. Stegner is really at his best when he turns the obvious in history—the things we shouldn't forget but do—into exciting art.... To repeat, *Angle of Repose* is dense with...nuggets, but it is also just *dense*; and the ordinary reader may tire even of the splendid passages. Which would be a shame.”

Barnett Singer
“The Historical Ideal in Wallace Stegner's Fiction”
South Dakota Review 1 (1977) 28-44

“On one level the novel is the story of an eastern woman, Susan Burling, who marries another easterner, Oliver Ward, goes west, and tries to acclimate herself to western ways. On another level the book is about Susan's grandson, Lyman Ward, a retired history professor, who is an amputee and alienated from his world of 1970. By shifting back and forth between the later nineteenth century and events and ideas of the 1960s, Stegner deals with a full century of western history. It is a huge task and one that Stegner accomplishes through two major themes of western history: (1) What is the relationship between East and West? Should the emphases be placed on continuities or on differences? and (2) What comparisons and contrasts can be made between the frontier West and the New West of the 1960s? Because it deals with the major questions involved in a discussion of the nature of western history, Stegner's work is a paradigm for the western novel as history.

The first theme of eastern influence upon the West is developed primarily through the character of Susan Burling Ward. She lives most of her life in the West as she follows her husband to the mining camps of California and Colorado, to the new community of Boise, and finally to Grass Valley, California. Unlike her husband, she never becomes a westerner. Throughout her life she holds on to her eastern, genteel symbols. Her clothing, her maid, and governess (probably the one household in Boise in the 1880s to have both), her eastern literary friends, and her allusions to the East and the classics—all these illustrate her connections with the East.

Through adroit use of symbolic action Stegner represents how much Susan is a stranger to western ways. On one occasion, while standing on an elevated porch and speaking to a Mexican worker, she drops her handkerchief. The laborer quickly retrieves it and hands it up to her. She reaches down for the handkerchief but quickly withdraws her hand when she realizes what she is doing. She cannot—in fact will not—take the handkerchief from his hand; finally she calls her maid to get it back. Another night, while she and Oliver are returning to Leadville—Colorado's riproaring mining town—they are forced to bed down in a flophouse. Oliver hesitates, for he realizes that his wife is horrified by the prospect of sleeping in a curtained-off section of a room no more than snoring and belching distance from rough miners and dirty vagabonds. Susan is queasy about the situation, and she lies awake most of the night—first in fear and then, true to her character, in dreaming about how she will picture this 'rough' West for eastern magazines. Obviously much of the truth will be brushed away and large doses of romanticism applied before the 'dreamed up' West will be publishable in *Century* and *Scribner's*.

A third scene—from which Stegner wrings multiple meanings—is the most revealing incident about Susan's attachment to a nonwestern perspective. Before this scene Oliver and Susan have argued about the suitability of an eastern man who has come west. Susan, overcome by her respect for his reading and his obvious exposure to eastern culture, declares him a cultivated gentleman. She is amazed and upset when Oliver says that the man is worthless in the West—in fact a hazard because he knows so little about mining and engineering. Susan does not see that his lack of experience in these professions should be held against him. One night soon after this discussion Susan and Oliver sit down to dinner, and she mentally criticizes Oliver for not washing before eating—there appears to be smudge on his thumb.

Later a third person tells of the day's happenings (the account does not come from Oliver, for, as Susan says, he does not like talkee, talkee). Oliver, the eastern engineer, and others were in the mines when someone shouted a warning. The easterner froze in his tracks, and had it not been for Oliver's quick thinking and fast reactions the gentleman might have lost his life. The smudge on Oliver's thumb is an ugly bruise suffered by aiding a man whom he does not respect. At the end of the scene the reader realizes—and

so does Susan—how much her perspective prevents her from understanding the West and what it demands from its residents.

Susan's life in Boise—her longest stay in one place in the West before the family moves to Grass Valley—epitomizes the tensions that eat at her even after she has lived in the West for more than a decade. Stegner catches her dilemmas in one ironic sentence of description: 'There sat Susan Burling Ward, tired-eyed after a day's drawing, dragged-out after a day's heat, and tightening her drowning-woman's grip on culture, literature, civilization, by trying to read *War and Peace*. Like the local colorist she is, Susan loves the scenery, the wild and picturesque part of the Boise Valley; but once she faces the problems of living 'in' the Boise area, she finds its remoteness and crassness repugnant and is stifled by the boosterism of its residents. Life in Boise seems acceptable only when she withdraws from it—when she and Oliver move up a river canyon and when she tries to establish a western miniature of Brook Farm.

Yet she becomes attached to the West, despite her reluctance to do so. Near the end of the Wards' stay in Boise, disappointments, failures, and tragedies seem to engulf them. Oliver's irrigation schemes will not hold water, their youngest child drowns (ironically, in an irrigation ditch), Oliver takes to the bottle, and a young engineering friend complicates Susan's problems by declaring his love for her. Susan almost gives up on the West; she leaves Oliver, ships her oldest son to an eastern boarding school, and thinks of remaining in the East. But she cannot remain in the East; something draws her west again—back to Oliver, back to disappointments, back to the dreadful West. She realizes, in spite of herself, that she has become attached to things in the West—even if she is not yet a westerner.

It would be a mistake to picture Oliver as the archetypal westerner—as the exact opposite of Susan. But he does take on characteristics ascribed to many westerners. His dreams are expansive—and expensive—but he is a diligent worker. Because he realizes the need for help in achieving his dreams, he is less class-conscious than Susan and evaluates a person more by his abilities than by his cultural achievements. Though he is overly protective of his wife, he does not allow an excessive gentility to blind him to the realities of a region that demands a ruggedness unknown to Susan's eastern friends.

He is not a local colorist caught up in the picturesque, picnic West. For him the region is a place where his dreams can be put to work; it is a place to be conquered. He finds Susan's classical allusions to miners and their arduous work 'about used up,' and he bluntly tells her that the cultured gentleman who claims to be an engineer is worthless in the West. At times Susan realizes that Oliver is different: 'It was his physical readiness, his unflustered way of doing what was needed in a crisis, that she most respected in him; it made him different from the men she had known.'

Oliver's dreams are pregnant with promise, although most of them eventually miscarry. He invents devices to save time and money. He discovers the necessary ingredients to make cement. He lays out a usable scheme to irrigate an entire western valley. But he cannot bring his dreams to fruition, and a major reason for his lack of success is a problem that plagued many western dreamers: he is dependent upon eastern capital, and too often sources of eastern capital are as untrustworthy as Lady Fortuna. All of Oliver's dreams prove workable—but only after he has left the scene. Like many westerners, his schemes and partial successes are destroyed by his inability to control sources of financing.

Stegner, sometimes through his narrator and sometimes as omniscient author, also comments on the relationship between East and West. Early in the novel Lyman Ward says: 'I am impressed with how much of my grandparents' life depended on continuities, contacts, connections, friendships, and blood relationships. Contrary to the myth, the West was not made entirely by pioneers who had thrown everything away but an ax and a gun.' On other occasions Stegner contrasts Susan's romantic perceptions with what the West was really like. By depicting these two kinds of Wests, Stegner makes clear how much eastern visions defined what the West was to Americans. Most of these foreign interpreters overstressed the uniqueness of western life and underplayed the continuities between East and West. The point Stegner argues is the central thesis of Henry Nash Smith's brilliant book *Virgin Land* and among the major contentions in the writings of the western historian Earl Pomeroy.

The second theme in Stegner's novel is his depiction of the West as it moves from frontier to settled community and finally on to the Bat Area counterculture of the 1960s. By keeping two eras of western life before the reader and by commenting on the transitions between the two periods, Stegner continually narrates and interprets the historical development of the West. Susan's life, as it moves from raw Leadville to semi-settled Boise and finally to the security of Grass Valley, illustrates the flow of western history that Stegner is narrating. Throughout the novel the life and mores of the Wards are placed alongside the Berkeley fever of Lyman's young neighbor, Shelley Rasmussen, and his son, Rodman.

And Lyman is the link. As he says, 'I really would like to talk to somebody about my grandparents, their past, their part in the West's becoming, their struggle toward ambiguous ends.' He likes the idea of seeing how 'a fourth-generation Trevithick should help me organize the lives of the first-generation Wards.' What Lyman notes is the irony of Shelley, who is a descendant of a Cornish miner, helping him interpret the meaning of the lives of a family who 'ruled' her ancestors. And more to the point: It is a Trevithick (Shelley's mother) who, more than any of his kin, keeps Lyman moving physically. Stegner implies that the social and cultural history of the West has leveled some mountains, elevated some valleys, and bridged several chasms.

Stegner also suggests that if contemporary westerners paid more attention to their past they could learn from their history. Shelley is excited about the commune that her husband is planning, and she is disappointed that Lyman does not share her enthusiasm. Her problem, Lyman says, is that she could learn from Susan's experiences in trying to set up a pseudo Brook Farm in the Boise Canyon and from other historical precedents. What Lyman preaches (and one hears Stegner in the background at this point) is that if one knows the past one can better manage the present and plot the future.

It is from Lyman Ward, who acts as narrator, as commentator, as synthesizer, that one receives the most explicit comments about history, especially on the frontier becoming the New West. From the opening pages of the novel Stegner establishes a fluidity of time for his narrator. This fluidity is important, for Lyman switches from present to past and to present again as he searches for an understanding of his life. As he tries to seize hold of his present circumstances, he perceives the paradoxical truth that as soon as he defines the present it has become the past. And he realizes, too, that his life is cumulative: he is *in* and *of* the past just as he is tied to a complicated present. Both periods impinge upon him; he can escape neither.

In his attempt to comprehend fully the relationship between the Old and the New Wests, Lyman utilizes two geological terms. The first is 'angle of repose,' the incline at which rocks cease to roll. He wishes to study his grandparents to discover how they achieved an angle of repose in their lives. The second term, the Doppler Effect, defines the way in which he wishes to undertake his study. It is not enough, he thinks, to stand in 1970, look back to the late nineteenth century, and write about his ancestors. Instead, he must place himself alongside his grandparents and, in a sense, live their lives with them. Like the good historian, he wishes to be past-minded, to climb into their shoes, and to relive their lives with understanding and objectivity.

But several pressures keep Lyman from producing the kind of history he wishes to write. In the first place, so few of his contemporaries think his subject or his method is correct. Lyman wants his son and the Berkeley generation to understand how much they are tied to the past. The problem is, he says, that they are 'without a sense of history.... [To them] it is only an aborted social science.' His son, Rodman, sums up the view that his father fears: 'The past isn't going to teach us anything about what we've got ahead of us. Maybe it did once, or seemed to. It doesn't any more.' But Lyman wants to study the past. It is, he argues, 'the only direction we can learn from.' He continues: 'I believe in Time, as they did, and in the life chronological rather than in the life existential. We live in time and through it, we build our huts in its rivers, or used to, and we cannot afford all these abandonings.' The Berkeley generation has not yet learned this lesson; the youth of the 1960s, he says, are 'by Paul Goodman out of Margaret Mead.'

Nor does Lyman want a distorted meaning of the past once it is scrutinized. Too many readers are like Rodman, who wants the drama and the color of something like the life of Lola Montez. But to Lyman this kind of writing is worthless: 'Every fourth-rate antiquarian in the West has panned Lola's poor little gravel. My grandparents are in a deep vein that has never been dug. They were *people*.'

Most of the time Lyman the historian practices what he preaches. He establishes what the region was like when Susan went west. The reader sees her trip in the context of early transcontinental rail travel and within the tense atmosphere that Americans experienced a few weeks after Custer's defeat in the summer of 1876. Here Lyman utilizes the Doppler Effect when he draws close to his subject, near enough for the reader to discern the sounds of her inner struggles. In addition, he wants to make sure that his readers see the continuities in the time periods he describes. When he summarizes the authoritarianism of mine owners and the ill-treatment of miners in the 1870s, he reminds his listeners that much will change in the next century. The Western Federation of Miners, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the United Mine Workers are yet to come. One cannot hurry history; one must study it and write about it as it was, not as he wishes it had been. Nor must he remold it entirely by the outlook of his contemporaries, that presentist historians make these mistakes and thus distort history [Postmodernists].

Lyman also realizes that the historian (or even an entire society) can easily fall in love with the past and use it as a refuge from an oppressive present. In fact, in spite of his vows not to fall victim to an alluring past, Lyman does so. On one occasion when the counterculture seems to be knocking at his door, he muses: 'I am not going to get sucked into this. I'll call the cops in a minute if I have to. And this is all, absolutely all. I am going to think about it. I am going back to Grandmother's nineteenth century, where the problems and the people are less messy.' Or, in another situation, he catches an epiphany-like glimpse of himself: 'This is not a story of frontier hardships, though my grandparents went through a few; nor of pioneer hardihood, though they both had it. It is only Lyman Ward, Coe Professor of History, Emeritus, living a day in his grandparents' life to avoid paying too much attention to his own.'

It would be a mistake to consider Lyman merely the mouthpiece of Wallace Stegner. Students of literature avoid the error of always identifying the ideas of a character with those of its author, but historians need additional warning about the pitfalls of such comparisons. Yet much of what Lyman talks about, Stegner has spoken for on other occasions. Stegner shares some of Lyman's distaste for the student radicalism of the 1960s. Stegner remarked in 1972 that the student movement 'started at Berkeley and we inherited it at Stanford. The kids didn't come to learn, they came angry and with answers—not questions.' He added, 'I don't know why when you get mad at Mr. Smith, you break Mr. Jones's windows.' Much of this misplaced anger, Stegner argued, would have been avoided if we were better students of our past."

Richard W. Etulain
"Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration"
The American West: New Perspectives, New Dimensions
ed. Jerome O. Steffen
(U Oklahoma 1979) 152-74

"The confusion on the point of how closely the Susan Burling Ward story reflects the life story of Mary Hallock Foote was begun by Stegner's prefatory note to *Angle of Repose*: 'My thanks to J. M. and her sister for the loan of their ancestors. Though I have used many details of their lives and characters, I have not hesitated to warp both personalities and events to fictional needs. This is a novel which utilizes selected facts from their real lives. It is in no sense a family history'.... Stegner explained...that he had been unable to provide a foreword explaining his use of Foote's letters and reminiscences because Mrs. Micoleau had not wanted him to use any real names.... The one main character 'created' by Stegner, Frank Sargent, is a compilation of the characteristics, actions, and backgrounds of several young men described by Mary Hallock Foote.... It is true that *Angle of Repose* has reawakened interest in Mary Hallock Foote and her work. It is unfortunate that many readers have accepted the novel as a valid interpretation of her life....

When Stegner chose to write a novel based on the life of Foote, world literature provided him many distinguished precedents of fictionalized versions of historical figures. Unless the author indicates otherwise, readers accept the convention that the fictional portraits are the author's interpretation of what these people must have been like, based on known historical events in which they participated or on the details of their lives that are known through their recorded acts and statements. Readers who know Stegner based his novel on the life of Mary Hallock Foote have been allowed to assume that Stegner followed the convention. Most have not been aware that Stegner deviated significantly from the historical record when

he made Susan Burling Ward an adulteress and a filicide.... According to Mrs. Marian Coway, 'People who had barely known M. H. Foote [in Grass Valley] would stop me in the street and say, in essence, "I never knew your grandmother did *that!*"'

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
"Angle of Repose and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study"
Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, ed. Anthony Arthur
(G. K. Hall 1982) 205, 207-08

"Lyman Ward's compulsive historical research into the lives of his grandparents: his recreation of the story of their relationship is an effort to come to terms with the wrong done to him by his wife, who ran off with her doctor, abandoning Lyman to crippling disease. Once again, in this novel as with the long journey of Bruce Mason [*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation*] toward expiation of his hatred and resentment, one feels that Lyman Ward is a lost soul, wandering, mentally, not only the face of the earth, but through time as well as in an effort to find some formula, some mechanism by which to make his spirit, if not his body, whole once again.

Forgiveness. The coming together of fallible human beings. In Stegner's work there is always struggle; in novel after novel we suffer through the strivings of human beings to be better. Following the pattern set in the Nobel Prize acceptance speeches of Faulkner and Steinbeck, Stegner also believed in the possible perfectibility of man. Here, too, he ran against the grain of current opinion, which declares that individuals do not need to strive to be better—all they need to do is sit down and recognize how wonderful they already are."

Jackson J. Benson
Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work
(Viking 1996) 10

"Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose*...takes his own part but also the part of his grandmother whom he re-creates out of her letters. This, by the way, is mirrored in the author's own activity of using Mary Hallock Foote's letters as a basis for dividing himself to create the dialogic conflict of the novel."

Jackson J. Benson
"Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner's Fiction"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer
ed. Charles E. Rankin
(U New Mexico 1996) 223

"No one since John Steinbeck in his *Grapes of Wrath* produced a more memorable work of fiction about the West; in several respects *Angle of Repose* represents the high point of the western novel since World War II. Based on the life and writings of illustrator and novelist Mary Hallock Foote who came west with her engineer husband during the Gilded Age. Stegner's heroine, Susan Burling Ward, epitomizes the reluctant Easterner venturing west to discover a new local color region. Her story as a snobbish immigrant alien to the frontier West—"I love my West when I am in the East"—became a perfect vehicle for comparing the two regions. More analytically than other writers, Stegner shows, by contrasting Susan's romantic perceptions with what the West symbolized for Americans.

Like Stegner's heroine, most outsiders overemphasize the uniqueness of western life and downplay continuities between East and West. In stressing large eastern influences on the West, Stegner echoes the revisionist interpretation of such scholars as Henry Nash Smith and Earl Pomeroy. As the novel's narrator Lyman Ward notes in this regard, 'I am impressed with how much of my grandparents' life depended on continuities, contacts, connections, friendships, and blood relationships. Contrary to the myth, the West was not made entirely by pioneers who had thrown everything away but an ax and a gun.'

On another level, through Lyman, Susan's grandson and an amputee and retired history professor, the novel deals with a full century of history. Unable to face his troubled times, Lyman retreats to his grandmother's nineteenth-century frontier, hoping to discover in her life an 'angle of repose' on which to model his life. By shifting back and forth between the Gilded Age West and the Bay Area of the 1960s,

Stegner raises another central historiographical question: Has change or continuity—or both—dominated western history stretching from the frontier to the New West of the 1960s?

These two thematic strains—eastern influences on the West and ties between the frontier and modern West—furnish useful background for Stegner’s memorable treatment of marriage. Susan’s troubled marriage and that of Lyman, as well as the imperfect unions of other characters, illustrate Stegner’s lifelong fascination with familial themes. Seeing firsthand in his own father and mother what dilemmas and frictions arose from mismatched personalities, Stegner returned repeatedly to this theme in his most noteworthy fiction.

Angle of Repose also overflows with Stegner’s revealing observations about the best historical interpretations of the West. Here, as elsewhere, Stegner assiduously avoids a Wild West. Instead, as in all of his writings, he calls for careful and judicious scrutiny of the human side of the western past—its families, friendships, and cultural landscapes—and avoidance of the frantic adventure, white- and black-hat stereotypes, and unbelievable fantasy of a six-gun West. Too many fans want only drama and color, something like the sensationalized life of temptress Lola Montez. But Lyman Ward knows this kind of western history is distorted and unreal: ‘Every fourth-rate antiquarian in the West has panned Lola’s poor little gravel,’ he grumps; but ‘my grandparents are a deep vein that has never been dug. They were *people*.’

More disturbing to Stegner than the romanticizers are those blind to the lessons of the past. Lyman wants his son Rodman and the Berkeley generation to understand how much they are linked to the past, but they seem ‘without the sense of history.... [To them] it is only an aborted social science.’ His son asserts, to the contrary, that ‘the past isn’t going to teach us anything about what we’ve got ahead of us.’ He’s clearly opposed to Lyman’s conviction that we must ‘believe in Time...in the life chronological rather than in the life existential. We live in time and through it, we build our huts in its ruins, or used to, and we cannot afford all these abandonings.’ The Berkeley generation, Lyman adds snidely, has not yet learned this lesson; they are ‘by Paul Goodman out of Margaret Mead.’

Moreover, *Angle of Repose* remains a premier western novel because it not only asks the most important questions about the making of the modern West; it also seems to give the best answers. Scratch a westerner deeply enough, Stegner implies, and one will often find an easterner (or another migrant) who has carried along much of his cultural baggage and has had to readjust his thinking and living to fit a new environment. To understand the modern West, one must likewise analyze the meanings of such frontier activities as the Gold Rush, labor disputes in the mines, political malcontents like the Populists, and the large and dramatic roles the federal government played in the early West. What the narrator learns is central to what Stegner argued on many occasions: The American West, among other things, is the product of two angles of repose—East *and* West, frontier and Berkeley generation.”

Richard W. Etulain
“Wallace Stegner, Western Humanist”
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 51-54

“Stegner wrote...about the modern westerner’s peculiar historical isolation, and the way to break it. This time he spoke through Lyman Ward, narrator of *Angle of Repose*. A western historian past the middle of a troubling life, chairbound with one withered leg, Ward has given up writing monographs to piece together the stories of his grandparents, how they faced the West and were changed by it and by each other. Doing that, he hopes to find for his own life a resonance and connection he has never known. ‘As I look down my nose to where my left leg bends and my right leg stops,’ Ward tells us at the outset, ‘I realize that it isn’t backward that I want to go but downward. I want to touch once more the ground I have been maimed away from’.”

Elliott West
“Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity”
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 70

“Here, Stegner used a fictional third-person narrator to accomplish his goals of connectivity and didacticism. In the story, Lyman Ward is a retired prize-winning historian confined to a wheelchair and bitter about his failed marriage. To occupy his time, he decides to research and reconstruct the lives of his

grandparents, Oliver and Susan Ward, while living out his retirement at the family home in Grass Valley, California. In the book, Stegner wove together past and present, using the aptly named Ward as his narrative link. As a result, one learns as much about the western present as the western past.

The narrator, Lyman Ward, acquires depth and complexity of his own, as he sorts through the historical record his grandparents left. Stegner also used Lyman as a mouthpiece to make pointed comments about a number of concerns—the historical process, the dangers of western myth, and the persistence of regional, generational, and sexual tensions. The result is the sprawling history of one western family, from the frontier period to the turmoil of the 1960s, and an exploration of the historical process itself. Although the book is fiction, *Angle of Repose* represents Stegner's most provocative and controversial work on the West. In connecting the past and the present, and in providing numerous opportunities for questioning and reflection, Stegner set an innovative standard for the historical discipline, utilizing alternative methodology to create a 'usable past.' He also incurred the ire of many critics, who found the 'usable past' he created in the story distorted and problematic."

Rob Williams

"'Huts of Time': Wallace Stegner's Historical Legacy"

Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 119-20, 122-25, 127, 138-40

"*Angle of Repose* attempts to capture readers in the web of our enduring literary heritage, to turn us into literary historians.... [It] is a 'new' western historical novel, rethinking western myths. Stegner offers a revision 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. 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. 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....

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'.... Stegner creates Susan Ward out of cultural deposits and follows 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. 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 the 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...

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. 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, 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.' 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.' 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 drowning 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. Frank Sergeant 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.'

Will Susan's 'starved desire' 'for talk' prevent her from ever becoming a westerner? 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?' 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. 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'... 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.' 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.' 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.' 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. 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. 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.' 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.' (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 liked a cinder.' 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.' (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.' Although the books and the gentility are 'inherited through the female line,' Lyman accepts them as defining his contemporary western masculinity. In fact, Lyman has spent more 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 acknowledged 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. But he believes romantic poets and painters constrain Susan's vision... 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 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.' 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. 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. 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'....

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. Again and again Susan recognizes that beneath the surface of the 'picturesque' 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....

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. 'I have always to write from outside, from the protected woman's point of view, when I ought to be writing from within.' 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. He and Susan first meet in a library; she first admires him 'standing with head bent, reading, his back to her.' 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.' 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,' Oliver helps Susan to write in a 'spirit of discovery.'

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 the King, Prager, Emmons, the Hague brothers...who had been Oliver's guides and models' and who appear as characters in the novel. 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.)

The vocabulary becomes Lyman's legacy from his grandfather and grandmother. 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.' 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. The were *people*.' 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 kind of questions Stegner pursued in *Joe Hill*. Susan's plots might be contrived, but she receives fan letters from miners about her technical accuracy.

Susan herself mined two western states, 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. 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.' 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.) 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 nation's 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.' (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.' 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....

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.' 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.

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.' 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.

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 Cabled 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. 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.' 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.' As this last quote suggests, he often associates these values with women and men, affirming both viewpoints as 'the legitimate inclinations of the sexes.' 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*. 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. 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 the 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 mentions, and with Rebecca Harding Davis, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Elizabeth Stuart Phillips, 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.' 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 Dregler would publish influential works of women's history soon after *Angle of Repose* appeared using the same letters, read in quite different ways.) 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. Lyman follows 'Bancroft's advice to historians: present your subject in his own terms, judge him in yours'; 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.' 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. 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.'

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.' 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.' The 'inescapable' theme leads Lyman to focus on conflict and estrangement, to see his grandparents' marriage as a 'union of opposites.' 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.'

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. 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.

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.' 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. 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. 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.

In his memoir, *Wolf Willow*, Stegner comments that 'almost everything I got from books was either at odds with what I knew from experience or irrelevant to it or remote from it. Books didn't enlarge me: they dispersed me.' 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 hands on'—from Shakespeare to 'Tarzan' to B. M. Bower to Cooper to the Sears Catalogue. Evidentially 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 bought good libraries to so many earlier frontier towns,' he says, 'and who lighted fires under susceptible village boys.' 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."

Melody Graulich

"Book Learning: *Angle of Repose* as Literary History"

Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 231-50

"*Angle of Repose* begins where all those Hollywood horse operas end: with the civilizing woman, Susan Burling Ward, and the freedom-loving man, Oliver Ward, riding west into the sunset, locked in the holy but invisible chains of matrimony.... As a writer, one of the things I was also learning about *Angle of Repose* was that it can be read as metafiction, as a novel expressly concerned with the art of making stories, whether histories or novels. This is probably apparent to any reasonably intelligent reader, but it had yet to be pointed out in print... I was also fascinated by Stegner's mastery of technique in *Angle of Repose*, particularly his ability to employ, though the controlling intelligence of a first-person narrator, virtually every point of view known to exist, including stream of consciousness, first-person participant, first-person observer, second person, third-person omniscient, and third-person limited.

For me, *Angle of Repose* was a breakthrough novel in terms of point of view, in its own way as important as Joyce's *Ulysses*, although I could see that it was principally from Faulkner and James, not Joyce, that Stegner had learned to do what he was doing. So far as I could tell, not even John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, or John Fowles had exploited meta-fictional techniques as masterfully as Stegner had. He was really, I concluded, playing the fashionable techniques of these so-called 'chaos-drunk' writers against themselves by sticking to the 'old fashioned' virtues of Realism. Unlike Fowles in *The French*

Lieutenant's Woman or Nabokov in *Ada*, for example, in *Angle of Repose* never drops (or pretends to lower) his mask and directly address the reader. In other words, like a good Realist, Wallace Stegner never purposely lets his puppet strings show or points to himself in the act of writing, although his narrator, Lyman Ward, does so continually.... I think Wally thought writers such as Barth and Nabokov were sometimes doing no more than showing off their technical abilities in their metafictional novels. I think he thought such novels were all technique.”

James R. Hepworth
Stealing Glances: Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner
(U New Mexico 1998) 15-16

Michael Hollister (2014)