

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

All the Little Live Things (1967)



Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

INTRODUCTION

“In his dissonance over whether he had even managed to go native himself, he wrote a superb essay about creating a small ranch in the Los Alto Hills outside San Francisco that can serve as a guide to conscious place immersion—or what we would call today, western bio-regionalism. There is a bit of irony in the circumstance, for many environmentalists in the 1990s regard creating rural homes from subdivided natural areas as one of the greatest threats the West currently faces. And yet in his own effort to go native, Stegner himself could not resist doing that very thing.... Like so many of us across the West today, Stegner in essence hoped to be the last homebuilder in his area.... But as the houses and vapor lamps inevitably drew closer, he helped found the Committee for Green Foothills to slow their approach.” (Dan Flores, “Citizen of a Larger Country: Wallace Stegner, the Environment, and the West,” *Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, 1996: 84-85)

“I was feeling grim...because in one year four of our friends died of cancer, one after another, all relatively young women in their forties.... A wisecracking narrator can make a story seem a little less grim... I borrowed for Joe’s portrait the character of my agent... He made a properly acerbic commentator on the suburban scene.... I just project something in myself a little further out to get an image of what can happen... He goes further than I would.” (Stegner, *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature*, Richard W. Etulain, 1983; 1996: 74, 77)

This novel contains the metaphor that death may come like a drunk driver you meet at an intersection, an unwitting prophecy—or premonition—of exactly how Stegner would die in 1993.

Prologue

“How Do I Know What I Think Till I See What I Say”

As his common name indicates, Joe (*All-ston*) the narrator has common problems. He is an upper middle-class suburbanite in his general outlook and concerns, a representative social type in the tradition of Realism. As an individual he is feeling “bruised” for some reason and “so stiff from a beating that every move reminds him and fills him with outrage.” The outrage that prompts his story is comparable to that of Nick Carraway after the death of Gatsby, but Marian is the opposite of Gatsby and Nick’s outrage is directed at a decadent society, whereas Joe’s is directed at both society and Nature. Also like *Gatsby*, this novel is a retrospective confession. In the first paragraph it begins to rain outside his study window. Traditionally rain connotes the bringing of new life, whereas in this novel it is also associated with death in childbirth, as it is at the end of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. Also as in Hemingway, and in accord with his iceberg principle, most of the many literary allusions in the novel are submerged.

When in the second paragraph Joe refers to “the ghost of Marian’s presence,” we infer that her death must be the specific cause of his outrage. The tone and actions in this opening to the novel suggest that Joe and his wife Ruth are just returning from her funeral. We see that Joe is inclined to pessimism, whereas Ruth is inclined to optimism and is “more resilient.” Joe is broken up and confronting the reality of death, while Ruth “wills continuity” and carries on. The two are traditional gender types in representing dynamics common to successful marriages, the wife serving as a balance and corrective—even a conscience—to her husband, as in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by William Dean Howells. When she cautions him not to drink too much, her gloved “white hand was laid like a policeman’s on my arm.” The complementary relationship of husband and wife is expressed in the Victorian paradigm of gender roles. The British novelist John Fowles, also a Realist—and a male feminist—affirms this traditional paradigm as archetypal in his long feminist novel *Daniel Martin* (1977).

The image of “Peck’s treehouse” establishes the counterforce of the Wilderness in the Garden—in this case the woodsy hills of suburban Los Altos where Stegner lived most of his life with his wife Mary, above the campus of Stanford University where he directed the creative writing program. As is common to most homeowners, Joe must defend his yard and garden against pests--weeds, poison-oak, wood borers, and gophers. “To take all the trouble of digging, fertilizing, planting, spraying, pruning, coddling, only to have blind vermin come burrowing brainlessly underground to destroy everything.” The many references to specific plants and varieties of wild life embed consciousness in the natural order, the ultimate Reality. There is more wild life in Joe’s suburban yard than in Thoreau’s *Walden*.

As a retired literary agent who sold books for a living, Joe is better educated than the common man, making his many submerged and his many explicit literary allusions realistic. Submerged allusions may be unconscious, as Stegner has said, evidence of how deeply embedded they are in the psyche. The many allusions also link present to past through traditions and cultural myths and iconic imagery--such as Eden, encroaching Wilderness, Walden Pond, the Garden of the West, and the Machine in the Garden. As the allusions accumulate, they increase the unity and resonance of the novel as an artistic whole. Stegner’s aesthetics in this novel enhance his fundamental Realism with Modernist techniques that make *All the Little Live Things* as intellectually rich as the allusive T. S. Eliot.

Marian revived him after the pointless death of his only child, Curtis, but now she too has died. Joe’s phrase “unfulfilled April” is another example of submerged allusion, to “April is the cruelest month,” a famous line from Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922). “Marian’s philosophy of acceptance was never mine—I remain a Manichee in spite of her.” Joe is angry and polarized against Evil—Manichean—after the unjust death of Marian, who embodies spiritual unity, acceptance, and transcendence. “I can’t find proofs of the crawl toward perfection that she believed in.” Joe is bitter like an alienated Postmodernist: “I have made straight A in irony—that curse, that evasion...” But his immersion in Nature, his morality and his ability to love are the opposite of Postmodernist. In the Modernist tradition of individuation the novel dramatizes the redemption of his heart through love of Marian, who is a traditionalist—Emersonian and Taoist. While evil pests invade Joe’s garden, “Marian has invaded me, and though my mind may not have changed, I will not be the same.” In this world “Maybe the triumph of the good is less sure than my Sunday-school teachers believed.” But the end validates the Sunday-school teachers. Marian is the good, and she triumphs, paradoxically through her suffering and death, like Christ.

Up to now Joe's property in the wooded hills has been "Prospero's island," an allusion to the magical island in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, a place thought to have been inspired by the recent discovery of America. The ruined cherry tree in Joe's yard evokes America through the submerged allusion to the fictitious folk tale of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree, then redeeming himself from the evil act by telling the truth. Joe's cherry tree is gnawed down by an "evil" gopher, placing the blame on Nature, and Joe tries to tell the truth in his reflections throughout the novel.

The reader wonders why Marian died. "All of us tainted and responsible—Weld, Peck, the LoPrestis and their sullen daughter, myself, John, even Marian." This is the cast of main characters, all responsible for "ambiguous evil," like the characters at the end of Stephen Crane's famous story "The Blue Hotel." Joe confesses, "I am as responsible as anyone." Here the word "responsible" has both negative and positive meanings. Joe and his wife Ruth have moved here from Manhattan in New York City, a place epitomizing modern urban life and Postmodernism, to this pastoral sanctuary in the West. Like Thoreau in the woods of Walden, "We simplified feeling... We walked, gardened, read.... I cultivated the condition that Marian called twilight sleep." Like Thoreau, she wants to "wake up" her neighbors, but in an accepting rather than in the censorious spirit of Thoreau. Joe is the censorious one, calling his neighbors Weld, Fran LoPresti, and his intruder Jim Peck "weevils." Yet "even Jim Peck, who challenged every faith I hold, threatened our serenity far less than did Marian Catlin, who only offered us love."

The prologue ends with the rain coming down harder. In guilt and shame, Joe identifies himself with "all the little live things" that hide in the darkness under rocks in his yard, feels he has a responsibility to come out into the light, and commits himself to try to understand Marian's belief that "every particle of the universe has both consciousness and choice." Nick in *Gatsby* has everything figured out by the time he starts telling his story, whereas Joe is trying to figure everything out all the way along as he tells his story. Marian's belief in total spirituality—Idealism--also challenges the reader to think by contradicting the secular materialism prevailing in our Postmodernist culture.

1

Joe's cat kills "evil" gophers, but also squirrels, rabbits, and birds. The cat with no forebrain is Nature—from the human perspective both "good" and "evil." Some birds, cedar waxwings, come into the yard and get high on fermented pyracantha berries. "They sit in clouds" in a tree like Jim Peck and "when they get really illuminated they try to fly through the plate-glass windows," knock themselves out and get eaten by the cat. This little fable prefigures the invasion of Joe's property by human pests and their likely future. Joe like Thoreau derives his vision of life from his experience of Nature.

The conservationist theme—the displacement of beautiful Nature by ugly Civilization—is introduced in the person of Tom Weld, who in developing his property is spoiling the view, a common disappointment today shared by many people: "The hill that once swelled into view across the ravine like an opulent woman lazily turning was mutilated and ruined." Joe is so outraged he sees Weld as a rapist mutilating a woman, a popular metaphor especially among feminist environmentalists. The word *weld* refers to metal working and evokes machinery such as Weld's bulldozer, "like a hog in a wallow." The joining of metal parts is implicitly contrasted with the lack of joining together as neighbors in cooperation, though it is hard to see how any agreement could be reached in such a case. Joe sees Weld as a "land butcher," but he understands unchanging human nature: "He is only the raw material of mankind, the aboriginal owner of the undeveloped tract called Paradise."

This allusion to *Paradise Lost* (1667) enlarges the theme to an archetypal conflict of values throughout the history of the human race: City versus Garden or Wilderness. Weld's bulldozer is the representative Machine in the Garden, the despoiler of Nature in the pastoral conservation myth originating in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) by Jefferson and in *The Prairie* (1827) by Cooper, and analyzed in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) by Leo Marx. Of course, having chosen hot property on the peninsula just south of San Francisco, Joe should have expected development. There is plenty of room for Edenic sanctuary in more rural California. Joe has an elite sense of entitlement common to liberals; nevertheless, at the same time, most of us are likely to share his feelings to some extent, especially if a neighbor has interfered with our view.

Joe and Ruth Allston enjoy long nature walks on their property in the spirit of Thoreau in “Walking” (1862). However, their marriage is a union of complementary opposites—“bald head following white head”—in contrast to the individualism of Thoreau, a grumpy loner who never married or earned any property. The whole novel is an extended contrast to *Walden*. The reference to Joe’s blackthorn walking stick that once belonged to an Irish poet links him to the pastoral literary tradition and contemporary America to the European past, a cultural root extending through time. The pastoral spirit of their walking uphill to a ridge with a panoramic vista leads to a higher view of life and a transcendent experience like flying in the sky: “I have never anywhere else had so strong a feeling of the vast continuity of air in which we live. On a walk, we flew up into that gusty envelope like climbing kites.”

Like most Americans the Allstons live close to neighbors and feel part of a community, unlike Thoreau. Julie the rebellious teenage daughter of their neighbors Lucio and Fran is introduced as an embodiment of countercultural conflicts becoming endemic during the 1960s: “She had a cold ferocity of antagonism to her mother, a contemptuous toleration of her father, and a passion of attachment to her gelding.” Joe thinks she spends all her time with her horse “because she had no other friends and because riding let her indulge her fantasies of having a bit in her father’s mouth and a Mexican spur in her mother’s side.” Julie is no Jewel. Like an emerging Feminist, she is rejecting her family and attaching herself instead to a castrated male (Nature denatured and dominated)—her “total emotional life.”

Joe anticipates development and the loss of “our desert island.” He is Romantic rather than Realistic to conceive of his location as a desert island in the first place. His own improvements to the land only hasten the “loss of Eden.” His reference to Aesop calls attention to his repeated analogies between animals—pests in particular—to people, before introducing the human pest Jim Peck. Joe and Ruth experience a “stoppage of the heart” when they are shocked to come upon a motorcycle in their path—a Machine in *their* Garden—and slouched on its seat a longhaired bearded barbarian in orange coveralls. Jim Peck combines the worst of extremes—destructive modern technology *and* wild Nature—embodying the dangerous counterforces to the Garden of *both* City and Wilderness. Joe sees him as Caliban from *The Tempest*—“surely the feet inside those boots were cloven.” Peck is also like the pagan god Pan, or worse. Joe imagines the long hair is “hiding his horns” like a demon, or a form of Satan—the first rebel.

Stegner establishes a foundation of Realism with an abundance of concrete detail while adding allusions that evoke myths—particularly the myth of the Garden in the West and its origin in the myth of the Garden of Eden, giving the novel a biblical subtext—a version of the Modernist technique called by Eliot “the mythic method” in his review of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). A third myth is the archetypal conflict between Order versus Disorder personified in Apollo and Dionysus at ancient Delphi—a primary theme in *All the Little Live Things*: “If ever I saw the incarnated essence of disorder, this was it. He emanated a spirit as erratic, reckless, and Dionysian as his smell.” Joe tries to play Apollo the god of order, light and reason, a pagan precursor of Christ who conquered the snake from the darkness underground.

However, he realizes that he too instigates Disorder, wondering “If, supposing I had responded to him heartily or good-naturedly, we might have begun and ended in good feeling rather than in suspicion and dislike. Marian suggested as much, so did Ruth.” The women are correctives to the protective instinct that incites his masculine aggression. Stegner inverts the gender roles in the Eden myth by making Joe the transgressor. He is an unregenerate “Old Adam” trying to regain and sustain Eden and the tree in which Peck builds his treehouse is a mock Tree of Knowledge surrounded by poison oak. Unlike Eve, Joe wants the devil to get the hell out. Joe is an admittedly unreliable narrator whose self-critical struggle to be reliable makes him sympathetic and contrasts with the omniscient narrators of Victorian novels and with the unreliable amoral narrators of Postmodernist novels. Paradoxically, in his confessional quest for moral truth, the more Joe faults himself, the more reliable he becomes.

Joe associates the rebellious Jim Peck with his dead son Curtis—“the son not quite keeping his temper before a censorious father.” Hereafter his ongoing interaction with Peck forces Joe to relive the agonizing relationship he had with Curtis. Peck is an emblematic rebel of the 1960s modeled to some extent on hip

novelist Ken Kesey, at that time a fellow in Stegner's creative writing program at Stanford. In writing workshops Kesey acted like the only genius in the room and disrespected Stegner. Peck points out that his motorcycle is a Honda at a time when Kesey was living nearby in La Honda, where he entertained the Hells Angels motorcycle gang: When Peck says, 'Not everybody that rides a motor is a Hells Angel,' Stegner is implying that neither Peck nor Kesey is as tough nor as bad as a Hells Angel. A Honda is light in weight compared to a Harley and as a measure of capacity used for dry goods, a peck is light in weight (the fourth part of a bushel, or two gallons).

Peck is again associated with goat-footed Pan: "for I felt almost with panic—panic? Yes, exactly—the threat of unpeace that lurked there from the moment he set his hoof in the dry duff under that bay tree." On the contrary, Ruth is kind and even interested in Peck, who tells her he is a graduate student in philosophy—a joke reflecting intellectual decline in "higher" education. Peck is one of those radical students Stegner was encountering at Stanford in the 1960s who came to class thinking they already knew everything. Joe sees Peck as merely "a delayed adolescent projecting his uneasy virility into whiskers and motorcycle," his motto "DISGUSTED? FIGHT BACK. BE DISGUSTING."

Joe sees Peck as another naïve conformist, paralleling him as a "lover of the Folk" to a Communist in the 1930s. Joe is a Realist about human nature—the Folk, who "discriminated, segregated, lynched, fought with switchblades, vulgarized everything they touched." Peck wants to set up camp and pursue his "higher" education amid the poison oak here in the "bottom," puckering his lips "into the semblance of a turkey's behind." Peck is like Thoreau in being a homeless freeloader whose independence is dependent on his landlord, but he has none of Thoreau's virtues. Stegner liked to quote Robert Frost saying that "All art is synecdoche." Peck epitomizes the hypocritical dependence of the rebellious younger generation on their elders and the civilization they scorn.

Of course Joe refuses. But the kindly Ruth, whose name means mercy, intervenes for Peck. The name Peck also suggests that he is like a bird, an airhead who keeps pecking away: he builds a nest in a tree and his back in orange coveralls is "brilliant as a tanager's." Ironically, while selecting a place for his camp and explaining his plans, the oblivious Peck says to Joe, "I don't like being available to just anybody that comes along." And further, "I'd respect your privacy, I'd expect you to respect mine." Joe mocks him for his pretense to going native: "You want your Walden with modern conveniences, is that it." One of the modern conveniences Peck has is the entitlement he feels to sponge off other people.

What infuriates Joe most about the younger generation represented by Peck is his "turning nonsense into reality by the simple refusal to listen to anything but the ticking of his own Ingersoll mind." Robert Ingersoll was an infamous "village atheist" in the late 19th century. Joe recognizes that he is withdrawing from society like Peck—"he spoke some of my opinions"—but Joe is a classical liberal capable of self-criticism and compromise, whereas Peck has the closed mind of totalitarian liberals after the 1960s. The most significant contrast between them is religious: After his comparison of Peck to Ingersoll, Joe's reference to "too many hopeless arguments in the past" implies that he has often argued with atheists over the existence of God. Joe invokes God throughout the novel, even if in vain. His faith has been severely tested by the loss of his son, he is angry, grieving and spiritually alienated, as is evident in his crabby disposition, but he retains faith in transcendence through his reverence for Nature, his scripture. And the novel is mainly about the revival of his spirituality through his love of Marian.

Smelling "as rank as a goat yard" associates Peck again with the goat-headed Satan. Joe projects his revulsion as "Caliban's smile" reminds him "how much lips surrounded by beard look like another sort of bodily opening"—"anal lips." Consistently in contrast, Ruth is congenial and neighborly. Joe resents the fact that if he refuses Peck "he would live in my woods in spite of me," but Ruth makes him feel "stingy" and prejudiced against Peck as a type. Also, he has to admit that the spot where Peck wants to camp is a "pure wasteland," placing the goatish camper in the spiritual wasteland of T. S. Eliot's poem. Just then a jay lands nearby and yaks at Joe, an obnoxious bird—a pest like Peck. Joe submits against his better judgment and when they shake on it, Peck's hand "gripped like bird claws."

Joe immediately regrets yielding and afterward up the hill he bursts out to Ruth, "In God's name why did you let me do that? You *wanted* me to do it." Ruth answers "Yes," explaining that she would have

wanted people to be charitable to their son Curtis (in accord with the “golden rule” predating Christianity: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). Ruth actually cares about Peck: “No matter how crazy they act,” she believes, “they have to be given a chance.” Joe feels even more guilty now, suspecting that she has always blamed him for not being charitable enough to Curtis.

3

Watching him set up camp from a distance, not without some admiration after all, Joe sees Peck as at least hardworking and more natural than the literary intellectuals he has known all his life—“Thoreau with amenities.” Ruth would not have minded inviting Peck to Thanksgiving dinner. Joe said No, but afterward he wished he had been generous. Then a Volkswagen bus full of countercultural merrymakers joins Peck in the bottom and they party for days, an evocation of the bus made famous by Ken Kesey when it toured the country, an adventure satirized by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), published just a year after *All the Little Live Things*. Stegner adds a detail indicating that Peck is a composite and should not be taken literally as Kesey by giving the bus Illinois license plates.

Ruth sees no harm in the partying: “You want to find them guilty before they even give the slightest indication of doing anything wrong....Why can’t you let him alone? He’s not hurting anything.” Joe investigates: “I told myself that I had better find out before he developed a subdivision over there.” He finds Peck building a treehouse: “Looking up at this Tarzan, this fabricator, this retarded adolescent living a Swiss-Family-Robinson fantasy...” he is exasperated that Peck lacks the manners to ask permission, a characteristic of the younger generation: “They took, they challenged, they acknowledged nothing.” He calls the treehouse “a Jay-bird’s nest,” but he also questions his own character: “Was I only responding, stiffly and wrongly, to my finished but unresolved quarrel with Curtis?”

Crossing the bridge Peck has built, Joe is thrown “off balance,” symbolism that supports his wife’s criticisms of him: “Ruth would have said I asked for it...” In turn, hearing that Peck caught poison oak, Joe thinks *he* asked for it: “He gladdened my soul, that arrogant young poop. Trying to treat poison oak the way he treated people.” The treehouse Peck builds is just as “crooked and misproportioned” as any society he would construct, but Ruth thinks it is cute like a child’s fairy tale playhouse.

4

As in *Walden*, themes are expressed by seasons—spiritual renewal by Spring. “We spent most of our time outdoors, just looking and learning.” Joe’s reference to Denmark is evidence of a larger experience of the world than Peck has had—or that Thoreau had for that matter. “We walked a great deal” while most of the time Peck roosts in one place. When they glimpse a girl step out onto Peck’s porch with bare breasts, “‘Oh my goodness!’ Ruth said, half laughing.” Though disapproving of the promiscuity displayed by the younger generation, she considers it none of her business. Joe suspects that “Ruth had some hope it was a real love affair,” but he knows that in the books of the younger generation “and perhaps in their lives too, love is about as romantic as a five-minute car wash.”

Joe reads natural events--“the amatory play of Peck, the lizards, and the birds”—as “somber parables.” He ends his upbeat chapter celebrating new life in the Spring with the somber parable of his cat torturing a mouse—“one of the pretty kind”—at excruciating length, bouncing it around until finally he “ate it, head first.” Once again, the cat is Nature, from an unsentimental perspective—as opposed to the Romanticism of the younger generation. Nature is cruel and ugly as well as beautiful, killing us all in the end. Like every life, the chapter ends in death. Here at the end of Part I the tone of the novel is Naturalistic rather than transcendent, because Joe has yet to meet Marian.

II

1

The Catholic Church called Our Lady of the Grand Tetons is named after the majestic Grand Teton mountain range “by somebody who didn’t know what tetons are.” The Tetons are a branch of the Dakota

Indian tribe. Ironically, rather than convert Indians, the white Catholics seem to have converted to the religion of the Indians—as if Our Lady is wearing buckskin and a feather. Stegner loved to point out the absurdities resulting from ignorance of history. Joe identifies with the Indian attitude when he affirms “our local Earth Mother” rather than Our Lady. Stegner said elsewhere, “I would just rather get a little more American Indian than Judeo-Christian in my attitudes toward the earth.”

The town in this novel is in the zone of a “fault,” a geological metaphor. Flawed ground is analogous to flawed human nature. Stegner is not Emersonian. Nature is “flawed” in being imperfect for humans: “Right beside Mother Earth, in the same bed, lies Father Earthquake.” Joe defines Nature and the struggle of gardening—“improving Nature”—in moral terms: “I was a Manichee... Evil lay underground in Paradise before life ever appeared. It was part of the mud life was made with.” Even “here in authentic Eden,” Joe lists 17 different pests and diseases that kills his plants, including moles, voles, mice, and gophers. “If God could not create a perfect world—and good God, how badly You failed!—Allston would lend a hand... I was self-employed in a holy war against the thousand pests that infest Eden.” He thinks “what a quaint idea it is to perfect Eden with poisons,” an ironic theme in Hawthorne’s famous story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844). Yet poison oak is already there—a native species. Then he meets Marian, who like innocent Beatrice Rappaccini is an incarnation of divine truth: “It was something like love at first sight.” The age difference makes his love of Marian platonic and paternal.

Joe gains increasing credibility as a narrator by displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of the terrain, climate, and every plant, bird, and other creature on his land—as well as by his ability to turn literal facts into metaphors within the context of cultural history. At the same time, ironically, his sense of futility in battling pests makes him feel like a clown in front of Marian—like the cartoon Elmer Fudd or the golf course groundskeeper in the movie *Caddyshack*—especially when he blasts a gopher with his shotgun. In response, Marian’s first words in the novel identify her with transcendence: “For heaven’s sake, what have you gone and done?” The opposition between practical and transcendent values is dramatized at length by Melville in *Pierre* (1852). The question of when if ever violence may be justified arises in many trials and in responses of the public to every war. Marian pities the gopher.

Having lost a son, Joe sees Marian as an ideal alternative: “I admit to a pang. God knows what it is—maybe envy that someone is lucky enough to have such a daughter.” Ruth introduces Marian and her husband as their new neighbors, the Catlins. George Catlin (1796-1872) is the most famous painter of Indians in the frontier West and is a character in a series of novels by Stegner’s student Larry McMurtry. This Catlin is an “ethnologist,” but his wife Marian, ironically, would be as out of place among Indians as Our Lady. The qualities of Catlin the painter are divided: scientific observation personified in the husband, idealistic spiritual perception in the wife. Casting himself facetiously as an “early explorer,” Joe regales “these green immigrants with the hyperbolic perils of the New World.”

With her reverence for all life, Marian is like the famous missionary Albert Schweitzer in Africa. She loves *all* the little live things. She feels sorry for fishing worms and sounds like a Christian Scientist when she says, “You can become immune to germs.” Like Emerson at the end of *Nature* (1836) she denies that anything in Nature is bad, let alone “evil.” Joe feels infatuated in his heart, “But good Lord, what this charming idiotic woman is saying!” His head thinks she is “foolish,” “ridiculous,” like “an oversensitive child.” She and her husband accept Nature “exactly as it is” and they are “not going to grow a thing.” They will depend on other people to grow their food and will allow their house to be invaded by termites, rats, bats, mice, tarantulas, mildew, mold, and bacteria; choked in by tall weeds, thistles and poison ivy with its roof eventually covered by morning-glory, moss and wild blackberry vines.

Marian opposes all human meddling in Nature, hence she would oppose such laws as the Endangered Species Act, used by environmentalists to stop logging, which caused overcrowding, dense undergrowth, infestation, drying, and ever more intense and destructive wildfires that are now destroying the national forests. Unfortunately, trees and wildlife are not immune to environmentalists.

The paradigm of new settlers encountering natives adds the historical perspective of a Realist noting recurrent patterns of human behavior that apply to the characters in this novel. The pattern is so familiar, epitomized by the famous sale of Manhattan Island, Stegner summarizes in a terse, witty style. The satirical tone recalls fellow historian Washington Irving's account of presumptuous Europeans, gullible Indians, and Lunatics in Chapter 5 of *A History of New York* (1809).

With respect to Indians, up to now Joe has been a liberal like Irving, who sides with the Indians against the Puritans in his essay "Philip of Pokanoket." Joe has been politically correct: "Up to now my sympathies have been with the noble and ill-used redskin," even though he knows Indians committed atrocities too. The term "redskin" had been derogatory in the 19th century, but by 1967 Indians were idealized. The term had become honorary, as evinced by the name of the Washington Redskins football team. Today, in trying to force the team to change its name, intolerant liberals are engaged in ethnic cleansing.

Both Irving and Stegner are politically incorrect in depicting Europeans and Indians as equally violent, selfish, foolish, and human. It is easy to idealize barbarians when they do not invade your property. Irving might have been less sympathetic to them if he ever had to fight off an Indian attack on Sleepy Hollow. Now that Joe must accommodate Jim Peck, he calls him a "Mohican" with resentment because he feels under pressure to be politically correct and accept Peck and his behavior completely, "as if somebody has wrapped a blood-pressure band around my neck and is pumping up."

Joe also faults his neighbor Tom Weld, for not moving somewhere more suitable for ranching, yet he himself does not move somewhere more suitable for playing Thoreau. Joe would not even be here if Weld had not sold twenty acres of his land to a developer "who resold our five to us." His other neighbor, the easygoing LoPresti, is tolerant of Tom Weld even though Weld's dog killed his chickens. He does not blame Weld or his dog, he even admires the animal, and he accepts his losses as according to Nature. The reproductive union of the neighbors' two dogs is a metaphor of harmonious community.

When Joe gets stuck in the mud he relies on Weld to tow him out: "I felt my years, and I was grateful to him." But then, rather than incur the inconvenience of building a gated fence around his own land, Joe asks Weld to fence his much larger expanse of land to keep his horses contained in accord with California law. He is willing to pay half the cost, but it is ironic that Joe complains all the time about subdividing the natural environment and yet wants his neighbor to build a long fence. Driving home, he gets stuck in the mud again. He is definitely a stick-in-the-mud. He can't ask Weld to pull him out again, that would be asking too much—like asking him to build all that fence. As Stegner's friend Robert Frost famously wrote, "Good fences make good neighbors." Good neighbor Weld is the one who builds a fence, but not a complete enclosure, and in the process he removes planks from his bridge to make a cattle guard, leading to the disaster at the climax of the novel—for which Joe feels partly responsible.

Joe demonstrates that he has a heart when he rescues a possum from Weld's dog, whereupon Ruth demonstrates that she has a head, reversing their customary roles: "All winter she preaches me sweet reasonableness, which is not my natural move, and then the minute I show signs of conversion she reminds me of the unappeasable aggressor." Ruth is wise in seeing both sides of situations and in maintaining a balanced perspective. In this instance, ironically, she takes the practical view of Joe in his debate with Marian, whose perspective transcends the practical world.

When Joe realizes he is being too hard on "cretinous good-natured Weld," that he is "justifying himself at the expense of the neighbors," Marian asks if he has "worked it out and got to be friends again." He tells her Weld's roaming dog got hit by a truck and the horses are gone because a fire in the pasture burned up all their feed. Now his only complaint against Weld is an "eyesore." And the bridge. Weld's "eyesore" (a dog pen and pigeon house) was there when Joe bought his property. Weld was here first, but now Joe wants his neighbors to conform to *his* ideal view. He comes from New York. He has a habit of looking down on other people. Ironically, for all his claims to love Nature, Joe cares more about his scenery than about Weld's dog and pigeons. And the reduction of planks on the bridge resulted from his own implied threat to call the law down on Weld if he did not fence in horses that now are gone.

Joe caused the fence to go up, resulting in holes in the bridge, whereas Weld is the one who provides a bridge, though it is now hazardous. Yet Joe places all the blame for their estrangement on Weld: "If the fire had swept the neighborhood, he'd never have comprehended that his refusal to fence his pasture had anything to do with it." Marian faults his judgment: "But if you'd followed your impulse and offered to pay half the fence, maybe the bridge would be solid." In this chapter Joe is a typical liberal claiming to be a victim: "I wanted it to be clear I was much put-upon, not merely cantankerous." He tries to force his ideal view on others, he makes unreasonable demands, he does not contribute his fair share in calling for expensive changes, he calls his adversaries insulting names, he is a fencer not a bridger in his community, he refuses to accept any responsibility for causing problems, he will not compromise or admit to being wrong even when he knows he is wrong, he threatens to use law enforcement to get his way, and he is motivated by resentment and pride. Marian asks if he does not wish now that he had offered to pay half the cost of the fence: "No, I said. 'I'd look terrible with my nose that far out of joint'."

A space break calls attention to a shift in focus from the faults of Joe to what makes him susceptible to Ruth and Marian. The best of Joe is revealed when he observes John Catlin slide his arm around his wife "not playfully but with a grave sort of protectiveness pleasant to see." Joe is glad to see that Catlin loves Marian and is protective of her, evidence of his respect for women and a reflection of his own devotion to Ruth. Just as he tries to protect his plants from pests, he protects Marian from approaching pigeon hunters before they start shooting. At the same time, however, he continues to fence with her: "You like your roses with holes in them."

Ruth leads the Catlins on "what in Jane Austen novels is called a stroll in the shrubbery." This allusion parallels these characters to Austen's as members of a privileged class while contrasting the order of her society with the disorder of California in the 1960s. Marian here is like one of the "flower children" a few miles to the north pouring into San Francisco to celebrate the New Age. She falls on her knees to worship a mushroom: "Her upturned face is that of an overacting child." To Marian a mushroom that pushed through the asphalt walk is a revelation of divine power: "Think of the *force* down there, just telling things to get born!" Mushrooms were a popular hallucinogenic drug in the 60s and evoke smoking a hookah on the big mushroom in the Wonderland of Alice. Of course, some mushrooms are poisonous.

John Catlin is described as having a "healthy responsible attentive New England face," identifying him with the moral tradition of emotionally restrained Puritanism and contrasting him with Joe the pushy New Yorker. Catlin watches his wife "with a concentrated alertness before he hides his mouth behind the lighting of a cigarette." Throughout the novel, he defers to Marian like a Victorian husband and "hides his mouth" in contrast to Joe, who keeps fencing—"arguing with her about the sacredness of life." This becomes ironic when Ruth tells him Marian is pregnant. That she is also dying of cancer suddenly turns the novel tragic: "'But good God,' I say, 'she's so young.... Christ, I've got a gift,' I say. 'Why didn't you shut me up?'" This scene extends the Christian subtext, with multiple ironic meanings, for Miriam is a gift of redemption like the sacrificial Christ. "Paradise, so late our happy seat, was lost, and lost not through any of the people I felt like casting in the snake's role [like Peck], but through one to whom our hearts instantly went out...love, not sin, costs us Eden."

III

1

As an aging American Adam, Joe is suffering toward the old theological paradox of the "Fortunate Fall": "I began this rumination in the mood of an old-fashioned Christian who opens the Bible at random, hungry for a text." The death of Marian has made him angry at "the way life cheated one who so loved being alive." But he confesses that he is "talking at least as much about Joseph Allston and how life has cheated him..." He realizes that "evil is everywhere and in all of us." The snake he seeks is in himself. By this point, though basically a Realist, the versatile Stegner is also as much an allegorist as Hawthorne in "Egotism, or The Bosom Serpent."

Puritans came west to America seeking refuge to build a holy City on a Hill, whereas these modern Americans came west seeking refuge from the unholy City in the pastoral hills of California. “And at the heart of our community was the Catlin cottage,” located “a little higher than the rest of the bottomland.” After they become close friends, the Allstons and the Catlins “kissed on greeting and parting as if they had been our children.” Marian wears “no make-up at all.” Her flowerbeds are full of weeds but other people bring her flowers in abundance. When her little girl Debby cries out to her for help on the swing—“Come push me, I’m dying”—Marian’s reply affirms self-reliance and prefigures what she herself is doing as she dies: “Pump. See how high you can go.”

The treehouse appears to be as high as Peck can go. Marian says “he keeps his bridge pulled up and doesn’t want us snooping around his place,” but Joe sees that Debby is already infatuated with the “satyr” living in a tree and we wonder how high she will go.

2

In contrast to the treehouse, Joe idealizes the grove where he and Ruth sit with the Catlins “as an eighteenth-century landscape” that is consistent with his earlier reference to the world of Jane Austen, with an added “Maxfield Parrish touch.” It is “Most orderly and neoclassic that pastoral grove,” and also romantic “as the child soars upward in the swing. But also, inescapably part of the picture, the shape of Disorder stands a little apart, in shadow, gleaming darkly, the orange suit like a gross flower... His wild hair, wild beard, wild eyes, are the components of a true satiric leer. Through his unvarying grin he peers out at the world of civilization and sense like a wild man through a screen of vines.... Dangerousness is not necessarily a function of malicious intent. If I were painting a portrait of the father of evil, I wonder if I wouldn’t give him the face of a high-minded fool.... If he was old enough to be playing saint and screwing girls he was old enough to take his chance in civilized company.”

Ironically, Peck claims that he wants “to be absolutely *harmless*.” Like Ken Kesey at the time, he is writing a book. Unlike Kesey he is trying to get back to Nature and “think his way past all the boundaries” primarily by not eating meat rather than by taking LSD, though he does that too—as if rearranging your brain with a pharmaceutical is more natural than not eating meat. The hip hypocrite “held the two women with his eyes like a pair of wedding guests”—an allusion to “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,” the famous poem by Coleridge, who enhanced his poetic vision with opium. Ruth and Marian, respecting Peck as a neighbor, build a social bridge while Joe sulks. “They had given him his turn, and were off on their own food fads, which were neither simple nor harmless.” After a reference to “Weld’s booby-trap bridge,” Joe considers whether he should try to build a social bridge to Peck: “Could one do with a not-very-likable stranger what one had been totally unable to do with one’s son?”

Joe summarizes the pop countercultural trends and panaceas of the 1960s personified in Peck, the politically correct stock responses, the rebellion “against authority of whatever kind... Could I stand to see humane feelings and noble ideals come half-baked from that oven? I doubted it.” Joe the liberal is irritated that “the irresponsibility of [Peck’s] search for freedom forced me to be more conservative than I wanted to be.” Peck gives Debby a ride hugging tightly behind him on his motorcycle: “Give her another ten years and she’d be sneaking up his tree in a leotard.” Then the whole group of them follow the leader down to the bottom to visit the treehouse, Peck’s tree of carnal knowledge: “‘It’s like getting into hell,’ I said.” By now, as they are crossing the hazardous bridge, Ruth too is irritated—with Joe for his intolerance. The extremely complicated process of crossing Peck’s unstable bridge to his place corresponds to the difficulty of accommodating all his demands.

Joe is the only one who refuses to cross the bridge. Marian cries down to him from the treehouse doorway, “It’s a real bug’s nest. And it seems so high.” Peck is one of “all the little live things” she loves indiscriminately, whereas Joe suspects “the hairy oaf” of looking up her dress. Then the sullen neighbor girl Julie LoPresti who hates her parents comes riding along on horseback and is seduced by the treehouse on sight, as “Peck, old Nick of the Woods, grinned at her through his vines.... She was caught too far off guard to remember to be sullen.” As Julie crosses the bridge, Marian exclaims in what turns out to be a prefiguration of the plot, “There’s the girl the bridge was *made* for!” When the Allstons and the Catlins climb back up the hill and part company, Joe grows more concerned for Marian, whose smile “blazed,

excessive, intense, and troubling.” She is kind enough “to assure me that *she* didn’t think I had been acting badly, even if Ruth did.” Her grace toward cranky old Joe makes Marian his redeemer: “The cobweb of her kiss clung to my cheek, saving the whole afternoon.”

3

Joe discovers that, to make himself more comfortable, Peck is tapping both his electric power line and his water supply pipe. The younger generation’s version of being “independent” is more dependent on society than Thoreau was at Walden. Joe can afford the extra expense, but “I was only infuriated at being made into a mark, and being helpless to do anything about it.” Though his principles and fears are validated in the plot, Joe’s pride and conduct make him partly responsible for the eventual catastrophe. Ruth again acts as his conscience: “What did it matter, really? If I had not taken a hostile attitude in the beginning, he probably wouldn’t have tried to put things over on me.”

IV

After the death of Marian, the rains that open the novel turn into a storm. The birds coming to the feeder “ought to mean spring and actually mean winter,” a metaphor of Joe’s contradictory feelings of rebirth and grief. Marian “moves from high spring to summer, and stops.” Another reference to “Weld’s miserable bridge, still unrepaired,” points to the climax of the plot.

The narrative recycles like the seasons and we start over again at the beginning of the story, the arrival of Marian in the spring. Stegner said of himself, “I think more circularly than linearly. I don’t think there are beginnings and distinctions so much as circles which end by closing the circle and starting all over again.” Circularity is a characteristic of transcendent consciousness in literature, expressed by Modernists in circular structures such as *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Professor’s House*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Finnegans Wake*. The pregnant Marian is renewing life like Spring: “We thought of ourselves as old settlers, but she made us newcomers again.” On a Sunday, rather than go to church they take a nature walk in the hills. “Every three minutes Marian discovered a new plant which John identified with the infallibility of a botany book.” Yet when they pass “Peck’s roost” Debby catches poison oak because Marian and John do not identify the poison around Peck’s place.

Similarly, “As we were sitting on the terrace discussing with indignation the couple who slaughtered pigeons for their dog’s education (and also trapped the foxes who raided the pigeon-house, Marian had discovered), the red-tailed hawk from Shields’s pasture labored over us heavy and slow” with “a gopher snake in his talons... Marian accused me of staging the whole business, just to demonstrate my tooth-and-claw thesis” [Naturalistic theory of Nature]. In his own mind Joe is a hawk, Peck a snake, Marian a pigeon. Marian and John make friends with neighbors Joe dislikes—“like harmless weeds”—or has never met, improving the community with their sociability while Joe improves his yard. John tells the Allstons that Marian’s health is improving. There has been no recurrence of her cancer but her pregnancy could bring it back as a little live thing that might grow along with the baby.

More generous in response to Marian, Joe builds a playhouse for Debby in the grove, but “Marian admitted a little apologetically that it suffered by contrast with Peck’s treehouse.” He tops Peck by offering to let Debby get a pony, use his pasture free of charge and build a shed there for the animal.

2

This chapter best illustrates the theme of Frost’s adage “good fences make good neighbors.” Joe’s increased generosity allows a good fence built to contain a pony for Debby. This good fencing becomes a “neighborhood work party” that unifies rather than dividing the community, like an old-fashioned barn raising. Afterward “the sweat flies buzzed around me with a noisy, frantic insistence to entrap themselves in the hairs of my ears, and I had an epiphany, an instant bright awareness of how that ridiculous dog must feel all the time.” Generosity has made him empathetic rather than contemptuous, a good neighbor, egalitarian rather than condescending. Empathy is bridging.

But then Joe notices Peck nearby apparently watching them from his treehouse: “Why hadn’t he swung on his Tarzan rope across the creek and offered to help?” After all, by now Peck owes Joe a lot for all his generosity. The women are not sweating from the labor of building the fence and are not annoyed by Peck’s failure to lend a hand. In fact, Ruth faults Joe: “What a moralist.” And Marian watches Peck “like a gleeful little girl.” Ruth explains that Peck is doing Yoga exercises and identifies each posture he takes: “Watch this, you might learn something that would be good for your back.”

Joe exhibits so much knowledge of animal life throughout the novel that he has a lot of authority for his perceptions of this animal in his tree: “Peck was a long way from true meditation [and] he couldn’t have been more conscious of being watched.” The more he watches Peck perform, the more contemptuous Joe becomes: “I really did think Peck had put on this show out of a trivial juvenile desire to show off.” The “window of his soul” is his “anal sphincter.” Peck is now surrounded with young girls who “sat entranced around their hairy guru, under the bo tree.” The bo tree, or Bodhi Tree, is an old fig tree famous for being the tree under which Buddah attained Enlightenment, or Bodhi. Peck is playing the role of a spiritual guru, but he is not a mediator, he is merely a fornicator--not Bodhi, just high on bodies.

3

Peck erects his own mailbox next to Joe’s-- “again without permission.” Marion and John look upon Peck and his crowd “as anthropologists might have looked upon a village of picturesque head-hunters,” whereas Joe can see that Peck is a body-hunter. Joe asks Marian whether she thinks “Julie should be taking Debby over there all the time.” She looks at him “as if giving a ridiculous remark every chance to make sense before she laughed at it.” And when he calls them all children she questions his Christianity: “Don’t you believe all that about little children and the Kingdom of Heaven?” The many comparisons of Marian to a child throughout the novel identify her with the Christian doctrine that “Except ye become as a little child ye shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

Of Peck and the hippies, Marian admits, “They’re romantics, I suppose. Man is naturally good, but he’s corrupted by society.” Joe insists on the folly of defining the good life as absolute freedom—“and that goes for those birdbrains across the creek.” While he persists in his practical Realism, she is preoccupied saving and caring for a wasp that falls into her jam pot. This wasp recalls the wasps in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), who are allowed to nest in the farmer’s living room and to alight on the eyelids of his children, illustrating the ideal of agrarian pastoralism to live in perfect harmony with Nature. Marian (*marry*-an) differs from the self-indulgent romantics—especially pro-abortion Margo (*Mar*-go)--in accepting responsibility as a wife and mother, willing to suffer horribly for her unborn child.

Figuratively, Peck has established a wasps’ nest in Joe’s place. He is a more dangerous “squatter” than the wasps in *Letters* and more like the squatters who bedeviled James Fenimore Cooper on his rural estate. Cooper criticizes squatters at length in *The Prairie* (1827). Joe responds to wasps like Cooper, Marian like Crèvecoeur. The submerged allusions of squatter and wasp to Cooper and Crèvecoeur place *All the Little Live Things* in the context of the western tradition, writing about the myth of the Garden of the West: Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Cooper, Twain, Norris, Cather, Steinbeck, and Stegner. The recurrent pattern of westward movement extends the tradition of America as a Symbol. “It conformed to twenty generations of American experience.” Joe confesses, “We would have pooh-poohed the idea that we were living by the Garden myth, but we were. We expected to become less culpable by becoming more withdrawn.”

4

Peck litters the lane with beer cans and unopened junk mail for Joe to clean up. His place on the bottom becomes “a permanent gypsy camp.” The hippie bus returns with more “fantastic adolescent freaks” in pursuit of absolute freedom. They freely cut down some of Joe’s trees to fuel their campfires. One of the girls is “a founder of something called the Committee for Sexual Freedom that had chapters at all the colleges in the area” and is known for “conducting a rally to legalize abortion.” By now there is “no doubt” that Peck has “captured the neighborhood youth.” The neighbor kid Dave Weld turns into a hippie with a “John-the-Baptist bob.”

With the pop charisma of a “sacred person,” Peck has become “The Most High” in a double sense. His place is a mock Heaven and his throne room is his treehouse. Though hippies denied being hierarchical, some are not “admitted to the Presence. Sometimes they spent a whole afternoon and evening there and never saw the holy one, who stayed up in the treehouse with favored disciples.... I asked Marian what had happened to the absolute-freedom rule.... She only laughed at me. She thought of them as kids playing Utopia.” Joe thinks Peck is a seducer playing Jesus: “Put away your nets and follow me”—“this despite the probability that they were as promiscuous as a camp of howler monkeys.” As a former agent, Joe describes Peck’s ideas as immature and trite, coming “straight out of old James Dean movies and Ginsberg poems.... There was so much Dean in his Ginsberg.”

5

Peck in his motorcycle helmet is “insect-headed”—one of all the little live things. He has been talking to Marian in the grove, “trying to convert me,” she tells Joe. Like Joe, Marian sees Peck as immature: “Sometimes he just seems to be drifting in this cloud of abstract ideas and sometimes he’s literally reforming the world. He thinks you could make it over, he really does....” Meanwhile, however, Peck has already given up trying to write a book—a far lesser task than remaking the world. As an excuse he claims that “Writing is a dead art.” Joe ridicules his rationalization as typical of the younger generation’s disdain for “mere” achievement: “They’re dissatisfied with mere achievement before they’re in the slightest danger of accomplishing any.” At least Ken Kesey accomplished two novels before he quit.

Those who can’t accomplish, teach—that is the adage. Peck now wants to found a “free university” with funding from the big liberal foundations: “‘That figures,’ I said. ‘Let the Establishment fund the Disestablishment.’” Joe shares with Marian his grief over his son to explain his objections to Peck. At the same time he believes his principles transcend his personal experience: “I told myself that I would have found his beliefs and his activities dangerous nonsense if I had never had a son, or if my son had not wretchedly thrown away his life.” The parallel between his son and Peck intensifies his emotional responses but Peck is only another instance in a pattern Joe has been observing for years. Peck is not merely like his son Curtis, he is a broadly representative expression of the younger generation.

Peck also illustrates the lone ranger myth of the West that Stegner debunked all his life: “The free individual is an untutored animal.... The whole history of mankind is social, not individual.” Joe predicts that selfishness and the breakdown of marriage will lead to more illegitimate children, more social disorder, and more crime. “So we have more and more surviving losers.” Eventually “our technological tinkering will finally destroy all life, and ourselves with it.” Then evolution will repeat the cycle. Marian agrees that Order is the basis of everything, but counters that she and John believe “that all evolution is only a perfecting of consciousness.... I think we’ll perfect ourselves, finally, not destroy ourselves.” She has faith in Peck, whereas Joe equates him with “old Comus and his crew.” Comus is the seducer in the masque by Milton (1634) representing the Flesh as opposed to the Spirit, a primitive like Caliban by Shakespeare and the revelers in “The Maypole of Merry Mount” by Hawthorne.

6

Joe explains further in his letter to Marian that he feels a “moral duty” to resist Peck. As to his son Curt, he feels some guilt but “If I had it to do over again, I can’t see how I would have done it differently.” His son was “modern youth to the seventh power. He never got over being modern youth. He was crypto-communist youth during the late twenties, pacifist-internationalist youth in the forties, and overage beat youth in the fifties...rebel in uniform, nonconformist who runs in packs and sings in close harmony with his age group....” Curtis represents the first generation of American youth corrupted by Postmodernism: “The twentieth century corrupted him, the America that he despised corrupted him, industrial civilization corrupted him with the very vices he thought he scorned in it. It encouraged him to hunt out the shoddy, the physical, the self-indulgent, the shrill, and the vulgar, and to call these things freedom.”

Curtis “was drunken, disorderly, and promiscuous from early adolescence.” He “gave nothing and took all he could.” Joe is ashamed that his son had “sponged on people, especially women; he betrayed friends, especially women... His wretched treatment of his mother was one of the commonest sources of our quarrels.” Curtis hated Joe: “I tried to give him a code to live by. He wanted not one scrap of it, he didn’t

agree with a single value I held...the only way to live with him in peace would have been to submit to his beliefs.” Curt displays the intolerance that led to Political Correctness. He epitomizes the “corrupt age” of the late 20th century that valued “indulgence more than restraint”—like the late Roman empire. At the end Curtis lived in a “motorcycle bohemia” near the beach with a girl and a surfboard. His meaningless life ended in a surfing accident—“the very face of kicks-crazy America.”

The possibility that Curtis let himself die—deliberately committed suicide—applies to a succession of young Postmodernists including Jack London who overdosed, Richard Brautigan who shot himself, Jerzy Kosinski who suffocated himself, and David Foster Wallace who hanged himself. “If Curt was really a suicide, did he go hating, or did he go hopeless?” Books may have corrupted him, but probably “only corroborated him, without quite giving him the confidence of his convictions.... Miller, Albee, Kerouac, Sartre, Genet, the Marquis de Sade, Ginsberg, Burroughs—a poison garland from the Grove.” Here Joe the literary agent contrasts the decadent Postmodernist values of Grove Press with the humane civilized values of himself, Ruth and the Catlins as expressed while they sit together in their neoclassic grove of trees. “If [Peck] and Curtis are the future, then I am an irreconcilable past.”

Joe says he believes in guilt “as an essential cautery of the soul. One of my troubles was that I felt guilty without being able to persuade myself intellectually that I could have acted any other way.” Still, he feels “ambiguously but bitterly responsible.” He tried unsuccessfully to reconcile with “Curt’s ghost,” but he “would have none of my love unless it came unqualified and uncritical and in spite of every provocation—and it is simply uncanny how much of that spirit I detect in Jim Peck... It is not a kind of love I am ever likely to be able to give.” Joe is confessing to Marian as he might to a priest that he has no capacity for the unconditional love that children expect from parents and that Marian has suggested is a requirement for entering Heaven.

Already one of the most complex characters in American literature, Joe becomes even more deeply so when we learn that his own father shot himself, traumatizing him as a child and shaking his faith in others. Still further, he confronts his own “old guilts that were not unlike Curt’s.” This fills him with “self-loathing.” In this bitter mood he is questing for the Truth—“Call me Ishmael”—following not the spout of a white whale but the spirit of Marian. “Usually I am nimbler at ironies and evasive tactics than at the confessional business”—Postmodernist characteristics. Joe confesses that his “evasive tactics” include moving away from the corrupting City and withdrawing into a private Eden, trying to hide like one of all the little live things underground. “Marian had begun to force or coax me out of the burrow where I lived with the gophers and the moles and the other creatures of darkness.”

Joe still has faith in America, unlike Curtis and Peck. He learned from his own efforts that America “really *is* a land of opportunity and there really is such a thing as disinterested human kindness.” His poor suffering mother was his exemplar, though as a boy he had been ashamed of her. Now his mother seems to be trying to help him from the other side in concert with Marian on this side: “in the bad time after Curt’s death she came every night to join the spirit of my dead son... My two ghosts kept Ruth from getting close to me, and they made me sick for what I had done to people I loved, and what they had done to me. If I forgave Curt, I had to forgive myself.”

V

1

Joe mistakenly kills a snake that is his ally against true enemies such as gophers and moles, using a pitchfork like a devil himself. In this case he confirms Marian’s view that he should let Nature take its course and stop meddling. He acknowledges this by calling himself “as blind as a mole.” Ironically, his neighbor, a fellow pest, runs up a flag as if celebrating human blindness: “Oh, say can you see.” It is the 4th of July, the day the nation celebrates rebellion, and people are shooting off illegal fireworks.

2

The pregnant Marian pants up the hill to visit the Allstons--full of life: “Here she came at us. Live! Suffer! Enjoy! Wake up! In that body, for sure, the spirit was master of the flesh.” This places Marian in

a religious tradition that extends back through Thoreau and “The Flesh and the Spirit” (1678) by Anne Bradstreet and all the way back to the Gospels. Marian also quotes from a poem by Robert Frost, the friend of Stegner, on the value of pain and “hard pleasures.” Joe is enthralled: “It was her spirit that smiled, it bubbled out of her like the bright water bubbling from the fountain.” Remembering her smile, Joe says “I could knock my forehead on the ground”—bowing down in reverence.

Fountains are icons of immortal spirit in Hawthorne, as in “The Vision of the Fountain,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which Maule’s Well is polluted. Marian is comparable to sunny Phoebe in *Seven Gables*, the redemptive Angel in the House. She differs in being pregnant, a married friend rather than a fiancé, accepting Nature rather than trying to redeem it, and tolerant of natural though ungentle conduct. Stegner taught all of American literature for many years and here he is updating Hawthorne, with whom he shared many themes and values, though his allegorical dimension grows organically from realistic narrative rather than being preconceived as in Hawthorne.

The intensity of Marian’s vitality is poignant because she is “maimed and threatened,” has lost one breast to cancer and may be dying. “Her vividness troubled the air as the blur of the returning hummingbird troubled the air” and her life too may be short. Her belief that the negatives in life are necessary for us to appreciate the positives is the same as Hawthorne’s as expressed in *The Marble Faun*, where light and shadow together create the beauty of a landscape. In contrast Joe has the view common to most people: “Pain is poison, you poor demented enthusiast with whom I am madly in love.” Declaring his platonic love for the girl in an outburst, he immediately feels awkward and sorry for his aging wife Ruth: “I felt a gush of tenderness, not so much because she had been my wife and my intimate for fifty years, as because she was mortal and threatened like the girl beside her.”

The phonecall from his chatty neighbor Fran LoPresti juxtaposes her shallow conventional artifice to the authentic depth of Marian. Ironically, when Fran complains about “that gang of beatniks” and her child Julie hating her, she sounds like Joe discussing Peck and Curtis. After the call, Marion defends these kids and the younger generation they represent. In contrast, walking along the lane to the LoPrestis’ Fourth of July party, Joe sees dark mistletoe killing the oaks, analogous to the hippie parasites in his bo tree: “The more ravaged the tree, the more healthy those kissing-clusters.” Joe’s place has become, to him, a metaphor of America being overcome by parasites.

3

Joe and Ruth visit the LaPresti place with a present intending to patch up their relations “sadly out of whack since the Fourth of July.” This flash forward, skipping over the 4th of July party, is an example of the Modernist technique of non-linear narrative. The effect is to stimulate curiosity about what might have happened at the party, to heighten anticipation, and to establish a vivid detailed image of Fran LoPresti’s disturbing sculpture—a Postmodernist contrast to their “Christmas present”—persuading the reader in advance to identify with Joe’s criticism of the sculpture at the party.

Lucio LoPresti has finished his new patio but “it was like an unhappy woman with a tight mouth.” Now, having always been a man of “incessant new beginnings,” Lucio himself appears to be finished: “The expanse of tiles gleamed like an abandoned Roman bath. It would have made a splendid place to open your veins.” In contrast, Joe is still incessantly beginning new projects and forever defending against invading enemies like a Roman. While her husband works in the concrete, Fran LoPresti works in the abstract. She herself is said to be “abstracted” and her sculpture is abstract Expressionism in the Postmodernist mode. She welds incongruous objects into “messes of junk” that Joe compares to “the leavings of litterbugs in a Yellowstone hot springs”—trash polluting the natural world. This sculpture is her “her major creation,” evidently more important than her daughter Julie.

The sculpture is “darkly” female—a “dark lady” in literary tradition. Her exposed torso is shiny “with welds like scars.” Fran’s welding of a modern female makes her abstraction the cultural equivalent of Tom *Weld* scarring the feminine landscape with his bulldozer. Actually worse, because Fran is debasing herself. Her “New Woman” is a lifeless Machine in the Garden, like V in the dump at the end of the Postmodernist nightmare *V*. (1963) by the cynic Thomas Pynchon. Her breasts are made of typewriter ribbon spools, her “gangrenous guts” are a keyboard, her neck is a “hammer handle wrapped with leather like the neck of one

of those African women stretched with circle after circle of copper wire.” Her face is composed only of the hammer’s down-hooking claws.” The claws of a hammer jerk out what holds things together. Her skirt is a “galvanized boiler with rivets running like a row of buttons from belt to hem,” harder to remove than a chastity belt. With parts “rescued from the dump,” she may be said to have been reborn after being dumped. Ironically, this New Woman is standing on a new “pedestal”—Feminist instead of Victorian. Joe can “see through” Fran’s new creation both figuratively and literally.

Joe says, “I think it’s a portrait of Julie.” Ruth replies, “Julie, or Fran’s feelings about Julie?” Then she adds, “If you did a portrait of Curtis, would it resemble you?” We stared at each other almost with hatred.” Both of them blame Joe to some extent for the fate of their son, a tension between them that further explains Joe’s hurtful declaration of love for Marian. Ironically, Ruth disapproves of Fran for being Victorian, for wanting Julie to conform to her own social preferences: “She was afraid she’d grow up beat, or a lady vet...[like Annie] She wanted a nice sweet feminine domestic girl...” Joe is Victorian in siding with parents against rebellious children. He thinks Julie “is a monster,” whereas Ruth is sympathetic to her and blames Fran for being inflexible like her sculpture, much as she blames Joe for inflexibility toward Curtis. The role of Ruth throughout the novel in countering Joe’s excesses greatly reduces his implied criticism of the young New Woman. Postmodernism is the larger target of Stegner.

4

Whatever happened at the party, it had destroyed their relationship with their neighbors the LoPrestis. The 4th of July party scene has been delayed like fireworks until anticipation peaks. The comparison of the LoPresti place to a baseball field identifies it with democratic mainstream America, ironically, since the lower classes can attend baseball games whereas this private party is a selective cross-section of the international upper and professional classes from as far away as Soviet Russia: a city manager, a “big-time” subdivider, rich neighbors, college professors, gentlemen-farmers, honest-to-god farmers, retired generals, airline pilots, advertising men, the widow of an internationally famous oil geologist, the wife of an internationally famous architect, a Nobel Prize winner in medicine, and an exiled tyrant—“our resident dictator, the man in the white coat I had mistaken for a bartender.”

Fran is “a warm sort of woman, almost tediously female, as affectionate as she was affected.” Joe feels her forcing him to be affected too, to be a dishonest critic. He is polite and lies about what he thinks of her sculpture: “You should feel very good about it, I think.” After some drinks, however, he loses his inhibitions. He spots the developer groping women and sets his rear aflame with Fran’s blowtorch. Joe actually gains in stature by this violation of decorum and fire safety—becoming a rogue avenger. But then he and Lucio and some other men advance technology by constructing an acetylene cannon and blowing tin cans and other fodder down into the gully, confirming the opinion of Russian guests that Americans are a barbarous and warlike people with interior weapons.

After his adolescent male frivolity, Joe attempts to rejoin the women “still deep in the sort of talk women get into—about clothes, children, P.T.A., local politics, conservation, world affairs, art, music, books, that sort of thing—and they looked at me with some amusement and waved me away.” This comic portrayal of self-sufficient women exposes the condescension toward women Joe expresses in the phrase “the sort of talk women get into.” He mocks himself for his chauvinism by acknowledging that “their sort of talk” is about almost everything important—including the P.T.A.—more extensive, diverse, serious, and adult than the males’ talk while shooting off their cannon.

This compliment to women transcends Fran’s ugly New Woman. These women are not New. They care about children and the P.T.A. They represent intelligent women common to all times. Joe the drunk thinks he is being funny but actually makes himself the likely butt of derogatory jokes by following their talk with his adolescent prank when he plugs in the cement mixer while Annie the lady vet is bent into it reaching for a cold beer—“her rump reared up.” (Joe seems to have a fixation on rears and this prank is worse than the groping by the developer because Annie is in no position to slap his face or even to identify him and she is made a public spectacle.) Outrageously, Joe puts the blame on the city manager and plays the gentleman, handing Annie his handkerchief, saying, “That was a kid trick if I ever saw one. It’s a pity people drink when they don’t know how to hold it. Public officials at that.” After he sobers up, Joe is ashamed that “I

have wagged my ass's ears among the foolish and the drunken." Hypocritically, he has behaved with the rude, deceptive and presumptuous self-indulgence he has criticized in Peck.

The tipsy city manager gets a call and leaves the party in a police car, evidence to the Russian guests that law in America is "enforced by alcoholics." This novel was published in 1967 during the Cold War when Soviet propaganda was a popular subject of humor in America. These Russian guests watch the party celebrating independence with "stony Party eyes" and make generalizations about Americans that are as ignorant as some of those made by Peck, who ought to know better since he lives here. It is ironic from the start that these Russians, whose people are stereotyped worldwide for drunkenness, criticize Americans for drunkenness. Joe does not ask Marian whether she thinks Americans should resist the worldwide expansion of Communist totalitarianism or let nature take its course. He let his own lower nature take its course and "I have mocked a friend in such a way that she will never like or trust me again."

Because he was a literary agent Fran thinks Joe is the pope of art criticism: "She hadn't been able to read my bull." Nor has Annie. Joe facetiously consults Annie for her opinion of Fran's sculpture, drawing upon her expertise as a judge of dog shows. "What is it?" Annie asks. She circles around it judging features as if the New Woman is a dog. Joe encourages her nonsense by pointing at the boiler skirt and announcing, "It's an Ashcan Hound." Annie laughs so hard she "fell upon me and embraced me, roaring." Then he notices that Fran is standing just a few feet away, seeing and overhearing. Her face "wore every expression I never expected to see there—disappointment, rage, a distended ugly vanity, and hatred, hatred." In that moment Joe sees "the spirit that created" the New Woman. He has laughed at her dream of being recognized as a great artist. He is sorry of course, for he actually likes Fran. "Sober, I would have taken pains to protect her from scoffers like myself."

5

Joe hates himself for violating the golden rule, for doing to Fran "precisely what I most loathe when it is done to me." Empathizing with Fran, he recalls an occasion of his own humiliation and a schoolgirl whose feelings he deeply hurt when he was a boy. He repents his cruelty, expressing his empathy with the schoolgirl in a paraphrase of Jesus Christ. Ironically, to atone for his sin against Fran, "I would have to lie my head off, because here the only kindness was to lie."

Then here comes the primary model for the sculpture, the sullen daughter Julie, "slouching with her face closed." Alienated youth: "On her seat the slick stain of bareback riding was a part of her natural coloration, like the scut of a deer." Julie is passionately attached to her horse like Jewel is to his in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by Faulkner, but whereas Jewel is devoted to his mother, Julie hates hers. The contrast is evidence of the breakdown of the family in the later 20th century. The identification of Julie with the claw-faced sculpture is implied when Fran backs her up against a bumper in a tirade of criticism and Julie "looked as if she might come out clawing at any minute." When Joe interrupts their "mortal duel, their eyes stabbed me." All this makes sweet Marian sound remote from reality when she exclaims, as Joe and Ruth prepare to leave, "But Joe's been the life of the party!"

Back at his house, Joe hears a party going on down in Peck's camp in the bottom. "I stood between the revelry I despised without knowing what went on and the more elderly revelry I despised because I had just been part of it." This parallel between the two 4th of July parties, Joe's drunken misconduct and his rudeness to his hostess all reduce the force of his criticisms of Peck and the younger generation and strengthen the judiciously tolerant moral position of Ruth.

6

The lengthy rendering of the noisy revels going on is followed by Marian's quiet announcement to Joe and Ruth that her cancer is back and that she probably has no more than three months to live. "All day, all through that hectic party, she had had that locked up in her." She is not going to take any radiation treatments because they might damage her unborn child. To Joe, her cancer is among "the undiminished forces of disorder in the night." In the background he hears the disorderly crowd down at Peck's party singing "Give me that old-time religion" and in contradiction "yelling the delights of chaos."

These young hedonists are actually celebrating their rejection of the old-time religion, while Joe cannot reconcile the old religion with his observations of Nature—his Naturalism. Another irony is that Marian, so accepting of the natural order and all the little live things, should be destroyed by her own cells “rebellious against the order that had created them”—analogous to the younger generation rebelling against the social order that created them. Another irony is that while her death appears to epitomize the cruel deterministic injustice of Nature destroying the innocent, a theme of literary Naturalism, in the end her self-sacrificial heroism epitomizes the human spirit transcending Nature.

7

Joe invades the enemy camp to stop all the loud banging so that Marian can sleep in peace. “It smelled like a Navaho encampment.” Unlike Indians who hunted animals, these kids are “kicks-hunters.” They do not adapt to Reality to survive, they escape Reality for thrills. They are crawling into a section of highway culvert pipe while others pound on it with clubs, random noise without the meaning of Indian drums: “*Jesus*, that drives you right out of your skull!” From the Indians and from the old-time religion of Jesus they are as disconnected as the culvert pipe.

Turning on his flashlight, Joe is shocked to catch Julie LaPresti having sex under a tree. His worst fears are confirmed. “They *were* as promiscuous as howler monkeys, evidently, and they were not careful about confining their activities to the reasonably mature.” He gets mad, tells off Peck and orders them all to get off his land. “And for that, who was to blame? Peck, with his compulsion to break all laws and deny all authority, or I with my emotional inability to accept anything he stood for?”

VI

1

At the airport meeting John, who has left his work up in the cold north and flown home, Joe is presumptuous to criticize him for not loving his wife enough to tell her what to do. John consistently defers to Marian, unlike Joe, who fences with her and often overrides his own wife. John’s faith in Marian is implicitly reinforced by religious faith, for of all the islands in the Aleutians, he is working on “Saint-Paul Island.” As a prophet saving endangered species, John is a modern parallel to his namesake, a Christian prophet like Saint Paul who preached on the island of Patmos—cold science at one extreme, fiery evangelism at the other. Joe is the one who twice exclaims “good God.” Then he begs John to disregard science and believe in a miracle: “Miracles happen all the time.” Although Joe is acting out of protective love of Marian, he admits “I don’t understand anything she does.” Ironically, he tells John that Marian has “given up,” whereas she has just begun to fight.

Peck appears on his motorcycle, apologizes to Joe and tries to persuade him to let him stay and open his school. He explains that the banging on the culvert pipe was part of an experiment in becoming “really cleansed. Purified.” Clearly an advance over old-time religion. Joe asks him if the purification had led the devotees to reconciliation with their parents: “Not quite,” he said. “There’s too much that has to be changed in the Establishment before anybody could be reconciled to *it*.” This unwillingness to compromise is analogous to Joe’s attitude toward his son: “He was Curtis all over again, but worse, madder, more insistent.” He refuses all over again to compromise, though by now the reader is probably just as sick as he is of Peck and his crowd. The complexity of Joe is evident in his mixed feelings after Peck rides away, “spattering gravel back toward me in a pebbly rain.... Relieved? Justified? Oh no. Sick, half nauseated from anger, baffled and unsettled and vaguely guilty.”

2

In his guilt Joe wonders if he should have made a better effort: “What if, early in our acquaintance, I had crossed the creek?” Like the whole countercultural revolution of the 1960s, Peck leaves behind a lot of trash but also a few improvements worth keeping, such as the bridge. In the end, however, Peck confirms Joe’s view of him as dangerous, whatever may have been his best intentions, by leaving behind exposed

electric wires: “If he had left the bridge and treehouse for Debby’s use—and I did not entirely deny the possibility—he had managed to leave it so that she would electrocute herself the first time she came to play.” Joe knocks Peck’s dangerous philosophy like he knocked Fran’s sculpture: “The culvert at the edge of the brush hummed like Fran LoPresti’s welded woman when I knocked it with my fist.” Peck’s planned University of the Free Mind would have been a University of the Empty Mind: “It seemed to me that the culvert up there, hollow and resonant, Peck’s perfect monument, troubled the air at intervals with a faint, swarming hum when the wind blew through it.”

3

Joe now feels alienated because he evicted the alienated. “Was it my fault? A lot of people thought so—even, I was afraid, Marian.” Julie LoPresti avoids him. He sees her riding around with Dave Weld and “more often I encountered her at the Catlin cottage or on the trail or lane, riding with Debby.” Julie is being changed by her babysitting of Debby and her exposure to Marian.

The anxiety of Joe is partly due to his already having lost both his father and his son without being able to do anything to prevent their deaths. Both of them contrast with Marian in their weakness, his father who shot himself and his son who may have deliberately allowed himself to die. Thinking above all of her unborn child, Marian fights for life because she “felt that she had to stay in good health for her dying.” She has always been vividly alive and now, facing death, she is even more intense: “Do you suppose I feel the shortness of time because I want to experience everything and feel everything that the race has ever felt?” Joe is moved by her transcendence of self: “Do you know how magnificent you are?’ I said shakily.... ‘You sit thinking how little time there is to be loving and generous’.” He watches her “with the apprehensive alertness of a young man in love,” his feeling of youth evidence of a spiritual rebirth: “I never lost hope.” But outside her cottage, there is a buzzard cruising high in the distance.

4

Marian and John begin preparing their daughter for the loss of her mother by conditioning her to transfer her dependency to her father. “If she tried to climb into Marian’s lap, Marian held her away until John could take her.” John’s love for his little girl is conveyed when “Touching her—I had noticed how much he touched her lately, his hand always on her head, his arm around her... So we’re trying to phase me out and John in... Then it’ll be easier for both of them when I go.”

Her deeply painful sacrifice of her maternal relationship for the sake of her daughter and her husband is beyond Joe’s comprehension. The presumptuous Joe thinks Marian’s preparations for her death are presumptuous. He butts in to the extent of begging John “to make her abort the wretched fetus that was shortening her life.” The term “wretched fetus” makes him sound like Margo. Joe would “make her” have an abortion, whereas John replies, “She’s entitled to do it her way. It’s her death.”

5

Fran calls on the phone enraged, blaming Joe because Julie is pregnant at age 15 and has run away to join the hippies. She sounds like her sculpture looks. She is even more angry at “modern youth” than Joe. Others now dislike Joe for evicting the hippies, whereas Fran hates him for allowing them to set up camp in the first place: “I just wanted you to know what you started.” Joe is fortunate he evicted them when he did because Fran calls the police and the newspaper reports “RAID UNCOVERS YOUTH DRUG-SEX RING. IRATE PARENT FLOORS HIPPIE....girls, including juveniles, were sometimes traded around among sleeping bags.” The raid confirms that Peck is a danger to the community he despises. We wonder if Fran is the parent who slugged a hippie.

Fran wants Marian to persuade Julie to have an abortion. “Apparently I have influence over her. She’ll listen to me.” Of course she cannot. Joe imagines “Fran charging up to Marian, pregnant and dying and unalterably addicted to life, and proposing that she advise for another the abortion she would die rather than have performed on herself.” He suggests to Marian, “You could get Margo to persuade her.” Ironically, Joe is now identifying with the values of the howler monkeys. John says of Julie, “She wanted to get pregnant to spite Fran, and now she has.” Marian admits she has been naïve about the hippies. John adds of Julie, “The kid will do exactly what she pleases in any case.”

Marian declines until she is “flat in her bed and nauseated.” Now she is like most people dying of cancer, except that she resists drugs (unlike the hippies) and is fighting to live until she can give birth. “Death and life grew in her at an equal pace, the race would be down to the wire.”

Joe and Ruth see their neighbor Tom Weld bulldozing on his land and “we took refuge in fury at that barebacked Neanderthal and his brutish machine. I associated his mutilation of the hill with the mutilations that Marian had suffered and was still to suffer, and I hated Weld so passionately that I shook.” Joe is overwrought. Developing land to build homes for less affluent people to live in is not analogous to cancer. Joe is equating his loss of scenery with the loss of Marian.

In citing Crèvecoeur's pastoral *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) Joe enlarges the significance to him of Tom Weld and his bulldozer with the literary device of synecdoche, making this one event represent all such events in the gradual displacement of the Garden by the suburbs and the City throughout the country for the past two centuries. His clinging to hope that his personal Eden can be preserved for awhile longer is analogous to his hoping that Marian would preserve her life for awhile longer by having an abortion: “You mustn't kid yourself,” says his wife the Realist. Both his hopes are to stop natural processes, development and birth, in order to preserve what he loves.

At the same time that Joe in his heart is unrealistically hopeful, in his head he retains a grim Naturalistic view of life evoked in his memory by the persistent smell of tarweed. He sees Marian as a victim. He tells Ruth that none of her qualities helped Marian to survive—intelligence, foresight, determination, courage, grace. “But she hasn't given up,” Ruth answers, affirming Marian's transcendent spirit. Ruth goes on to persuade Joe to take a larger view, that Tom Weld is not ruining everything and that they are fortunate to have the position and scenery they have: “Lots of people don't have a tenth as much.”

Close to the end Marian tells Joe and Ruth, “Bless you both. I like to think you're my father and mother sent back to me.” Joseph is like a father to the Christ-evoking figure. This chapter prolongs their anxious wait for a call from John to come and drive her to the hospital, further dramatizing how much they love Marian. In the background the sound of the bulldozer is “like the hoarse breathing of a man heaving his weight against great stones or tree trunks,” the process that has been going on since the Puritans began clearing New England farms with axes in 1620.

VII

On the way to the Catlin cottage to drive Marian to the hospital, the analogy between the bulldozer and cancer is followed by the tarantula in the middle of the road. “Under most circumstances, I would have run over him... Now, for some reason I jerked the wheel and straddled him...” On his way to serve Marian, he is also on his way to adopting her moral vision of acceptance. The tarantula is a metaphor of death and Ruth reacts “as if the thing had crawled on her exposed heart.”

Despite her realism, Ruth and Joe both “had never believed it was inevitable...in spite of the visible symptoms of her fading life, we had not accepted as she accepted.” When they arrive at the Catlin cottage, Debby is in her mother's room saying goodbye to her. Joe notices wasps going in and out through a crack in the siding of the cottage and watches one: “I distinctly heard the sound of his tiny mandibles gnawing on the wood. I thought it could have been the wasp to which Marian had given back his life when he fell in her pot of jam.” Just as she accepted the wasp, Marian has accepted her death. Her object “was to say goodbye without Debby's ever knowing it was forever. No tears, no sobbing, above all no outward sign that she was in pain. The final act of the phasing out.”

Hearing her voice now, Joe is in awe: "Above everything I was proud of her and for her. She would go like a queen, directing her life to the end." As he waits for her beside the car, "The bulldozer roared into life again, much closer than before." This provokes Joe to think of Indian reverence for Mother Earth, of "the druids who worshipped trees, and of the Great Goddess.... I swear I thought of them all, because with that destroyer tearing up the hill Marian loved, and just at the moment when she was ready to make her last trip from the country house she loved, I had to think in her terms. The earth was literally alive for her; she would suffer to see it mutilated." Under her influence, Joe is evolving spiritually from Naturalism into pantheism, the identification of Nature with the divine.

2

Frail and fading, Marian is wrapped in white satin with death in her face, and yet, "Even then, her whole spirit braced against the agony of parting and the agony of her riddled flesh, she could smile... It was not an expression she wore, it was an illumination.... If you had painted her at that moment, you would have had to paint her with a halo." She is a martyred saint, dying in agony.

Their way to the hospital is blocked at "the wobbly bridge that had gone unrepaired for fifteen months since Weld had said he would fix it." We should recall that Joe himself initiated a series of consequences when he intimidated Weld into building a fence and did not offer to pay half the cost. Joe could have paid to repair the bridge himself. Thirty feet up the hill from the bridge young Dave Weld is sitting on his idling bulldozer, while Julie sits on her horse talking to someone in the Volkswagen hippie bus, which has returned with Jim Peck on his motorcycle to pick up the rest of his stuff at the camp. "And it was not likely that anyone in the bus could have passed the nervous Judas on the bulldozer without pausing for some release of scorn or hatred."

Dave Weld on his bulldozer, the more destructive Machine in the Garden, has succeeded Peck on his motorcycle as the lead villain in Joe's moral allegory. By calling him a "Judas" he makes young Weld a (1) betrayer of the sacred land in a pantheistic vision; (2) betrayer of Marian as the human incarnation of the mutilated Mother Earth; and (3) betrayer of Marian as a Christ-evoking figure—elevating her in the archetypal paradigm from Earth to Sky (see "Model of Metaphors").

The powerful forces represented by the bulldozer prevail throughout history: "They were all looking up at Dave Weld now." Converging here at the bridge, "All our complicated relationships erupted into one of their consequences." Desperate to move on, Joe honks his horn—"two light blips." Again, it is Joe who initiates the series of consequences. "Perhaps the abrupt starting of two motors, Honda and Volkswagen, frightened the horse; perhaps Dave Weld's lurch to the gears sent clods rolling to burst around the gelding's feet. Perhaps, indeed, my two touches on the horn did it all."

Caught between the roaring bus and the motorcycle the horse spins and rears and stampedes onto the bridge and falls through gaps in the planks with all four legs: "The gelding braced itself like a sitting dog on one flopping hoof and one peg of bloody white bone." John—more capable than Joe—leaps out of the car and puts the horse out of its misery with a hammer. Then the men work together, including even Peck, dragging the dead horse and pushing it into the gully. Finally able to drive on, Joe sees Marian in the back seat lift her head from John's shoulder and roll against the seat with a "strained, floundering motion like the threshing of the broken horse." The suffering of the horse is an *objective correlative* for the equivalent or greater suffering of Marian, intensifying empathy and horror.

Epilogue

Once again it is Spring, as the novel cycles through a year like *Walden*, the season when Joe first met Marian, who is Spring in spirit. "Tom Weld could put his bulldozer back to work tearing the heart out of his hill," just as the death of Marian tore out Joe's heart. "Despite her urgings, I do not accept the universe." This is an allusion to the famous declaration by 19th-century Transcendentalist leader Margaret Fuller, "I accept the universe." The allusion implicitly compares Marian to Fuller and to Emerson, whereas Joe resembles Melville, their philosophical adversary: "Burrowing among sunny flowers, I never lost the

sense of the presence of evil.” Evil such as the cancer that ate Marian and the gopher that ate the roots of his cherry tree last spring—“the cherry tree with death at its roots.”

Joe summarizes the creed of Marian: “Love even the threat and the pain, feel yourself fully alive, cast a bold shadow, accept, accept. What we call evil is only a groping toward good, part of the trial and error by which we move toward the perfected consciousness.” Her belief transcends this world and corresponds to the Christian view of the soul. Joe remains earthbound, practical, and bitter: “I do not accept, I am not reconciled.” He reverts to Naturalism and asks, “Why that crucifixion death...?” This again casts Marian as a Christ-evoking figure in her exemplary self-sacrifice.

An answer to Joe is suggested in the next two paragraphs when he sees Julie pregnant and walking together with her parents in the pasture, followed by their dog—all pastoral imagery. They “were a family.” Compared to before, they are like a holy family. Unlike Joe, they are reconciled. Even Fran. They have accepted each other and the unborn child, as Marian would have them do. They have mended bridges. “They were talking together in a way I had never seen them doing. And when they turned at Weld’s orchard fence and started back I saw that Julie’s once lank and stringy hair was in a single braid such as her mother used to wear. So maybe Julie had got something she obscurely wanted. I did not think that the child would be put out for adoption, as Fran in her first rage said it would be.”

Traditionally a child or a pregnancy represents hope, especially at the end of a story. The death of Marian’s baby seems to make her self-sacrifice, enduring so much pain by refusing treatment for its sake, a meaningless ordeal. Her situation is paralleled by Joe’s in his garden: “it would be the devil itself to spray without killing what I wanted to preserve.” His view of life at the end remains Naturalistic: “And think of how random and indeterminate it is, think how helplessly we must submit, think how impossible it is to control or direct it.” Joe has lost his faith in God, like so many other characters in 20th-century fiction, like Frederick Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, especially after Catherine and the baby die. Hemingway transcends Frederick and affirms faith nevertheless, as personified in the priest. In this novel faith is personified in Marian, who cites Christian doctrine but does not preach it. She preaches Nature instead. God is mentioned over 40 times and Christ and Jesus 9 times. Her own baby does not live, but her influence saves Julie’s baby and contributes to the reconciliation of the LoPresti family. She is also an inspirational exemplar to her daughter Debby and to her husband John.

In the prologue Joe says, “I don’t believe in conversions.” Marian does not revive his religious faith, nor turn him from a Melvillian into an Emersonian, but she does save and revive his soul, as indicated in the last paragraph of the novel: “I acknowledge my conversion. It turns out to be for me as I once told her it would be for her daughter. I shall be richer all my life for this sorrow.” His empathy for Marian is a bridge that has opened the way into his heart. “It was Marian who had exposed me to feeling as I had hoped not to be exposed again... I was never willing to suffer with others, and when my own pain hit me I crawled into a hole.... But where the death of my son drove me to find a hole and crawl in it, the death of this girl I knew for barely half a year keeps driving me into the open, and I hate it.... Marian has invaded me, and though my mind may not have changed I will not be the same....” Now that she is in his heart, there is hope for Joe.

In expressing religious belief, Stegner employs the iceberg principle of Hemingway: “The supernatural probably doesn’t have any place in either history or fiction. You have to deal with the supernatural as a motivation and a belief, but...I think you’d be wise to suppress your belief.” He said that reading a novel is like looking through a lens: “We look through it for the purified and honestly offered spirit of the artist.” His commitment to objectivity in narration is a characteristic of Neoclassical, Realist and Modernist aesthetic traditions and is basic to his integrity as a scholar, historian, and biographer. He induces the feeling in the reader of fiction that he is reporting and rendering and searching for the truth, not preaching. In a secular age, religious belief alienates many readers. Stegner allows readers to identify with Joe—though undercutting him all along as not always reliable even according to his own judgment—while holding up a higher consciousness in Marian.

Michael Hollister (2014)

