

## ANALYSIS

“The Women on the Wall” (1949)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“The Woman on the Wall’ and ‘The View from the Balcony’ are equally chilling stories which involve the revelation of the ‘natural’ in somewhat the same sense as it is used in ‘Butcher Bird,’ where it is related to Bo as killer, as butcher bird. The first of these is about women during the Second World War waiting for their men to return. Gradually, with Mr. Palmer, who observes them benignly at first as ‘quiet, peaceful, faithful to the times and seasons of their vigil,’ we learn about them one by one. Soon he becomes aware that within the group there is a groundswell of antipathy and spite in addition to grave problems: Mrs. Corson is on dope; the pregnant girl’s husband has been dead three years; plain prim Mrs. Kendall has an adopted son, whom she refers to as a ‘love child,’ tied to her apron strings. The eruption and confrontation is fierce, and when quiet settles again we realize that the ‘civilized’ scene is inseparable from the ‘natural,’ just as to the peaceful beach ‘the tides leaned in all the way from Iwo and Okinawa’.”

Robert Canzoneri

“Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence”

*Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, ed. Anthony Arthur  
(G. K. Hall 1982) 68-69

“The first tentative step, certainly unconsciously so, toward the achievement of [his] voice came in a short story. ‘The Women on the Wall,’ published just after World War II. It is a story that features a Mr. Palmer, a man of late middle-age, retired, who is writing his memoirs in his house near the Pacific Ocean. He is courtly in manner and, even in 1945, seems out of his time in a present more violent, full of conflict, less genteel, less polite than he seems to expect. Rather than writing, he spends much of his time looking out the window—a habit that reminds us of Joe Allston, his successor in the later story, ‘A Field Guide to Western Birds.’

Revealed not through first person, but in the third-person, limited omniscient point of view that had been a Stegner favorite, the center of consciousness, Mr. Palmer, is nevertheless the earliest appearance of what might be called the elderly, writer-observer figure. He is experienced, sensitive to his environment, an observer of people, a bit skeptical and self-doubting, and despite a somewhat hardened shell, vulnerable to emotion—all qualities that would be carried over, although in somewhat different proportions, to Joe Allston in ‘Field Guide,’ *All the Little Live Things* (1967), and *The Spectator Bird* (1976); Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose* (1971); and Larry Morgan in *Crossing to Safety* (1987). Like these first-person narrators, Palmer would seem to reflect a split in Stegner’s own personality between detachment and involvement and the internal conflict that sometimes resulted. Finding a voice would seem to have come, at least in part, out of his ability to cast this split in his own life and personality into fictional form.

While then narrators in the novels who would evolve out of Palmer all have a romantic streak, Palmer’s romanticism is so extreme, it carries him into fundamental errors about the people he observes. In the story he looks out his study window at the women who line up along the wall every day. Navy wives who during World War II wait at their mailboxes for word of their husbands, and out of his bookishness he is reminded of Homer’s Penelope ‘on the rocky isle of Ithaca above the winedark sea’ and finds himself getting ‘a little sentimental about these women.’

Of course, the point of the story depends on the unreliability of his perceptual framework—the women turn out, on closer acquaintance, to be very unromantic figures indeed. One of his Penelopes turns out to be a dope addict; another smothers her child with overprotectiveness; another is filled with ‘cold hostility’; another, unmarried, has become pregnant and worries that her lover may not come back and ‘make a decent woman’ of her. They are backbiting, self-involved, and in conflict with one another—not at all the placid, patient, heroic figures he has imagined them to be and admired. It is in a sense...a story that within itself

turns from the authoritarian voice to a dialogic conflict of several voices, as each woman in the end figuratively ‘insists’ on establishing her own real identity.... Mr. Palmer...seems to certain of his own vision that both he and the reader are shocked by his mistake, and the thought that sticks with us from ‘The Women on the Wall’ is the complete failure of the center of consciousness to see things as they really are. Ultimately, Palmer’s fussiness and egocentricity alienate us, and his errors are so gross that we cannot trust or believe in him.”

Jackson J. Benson  
“Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner’s Fiction”  
*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, ed. Charles E. Rankin  
(U New Mexico 1996) 218-20

“The story features Mr. Palmer, a figure vaguely reminiscent of Stegner himself, who is in late middle age, retired, and writing his memoirs in a house near the Pacific Ocean. He is courtly in manner and, even in 1945, seems out of his time in a present more violent, full of conflict, less genteel, and less polite than he seems to expect. Just as the author was doing when he got the idea for the story, Palmer spends much of his time looking out his window. (This is also a preoccupation of his successor, Joe Allston, in the second of these postwar germinal stories, ‘Field Guide to the Western Birds.’

Although the story is not told in the first person, but in the third-person, limited-omniscient point of view that had been a Stegner favorite, the center of consciousness, Mr. Palmer, is nevertheless the earliest appearance of what might be called the elderly writer- observer figure who is the most common protagonist of Stegner’s late fiction. Palmer is experienced, sensitive to his environment, an observer of people, a bit skeptical and self-doubting, and despite a somewhat hardened shell, vulnerable to emotion—all qualities that would be carried over, although in somewhat different proportions, to Joe Allston in ‘Field Guide,’ *All the Little Live Things*, and *Spectator Bird*; Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose*; and Larry Morgan in *Crossing to Safety*. And while these later characters have a romantic streak, Palmer’s romanticism is so extreme it carries him into fundamental errors about the people he observes. This is a harsh, almost shocking story about perception and the discovery of what is real.

Palmer looks out his study window at the women who line up every day along a wall across the point overlooking the ocean. These are Army and Navy wives who, during the latter stages of World War II, are waiting at their mailboxes for word of their husbands, and out of bookishness, Palmer is reminded of Homer’s Penelope ‘on the rocky isle of Ithaca above the wine-dark sea,’ and he finds himself getting ‘a little sentimental about these women.’ Of course, the point of the story depends on the unreliability of his perceptual framework—the women, on closer acquaintance, turn out to be very unromantic figures indeed. One of his Penelopes turns out to be a dope addict who is willing to neglect her young daughter in favor of a fix; another, insecure and hysterical, smothers her child with overprotectiveness; another, unmarried, has become pregnant and worries that her lover may not come back and ‘make a decent woman’ of her. They are backbiting, self-involved, and in conflict with one another—not at all the placid, patient, heroic figures Palmer has imagined them to be and has admired.... Brought into direct contact with the women, the narrator comes to view their waiting more realistically....

As in ‘The Women on the Wall,’ each of the later novels carried by these first-person narrators has as its central concern an effort to understand and make a judgment about a major character in that novel, a pattern prefigured not only in ‘The Women on the Wall’ (where Palmer is led to make judgments about several characters), but in ‘Field Guide to the Western Birds’ as well. In making their judgments—Palmer and the novel protagonists—they identify and characterize themselves to the reader, who in turn judges them. However, each of the narrators in the later novels finds himself in a position where he is not only unsure of precisely what judgment to make, but unsure about his own ability or qualifications to make that judgment. Mr. Palmer, by contrast, seems so certain of his own vision that both he and the reader are startled by his mistake, and the thought that sticks with us from the story is the complete failure of the center of consciousness to see things as they really are. Ultimately, Palmer’s fussiness and egocentricity alienate us and his errors are so gross that we cannot trust or believe in him.

In an essay called ‘A Problem in Fiction,’ the author tells how he wrote the story, a rare look into his process of composition. ‘The Women on the Wall’ was not one of those that sometimes mysteriously

seems to write itself, but one that had to be hewn out step by step by main force. The scene viewed by Mr. Palmer was a scene that Stegner saw out his own study window while wondering what project he would start on next.... He was on his way to writing a story—he had a place, a group of people, a situation, even a classical parallel (Penelope waiting for Ulysses)—but he had no idea what the story was going to be about.... Stegner brought the dog into the story and used it not only as a means to bring Palmer into the company of the women but to lead to a characterization of one of the women, Mrs. Kendall, and to symbolically represent ‘the way everybody in the story, adult, child, or dog, was tied down helplessly and no relief for it.’ Through another woman, Mrs. Corson, who gets high on marijuana and becomes talkative, the conditions of the other women are exposed to Palmer, and the ‘idyllic and wistful picture [he] started with has been violently shoved aside and the turmoil of suffering and frustrated humanity it has covered is revealed.’

What is most interesting in this description is the interplay of experience and imagination in the creative process, how the original scene—the smell of pine and eucalyptus and wood smoke and kelp; the sound of the surf on the beach; and the sight of the women waiting quietly and patiently for the mail—stimulated the writer. First he was reminded of literary parallels, not only of Penelope on the rocky isle of Ithaca above the wine-dark sea, but of Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn.’ In both cases a situation very dramatic was encapsulated, waiting to be revealed by the poets’ imagination. Second, he was led to realize that he, too, must stay with the picture and by moving it slightly and letting his imagination work, ‘reveal what was hidden behind it.’

Many details came to him out of ongoing experience—the barking dog—or recent experience—Mrs. Corson smokes marijuana because, having just interviewed Mexican youths in Los Angeles, Stegner ‘had marijuana on [his] mind’.... It never seems to have occurred to Stegner in looking back on the composition of this story, that his theme here, the revelation of stark reality behind romantic appearances, was a common one in his work.... It was the Realistic Period that was Stegner’s specialty as a teacher of American literature. In respect to discovering what lies beneath the surface, one can see ‘The Women on the Wall’ as a clear preface to *Angle of Repose* and *The Spectator Bird*. Both of his prize-winning novels are novels of discovery....

The elderly, observer-writer figure that we have already seen in ‘The Women on the Wall’...vaguely resembled the author. (Palmer is older than Stegner was at the time of writing, he is not a professional writer, and he is far less skeptical and realistic.) With the evolution of this persona in the late novels, starting with Joe Allston in ‘Field Guide,’ and going on with Joe Allston in *All the Little Live Things* (1967) and *Spectator Bird* (1976), Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose*, and finally Larry Morgan in *Crossing to Safety*, this central character becomes more and more like his creator. Larry and Molly Morgan are so much like Wallace and Mary Stegner that at book signings for *Crossing to Safety* readers wanted to know why Mary (who unlike Molly had never suffered from polio) was not wearing braces....

While Mr. Palmer in ‘The Women on the Wall’ blunders into truth and is somewhat sorry for it, Joe Allston holds a stricter standard for himself and for others. Like Palmer, he makes judgments and is proven wrong, but his judgments do not come out of his romantic illusions or his egotism, they come from better motives—out of his skeptical attempts to see behind appearances and his concern for the welfare of others. Unlike Mr. Palmer, Allston (and all his counterparts) is a learning character. Mr. Palmer is not going to modify his viewpoint or beliefs, but Allston, even at 66, is still wondering what the world is about and making judgments while wondering if he is right. Typically, not only in ‘Field Guide’ but also in the novels, the narrator at any given moment may or may not be mistaken or wrongheaded. He isn’t sure and neither are we, that is the beauty of it—life is ambiguous at best. Stegner’s voice here provides ample opportunity for complex perceptions that can be variously interpreted. Stegner may have been scorned by some post-modernists as a ‘realist,’ but like Henry James or Edith Wharton his world is a rich mixture of complexities and ambiguities.”

Jackson J. Benson  
*Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1998) 66-70, 79, 81, 125

Michael Hollister (2015)

