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Angling for Repose: Wallace Stegner and the De-Mythologizing of the American West

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ANGLING FOR REPOSE:
WALLACE STEGNER AND THE DE-MYTHOLOGIZING
OF THE AMERICAN WEST

A Dissertation

Presented to
The Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jennie A. Camp

June 2004

Advisor: Dr. Margaret Earley Whitt

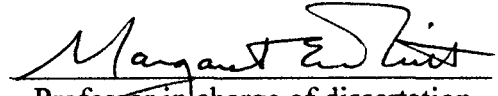
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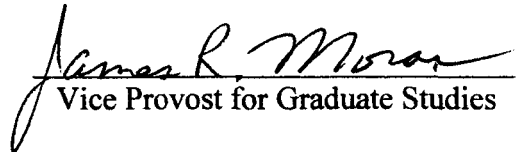
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GRADUATE STUDIES
AT
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Upon the recommendation of the chairperson of the
Department of English this dissertation is hereby accepted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy


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Abstract

When Wallace Stegner published his first book in 1937, a stereotypical Western novel invariably included a gun-slinging cowboy hero, a near-mythical gunfight at dusk, and a formulaic, predictable plot that rarely left readers unsure of who would prevail in the end. Stegner recognized the limitations of such archetypal assumptions and sought to achieve something different with his work. In this paper, I argue that Wallace Stegner asked the nuanced questions necessary to further this nation's understanding of western archetypes and, as a result, to begin to debunk the misleading mythologies of the American West.

In this study, I look first back at the predecessors who have informed Stegner's works, the mythologies in question, and the general emergence of a western American literary canon; next I turn to Stegner's nonfiction and fiction works to examine where and how he addresses such problematic western archetypes; and finally I consider how Stegner's literary successors have been influenced by his lifelong efforts to rewrite a new, more reality-based contemporary American West.

While Stegner does have predecessors – such as writers Frank Norris and Bernard DeVoto – who began to recognize and disparage the archetypes of a

glorified Old West, Stegner (1) both acknowledged and specifically cited the mythologies in his critical and historical nonfiction works, demonstrating from where they have emerged and why, and (2) attempted in his own fiction to both acknowledge and move beyond such mythologies. Through his essays, novels, and short stories, Stegner sought to draw those mythologies to the forefront and begin to dismantle them, one by one, in an effort to rewrite a more accurate portrayal of both the historical and the contemporary West.

As one looks ahead to an increasingly contemporary western American literary canon, I believe that Wallace Stegner marked an essential turning point in the canon's development; with Stegner, one learns to recognize and move beyond the mythologies that embed themselves in American language, history, and culture, and foster a literature that is rich in both history and in the diversity of today's contemporary West.

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Foreword

When I learned of Wallace Stegner's untimely death in April of 1993, I felt as if I'd lost both a friend and an opportunity. I had never met the man, but he was a grandfather of sorts, someone who knew a part of me that I was only just beginning to uncover: an unspoken part that takes quiet pride in the ancestors five generations back who trekked across the unforgiving plains and treacherous mountain passes to claim homesteads, and, perhaps above all, in the insistent stoicism and unfailing pioneer adaptability that at times runs through my veins as well. I was sitting in a newsroom in Oak Park, Illinois, when I heard the news. I don't recall who told me – whether I heard it announced on the radio or a fellow reporter broke the news – but I do remember that I was oddly paralyzed for the rest of the day. My narrow reporter's notebooks with their haphazard chicken scrawls lay quietly by my computer, waiting for the news stories I had yet to write, and somehow I could not bring myself to tackle the phone calls that needed to be made: to the local school board president to discuss implementation of a new gifted program, to the nearby Chicago Police Department to inquire about preventing street riots after an upcoming Bulls game. All I could do was stare out my second-story window onto the suburban street below with its bagel shop and convenience store and continual foot traffic to and from the El tracks two blocks

to the north, and wonder about the future of the likes of Bruce Mason, Joe Allston, Lyman Ward, and Larry and Sally Morgan.

I had always intended to meet Wallace Stegner one day. Not just at a crowded book signing, although such an encounter might have served as an opening, but in the peaceful quiet of his Los Altos Hills, California, study, where the windows would open to a tranquil jumble of dripping ferns and chattering birds and we would each fold afghans across our laps as we discussed his years as a faculty member at Bread Loaf, the struggles of teaching such a stubbornly wayward student as Ken Kesey, and the dangers of being typed by an East Coast-led publishing industry as a “western writer.” Jackson J. Benson had not yet published his biography of Stegner in the early 1990s and, aside from Forrest and Margaret Robinson’s slim 1977 volume on Stegner, little had been published about his life and works, and I imagine I fancied myself his one-day biographer, a devoted and attentive reader who would reveal to the literary world the majesty and grace of Stegner’s prose, of his skillful character development, of his lofty ambitions as a teacher and conservationist. But little did I know that Benson had long before set up a desk and computer in a corner of Stegner’s broad-windowed office, plugging away at a biography that grew into a nearly ten-year project, and that I, at age twenty-three, undoubtedly would appear more mad than brilliant if I were to tap on the windows of the office of someone whose prose has taught me something of my place in humanity but who knew nothing of me and why I might

be prowling around his property.

I was sorry, as much as anything, for poor Larry and Sally Morgan, who had returned to Battel Pond, Vermont, in Stegner's 1987 novel *Crossing to Safety* to join the supportive family circle around Charity Lang in her last days, and who now surely would be further devastated by the death of their creator. Larry and Sally were mere characters in a novel, of course, mirrored after Wallace himself and his wife Mary, but I felt a certain kinship with them since it was they who first introduced me in 1987 to both the driving emotion and quiet grace of Stegner's fiction. It was my mother who handed me *Crossing to Safety* shortly before I embarked on a five-month excursion to Madrid, Spain, to study the language and culture of a people whose history runs unimaginably deeper than the mere one-and-a-half centuries of my hardy western American forebears. I remember crying quietly on the long flight from Portland, Oregon, to Madrid, already homesick as I listened on my walkman to a loud jangle of nearly indecipherable pop tunes, a homemade tape given to me by college dorm-mates amused by my preference for the quieter poetry of Bob Dylan, and I began to enter the world of the Morgans and the Langs as we stepped back over the years of a sometimes troublesome but always loyal thirty-four-year friendship.

The characters in *Crossing to Safety* are both intense and utterly human. Larry is a professor and writer whose marriage to Sally is magnificently enviable. Afflicted with polio and in braces through much of their marriage, Sally offers a

quiet strength to Larry, who, in turn, both admires and protects his wife as the two follow Larry's university career eastward from Berkeley to Wisconsin to Vermont. The Langs, whom they meet in Madison, Wisconsin, where Larry and Sid are professors, are a curious lesson in contradictions, and although the four remain loyal friends throughout their lives together, the tensions of the Lang marriage continually are a source of angst for Larry and Sally. Sid is a poet and a dreamer. And alongside his controlling and driven wife, he appears unmotivated, unfocused, and at times even adolescent in his romantic but sometimes impractical thirst to write poetry rather than complete the research necessary to remain in good stead as a tenured university professor. Charity, whose family has followed the scholarly university route, pushes her wayward husband to put aside his poetry and set his sights on becoming a published scholar at an Ivy League school; Sid quietly fails at the scholarly research he finds so dull and sneaks off when he can to write his poems. Charity plans and organizes every moment of their lives, from the Martha Stewart-esque details necessary to enjoy a noon picnic with friends to the slices of afternoon when they will all set aside their activities and rest. Her planning is manic at times, and the tension between Charity and Sid grows increasingly more palpable as the novel progresses. But beneath Charity's obsessive need for control lies a loyalty and a sense of fun that draws the Morgans closer, and they bear her irrational list-making in order to enjoy what at times is a blissfully intimate relationship with their dearest, oldest friends.

Written when he was in his late 70s, *Crossing to Safety* was Stegner's last novel. It was published just before the fiftieth anniversary of his first novel, and although Stegner subsequently published a collection of short stories and three books of essays before his death in 1993, *Crossing to Safety* was a fitting end to a brilliant career as a novelist. For those critics who assume that Stegner's work resides only in the American West, *Crossing to Safety* moves interestingly eastward, with beautifully poetic descriptions of the Vermont woods that Wallace and Mary loved enough to call their second home:

Dew has soaked everything. I could wash my hands in the ferns, and when I pick a leaf off a maple branch I get a shower on my head and shoulders. Through the hardwoods along the foot of the hill, through the belt of cedars where the ground is swampy with springs, through the spruce and balsam of the steep pitch, I go alertly, feasting my eyes. I see coon tracks, an adult and two young, in the mud, and maturing grasses bent like croquet wickets with wet, and spotted orange Amanitas, at this season flattened or even concave and holding water, and miniature forests of club moss and ground pine and ground cedar. There are brown caves of shelter, mouse and hare country, under the wide skirts of spruce.

(6)

It was the poetry of *Crossing to Safety* that swallowed me initially, and then the complex humanity of the characters themselves. How could these be mere characters on a page when they were so real, so flawed, so intensely and humanly focused on their individual struggles with how to love and whom to trust and which way to turn?

Although set mostly in the East, the elements of Stegner's West are undeniably present, and probably these hints of the West, although subtle, are

why I later found myself wandering bookstores in search of anything by Wallace Stegner, essay or fiction, in my thirst for more. The two couples themselves are the merge and clash of East versus West: the Langs come from established and wealthy East Coast families, where expectations run high and life – as Charity demonstrates – can be insistently purposeful; the Morgans are orphaned westerners whose paths are their own and whose sense of purpose is driven only by the way that they decide to raise themselves from bed each morning. In the Langs we see both love and discord, resulting in an endless battle to enlighten and inform one another, while in the Morgans we find a marriage that in some ways exemplifies the idealized Eden of the West: Both Larry and Sally are strong and presumably self-sufficient individuals, yet they support and uplift one another unfailingly regardless of the hardships that life may bring – Sally’s polio, for example, or Larry’s dismissal from the University of Wisconsin. But despite its East/West thematic parallels, *Crossing to Safety* is far more of a lesson in character than in cultural rectitude. Stegner himself admitted in a 1989 interview with Richard W. Etulain that his aim was to record the complexities of a real friendship rather than toy with the creative devices that can turn a mere story into lasting literature:

Actually I didn’t even write it as a novel. I wrote it as a sort of memoir more for Mary and myself than for anything else, and I wasn’t at all sure I was ever going to publish it. ... [I]t was, really, in a way that no book of mine ever has been, an attempt to tell the absolute, unvarnished truth about other people and myself. Not in a sense of what is fitting for the novel, but how they literally were

in life. Inevitably I found myself inventing scenes and suppressing things, and bringing things forward in order to make the story work because I guess my habits are incorrigible; but my intention, at least, was the utter, unvarnished truth. (xi)

Perhaps it was these unassuming intentions that made the novel such a success: the emotions are real, the prose is some of his most poetic, and the story resonates far beyond the relative quietness it exudes on the page. I finished the novel shortly after arriving in Madrid, in a tiny hotel room overlooking a plaza where each morning an old woman with hunched shoulders and a loyal gray cat shuffled across the uneven cobblestones, spraying water to rinse away the dust before the morning sun began to erase the night's lingering shadows. Alone with my book and a thick thimbleful of Spanish coffee, I found myself falling in love.

Wallace Stegner died on April 12, 1993, at St. Vincent Hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico, from injuries resulting from a traffic accident two weeks earlier in Santa Fe, where he and Mary had traveled from Los Altos Hills to accept an award from the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Association. According to police reports, Wallace and Mary were returning to where they were staying after taking some friends home on the evening of March 28 when Stegner failed to yield the right of way on a dark highway and his car was struck by another vehicle. As Stegner's biographer Jackson Benson, who unfortunately is often irritatingly careful always to place Stegner in the best possible light, writes at the end of his biography:

They were in a rental car in an unfamiliar city, and their route took them on a street that crossed the main highway at the top of a hill. A car was coming from the left very fast, and it was almost impossible to see until it was nearly on top of them as Wallace pulled out from the stop sign. The car hit them broadside, breaking the corner post and smashing in the driver's-door panel. Cars stopped, and a woman who identified herself as a nurse had Mary, who was unhurt, put her cape over Wallace, who was bleeding profusely and in shock. Sadly, it was some time before word could be relayed to the authorities and an ambulance finally came to the scene. (419)

Although Stegner died from complications following the accident, he was 84 years old and had begun to battle declining health in the three years prior to his death. True to his pioneer roots, Stegner often refused to admit his own ailments, insisting instead on keeping to a rigorous schedule of travel, lectures, and accepting awards even to the point, at times, of collapse. In the late 1980s, Stegner's hip began to disintegrate, forcing him to walk with a limp – since, of course, he refused to use a cane. In early 1990, Stegner was hospitalized for internal bleeding after a particularly grueling schedule at a Park City, Utah, environmental conference. In the summer of 1992, hand pain led doctors to discover that Stegner had a blood disease called polynalgia. And while at Montana State University shortly after, Stegner collapsed onstage fifteen minutes into his lecture; he had ignored the pestering symptoms of a rather brutal case of the flu (Benson 416-418).

So when the Santa Fe accident occurred months later, Stegner was clearly feeling his age, whether or not he would have admitted to his ailments. Although

Stegner was taken to the intensive care unit with a broken collarbone, all the ribs on his left side broken, and a collapsed lung, doctors were optimistic, and after just two days they had him up and walking around. On the third day, however, Stegner contracted pneumonia and was taken back to intensive care, and shortly after he suffered a heart attack. Stegner died a week and a half later.

John Daniels, a reporter for *The Oregonian*, cuts nicely to the quick when he writes about Stegner's life work in his 1996 review of Benson's biography:

New York knew how to handle Wallace Stegner: Ignore his work, and when something had to be written about it, call him the "dean of Western writers." (Who, do you suppose, is the dean of Eastern writers? Or is it only us scribblers in the provinces who need a dean?) (E5)

Since Stegner's death, a number of literary tributes have been published that bemoan Stegner's lack of attention from the East Coast literary world, where a word of praise in *The New York Times Book Review* often equals dramatically increased book sales and attention from publishing houses. *The New York Times Book Review* neglected to review both *Angle of Repose*, which won the 1971 Pulitzer Prize, and *The Spectator Bird*, which won the 1976 National Book Award, and they relegated reviews of such books as *Wolf Willow* and *Crossing to Safety* to brief notices in the magazine's back pages. As Benson writes in the introduction to his biography, "Would a book of this quality (Doris Grumbach's review [of *Crossing to Safety*] praised it inordinately) by any other recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award have been accorded such treatment? Can

one imagine [Norman] Mailer, even with a bad novel, thrust into the back pages?”

(3). Stegner himself writes at length about the challenges that writers from the American West face; although he was ceaselessly devoted to the land and people of his home region, Stegner was wary of critics who limited his work by labeling him as merely a western regionalist: “I don’t like to be called a western writer, simply because it’s a limiting term, a pejorative term like ‘local colorist,’” he told Etulain in the late 1970s (*Conversations* 132).

In his 1969 essay “History, Myth, and the Western Writer,” Stegner attempts to clarify why a writer from the West would find it offensive to be typed merely as a western writer, and why such a classification can be so difficult to shake. Stegner differentiates between two kinds of western story-telling: (1) the Western, with a capital W, which refers to the Louis L’Amour-style dime store horse opera¹ – primarily reliant on a formulaic, mythical West – made popular by turn-of-the-century Wild West Shows, western pulp magazines, and later television and the movies, and (2) the western, with a small w, which, Stegner writes, “is not mythic but literary.” According to Stegner, the difficulty in better defining small-w western novels and stories lies in the great variety of populations, climates, occupations, and traditions of those who live in the West (he points to the disparateness of a plains tradition versus a lumberwoods tradition versus a Mexican border tradition, for example); the slow and irregular

¹ The term “dime store novel” originated with Beadle’s Dime Novels, a series of mass market Westerns first produced by Erastus Beadle in 1860.

settlement of the West; and what Stegner terms the “calcification” of the instantly recognizable Western novel and its erroneous but timeless myths. Such limitations have “had the effect of producing either stories with little family resemblance, or stories with altogether too much,” Stegner writes (*Sound 191*). Stegner contrasts this difficulty in pinpointing a cohesive American West with the broad but apparent trends that have emerged in other regions of the United States: in the Midwest, for example, where Stegner defines the works of such writers as Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis as “earthy, plain, and realistic,” and in the South, where Stegner lists common Edgar Allan Poe- and William Faulkner-esque characteristics such as “the gothic, the grotesque, the highly colored, and the ‘tall’” (189). Certainly one might point to such common western elements as the landscape or an infusion of pioneer spirit, but even these, Stegner argues, dangerously echo the archetypes cemented so firmly in place by the dime store Western. The dripping greenery and misty gray air of a suburban Seattle street hardly resembles the dry, hot Utah desert or the warm spray of surf along the California coastline, for example. And how does this notion of primarily Anglo-European pioneer spirit help us to understand the Navajo woman living in New Mexico or the African-American man who works in downtown Denver?

I believe Wallace Stegner asked the complex questions necessary to begin consciously to debunk the idealized mythologies of the American West, and it is for this that he should indeed be known as the “dean of Western writers.” Stegner

was the first to clearly differentiate between “the Western” and “the western,” as he terms it, and in addition to writing in countless essays about the problems that western writers face and the dangers of both incorporating and ignoring such a rich but potentially limiting history into the pages of a fictional work, Stegner fought to rise above western archetypes in his own work, striving for a broader venue than mere “western regionalism.” He tried, arguably, to break through the barriers of a formulaic and calcified dime store Western and prove to the rest of the nation that the West is indeed capable of producing works of solid and lasting literature.

For a man of such stature and numerous publications (in his lifetime, Stegner published thirteen novels, three short story collections, and sixteen books of essays and histories), Stegner has a remarkably small but fiercely dedicated following. Since his death in 1993, eleven books have been published on his life and works: one biography, two posthumous collections of his essays, one series of interviews, and several tributary looks at who Stegner was and what he tried to accomplish in his lifetime. Interestingly only one truly critical voice has emerged: Elizabeth Cook-Lynn writes a single essay in her collection *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* criticizing Stegner for a neglectful exclusion of Native Americans in his works. The remaining writers fairly successfully pull together Stegner's disparate but complementary roles of teacher, writer, historian, and conservationist, although

their sometimes blind praise is often troublesome – particularly in Jackson Benson’s biography *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* and his essay collection *Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction*, and particularly when a critical eye might help to further uncover both what Stegner may have been attempting to accomplish and how, in light of a greater western literary canon, Stegner’s efforts do or do not forward this notion of moving beyond the dime store Western toward a more literary western. But none of these posthumous publications directly address Stegner’s role as a literary critic and as an early spokesman of an emerging literary canon of the American West. It is here, I believe, that Stegner’s most important role lies. Certainly there are such nineteenth-century westerners as Bret Harte and Frank Norris who battled stereotypes of the horse opera Western novel, fighting to produce works that, like Stegner’s, pressed beyond the limiting archetypes of an idealized West. But, as I will argue in the pages to come, none had stopped to so consciously and thoroughly consider the birth, history, and national ramifications of such mythical assumptions until Stegner. And I believe it is because of Stegner’s work – both critical and literary – that the discussions have continued through the likes of such critics as Richard Slotkin and Richard W. Etulain, and contemporary western novelists such as Craig Lesley and Sherman Alexie are beginning to find a more receptive and accepting literary realm into which to introduce their works. The myths remain, of course, but with a conscious acknowledgement of what they are and where they came

from, we can much more accurately evaluate the literature that emerges from the West as well as begin to discuss how such myths define who we westerners are on a more contemporary and daily level.

For me, my discovery of Wallace Stegner opened new avenues into literature, writing, and uncovering the deeply imbedded cultural archetypes and assumptions not only of the American West but, more importantly, of the United States as a whole. I spent countless Chicago weekends curled on an overstuffed lavender-and-pink-striped armchair, slowly reading my way through Stegner's impressive oeuvre, and, once I had found all I could of Stegner, venturing out into the western novelists who both preceded and succeeded his work. My fellow reporters would ask me each Monday morning how much reading I had tackled over the weekend, and I frequently admitted to finishing one, two, and sometimes three books. Not the most stimulating social life, I suppose, but I had discovered a passion, and I was not about to compromise this new and undiscovered world with such trivialities as a night at the movies or an afternoon at an amusement park. When I arrived at Colorado State University to begin work on my MFA, I discovered that not only did fellow lovers of literature know little about Stegner, but many had not even heard his name. When I subsequently began my doctoral studies at the University of Denver, I found myself stepping beyond the world of western novelists and short story writers in search of the western critics who

catalyze discussions of what literature will endure and why. Although both the Midwest and particularly the South boast hoards of critics whose expertise lies in examining the literature and trends of their region, I discovered that literary discussions in the West were truly only just beginning, and many such discussions were still grounded in historical analyses of a post-Frederick Jackson Turner frontier or the morality of Lewis and Clark, with few nods at the actual literature of the American West. Critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch and Richard Slotkin have begun discussions of mythical archetypes, some western and some national, but neither cites Stegner – or any contemporary western author, for that matter – which makes me wonder whether they, too, are skeptical of, as reviewer John Daniels wrote, “us scribblers in the provinces” (E5).

Although he aspired to reach a wider venue with his fiction, Stegner writes almost exclusively of the West in his numerous nonfiction essays and books: of its landscape and aridity, of its people and hopefulness, of its history and myths. A sense of place is essential to a sense of self, Stegner writes again and again, and such wisdom is precisely what led me to see Stegner as a grandfatherly figure whose works would somehow lead me to a higher understanding of myself. When he writes in a personal essay in the 1989 collection *Growing Up Western* of his own longing to return to the West when he was away, I find myself surprised by my own nodding – surprised, I suppose, that this indelible sense of place does indeed play a role in how I see my world and my place in it:

It is a not unusual life curve for Westerners – to live in and be shaped by the bigness, space, clarity, and hopefulness of the West, to go away for study and enlargement and the perspective that distance and dissatisfaction can give, and then to return to where they belong. (Backes 185)

I have indeed returned, as so many of us have, with no intentions of leaving again, and now I hope to help continue Stegner's critical efforts to better understand this emerging western literary canon. I am sorry that I will never sit in Stegner's office with a mug of Earl Gray in one hand and a madly scribbling pencil in the other, but I know that I can meet Stegner again and again in the pages of his books. And while I can continue my own search for self by turning once more to the likes of Bruce Mason or Lyman Ward, I hope that a widening audience of readers and critics alike will find that they, too, can turn to Wallace Stegner for a sense of self, of region, of nation, and – most importantly – of humanity.

Introduction:

De-Mythologizing & the Formation of a Western American Literary Criticism

- ***The Argument***

Wallace Stegner spent a lifetime defending the American West, and at times his vehement love for his home region drifted into a kind of bitterness against those who might bring it harm: whether the opportunist ready to strip away the West's natural resources, or the literary critic unwilling to admit a westerner's ability to produce anything more artistically complex than a *Hondo* or a *Riders of the Purple Sage*. In a chapter lamenting the critical misreading of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's 1940 novel *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Stegner proclaims that such a myopic view of the West is hardly uncommon:

It seems almost a statement of the standard condition of novelists of the West, who are a little like the old folks in the Becket play, continually rising up out of the garbage cans to say something, and continually having the lids crammed down on them again. We may want to speak to the nation or the world, but often, by the condescending assumptions of critics who cannot or will not read us, we are allowed to speak only to our own back alley or within the echoing hollow of our own garbage can. (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 173)

Stegner saw a clear distinction between the writers of dime store-style

"Westerns," such as Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey, and those literary western writers, such as Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, who strove for something richer

in their work. The former, writers of “escape entertainment,” are craftsmen who have the benefit of working from an established blueprint, according to Stegner. The latter, writers of “serious fiction,” are artists who must create anew: “The man who works from blueprints is a thoroughly respectable character, but he is of another order from the man who makes the blueprints in the first place,” Stegner writes in his 1950 essay “Fiction: A Lens on Life” (*One Way* 19). Readers and critics east of the Missouri River have been unable to discern this distinction with regard to western literature, Stegner argues, and instead assume that “West” denotes “cowboy” and therefore a lesser brand of intellect. Throughout his life, Stegner resisted the label of “western writer”¹:

A principal problem of living in the West is that you get labeled as a limited regionalist. ... I don't like to be called a western writer, simply because it's a limiting term, a pejorative term like 'local colorist.' But I certainly am not objecting to being thought of as a person who comes from the West, as a writer who comes from the West, and who writes from the West. (*Conversations* 132)

I do not mean to suggest, particularly in these early pages, that Stegner was a bitter man who could not see beyond the ignorant neglect of his home region.

¹ Jackson J. Benson speaks to Stegner's struggle against presumptions of western literary inferiority in his 1996 biography. Stegner “did not want to be shunted aside as *merely* a Western writer,” Benson writes, and although such predominately East Coast-based bias cannot be cited directly, the undercurrents through the years have been clear, he continues: “It is no accident that on one occasion when Stegner's *Wolf Willow* was shunted in a brief notice to the back pages of *The New York Times Book Review*, the lengthy front-page review was not devoted to an original work, but a compilation of the letters of Oscar Wilde. More recently, *The New York Times Book Review* printed its review of *Crossing to Safety*, Stegner's last novel, on page fourteen. Would a book of this quality (Doris Grumbach's review praised it inordinately) by any other recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award have been accorded such treatment? Can one imagine Mailer, even with a bad novel, thrust into the back pages?” (3).

Stegner did indeed harbor a self-admitted impatience with those unwilling to grant the American West the literary reverence he believed it deserved. But rather than allowing this distaste to diminish his work to simple themes of evil easterners versus benign westerners, Stegner became one of the region's earliest and most prolific writers to struggle for more accurate definitions of the West, its people, and particularly the role of novelist and creator. Stegner disdained the idea of finding his work limited by the expectations and assumptions of others, and, therefore, he sought to redefine those expectations and assumptions.

The questions are simple yet crucial: Who is a westerner? What states comprise the contemporary American West? What is a "Western"² novel? And, perhaps most importantly, how can a western writer successfully step beyond the confines of the Western genre, or "escape entertainment," to create anew within the larger, more timeless scope of "serious literature"? In his life's work of more than thirty books, both fiction and nonfiction, Stegner strove to change the way this nation views the American West, and it is my intention in the chapters ahead to introduce and explore Stegner's role as a western writer³ who asked the nuanced questions necessary to further our understanding of western archetypes

² Here and throughout the chapters ahead, I will follow the terminology introduced by Stegner in his essay "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" (*Water* 186-201) and capitalize "Western" or "Westerner" only in reference to the formulaic dime store novels and novelists popularized in the late nineteenth century; more general references or references to western literary works will be referred to with a small w.

³ Although Stegner himself balked at the label "western writer," I will employ it repeatedly in this work in an effort to explore what that role entails and why it may be perceived as limiting or even pejorative.

and, as a result, to begin to debunk more effectively the misleading mythologies⁴ of the American West. While a few historians and even a novelist or two – namely the late-nineteenth-century novelist and essayist Frank Norris – preceded Stegner in recognizing the danger of the West’s persistent idealized mythologies, Stegner much more thoroughly questioned and ultimately began to debunk such myths, both through his own fiction and through the countless articles and essays he published. (I will discuss the roles of Norris and other western writers and historians in this introductory chapter and in Chapter 1.)

Although discussions of the American West and its unquestionable influences on the nation as a whole began surprisingly soon after Europeans first landed on the continent’s eastern coast, the conscious creation of a field of literary criticism unique to the American West did not begin until the twentieth century. Novelists and historians alike had been writing for decades about the wildness of the untamed West, particularly in contrast to the more genteel East Coast, and of the mountain man-inspired yearning for something raw and full of untapped promise in the nation’s seemingly endless frontier. But few had stopped to ponder

⁴My definition of mythology is derived from cultural critic Richard Slotkin’s historical trilogy. Consider, for example, his discussion of myth in the trilogy’s first volume, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*: “A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors. The narrative action of the myth-tale recapitulates that people’s experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm. ... [M]yth can be seen as an intellectual or artistic construct that bridges the gap between dream and reality, between impulse or desire and action. It draws on the content of individual and collective memory, structures it, and develops from it imperatives for belief and action” (6-7).

how their words, coupled with the words of so many other westerners, were beginning to entwine themselves into an ideology that describes the West as a region and, ultimately, the nation as a whole. While historians initially stepped to the forefront in the discussion of what would entail western American literature and why, the occasional fiction writer soon joined the conversation as well (see Table 1).

- *The Critical Context*

Theodore Roosevelt provides a natural starting point for a historian's voice of the emerging American West because not only did he write eloquently about the West and its most defining characteristics, but he also lived the example. Although Roosevelt was admirably prolific and his works are still studied and referenced today, I believe his greatest contribution to the development of a western American literary criticism comes largely from the highly public life that he led: heroic, relentlessly action-packed, and self-disciplined. When Roosevelt and others had finally talked President William McKinley into declaring the Spanish-American War in 1898, for example, Roosevelt was serving as assistant secretary of the Navy. Roosevelt immediately resigned his position with Congressional approval to travel West to organize the famous Rough Riders, a special cavalry regiment of cowboys, ranchers, hunters, lumberjacks, wilderness scouts, and Native Americans. Roosevelt saw his fraternal cavalry as an exemplification of an ideal form of democratic nationalism: Lines of social class,

Table 1

Key Voices in the Creation of a Western American Literary Criticism

Citing every critical voice regarding the West would be a difficult task; the below listed are perhaps the best known for their contributions to the development of a western American literary criticism. Historians are listed in plain type, while novelists who also wrote histories and/or essays are listed in italics. The decades listed denote when their voices began to emerge most definitively on a national level.

| Years | Western American Historian or Novelist |
|-------|----------------------------------------|
| 1890s | Theodore Roosevelt |
| | Frederick Jackson Turner |
| | <i>Frank Norris</i> |
| 1930s | <i>Bernard De Voto</i> |
| 1940s | <i>Wallace Stegner</i> |
| 1950s | Henry Nash Smith |
| 1970s | Richard Slotkin |
| | Sacvan Bercovitch |
| 1980s | Patricia Limerick |
| 1990s | Richard Etulain |

race, and culture would be forgotten as these disparate groups joined together to fight in a decidedly imperialist but heroically successful national venture:

The Rough Riders, Roosevelt wrote his children, were “obedient and yet thoroughly self-reliant and self-helpful, not afraid of anything and able to take care of themselves under all circumstances.” They were very brave and never complained – not even when they had hardly anything to eat, were worn out, or had to sleep on the bare ground in their wet clothes. (Renehan 28)

Roosevelt’s group reached a kind of pinnacle of heroism when they boldly charged Spanish troops at Kettle Hill in Cuba, and again at the adjacent San Juan Hill to secure the highest point on the San Juan Ridge. Roosevelt reflected on the battle as his own finest hour, when he “rose above those regular army officers like a balloon” (34).

In Roosevelt’s brave but brief leadership of the Rough Riders alone, one sees echoes of the western mythologies grounded in the pioneers’ grueling trek across the continent, as well as hints of the hard-working, self-made man that grew to become the United States’ notion of an ideal citizen. I believe the factors that made Roosevelt such an indispensable part of the West’s earliest voices were threefold: his fierce determination to live an upstanding and tirelessly bold life; his sense of individual and family values that carried current Americanized mores to the *n*th degree, mostly because Roosevelt himself was so exceptionally faithful to his own beliefs; and his ability to write and to write prolifically – both to record history as he experienced it and to persuade others of the merit of his values and lifestyle.

Roosevelt both blamed and was thankful for the childhood sickliness that made him the bold and determined individual that he soon became. Until the age of eleven, young Roosevelt was plagued by asthma, toothaches, stomachaches, and headaches, and it wasn't until his father sat him down and told him that he must "make his body" that Roosevelt decided it was time to take control of his diseased body (Brands 26). Roosevelt began to lift weights and participate in a variety of athletic activities, including swimming, horseback riding, and wrestling, until his physical condition did indeed begin to improve. From these early childhood lessons, Roosevelt learned that an individual must push the boundaries of life, rather than merely accepting whatever might come along (27).

As Roosevelt sought to define his own life and future, so, too, did he begin to conceptualize who the ideal American citizen should be, particularly in lieu of the nation's not-so-distant European past. As he writes in his 1897 book *American Ideals*, the uniquely American tradition demands that an individual's every effort must be his patriotic best:

The men who actually do the things best worth doing in American life are, as they always have been, purely, and usually quite unconsciously, American. The paths in which we have done the best work are precisely those where our work has been most original and our workers least hampered by Old World conventions and ideas. Our statesmen and soldiers, our pioneers and commonwealth-builders, and the architects of our material prosperity have struck out on their own lines, and during the last century have done more than has ever been elsewhere accomplished in the same space of time. These men live for their work. They strive mightily, and they fail or succeed as chance and their own strength direct; but whether they succeed or fail, they

live in and for their own land, their work is indissolubly connected with her well or ill being, and the praise which gives them heart, and the blame which may or may not cast them down, come from their own countrymen. (Work 88)

While “national patriotism” may not leap immediately to mind when considering western American ideals, the mythologies that Wallace Stegner both lived within and battled against undoubtedly included a certain allegiance to the pioneer brotherhood of a rough-and-tumble Old West – a West that had decidedly broken away from the Old World ties of the nation’s East Coast. Roosevelt acknowledges such unspoken kinship in his best-known historical work: the four volume *Winning of the West*, which outlines U.S. expansion after the American Revolution. Other notable publications in Roosevelt’s writing career include *The Naval War of 1812*, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*, *The New Nationalism*, and *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography*.

Always an advocate of bold, expansionist foreign policy, Roosevelt’s personal motto was “Speak softly and carry a big stick” (Siepmann 844), a mantra that surely echoes the manifest destiny attitude of the nation’s westward pioneers. As a father of six, Roosevelt pressed his children to live equally purposeful lives. In the early years, this pressure proved too much for young Teddy Jr., Roosevelt’s oldest, who complained of headaches at age ten that a family physician ultimately suggested might be coming from the pressures of his father’s high expectations. Roosevelt was embarrassed by the conclusion, and agreed to ease up (Brands 336). On the whole, though, Roosevelt’s biographers describe him as a doting

father who both enjoyed his children and continually encouraged them to exert themselves – particularly in light of the pioneer values evidenced above:

He was their most valued playmate, with whom they rode horseback, ran races, hiked, swam, hunted, and climbed. He was likewise their role model. The message of his vigorous example was a straightforward one. If the children were to be like him – and they dearly wished to be exactly like him – they must be ever active, embrace life, overcome all obstacles, and, above all, never complain. (Renehan 11)

Roosevelt was a kind of mythical hero who, although not born financially poor, was born physically poor in such a way that demanded a conscious rebuilding and planning of his own life; Roosevelt became, therefore, far more conscientious than most people of the lives around him and his own place in the mix of humanity. Fortunately, Roosevelt was an adept, Harvard-educated writer who produced hundreds and even thousands of pages of American history infused with the ideals that rang true at the turn of the last century. For good or for ill, those hardy ideals are precisely what carry forward not only into today's literature, but also in today's social and political decisions, and in the very way that Americans envision themselves, whether as westerners or simply as Americans. Stegner later argues that such mythical ideals become dangerously embedded in the psyche when one is unable to locate or identify precisely what they are, instead mindlessly responding to a reality that is blindly accepted as true; regardless, Theodore Roosevelt clearly marked a vantage point from which to begin a discussion of the historians whose voices are essential to the development of a western American literary canon.

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner arrived on the scene unexpectedly and irrevocably when he read a seemingly innocent paper titled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago in July of 1893. Just thirty-one years old at the time, Turner was a history professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison when his mentor, Herbert Baxter Adams, suggested that he attend the conference. Ironically, it is Adams’ “germ theory” that Turner successfully dismantles in his famous essay, turning the tide of his discipline toward a more dynamic and nationalistic look at history. A professor at The Johns Hopkins University, the nation’s premier institution at the time for the study of history, Adams viewed historical development in terms of “germs” or historical antecedents. Adams believed that the roots of American cultural and political institutions could be found in medieval Teutonic tribal structures. Until Turner’s frontier theory gained favor, Adams and his protégés saw little purpose in focusing solely on American history or institutions; for them, American history was an exercise in drawing parallels to early Anglo-Saxon origins (Ridge 4).

Turner, on the other hand, viewed history as a dynamic, ever-changing study that is dependent not only on past occurrences but also on the cultures and social structures of the people who are currently studying the discipline. In his often-neglected 1891 essay “The Significance of History,” Turner suggests that it is through a concentrated look at history that this nation can discover who and

what it should become in the present:

History, I have said, is to be taken in no narrow sense. It is more than past literature, more than past politics, more than past economics. It is the self-consciousness of humanity – humanity's effort to understand itself through the study of its past. Therefore it is not confined to books; the subject is to be studied, the past to explain it; and local history must be read as a part of world history. The study has a utility as a mental discipline, and as expanding our ideas regarding the dignity of the present. (Ridge 61)

As he turned his eyes in 1893 to an emphasis on the American frontier, Turner emerged as the first historian to attempt to interpret frontier life rather than simply record what happened. Turner saw the shifting American frontier as both a unique historical phenomenon and, therefore, a key to interpreting all American institutions and developments. Turner opens "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" with a reference to an 1890 statement from the U.S. Census Bureau that declares the official close of the American frontier. This continually receding frontier demanded of the American pioneers unique characteristics and skills of adaptation, all of which have melded together to form the social, political, and cultural institutions that are so uniquely American, Turner writes:

The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. ... This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. (Turner 2-3)

Too much attention has been paid to pinpointing the European “germs” evident in the development of a new American culture, Turner argues, and too little attention has been paid to the environment within which that new culture rests.

Although Turner’s theories clearly reverberate in the study of American history still today, many critics both in Turner’s era and in later years have criticized his ideas as too poetic, contradictory, and over-simplified. According to Turner scholar Martin Ridge, many critics believed that Turner viewed American society as “a monolith,” without taking into consideration the nation’s vast array of Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrants. Critics also have argued that Turner neglected to look simultaneously to such notable American historical events as slavery and ongoing immigration, which surely play enormous factors in the development of an American psyche and its institutions. (Turner does write in the opening pages of his seminal essay that “even the slavery struggle” must be viewed in light of the nation’s westward expansion.) Still more critics have denounced Turner’s theories as mere excuses for American imperialism and a belief that such national expansion is our nation’s manifest destiny (9-10).

Despite arguments to the contrary, Turner’s theory still holds as a main thread of interpretation among historians both in the United States and in such countries as Australia, Russia, and Brazil (Lamar 411). Although Stegner never specifically references Turner’s ideas, Stegner’s own philosophies regarding the

American West and the study of what is characteristically American clearly reflect Turner's work. Benson writes in his Stegner biography that what Stegner gleaned from Turner's influential theories was "a way of understanding his own background on one of the last American frontiers, a need, lasting nearly all his life, to explore and understand his roots" (62), but I believe the parallels run more deeply. As an environmental adviser to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall during the Kennedy Administration, Stegner exhibited then and throughout his life a fierce attachment to the West's fragile resources and the vastly varying environment that he believed came to define who westerners are. Stegner also paid great homage to the notion of the American frontier and its subsequent close in both his novels and his nonfiction works. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, for example, Bo Mason, a character modeled after Stegner's own father, is a man who longs for the American ideals of a frontier that – unfortunately for him – has recently closed. In continual search for a better life that he never quite attains, Mason drags his family from western state to state just after the turn of the century, hopping between such jobs as bar owner, farmer, restaurateur, illegal rum runner during the Prohibition years, and casino owner. It seems to me that some of Stegner's frustration with being typed as a western writer and therefore incapable of exploring life outside the confines of his home region arises from his critics' inability or unwillingness to recognize the parallels between Turner and Stegner. Like Turner, Stegner sees the world through the lens of the American

West. The shifting frontier was indeed a unique American phenomenon with unending repercussions across American life and culture, but it need not remain geographically stagnant. If, for example, Stegner chooses to carry his work to Vermont or overseas to his Norwegian ancestors – as he does in such novels as *Second Growth* and *The Spectator Bird* – he is not merely a western regionalist stepping outside of his comfort zone or his literary capabilities. Instead, when such a move is viewed through Turner's theories, Stegner is simply examining life outside of the contemporary West with an ever-steady eye on the unquestionable influences of the westward expansion that left such an indelible mark on this nation. In other words, Stegner's or any western writer's work need not be expressly located in the West in order to explore and reflect the unique characteristics as well as the Stegner-exposed dangerous archetypes of the region. With the aid of Turner's theories, the very mythologies and assumptions that Stegner later suggests can be so dangerously limiting without an understanding of their origins begin to reveal themselves.

Frank Norris began publishing his works on the West only a short time after Roosevelt and Turner, and although he primarily saw himself as an accomplished novelist and short story writer, like his predecessors, Norris wrote numerous essays about this “new” America, its people, and the need to separate from the European motherland to form a bold new identity. Unlike Roosevelt

and Turner, Norris's training and interests lay primarily in the arts; although he lived only until the age of thirty-two, Norris emerged decisively as a new breed of American fiction writer, and his unflinching analysis of both western and American literature suggest the beginnings of a western American literary criticism. Norris was not privy to the same terminology as Stegner – the concept of mythopoesis, for example, did not emerge until such cultural anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss began publishing their views in the 1950s – but his essays clearly contain seeds of such concepts as the cultural limitations of erroneous mythologies and the need to step beyond formulaic Western dime store novels. For example, Norris writes in his essay “The Frontier Gone at Last” of the danger, particularly now that the frontier is closed, of falling into an expected role of cowboy-inspired Westerner:

We may keep alive for many years yet the idea of a Wild West, but the hired cowboys and paid rough riders of Mr. William Cody are more like “the real thing” than can be found today in Arizona, New Mexico or Idaho. Only the imitation cowboys, the college-bred fellows who “go out on a ranch” carry the revolver or wear the concho. The Frontier has become conscious of itself, acts the part for the Eastern visitor; and this self-consciousness is a sign, surer than all others, of the decadence of a type, the passing of an epoch. (1185)

Although he acknowledges the limitations of such archetypal assumptions, Norris does not, however, call for an erasure of such once-historical regional characteristics. In his essay “The Literature of the West,” a response to an article by writer William R. Lighton, Norris argues that although the West's “wild life” is certainly no longer the only lifestyle found in the region, one cannot simply ignore

the past:

[I]n the fictitious presentation of an epoch of a people, the writer must search for the idiosyncrasy, the characteristic, that thing, that feature, element or person that distinguishes the time or place treated of from all other times and all other places. He must address himself to the task of picturing the peculiarity, the specialized product of conditions that obtain in that locality and nowhere else. (1176)

Norris continually suggests, both here and in his use of autobiography in his own fiction, that novelists should do more to toy with the lines of genre separating history from fiction. Stegner also relied on life experiences to inspire much of his fiction, although Stegner went a step further than Norris with such works as *Wolf Willow* and *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, which directly join essay and short story, political commentary and literary drama.

Continuing his argument that the Wild West past is inseparable from a contemporary metropolitan present, Norris gives a face to Western archetypes when he writes of the “red-shirted adventurer”:

You cannot get away from him. Long since he has put off the red shirt, he has even abandoned his revolver. Meet him and for all you would know he is a man of sober mind, decorous even, the kind to whom you would suppose adventures never came. A man who very possibly drinks little, who gambles less, who wears the bowler hat and pressed trousers of convention.

But scratch the surface ever so little and behold – there is the Forty-niner. There just beneath the veneer is the tough fibre of the breed, whose work since the beginning of the nineteenth century has been the subjugating of the West. (1177)

Westerners have a history of wonderfully Homeric stories, Norris continues: the heroes, the battles, and the passion. But westerners also have allowed “the

traducing, falsifying dime novels” to dominate, overshadowing a chance to produce truly great American literature with mindless, formulaic fiction (1179). A great epic of the American West will come one day, Norris writes, but only when it is able to encompass all of the West, from the archetypal red-shirted adventurer to the San Francisco businessman and the contemporary Wyoming rancher. Norris is clearly embarrassed by what he sees as the West’s self-imposed literary limitations, and although he does not yet turn his blame to the myopic short-sightedness of nonwesterners, as Stegner does, Norris does blame the supposed literary center of New York for limiting those writers who believe they must live in the nation’s literary epicenter in order to be successful (Walker 296-297).

The author of six novels and more than three hundred essays, book reviews, short stories, interviews, and poems, Norris is a curious blend of several seemingly contradictory literary trends coming to a head both in Europe and in the United States at the turn of the century. Born in Chicago in 1870 but raised and educated in San Francisco and Paris, Norris was fascinated throughout his career by the eternal struggle between the individual and such broader influences as society and nature. Both Norris’s fiction and his critical essays also evidence a tension between the deterministic and fatalistic naturalism of Emile Zola and the more popular romantic realism of Rudyard Kipling. Add to the mix a personal sense of moral code, a journalism-inspired emphasis on objectivity and the

importance of history, and years of artistic training both in San Francisco and in Paris as a painter, and Norris emerges with a curious literary mix indeed. Norris is often credited with being the first novelist to adapt Zola's naturalism to an American literary sensibility – namely one grounded in the American West. In his much-discussed 1899 novel *McTeague*, for example, Norris bravely steps outside conventional literary boundaries with his provocative murder scene in chapter nineteen. Although today's readers would hardly find the scene much more than mildly titillating, in Norris's day, his crude details and fatalistic presentation of a man driven to murder by insurmountable economic and social forces garnered a firestorm of criticism. Norris biographer Franklin Walker writes that while an occasional critic went so far as to decry *McTeague* as "dangerous to the commonweal" (224), most reviewers simply viewed Norris as sadly misled in his literary ambitions: "The majority of reviewers acknowledged that the novel had strength of a kind and showed promising talent," Walker writes, "but they were almost unanimous in advising Norris to abandon the school of naturalism and embrace American idealism" (223). Here, I believe, is where one sees early critical pressures to embrace the mythopoesis already defining American social and political thought. To ignore American idealism, for example, smacked of national disloyalty when it might lead foreigners – Europeans, in particular – to view the United States as anything less than driven and successful.

When Norris died at age thirty-two following an undetected ruptured

appendix, he was two novels into his ambitious project *The Epic of the Trilogy of the Wheat*. *The Octopus*, published in 1901 to rave reviews, is a California tale of raising and shipping wheat beneath the political control of a giant railroad trust. *The Pit*, published in 1903 shortly after Norris's death, explores buying and selling wheat on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade. The unwritten final novel in the trilogy, *The Wolf*, was to study the economic challenges of European nations dependent on American wheat for survival. Although *The Pit* was met with mild disappointment, perhaps because it followed the trilogy's successful first novel, Walker writes that *The Octopus* is what first truly earned Norris public recognition:

When [*The Octopus*] appeared the following April, it was to mark several milestones in American fiction; it was to be the first of a long stream of novels dealing broadly with economic currents in American life, it was to make the first noteworthy stride towards the fiction of the Western frontier, and, through its vigor and breadth, it was to make still another inroad upon the hold of sentimental and petty fiction, offering a model of substance to the younger writers who were to carry on. (272)

Although Norris outspokenly abhorred the sentimental, he rallied in essays such as "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" for a revival of a new kind of romanticism that looked beyond the sentimental into a deeper means of uncovering why people behave as they do. His curious mix of realism and romanticism, blended – as I have suggested already – with journalistic objectivism and a reverence for history, foreshadows the new western literature that Stegner lauds in lieu of the dangerously archetypal dime store novel. For Norris, realism alone is not enough:

“Realism stultifies itself. It notes only the surface of things. For it Beauty is not even skin-deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions of depth, a mere outside” (Norris 1166). And Romance, likewise, need not be limited to the front parlor or the company of ladies, Norris argues: “You will find her, I grant you, in the chatelaine’s chamber and the dungeon of the man-at-arms; but, if you choose to look for her, you will find her equally at home in the brownstone house on the corner and in the office building downtown” (1167). Norris believed in a “novel of purpose” but not propaganda (Walker 254), in character development grounded in his own life and experiences (260), and in a very modified sense of Zola-inspired naturalism as a means of drawing together the disparate goals of realism and romanticism. “The important thing in writing is *not* to be literary,” Norris wrote (281), which further points to allowing autobiography and history to inform one’s fiction rather than the credos of a typically East Coast-driven literary world – a notion that Stegner clearly embraces as well. In all of Norris’s eclectic literary tastes lie hints of a western American literary criticism to come, and although the literary terminology employed by Norris and Stegner may differ – presumably because they lived and wrote in very different eras – their ideas are surprisingly similar. And, taken together, they exhibit the beginnings of a conscious move to both define and intellectualize the young literary world of the American West.

Although Bernard DeVoto’s voice frequently is overlooked today in both

literary and historical circles, his influence during his lifetime on national discussions of the American West was notable, and the effect he had on Stegner's life and work was exceptional. In some ways, Stegner – who was twelve years DeVoto's junior – led a life that mirrored DeVoto's: from their mutual lifelong priorities of defending and redefining the American West to their careers as university professors, historians, and novelists. Like Stegner, DeVoto was born and raised in Utah, and taught for a time at Harvard. Both men's work reflects the values of Turner's frontier theory, although with similar deviations, as historian John L. Thomas notes in his book *A Country in the Mind: Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, History, and the American Land*:

Stegner, like DeVoto before him, departed from Turner's celebration of democratic individualism by emphasizing the collective and communal results of frontier experience – the building of homes, neighborhoods, and towns. Still, the notion of wilderness as a trial of strength – “something that has helped form our character” sat uneasily beside the promise of spiritual renewal – the “need to learn to listen to the land, hear what it says.” (230)

Like Stegner after him, DeVoto was an ardent conservationist and, frankly, one of the West's earliest voices to criticize the archetypal ideal of the explorer/settler or cattle rancher whose profession frequently stripped away the West's fragile resources. According to *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, this bold defense of a new kind of West may be precisely what kept DeVoto from earning a more supportive and broader following:

Critics have often felt uneasy with DeVoto because he did not sentimentalize the western experience, nor did he accept the easy clichés through which many Americans romanticize western

history. An ardent conservationist in his later years, DeVoto was uncompromising in his denunciation of the cattle interests, the vapid “good guys” of contemporary American mythology. (303)

What made DeVoto unique to early discussions of the influences of the American West was his dual role as historian and fiction writer, and although he ultimately has not been particularly revered or remembered for his fiction, like Stegner, DeVoto did attempt to write western stories that separated themselves from the dime store Westerns of the time.

While teaching history at first Northwestern University and then Harvard in the 1920s, DeVoto published three novels set in the American West: *The Crooked Mile* (1924), *The Chariot of Fire* (1926), and *The House of Sun-Goes-Down* (1928). DeVoto later published *Mountain Time* in 1947, but none of his novels received the attention he would have liked – in part because his fiction efforts frequently were dismissed as merely a historian’s casual play at being a novelist, and in part because critics accused him of poor literary techniques in plotting action and in creating believable characters (Thomas 24). Despite his limited successes as a fiction writer, DeVoto found his voice in the 1930s when he began writing the editorial Easy Chair column for *Harper’s*. DeVoto wrote the popular editor’s column for twenty years, from 1935 to 1955, and he frequently used the space as a venue for defending the West that he so loved: “In ‘Fossil Remnants of the Frontier’ (April 1935) [DeVoto] announces himself, as he had done for fifteen years, as the dry-eyed demolitions expert armed with the facts and determined to blow sky-high every fable, figment, or fabrication of the Western

past he encounters” (Thomas 16). DeVoto also served as editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* in the 1930s, a role that further established his voice in the literary community, and he began to publish the histories for which he earned far more praise than his fiction works. His better known nonfiction books include *Across the Wide Missouri*, an account of the Rocky Mountain fur trade that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in history in 1948, as well as *The Year of Decision* (1943), *The Course of Empire* (1952), and his edition of *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (1953). Despite his Pulitzer Prize, DeVoto still was criticized for his literary efforts, this time with a reverse of a previous complaint: now his histories were frequently dismissed as “popularizations of history written by a literary dilettante” (Lamar 302). In his 1973 biography of DeVoto titled *The Uneasy Chair*, Stegner writes that DeVoto’s publication of *Mark Twain’s America* in 1932 marked his entrance onto the literary scene. DeVoto was a fan and passionate defender of Twain’s works, and Stegner writes that his *Mark Twain’s America* was “a hymn of praise, not only a corrective report on the West and the frontier, but a celebration. And that was prophetic” (115). Prophetic indeed, when one considers just how neatly Stegner’s professional efforts followed those of his older friend and mentor, and yet Stegner is the one who far more successfully is able to couple conservationism with both historical and fiction writing to consciously create a new national image of the West’s role in the development of this nation.

DeVoto and Stegner first met in Chicago in 1937 at a Modern Language

Association convention after Stegner wrote to DeVoto to thank him for his role in awarding Stegner's first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, the Little, Brown Prize for short fiction. The next year the two met again in Vermont at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, and from then on they kept in touch and followed one another's careers. Stegner himself admits in the author's note to his DeVoto biography that he was not aware of the extent of their shared personal philosophies until he began to research DeVoto's life and work more fully for *The Uneasy Chair*:

[U]ntil I began this biography I had not realized how many of my basic attitudes about the West, about America in general, about literature, and about history parallel his, either because so much of our experience retraced the same curve or because of his direct influence. It would be impossible at this date to say how many of my attitudes have been formed or modified by contact with him; but the debt is considerable, and I freely acknowledge it. (ix)

Like most critics in DeVoto's time, Stegner writes that although DeVoto's fiction was not as successful as it might have been, DeVoto's nonfiction often carried the passion and clarity of thought necessary to introduce to the nation a whole new way of looking at the West. As he praises three of DeVoto's more stirring essays on the West, Stegner lists several of DeVoto's attempts at breaking through the very same western archetypes that irked Stegner throughout his career:

Together, [the essays] do in non-fictional (and much more persuasive) terms the portrait of Ogden that he attempted fictionally in *The Crooked Mile* and *The House of Sun-Goes-Down*. They point out how much co-operation was absolutely necessary for survival in the arid West that the stereotype called ruggedly individualistic, how much curious learning lay around in any frontier and postfrontier community, how the frontier that

convention called a safety valve was actually the source of much American radicalism and unrest, how it was not to be considered separately from the civilization whose fringe it was, because it *was* the heterogeneous civilization randomly transported to the wilderness. (149)

Although DeVoto's Easy Chair essays and his larger histories of the American West are occasionally referenced in contemporary discussions, I believe his greatest success as a writer and thinker was in his vast influence on Stegner's career. By a simple act of fate, Stegner turned out to be better able to harness his political and cultural passions in ways that employed literary technique and writerly persuasion in his efforts to turn the tide in western literary criticism. DeVoto, who was frequently criticized by Stegner and others for his hot temper and occasional inability to tone down his arguments enough to prevent alienating large segments of his readership, set the stage for a literary master like Stegner to join the fray and more calmly and masterfully continue the efforts that he had begun. While DeVoto was a trained historian with a journalist's ability to delineate the facts and an editor's passion for criticizing the ills of society, Stegner was an artist whose creativity in both literary and nonfiction writing allowed him to produce works that test the very limits that DeVoto in his lifetime had begun to suggest. Without DeVoto's influence, Stegner very well may have continued on a similar path, but surely his success at pinpointing such problems as the West's rampant waste of natural resources and a national tendency to refer to western myths in such a way that left the western literary world stuck in a rut of John

Wayne- and Louis L'Amour-influenced formulaic stories would have been a longer time in coming. DeVoto was the first to lay the groundwork, and although many of his efforts may be forgotten by the more contemporary westerners who look back at their region's critical voices, it would be a mistake to neglect the importance of DeVoto's long-term role.

Wallace Stegner's first epic-length and influential novel, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, was published in 1943, marking his more formal entrance into a discussion that had begun only a generation or so before his time. Stegner already had six book-length publications to his name at this point – the novels *Remembering Laughter* (1937), *The Potter's House* (1938), *On a Darkling Plain* (1940), and *Fire and Ice* (1941), as well as his doctoral dissertation, *Clarence Edward Dutton: An Appraisal* (1936), and the history *Mormon Country* (1942) – but it was *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* that tackled with depth the misleading archetypes of his region, while at the same time presenting a tale that boasts full and uniquely individual characters, a sometimes messy but always forward-moving sense of action, and the vividly evoked sense of place that soon became one of Stegner's literary trademarks. Historian Richard W. Etulain also sees *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* as Stegner's earliest demonstration of the erroneous western mythologies that he spent a lifetime battling:

In depicting the differences between husband and wife Bo and Elsa Mason, Stegner creates the masculine boomer, the “strong,

dominant kind of man, and in a way a dangerous one ... deluded, socially deluded, the product of frontiers which now all of a sudden have closed." He dreams eternally of the "big candy rock mountain" just over the horizon, while his domestic, nurturing wife hopes to build a protective, safe nest for her family. In some ways "exorcising" his own father and "making some kind of recompense" to his mother, in treating gender relations in the West, and in demonstrating the dangerous tendencies of the acquisitive, selfish westerner turned loose on his region, Stegner was treating topics that few other western authors of the time addressed. (*Re-Imagining* 147-148)

For William Kittredge, whose essay "Doors to Our House" is collected in the 1990 book *Beyond the Mythic West*, Stegner's novel deserves praise not only for its early consciousness of a world beyond the stereotypical West but also for the beauty of its prose:

Listen to Wallace Stegner, from *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*:

"Things greened up beautifully that June. Rains came up out of the southeast, piling up solidly, moving toward them as slowly and surely as the sun moved, and it was fun to watch them come, the three of them standing in the doorway. When they saw the land to the east of them darken under the rain Bo would say, 'Well, doesn't look as if it's going to miss us,' and they would jump to shut the windows and bring things in from the yard or clothesline. Then they could stand quietly in the door and watch the rain come, the front of it like a wall and the wind ahead of it stirring up dust, until it reached them and drenched the bare packed earth of the yard, and the ground smoked under its feet, and darkened, and rained in little streams, and they heard the swish of rain on roof and ground and in the air."

... A generation of writers were proving that the West had more compelling stories than those of simpleminded gunplay, that the private lives lived in the West were worth writing about just as any life is worth art if, in seeing it through the eyes of the artist, we are helped to see our own life with renewed clarity. (Udall 142-143)

Stegner was a new and effective western voice, there is no question, and Etulain

even goes so far as to suggest that Stegner was “at least a generation” ahead of other western writers in recognizing the misconceptions common to the West (147).

I believe there are three key areas where Stegner’s voice worries the norm and introduces a new way of thinking about the West: (1) His approach to writing both fiction and history calls for a middle ground between the two genres, a concept that was virtually unheard of in Stegner’s time and is still troublesome today to historians and fiction writers alike. (2) His ultimately well-researched but initially well-lived sense of the problematic archetypes at play in the American West emerged clearly and forcefully on the pages of his fiction and his histories. (3) And his emphasis on the importance of environmental conservationism ran counter to the stereotypical Western ideal of a land of milk and honey with endless opportunity, unlimited resources, and a boundless sense of hope; likewise, few nonwesterners had yet begun to suggest the importance of preserving the dwindling wilderness in the early half of the twentieth century.

While DeVoto was sorely criticized for a career that seemingly mistakenly muddled history and fiction, Stegner ultimately was praised for his bold new look at ways that the two genres might overlap. Stegner has several historicized fictions and fictionalized histories to his credit, including *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel* (1950), *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* (1954), *The Gathering of Zion* (1964), and *Wolf Willow* (1962), and, as Forrest G. Robinson and Margaret G. Robinson write in their 1977 Stegner biography, all of his attempts were a clear

step in the direction of a new literary West in opposition to the legacy of the dime store novel Western:

[Stegner] has learned that a middle course between history and fiction, Clio and Calliope, has been the best protection against Scylla and Charybdis. Like prose fiction, history deals with persons, places, and events; some of the best of it takes vivid narrative form; it is not a science, but a branch of literature. Like history, novels reflect society and "may have an almost-historical value as record." ... Cold Western facts are not enough. Western fictions are too often misleading fabrications. But the imaginative rendering of Western persons, places, and events – "the middle ground" – should help to unveil those continuities between past and present which have remained obscure. (51-52)

In an effort to define Stegner's goals in achieving this western "middle ground," Benson refers in his 1996 biography to Stegner's discussion of DeVoto's methods, which, Benson writes, are notably similar to what Stegner is attempting to do:

His kind of history not only permitted the selection and dramatization of striking actions, it also allowed the historian to pass judgment on both events and people, and it permitted the elaboration of large, umbrella theses to contain and explain events, so long as the theses were developed inductively and not imposed from without. Furthermore it permitted symbolic selection – history by synecdoche, the illumination of whole areas and periods through concentration upon one brief time, one single sequence, a few representative characters. (121)

Stegner's *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains*

Frontier, for example, is an obvious example of blending history with fiction as

Stegner couples, chapter by chapter, personal autobiography with short fiction and historical essay. This "history by synecdoche" is more understated in such novels as *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel* and *Angle of Repose*. *Joe Hill* is the tale of

Joseph Hillstrom, the turn-of-the-century IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) labor martyr who was executed in Utah for his alleged role in a Wild West-style holdup that turned to murder. As Stegner's subtitle suggests, he took a mythologically historical figure and fictionalized his life, in part in an effort to pry beneath the existing Joe Hill myths. In *Angle of Repose*, Stegner borrows regularly from the diaries and letters of Mary Hallock Foote, an East Coast artist and writer who moved West with her fortune-seeking husband. Although Stegner makes it particularly clear in *Angle of Repose* that he is writing a work of fiction, his historical bases appear throughout the novel in the form of both direct references to Foote's life and quotations from her diaries and letters. Interestingly both *Joe Hill* and *Angle of Repose* were sorely criticized for the genre boundaries that they so defiantly overstep; I will discuss the two novels in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Another point that makes Stegner's arguments unique is that he not only studies the archetypes that he argues against, but he actually lived a childhood led under an erroneous sense of those idealized myths – particularly under the care of his fortune-seeking father, whose exploits are best described, although fictionalized, in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. I believe some of the most recurrent western archetypal assumptions that Stegner battles include the necessity of rugged individualism (Stegner saw the importance of community effort in the founding of the West), the power of a pioneer-inspired sense of manifest destiny

at all costs (Stegner was an ardent proponent of protecting the environment and the West's fragile resources), a restlessness that belies the human need for a sense of place (most of Stegner's fictional characters spend lifetimes searching for a sense of personal history and belonging), and the ideal of the Big Rock Candy Mountain or the end-of-movie peaceful lope into a western sunset (life is never so simple, Stegner suggests in his fiction). Such myths at best are frequently elaborations of the truth, according to Stegner, and at worst they are dead wrong: "The gunslinger was usually a despicable person, sometimes even a coward, who killed from ambush and victimized others who were weaker and vulnerable – hardly a hero. He was another variety of the 'lone horseman' who, Stegner assures us over and over again, was not at the heart of the Western experience" (Benson, *Wallace Stegner* 178). At the end of his often-quoted essay "Born a Square," Stegner jokes that despite his continual bemoaning of the misunderstood West, he himself is western-born and "incorrigible," and, therefore, eternally filled with a sometimes idealized sense of hope. It is simply time to move on, he argues:

The West does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long. It has no future in exploiting its setting either, for too consistently it has tried to substitute scenery for a society. All it has to do is to be itself at the most responsible pitch, to take a hard look at itself and acknowledge some things that the myths have consistently obscured – been *used* to obscure. The West is politically reactionary and exploitative: admit it, instead of pretending to be the last brave home of American freedom. The West as a whole is guilty of inexpiable crimes against the land: admit that, too. The West is rootless, culturally half-baked. So be it. To deny weaknesses is to be victimized by them and caught in lies forever. But while the West is admitting

its inadequacy, let it remember its strength: it is the New World's last chance to be something better, the only American society still malleable enough to be formed. (*Sound* 183-184)

The chapters ahead look more specifically at how Stegner identifies and attempts to dismantle these myths in his novels, short stories, and historical works – as well as those moments when the myths are too great even for his conscientious efforts and he slides into the same traps that he argues so vehemently against.

Stegner's lifelong concern for environmental conservationism was a concept that was new to many of his generation except perhaps Teddy Roosevelt, who was the first president to take an interest in preserving the beauty of the West and who added some sixteen million acres to the national forest system during his administration. With the ready venue of his Easy Chair column, DeVoto also argued against exploitation of the West's resources, but it wasn't until Stegner's consistent and passionate attention to matters that the national audience for an environmental cause began to grow. When Stewart Udall received his appointment to U.S. secretary of the interior from newly elected President John F. Kennedy, Stegner mailed Udall a copy of his 1954 history/biography *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*. Udall was so taken with the book that he asked Stegner to serve as his western conservation adviser for several months in 1961 (Benson, *Wallace Stegner* 276). "The spirit of conservation – which Stegner has done a great deal to encourage – has become more widespread since the end of World War II, and its impact has

been salutary,” the Robinsons write in their 1977 biography. “Even in a state so overpopulated and industrialized as California there is some hope – provided, of course, that foresight is brought to the resolution of public and private differences. ... The past notwithstanding, Stegner believes that the West still ‘has a chance to create a society to match its scenery’” (48). The plundering of the West, Stegner said in his 1970s interviews with Etulain published in *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature*, has been spearheaded primarily by major corporations that are nonplussed by usurping an area’s resources and then moving on, leaving ghost towns in their wake. Federal intervention has been necessary, Stegner continues, to preserve what remains (174-175). Stegner’s efforts, in addition to his political involvements at the federal, state, and even local level, are further evidenced in the publications of such pro-environmental works as *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, *This is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (1955), *DISCOVERY! The Search for Arabian Oil* (1971), *American Places* (1981), *The American West as Living Space* (1987), and *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (1992).

Because of his dual careers, Stegner was able to share his personal philosophies widely, with or without the encouragement of an East Coast-centered publishing industry, through both his many publications – books as well as essays – and through his twenty-five years as director of Stanford’s respected creative writing program. Some of Stegner’s best-known students who emerged from the

Stanford writing program, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s – besides Ken Kesey, with whom Stegner had a somewhat contentious relationship that has gotten plenty of public attention over the years – include Tillie Olsen, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Nancy Packer, Ernest Gaines, Peter Beagle, Larry McMurtry, Robert Stone, Thomas McGuane, Al Young, James Houston, Pat Zilver, and Evan Connell. In his biography, Benson credits Stegner with instilling in his students a strong sense of place: “One thinks, in this regard, of Jim Houston and California, Larry McMurtry and Texas, Edward Abbey and the Southwest, Ernest Gaines and Louisiana, and even Ken Kesey and Oregon. But of his students perhaps the strongest adherent to place and defender of the land may be Wendell Berry” (261-262). Indeed Stegner was successful not only in touching his students’ emotional centers with a sense of his own personal philosophies, but his writings were also persuasive enough to earn him a place within the Kennedy administration, as well as a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, among other accolades. Even as he entered his eighties and his health began to fail, Stegner continued to write countless book introductions for friends and lectured frequently across the United States. One might wonder, then, with all of this national attention, from whence the disgruntlement arises about Stegner’s all-too limiting categorization as a western writer; I would argue that Wallace Stegner deserved even more attention than he received. A Nobel Prize for his place as one of the nation’s first consciously literary western writer/critics as well as an

influential early environmentalist? Perhaps. But, if nothing else, surely he deserved the more consistent respect of such publications as *The New York Times Book Review*, which frequently ignored or shoved to hind pages references to Stegner's work that its editors apparently believed only a smaller western audience would take an interest in.

In 1950, historian and literary critic Henry Nash Smith published his seminal work *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, placing him on a par with Turner in terms of the dramatic effect his theories and critical approach had on the field of American history. Up until this time, most history of the American West had been primarily anecdotal, ranging from biographies of gunslingers and Native American heroes to specific studies of the building of the railroad or the Oregon Trail.⁵ But Smith, whom many consider the originating figure of the American Studies movement that began in the 1950s and who received the first Ph.D. in American civilization from Harvard, had a very different approach. Just as academic disciplines in the humanities – the study of American history in particular – were emphasizing more and more a turn toward specific specializations, Smith chose to take a broad approach to his look at the American West, incorporating not only a progressive chronology of accomplished literati but travel accounts, dime store novels, and reports of western explorers,

⁵ Consider, for example, John Filson's 1784 "Boone Autobiography" or Francis Parkman's 1849 history *The Oregon Trail*.

surveyors, and geologists as well. Serious academics had not yet deigned to examine such seemingly trivial writing alongside more lasting publications such as – in Smith’s case – J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur or James Fenimore Cooper, but Smith argues bravely and vehemently that history necessarily must include all the writings of a particular region or era. Smith introduced historians to the anthropological terms “myth” and “symbol,” and he insisted that the existence of a cultural myth can be as important as that of a known fact (Etulain, *Re-Imagining* 161). Trained in cultural and literary criticism rather than history, Smith made a bold and somewhat sudden appearance on the stage of western American historical discussions, and his influences are still pervasive in today’s scholarship as well.

Smith divides his study into three sections: “Passage to India,” “The Sons of Leatherstocking,” and “The Garden of the World.” In Book One, there is a progression from the West as an unexplored, savage landscape, to a possible passage to an American empire in the Far East (a popular dream of many frontier-day Americans), to a melding of manifest destiny beliefs into the very western landscape itself, relocating the dream of an Asian-American empire to the mountains, plains, and woodlands of the American West. Throughout his study, Smith consistently has an eye to a developing national language that incorporates idealized western mythologies within its more factual history. While reviewing the travels of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, for example, Smith steps

beyond mere dates and accomplishments to consider the effect of the men's journeys on a waiting nation: "The importance of the Lewis and Clark expedition lay on the level of imagination: it was drama, it was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future" (17). To draw this changing landscape of the ultimately imperialist American dream, Smith pulls together such disparate writings as the works of Thomas Jefferson, the speeches of Thomas Hart Benton, the railroad proposals of William Gilpin, and the mystic poetry of Walt Whitman. In Book Two, the narrative shifts from the political and historical figures of the first book to fictionalized and mythological figures as Smith again traces a chronology, although this time his progression is of the illustrious dime store novel-type gunslinger/cowboy figure – Frank Norris's "red-shirted adventurer." Smith begins this section with a look at the heroism of Daniel Boone, then moves on to examine the fictional heroes of Cooper and Charles Webber, and finally considers such archetypal western heroes and heroines as Kit Carson, Deadwood Dick, Buffalo Bill, and Calamity Jane. In Book Three, Smith presents an analysis of the once barren and wild American West as the "Garden of the World," an Eden where utopian images abound and reality often comes crashing through at rather inopportune times. Smith closes his book with an oft-quoted essay titled "The Myth of the Garden and Turner's Frontier Hypothesis" that, for the first time, suggests that Turner's theories were based not on historical fact but on a metaphorical and mythological western American language. Turner's theories

developed out of the American “myth of the garden,” Smith argues, and unfortunately Turner was mired – as were most historians and critics of his day – in “certain archaic assumptions which hampered his approach to twentieth-century social problems” (251).

According to literature and American Studies scholar Lee Clark Mitchell, whose essay “Henry Nash Smith’s Myth of the West” is included in Etulain’s 1991 collection *Writing Western History*, Smith was the first American scholar to suggest that mere rhetoric can drastically color what might otherwise be considered factual history:

In part, Smith’s triumph can be traced to the sheer ambitiousness of his scope – his willingness to venture bold speculations about a diverse array of western materials, and then to move like Turner beyond the bounds of a narrowly regional history in order to pose much larger questions of cultural meaning and national identity. ... Yet where Turner’s broad rhetorical strokes carried a thesis that the frontier had created Americans, Smith chose to turn his eye inward to focus on figures of speech themselves, on the vivid language invoked by Americans to create a West as image of their desires. Both men captured contemporary imaginations by writing western history metaphorically, but Smith trumped Turner by reading as metaphor the language others had accepted as literally true. (247)

Despite its groundbreaking stature, a key problem with Smith’s work in *Virgin Land* lies with his underdeveloped look at collective beliefs and assumptions, Mitchell continues. To simply assert that certain myths were widespread and influential, as Smith does, is not enough, Mitchell writes: “The point is that imputing collective beliefs is an extraordinarily difficult process, not simply to be assumed, as Smith tended to do” (264). Perhaps, however, such a lack of factual proof can be attributed to the fact that Smith was one of the first to pull such

collective beliefs into scholarly conversation. Just as Turner's theories now may seem remiss in their exclusion of the West's various minority populations, so, too, do Smith's theories weaken in the light of repeated applications and more in-depth discussions of the concepts that he first introduced. Such criticism does not, however, diminish the effect his studies had on the scholarship of his day.

After the publication of *Virgin Land*, Smith unfortunately did not continue his quest to examine the mythologies of the American West and instead turned his attentions to the more narrow venue of studying the life and works of Mark Twain. Smith, who served for more than a decade on the editorial staff of the influential regional journal *Southwest Review* and who helped to establish the *American Quarterly*, was known as father of the "myth and symbol school" (Lamar 1057), and his contributions to the development of a western American literary criticism are indispensable. Echoes of Norris, DeVoto, and Stegner reverberate in Smith's erudite examination of the very language that ropes one into a reality that may or may not be true. What I believe make Smith's essays particularly of interest are the echoes of his training in cultural and literary criticism rather than history; Smith boasts a poet's ear for the cultural nuances of language. While Stegner does not discuss mythology at the level of language, per say, he does acknowledge the weight of such cultural trappings as the mythological symbols that Smith introduces (the frontier hero, for example, or the mystical notion of America as a garden of the world). Although Stegner does not refer directly to Smith's works in his own publications, the two men plainly

shared a curiosity and reverence for the far-reaching influences of the American West. As Smith writes in the opening pages of *Virgin Land*, the debate regarding Turner's theories (and, on a broader note, regarding any such analyses of the developing American West) "is much more than a mere academic quibble. It concerns the image of themselves which many – perhaps most – Americans of the present day cherish, an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future" (4).

Interestingly cultural critics (and East Coast residents) Richard Slotkin and Sacvan Bercovitch, although well-published and highly regarded in most academic circles, rarely are included in current discussions amongst western American critics regarding the history of literature of the West. Historians Richard Etulain and Patricia Nelson Limerick, for example, two university professors from the West whose many publications have had an impressive impact on western American literature, each mention Slotkin in a sentence or two in only one of their many book-length studies and do not address Bercovitch at all. Slotkin's exhaustive trilogy examining the myths of the American West – *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992) – surely is worthy of some kind of critical reaction, even if western scholars disagree with Slotkin's conclusions. But

western critics remain silent, instead turning their attentions to arguably less extensive publications such as Richard White's 1991 volume "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*": *A New History of the American West*. White, a professor of history at Stanford University, is a westerner and, therefore, apparently worthy of inclusion in regional cultural and literary conversations. Slotkin and Bercovitch themselves have remained silent regarding their exclusion from such scholarly western discussions, although their ideas are readily recognized in their home regions.

Slotkin, a professor of English and American Studies for more than twenty-five years at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, has published three historical novels in addition to his award-winning trilogy: *The Crater: A Novel of the Civil War*, *The Return of Henry Starr*, and *Abe: A Novel of the Young Lincoln*. He is unquestionably best known for the historical trilogy, which begins with *Regeneration Through Violence*, an exploration of how the United States relies on imperialistic violence to regenerate and reaffirm its identity. This nation's continually recycled myths of such violent characters as the bear hunter, the Indian fighter, and the deerslayer rest calmly behind a sheen of mythology and historical distance, Slotkin writes, making any disturbing or even murderous behavior seem less horrific and decidedly more heroic. In today's contemporary mindset, this American mythology of violence still continues to numb human sensibilities, according to Slotkin:

Our heroes and their narratives are an index to our character and conception of our role in the universe – Whitman's woodchopper,

gaining mythic stature through the reduction of wilderness to planks and blocks, in the service of civilization and the soul; Ahab and the *Pequod* furnished in the “chased bones” of their prey, Benjamin Church decked in the scalps and royalties of the slain Philip; Leatherstocking accepting a mythic name from his slain Indian enemy; Davy Crockett grinning by a mountain of 105 bear-hides; Boone, whose rifle shots are prayer and poetry, an acolyte perpetually sacrificing to his god. The heroism in these figures consists for us in their method of achieving their goal. The trophies they are perpetually garnering have no material value; their sanctity derives from their function as visual and concrete proofs of the self-justifying acts of violent self-transcendence and regeneration that produced them. So the Indians (no less “American” than Crockett) garnered trophies as proofs and reminders of their battle valor and as kernels around which to build their names and the myth-tales of the tribe. In Vietnam it was called the body count. (564)

Much like Henry Nash Smith, Slotkin incorporates a variety of writings and characters – both literary and decidedly non-literary – as he builds his argument regarding the United States’ pervasive mythologies of violence: Indian war narratives, captivity narratives, letters, speeches, newspaper articles, pamphlets, and so on. Slotkin builds his case gradually and chronologically, beginning with the nation’s earliest colonists. Perhaps the most enlightening part of Slotkin’s discussion is his close examination of the cultural progression that carries a single idea or tale from verbal storytelling into a more complex popular narrative and finally into myth; language, of course, reenters the myth cycle again when single images from the final myth become a permanent part of a culture’s dialogue through words or phrases such as “pull yourself up by your bootstraps.”

In the second volume of his trilogy, *The Fatal Environment*, Slotkin examines the frontier, concepts of manifest destiny, and the ways that white

domination of Native Americans aided in the United States' determined but breathlessly greedy rise to a national superpower. Slotkin places great weight on the mystique of Custer's Last Stand, arguing that this nation has grown to see a Christ-inspired move towards salvation in its sacrifice of Custer and ultimate subjugation of Native Americans:

[The myth of Custer's Last Stand] contained the suggestion of a way to salvation in the notion that Custer's was a redemptive sacrifice, and that from the ashes of that terminal battle of the last Frontier the shape of a hero for the new age arises: a soldier, a commander of men, a youth vested with the authority of age, a technocrat, a natural aristocrat. (531)

Slotkin's third and final volume, *Gunfighter Nation*, takes a closer look at the contemporary American West and the ways in which a racial theory of white dominance has defined this nation's citizens. Despite an overall fatalistic view of American culture and its superior, imperialistic ways, Slotkin does offer some minor hope in his concluding pages of *Gunfighter Nation*: "Myth is not only something *given* but something *made*, a product of human labor, one of the tools with which human beings do the work of making culture and society," he writes (659). Therefore, with an astute awareness of the origins of national myths and – ideally – a sense of why they exist, the United States can begin to correct the wrongs inflicted by its presumption of political and cultural imperialism, according to Slotkin.

In his study *Re-Imagining the Modern American West*, Etulain suggests that perhaps it is the American Studies scholars who tend to follow Slotkin in "stressing destructive ideas that misshaped the frontier and the American West" –

rather than experts in literary studies or history. Those scholars who are not as inclined to buy into Slotkin's presumption of regenerative violence use his Smith-influenced chapters on dime store novels as a blueprint for examining popular Westerns in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Etulain writes (163). Historian Brian W. Dippie argues in his essay "American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives," published in Limerick's 1991 collection *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, that although ambitious, Slotkin's trilogy in some ways facilitates the very frontier-originated myths that it seeks to dismantle: "Where are the women in this tradition?" asked Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan Rosowski ... and it is a question that cuts to the heart of a male myth steeped in escapist fantasies and as revealing for what it excludes as what it contains" (133). Blake Allmendinger repeats the question in his 1998 book *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature*: "Where are the women in the last two volumes of Richard Slotkin's groundbreaking trilogy?" (13). Much as Stegner falls victim occasionally to the very myths that he is attempting to unsaddle, so, too, does Slotkin slip into a white male-centered perception of western history that denies the human reactions and contributions of such fellow citizens as women, Native Americans, African Americans, and the many Asian immigrants who came to help build the region's railroads.⁶ It is a curious problem when one considers that one of Slotkin's apparent goals is to uncover this nation's deeply imbedded

⁶ I will examine further Stegner's inability to completely rise above the myths he seeks to dismantle in Chapter 2.

myths of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, and yet, in the process, he neglects in his nearly two thousand-page trilogy to cite or even consistently recognize those non-white male populations that he would argue have been so clearly left in the margins.

Although Stegner never published a direct response to Slotkin's work, his essays speak to a regenerative sense of hope, not violence, as a foundational part of this nation's cultural development. While Stegner's political and cultural analyses are typically pragmatic rather than blindly idealistic, Stegner harbored a self-admitted western sense of hope, in addition to his fierce love of the American West, that ran decidedly counter to Slotkin's conclusions. Stegner saw his role as a combination of educator and encourager, whether it meant convincing politicians that a water dam was destructive and unnecessary, as in *This is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (1955), or exposing his readers to the simmering racial prejudices in their home regions, as in *One Nation* (1945): "I'm constantly trying to bear in mind that having been very lucky, I also am very responsible, and that the only thing that makes civilization go forward is the responsibility of individuals. ... All of us have the obligation somehow to have some kind of concern for the species, for the culture, for the larger thing outside of ourselves" (*Conversations* 196-197).

Sacvan Bercovitch, a professor at Harvard of comparative literature, English, and American literature, has written and edited a number of books examining, like Slotkin, the genesis and development of American mythologies.

Unlike Slotkin, however, Bercovitch looks first and foremost to the Puritans of seventeenth-century New England for what he sees as the nation's most fundamental mythologies. Although there are only occasional glimpses of the pervasive mythologies of the American West in Bercovitch's work, he is worth mentioning here both because of his broad influence on more general discussions of national archetypes and because even his studies of Puritan New England often exhibit parallels to the ideologies forming sometimes simultaneously in the American West. Bercovitch's better known works include *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1991), *The American Jeremiad* (1991), and *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*; he also recently edited the multi-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature*.

In *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Bercovitch writes that because the genesis of American mythologies rests in the nation's varied landscapes, the myths can take on different forms depending on who and when and where:

... [S]ince the source of meaning lay in the American landscape, the terms of signification could change with changing national needs. What for Mather had been the purifying wilderness, and for Edwards the theocratic garden of God, became for Emerson's generation the redemptive West, as frontier or agrarian settlement or virgin land. Every stage of this long development bespeaks the astonishing tenacity of the myth. (186)

According to Bercovitch, then, western American mythologies do not originate with the close of the frontier, as Turner argues, or even with the fierce tenacity of the westward-bound pioneers and mountain men fighting to make new lives for themselves, as Smith suggests; the origins are found at the nation's very

beginnings: in seventeenth-century New England. And while many western American historians might balk at such a bold dismissal of Turner's frontier theories, one would be remiss to envision a westward trek across the nation's plains that did not carry shadows of its travelers' East Coast foundations.

I believe Bercovitch perceptively offers two national mythologies worth noting: the "errand into the wilderness" and the "American consensus."

Bercovitch's errand into the wilderness refers to a Puritan sense of God-given manifest destiny with regard to the new nation's wild and untrammelled frontier: "Others take the land by His providence, but God's people take the land by promise" (*American* 162). The land, therefore, becomes not merely a desirable commodity offering the eternal secular hope of a Big Rock Candy Mountain, but a sacred garden promised by God and offering assurances from God that all steps taken into the hinterland are seen as a "redemptive errand for mankind" (163). The frontier is their mission, their Jerusalem, and as representatives of God, their duty is to obey his will and set off boldly and confidently into the new territory. The errand into the wilderness drifts cleanly into Bercovitch's concept of American consensus when one considers the foundations of the American Revolution:

Once and for all, the errand took on a special, self-enclosed *American* form. Independence from England completed the separation of the New World from the Old. Henceforth, Americans could direct the process of migration toward its proper goal, the conquest of a continent. Independence became the norm for representative selfhood: independence of mind, independence of means, and these twin blessings, sacred and secular, the mirror of a rising nation – what could better demonstrate the bond of

personal and social identity? Elsewhere, to be independent was to challenge society. In the United States, it was to be a model of consensus. (*Rites* 38)

This American sense of independence, in accordance with Bercovitch's conclusions, arises not with the early pioneers who left behind home and family to seek their fortune but with those early Americans who fought for independence from the mother country, thus pulling together as a nation under an early assumption that independence is both favorable and desirable.

In my view, western cultural critics who ignore Bercovitch are neglecting fundamental national connections that cannot be overlooked in what can be an otherwise stubborn and sometimes adolescent determination to declare a particular uniqueness among westerners. Likewise, Bercovitch, in his many complex theories and publications, is sadly remiss in not exploring further the oddity of a national frontier that initially was continually receding and later formally closed; no people or nation has seen such a phenomenon before, and surely the once-wild-but-now-tamed frontier adds a dimension to American ideologies that is worth examining. Interestingly it is Smith who acknowledges Bercovitch in a reflective (and somewhat defensive) look back at *Virgin Land* and both the recurrent criticisms and the praise that he received since its publication. Historian Lee Clark Mitchell lists several of Smith's regrets regarding his career-making study: "his rigidly dualistic model, 'of symbols and myths on the one hand, and on the other a supposed extramental [sic] historical reality'; ... [his] exclusion of minority voices (notably Indians); ... and [his] casual dismissal of popular literature (notably cowboy Westerns)" (Etulain, *Writing* 260). What

Smith continues to defend wholeheartedly, Mitchell says, is the effectiveness of his basic approach to the book of relating “myth” with Bercovitch’s “ideal of an American consensus”: “His concept of ‘virgin land’ defines, so he triumphantly reasserted at last, the ‘central ideology or myth of America’” (260-261).

As with Slotkin, Stegner does not directly comment on Bercovitch’s theories, but Stegner’s nonfiction studies of Mormonism suggest a similar consideration of Bercovitch’s notions of a Christ-inspired errand into the wilderness and an American consensus. While Stegner clearly grants a greater emphasis on the impact of the frontier phenomenon than Bercovitch allows, he also demonstrates a sensitivity to East Coast foundations in such novels as *Second Growth* and *The Spectator Bird*.⁷ In his 1970s interviews with Richard Etulain, Stegner recognizes the parallels between a New Jerusalem and Bo Mason’s Big Rock Candy Mountain. Stegner considers New Jerusalem in light of the Mormon trek west to Utah, a subject that he tackles in his histories *Mormon Country* (1942) and *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964), but the biblical genesis of the myth is comparable to what inspired the Puritans as well:

The dream of coming west toward New Jerusalem is of course a religious dream. That’s Europe’s oldest dream, but it’s likewise a material dream, and the Mormon Church profited for years and years because it had an almost irresistible double combination to offer the poor of Europe. ... It offered them for one thing the hope

⁷ In *Second Growth*, Stegner examines the impact of an annual influx of wealthy summer vacationers on the established residents of a small New Hampshire village; in *The Spectator Bird*, narrator Joe Allston recounts his European travels in search of his family’s roots and, ultimately, a greater sense of himself.

of heaven, and for another free land, as well as the community of support which a lot of them took advantage of and needed. All that potential converts found hard to resist. Bo Mason is never satisfied with anything quite as pedestrian as the dream Mormons would settle for, but he's certainly motivated to keep on toward some ultimate Big Rock Candy Mountain which isn't very different from the streets of jasper and pearl of the New Jerusalem. (*Conversations* 115)

For Stegner, when civilization meets the wilderness, Christianity takes a backseat to secularism as the mythologies of the Wild West mark a decided break from the Puritan oppressions that most pioneers either chose to leave behind or, as in the case of countless outcasts and even criminals, were forced to leave. For the pioneers, the hardy independence valued in Bercovitch's American consensus involves not only a break from the mother country but a break from East Coast sensibilities as well.

When Patricia Nelson Limerick published her groundbreaking history *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* in 1987, she shattered many of the assumptions of the western history discipline that preceded her. Much like Turner just before the turn of the century and Smith midway through the twentieth century, Limerick introduced a whole new means of looking at the American West and its influences on the nation as a whole – much to the chagrin of some old-school historians and, on the other hand, to the tune of a great deal of applause from a following of scholars and critics who soon joined forces under the label of New Western Historians. Limerick's most profound premise, which she forwards both in *The Legacy of Conquest* and in many

publications to follow, argues that the frontier never truly closed in 1890 as Turner stated. Turner's frontier theories are not only erroneous, Limerick writes, but they trap westerners in a history with a self-imposed starting point and stopping point and little leeway for the continuity of cycles and cultural consistency:

Certainly courageous, Turner was also, on this count, wrong. If the "frontier" meant, in one of its many and changeable definitions, the discovery of new resources and the rush of population to exploit those resources, then 1890 was no deadline. Homesteading persisted into the twentieth century; rushes to pump oil or to mine coal or uranium punctuated the 1900s. In sheer numbers, the westward movement of the twentieth century far outweighed the western movement of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the cross-cultural encounters and conflicts engendered by the "frontier" are still with us in 1990; the population of western America shows few signs of turning into a blended and homogeneous whole. (*Trails* 83)

Limerick replaces frontier mythology with an overriding western American legacy of conquest not unlike Slotkin's theories of American regeneration through violence. Where Limerick steps decisively away from Slotkin, however, is in her recognition of the varied voices that make up the history of the American West. While the frontier in actuality was a meeting ground for an exceptionally motley group of races, cultures, and sociological classes, western American archetypes have narrowed that story to two sides: "the white civilizers from the eastern United States on one side, and, on the other, everybody else – Indians, Hispanics, French Canadians, Russians, Asians, and Polynesians" (Udall, *Beyond* 41). Such reductionism dangerously limits one's ability to see both where this country has been and where it should be headed, Limerick writes:

Certainly there were ethical problems with this over-accenting of Anglo-Americans, but there were also fundamental problems of inaccuracy and dullness. Reading western history according to the frontier model was a bit like reading Shakespeare in an edited version allowing only one character per play: Caesar would be on his own, with no assassins, no wife above or below reproach, no Marc Anthony to speak at the funeral; Macbeth would live a calm and uneventful life, with no witches, no scheming wife, and no murder to haunt him. (41)

Limerick was the first western historian both to point out the key missing ingredients from pre-1980s western American history studies and – most importantly – to suggest an entirely new line of thinking to replace what she rather decisively dismantled.

Beginning in the 1960s, historians had started to focus on minority experiences in the American West, as well as other non-archetypal Anglo-Saxon hero stories. But with the gradual rejection of Turner's theories came an increasing sense of confusion, Limerick writes in *The Legacy of Conquest*: "The breakdown of the old organizing idea fostered chaos; the corral built to contain Western history had been knocked apart" (22). Rather than viewing the American West as a process to be studied, Limerick argues that one instead must see the region as a place – in particular, a place where a number of diverse cultures and people have discovered a meeting ground and where the "workings of conquest" have pulled these groups together onto common ground (27). For Limerick, the concept of conquest is a broad one that allows for a widening of boundaries within discussions of the American West, both literally in terms of geographical limitations (Limerick opts for an open-ended consideration of where precisely to draw lines around the West) and more figuratively with regard to who these

conquerors may be. At times they are the pioneers themselves who bring forward what they perceive as civilization to overcome savagery, and then, once they have succeeded, move on in a never-ending cycle of conquest; at other times the conquest involves such concepts as a competition for legitimacy amongst the West's various diverse peoples, the contest for property and profit, and such contemporary issues as disputes over bilingualism and immigration.

Etulain writes in his 1999 book *Telling Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry* that if Stegner represented post-1960s writers of realistic regional fiction, Limerick kicked off a new wave of historians interested in a probing and less romantic sense of western history (137-138). While some critics see Limerick's work as short on new information and "too glib and popular in approach" (119), the western history symposium that followed just two years later in Santa Fe, New Mexico, solidified Limerick's role as leader in a startlingly new scholarly direction. The conference resulted in the publication of *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, a volume that clearly outlines the definition of a New Western History. In an effort to condense and simplify the goals of this new field of study, Limerick lists six basic ideas that link these new western American scholars together:

- New Western Historians define "the West" primarily as a place ... the region west of the hundredth meridian.
- New Western Historians do see a "process" at work in this region's history ... But they reject the old term "frontier" for that process.
- In the broadest picture, the process involves the convergence of diverse people ... in the region, and their encounters with each other and with the natural environment.

- New Western Historians reject the notion of a clear cut “end to the frontier,” in 1890, or in any other year.
- New Western Historians break free of the old model of “progress” and “improvement,” and face up to the possibility that some roads of western development led directly to failure and to injury.
- New Western Historians surrender the conventional, never-very-convincing claim of an omniscient, neutral objectivity.... [I]t is OK for scholars to care about their subjects, both in the past and the present, and to put that concern on record. (85-87)

The problem, Limerick reminds one in *The Real West*, is that for two centuries a large amount of energy and money has gone into creating an idealized view of the American West. And while this imagined West may hold remarkably tenuous ties to factual history, it persists in determining the way that Americans think and live, both as westerners and as Americans: “[T]he Real West and the Fake West end up tied together, virtually Siamese twins sharing the same circulatory system. The intellectual surgery required to separate them would be an almost guaranteed failure” (13). Thus the New Western Historians, just as their arguably ethnocentric predecessors, have a remarkable and seemingly insurmountable trail ahead.

As Limerick writes in *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West*, the West now needs to learn the tools that will help it to move on: “It is time for a different kind of Western hero: the sustainable hero who can replace the old, exhausted, and depleted Western heroes. As Wallace Stegner said of the old Western myths, ‘dream other dreams, and better’” (315). Stegner read much of Limerick’s work before his death in 1993, and, for the most part, he

was intrigued by her new approach to western history. While his published comments on Limerick's writings are brief, Stegner does say in a 1989 interview with Etulain that Limerick "has a point" regarding her conception of a still-extant frontier and, in place of a historical line drawn at the year 1890, western continuities such as an economic boom-and-bust cycle (xvi). Stegner himself was criticized for neglecting to incorporate non-Anglo voices in his writings, particularly in his fiction and particularly in reference to the absence of Native Americans in nearly all of his work. Although one of his earliest publications, a collection of essays titled *One Nation* that explores racial tensions in the United States through 1945, demonstrates his sensitivity to the nation's diverse populations, Stegner never again returned to such issues, whether in his fiction or his nonfiction.⁸

While Limerick prefers to push the limits of both scholarly assumptions and intellectual tolerance with her revolutionary new ideas, historian Richard W. Etulain tends to take a more objectively historical approach in his more than forty book-length publications. Objectivity, of course, is a problematic concept when dealing with such a subjective discipline as history, as has been demonstrated consistently in the shifting theories regarding the history of the American West since its conception, but much of Etulain's work is self-admittedly "non-

⁸ I will discuss this omission further in Chapter 2.

theoretical,” allowing him instead to focus on the trends and theoretical developments of others. Etulain’s impressive host of publications, both authored and edited, include the following: *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature*, first published in 1983 and reissued in 1996, which records two weeks’ worth of two-hour discussions between Etulain and Stegner regarding such disparate topics as Stegner’s various fiction and nonfiction works, western American literature, and the future of the region; *A Bibliographical Guide to the Study of Western American Literature*, published in 1982 and again in 1995, which provides extensive bibliographic listings for more than five hundred western writers; *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History*, published in 1989, which provides an historical look at economic, political, social, and cultural developments in the West; *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, published in 1991, which examines the progression of historical and cultural theories regarding the West from Turner and his precursors through Patricia Nelson Limerick and her cohorts; *Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art*, published in 1996, which offers a broad overview of the cultural and intellectual history of the twentieth-century West; *Telling Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry*, published in 1999, which traces the progression of the western story from the mythological popularity of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show through dime novels and regional historical works such as Stegner’s to what Etulain terms the “gray” story of a new

flawed West; and *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?*, also published in 1999, which collects essays by such scholars as Limerick and Richard White about the passing of Turner's frontier theories.

Like Stegner, Etulain's philosophies regarding the historical study of the American West revolve in part around an old-school belief system that still merits Turner for his once-revolutionary turn-of-the-century ideas. Etulain, like Stegner, is willing to embrace the Limerick-inspired ideas of New Western Historians, but rather than erase all boundaries – geographical as well as figurative – and expect to achieve new ideas and directions, Etulain prefers to start with the old-school theories and begin to erase, piece by piece, those analyses and conclusions that no longer make sense with twenty-first century sensibilities. Etulain takes somewhat of a middle ground between Turner and Limerick, edging slightly closer to Limerick, with regard to Turner's overarching myth of the American frontier: Rather than viewing 1890 as a significantly final close to the frontier and therefore a break in the historical continuities of the West, Etulain prefers to view the 1890s as a crossroads from one way of life into another. The anomaly of the West is not merely the phenomenon of the shifting frontier but the relentlessness of change, Etulain writes in *The American West*:

Most of all, the overriding feature of modern western history is a persistent barrage of change. More than any other American region, the West has been buffeted by a high velocity of social and economic change, in wave after wave. Time and again, just as western society seemed to be settling into stable regional patterns, a new shift in the world economy, a new cycle of federal activity, or a new wave of newcomers brought sudden disruptions,

disruptions that thwarted western nurturings of a true regional identity and culture. In this sense, the land west of the ninety-eighth meridian is more notable for the diversity than for the homogeneity of its geographic, economic, social, and cultural landscapes. (8)

If one looks for a central connecting feature of western regionalism, Etulain continues, the best one can arrive at is its aridity – a characteristic that Stegner calls to light again and again in both his novels and particularly in his essays on the necessity of resource conservation in the West.

In *Re-Imagining the Modern American West*, Etulain refers to such western historians and writers as Limerick and novelist Leslie Marmon Silko as postregionalist, a movement that roughly parallels that of postmodernism, although in the West the shift from the historical regionalism of DeVoto and Stegner to postregionalism did not occur until after the 1960s and even into the 1980s. As Etulain writes, “Some western postregionalists discovered, for example, the validity of the postmodernist critique of American culture following the 1960s, that diversity, complexity, disunity, and fragmentation (even messiness) characterized American history more than did consensus, unity, and democratic capitalism” (141). According to postregionalists, western culture no longer holds a recognizable center, Etulain continues, although he is clearly not comfortable remaining in such an ill-defined space. “*Complexity and change* must be given central focus,” he writes in the book’s closing pages, allowing himself the out of a generalized and therefore relatively safe common ground on which to center discussions of the American West (212).

Historian William G. Robbins questions Etulain’s hesitancy in joining the

postregional revisionists of western American history. As he writes in his essay “Laying Siege to Western History: The Emergence of New Paradigms,” collected in Limerick’s volume *Trails*, in *The American West* co-authors Etulain and Michael Malone present new research and an excellent bibliography but ultimately fall victim to “a timeworn and positivist argument”: “In essence, the Malone-Etulain effort at synthesis is more conventional than innovative, more inclined to straddle historical controversy than to take a stand, more prone to follow standard interpretation than to seek ‘life-out-on-a-limb’ – to invoke Patricia Limerick’s phrase” (213). Regardless of which scholarly team he chooses – or whether he prefers to root from the sidelines – Etulain offers an indispensable and growing collection of histories of the American West that incorporate contemporary philosophies with old in ways that no other western histories have yet managed. In fact, it may very well be his seat on the sidelines that insures a broader, more evenhanded look at these critical and literary trends leading from western frontier to western region and, finally, to western postregion.

- ***An Overview***

As is evidenced above, a number of historians such as DeVoto, Etulain, and even biographer Jackson J. Benson recognize Wallace Stegner’s ingenuity as a fiction writer, historian, educator, and even conservationist. In fact, both Etulain and Benson ironically grant Stegner near-mythic qualities, rarely, if ever, deigning to criticize the man they see as a true master of western American literature. But,

amidst their efforts to summarize Stegner's work and praise his political and social efforts as a dedicated lifelong westerner, neither Etulain nor Benson pauses long enough to more specifically name the lasting role that Stegner has played in the scheme of western American literature and history. At one point, Etulain does comment that Stegner has "solidified his position as the leading man of western letters" (*American* 181), but such a label is ambiguous at best and confining at worst, as John Daniels suggests in his 1996 *Oregonian* review of Benson's biography. My goal here is to firmly locate Wallace Stegner as a pivotal figure in the genesis of a literary American West: As a western writer who asked nuanced and engaging questions to explore and ultimately debunk the idealized mythologies of the American West, Stegner himself becomes the turning point between the Western and the western – between the dime store horse opera Western and the contemporary literary western. Granted both novelists and historians alike have preceded Stegner in beginning to recognize the western archetypes that have gradually entered the culture of mainstream America until the very ideologies that lead one forward are tainted by unlikely mythical heroes and unattainable American ideals. But it has taken an historian/novelist, with a nearly equal talent for each discipline, to both begin to pinpoint the myths and then attempt to write a new kind of western literature that acknowledges but looks beyond the archetypes to a diverse and complex contemporary American West. Stegner is not foolproof in his efforts, as I will explore in Chapter 2, but he

impressively furthers discussions of western mythology, and for that he finds a permanent place marking the time when myth-dominated formulaic Westerns began to recede to make room for a more complex and creative kind of western literature.

In Chapter 1, I will follow a chronological progression, similar to this Introduction, tracing a selection of literary writers from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur through Wallace Stegner in an effort to further explore both the early mythologies that Stegner later strives to debunk and the breaking point between dime store Westerns and literary westerns. In Chapter 2, I will examine Stegner's inability to completely rise above the myths he seeks to dismantle, exploring evidence in his published works of moments when Stegner himself is shaped by western archetypes. In Chapter 3, I will turn to Stegner's nonfiction works and discuss his intentions as a writer, teacher, conservationist, and conscious participant in a twentieth-century redefinition of the idealized American West. In Chapter 4, I will begin an exploration of how Stegner manages to dismantle the myths discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, using Stegner's two best-known and most successful novels – *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose* – to illustrate what he is trying to accomplish. In Chapter 5, I will continue the discussion of Chapter 4, referring to patterns established in Stegner's other novels as well as in some of his short fiction. And in Chapter 6, I will consider the increased consciousness of a need to debunk misleading western

myths found among Stegner's literary contemporaries and look ahead to future directions of the literature of the American West, particularly in light of Stegner's monumental contributions.

Chapter 1

Stegner's Literary Predecessors & Early Idealized Western Myths

For many western historians and scholars, the 1902 publication of Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* marks nearly as momentous an occasion as Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier theory. *The Virginian* is the quintessential Western: Wister creates the red-bandana-wearing hero; the feminine heroine; the fast-paced, action-driven plot; the cowboy-versus-Indian skirmishes; the dusty-main-street, blowing-sage-brush western details; and the East-versus-West tensions that become the formula for hundreds of Western novels to follow. In "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*": *A New History of the American West*, Richard White calls *The Virginian* "the classic literary Western" (621). Richard Slotkin writes that Wister's *The Virginian* ranks as one of the "respectable literary works on which a Western could be based" (*Gunfighter* 253). According to the 1995 *Oxford Companion to American Literature*,¹ Wister's novel "established many of the patterns of fiction about the

¹ My reliance here on such encyclopedic compilations as the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* reflects my efforts in this chapter to seek out not what is most erudite or enduring as a literary success but what has transcended, as Richard Slotkin describes in *Regeneration through Violence*, from an initial narrative seed to a full-grown mythology in itself. While many of the texts discussed in these pages incorporate the formulaic mythologies introduced by Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, most of the tales and writers addressed here also add their own select ingredients to this growing recipe of western mythopoesis; what is important to reference in this discussion is not

West and created a native mythology” (Hart 733). And according to *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, *The Virginian* “firmly established the form for later fiction of the American West”; the novel’s hero “is the first and in many ways the best visualized cowboy hero, a figure later to become a ubiquitous literary character in western fiction” (1226).

In Stegner’s 1979 interviews with Richard Etulain, he recalls using money earned from collecting muskrat pelts as a child to buy books for Christmas, and Wister was among his first purchases: “I remember buying Owen Wister’s *Red Men and White*,” Stegner says. “Here’s the beginning of the western myth” (*Conversations* 21). Later in the same interviews, Stegner refers to the book *My Dear Wister*, a collection of letters between Wister and western artist Frederic Remington that suggests the joint role the two men played in creating the mythic cowboy hero:

A very interesting book, because you can see these two people making a myth before your very eyes. Wister’s whole excitement about the cowboy was based upon the fact that he saw him as a knight errant, as a chivalric kind of figure. He *was* errant, I

necessarily a writer’s best texts but those texts that have become publicly accepted as part of the greater myth. In this case, anthologies such as *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* and *The Norton Anthology* offer an appropriately reductive look at what is considered important and, therefore, may have helped to exacerbate the erroneous mythologies at hand.

suppose; he wandered in the same way, he may have been chivalrous to women in the same way, rescuing maidens in distress from dragons. That's the way the myth developed, and it's curious how much of it is actually out of the imagination of Owen Wister. Remington was more realistic; he drew what he saw. I know the horse, he said; that's all he would admit to knowing. Wister imposed all the chivalric trappings on the cowboy, and quite calculatedly – almost like Poe writing "The Raven" – created the cowboy vehicle in *The Virginian*. (153-154)

As Charles E. Rankin writes in his 1996 book *Wallace Stegner: Man & Writer*, Stegner claimed *The Virginian* as part of "the 'usable past' he has so often argued western writers needed" (236). In other words, Stegner recognized and regularly employed the complexity that emerges in western literature when writers incorporate literary parallels from works outside their own – archetypal or not – as a means of uniting the past with the present. Rankin argues that Stegner's allusions to *The Virginian* in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* are indirect but recognizable: "Wister offers Stegner a literary legacy where easterners-turning-westerners use reading to understand themselves, their relationship, and their lives, and where the evolving relationship between a man and a woman is a central part of the story" (236). Stegner clearly sees Wister's novel as a prototype for the Westerns that followed, and, despite the often misleading archetypes it helped to generate, *The Virginian* has become a foundational thread in the tapestry of western American literature.

Etulain argues that *The Virginian* is a pivotal novel in the progression of western American literature: "a perfect Janus symbol, looking backward to invoke

the frontier images of the nineteenth century, facing forward as a model for thousands of fictional treatments of the West in the next fifty years” (*Telling* 31). Etulain credits Wister with solidifying in the minds of American readers that the frontier was closed; pre-Wister novels described an open and promising western frontier, while post-Wister novels learned to grapple with a new frontierless America, Etulain writes (77):

Drawing upon earlier frontier narratives and adding new ingredients, Wister produced the metastory of the frontier. Synthesizing these diverse strains, Wister’s blockbuster novel defined the Western: the story of a white man’s adventures on the frontier undergoing ordeals of competition with alien landscapes. To these earlier components, Wister added a strain of romance, a greenhorn narrator, romantic descriptions of the cowboy as the archetypal frontier hero, and furnished a nostalgic rendering of a closing frontier. Solidified and endlessly repeated, these ingredients became the most widely recognized elements of the western story until the 1960s. (78)

For Etulain, *The Virginian* was a “watershed moment” in the development of western literature that suggests a direct parallel between the effects of Turner’s frontier theories on the study of western history and the nearly simultaneous effects of Wister’s adaptation of Turner’s theories on the world of western fiction. Both written works enable historians to more easily categorize the region’s history, and *The Virginian*, in particular, brought home to the general public a sense of the American West and its stories that has been both nostalgic and, for the most part, unshakeable.

While I agree with Etulain’s conclusions that *The Virginian* marks an

important moment in western literature, both in terms of suggesting a newly closed frontier and, of course, as an archetypal prototype for the many westerns that follow, I believe one key ramification of Wister's novel is still missing, and that is its impact on definitions of the literary western versus the dime store Western. Before publication of *The Virginian* in 1902, westerners essentially could point to one fairly clear strand of literature incorporating such voices as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Bret Harte, Samuel Clemens, and Hamlin Garland (see Table 2). In the background, in a separate intellectual milieu with very different motivations, was a group of western dime store novelists inspired by such historical figures as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Buffalo Bill who plainly sought commercial gain with their rapidly produced and widely sold tales of the Wild West. The popularity of dime novels was kicked off by Erastus Beadle, who published the first of Beadle's Dime Novels in June of 1860; over the next thirty years, Beadle's series eventually included thousands of titles and thirty different series. Beadle's goal was to produce inexpensive books for a wide audience, and that's just what he did: With his short, distinctively orange-covered Westerns selling at ten cents apiece, Beadle sold some five million books between 1860 and 1865 – a decidedly impressive figure for that time (Lamar 305). I believe Wister's *The Virginian* is a far more complex and erudite western than its dime novel predecessors, as I will discuss later in this chapter, but somehow Wister's use of dime novel themes and

formulas became conflated with his literary efforts, and the line between western literature and mass market Western adventure tales began to blur. After publication of *The Virginian*, such dime novelists as Zane Grey, Max Brand, Luke Short, and Louis L'Amour begin aspiring to something more than mere commercial gain: Many such contemporary dime novelists hoped to write literary novels of greater complexity but were unable to break out of the limiting formulas of the Western genre. As the strand of western literature continues past Wister with such writers as Jack London, Willa Cather, and O.E. Rolvaag, the West's dime novelists no longer rest in the background but now form a parallel strand

Table 2

The Western Versus the western: Key Voices in Western American Literature

Once again, citing every voice in the progression of western American literature from its inception until Wallace Stegner's time would be nearly insurmountable; those listed below have played enduring roles in the development of a western literary world. After the publication of Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* in 1902, the novelists break into two strands: those who write literary westerns on the left and those who write dime store-style popular Westerns on the right. As in Table 1, the decades listed mark a time when each author's voice began to emerge most definitively on a national level; in nearly every case below, their popularity extended well beyond the initial years cited.

| Years | Western American Novelist |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1780s | J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur |
| 1820s | James Fenimore Cooper |
| 1830s | Washington Irving |
| 1860s | Bret Harte |
| 1870s | Samuel Clemens |
| 1890s | Hamlin Garland |
| 1902 | Owen Wister's <i>The Virginian</i> |

| Literary Novelist | Years | Dime Store Novelist |
|---------------------------|-------|---------------------|
| Jack London | 1900s | |
| Willa Cather | 1910s | Zane Grey |
| O.E. Rolvaag ² | 1920s | Max Brand |
| | 1930s | Luke Short |
| | 1950s | Louis L'Amour |

² Those western American literary novelists who succeed Rolvaag and who are considered Stegner's contemporaries and beyond will be discussed in Chapter 6.

that still to this day is often confused with its literary cohorts – by the American reading public, contemporary literary critics, and even the writers themselves. In the eyes of many critics – particularly those on the East Coast – “western literature” became synonymous with Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour, making it increasingly difficult for a Wallace Stegner or a Craig Lesley³ to earn the attention they deserved.

I believe a primary difference between the two strands, as I will discuss further throughout this chapter, lies in the layered complexity of a literary western versus the surface-level formula of a dime novel. In a Cather novel, for instance, literary and historical allusions both draw one deeper into the characters and their stories, and suggest a wider stage for the fiction as a whole. In a Grey novel, on the other hand, the story mostly rests on the surface of the page with predictable characters, a formulaic plot, and typically unoriginal details. As Stegner writes in “Fiction: A Lens on Life,” writers of escape entertainment, such as Grey, work from a blueprint, while more serious writers, such as Cather, must create anew (*One Way* 19). Other differences between the literary western and dime store Western are as follows: Dime novels emphasize an open frontier while literary westerns typically are set in a frontier-less America; dime novels embrace Turner’s theories of manifest destiny and a frontier that necessarily influences all

³ I will discuss Stegner, Lesley, and a variety of other western authors in this light further in Chapter 6.

American history, while literary westerns often are more sensitive to the reductive rhetoric that Henry Nash Smith suggests colors all discussions of the West; and writers of dime novels still typically view commercial gain as a primary motivation, while most literary western writers aspire to some level of enduring literary success. With the publication of Wister's novel, however, these definitions began to blur into one, and literary western writers found themselves battling for an intellectual foothold in an industry dominated by East Coast-centered publishers.

Stegner suggests many of these arguments in his discussions of western literature in such essay collections as *The Sound of Mountain Water* and *One Way to Spell Man*. My intention here is to further elucidate his ideas by using a chronological look at the writers that precede Stegner, both before and after Wister's momentous publication, to examine how the lines between Stegner's small-w literary western and capital-W dime store Western began to blur and why. Stegner's lifelong attempts to debunk the mythologies that he believed limited the audiences that he and other literary western writers could successfully reach were spurred by a frustration over these blurred definitions, and I believe a closer look at unscrambling the places where the rhetoric began to run together will help assuage the frustrations that some western writers still experience today and suggest a means of stepping beyond such erroneous assumptions.

- ***Pre-Wister Western American Literature***

Although today it is frequently credited with helping to define the “new American,” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s 1782 publication of *Letters from an American Farmer* did not meet with immediate enthusiasm among the American reading public.⁴ His book saw edition after edition in a variety of European cities in the fifty years after its first publication, while in the United States it earned only half-interested attention. When a more rationalistic age overshadowed an earlier sense of romantic imagination in the early to mid-1800s, Crèvecoeur’s romanticized tale slipped out of sight for nearly a century; American critics dismissed Crèvecoeur’s work as a quaint and only at times informative historical account of life in this nation’s founding years – educational, yes, but hardly literary. In 1919, it was D.H. Lawrence who spurred new interest in Crèvecoeur by including *Letters from an American Farmer* on his list of classic American literary works, and readers learned to forgive Crèvecoeur his structural deficiencies and ill-defined sense of genre in an effort to uncover the historical significance beneath. Lawrence saw Crèvecoeur as a founding father of American literature: “[Benjamin] Franklin is the real *practical* prototype of the American,’ he observed in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. ‘Crèvecoeur is the

⁴ In each of the following entries, I will consider first the biographical background of the writer and/or text, citing a variety of critical voices in an effort to explore this notion of writer and/or text as myth (consider my earlier discussion of Theodore Roosevelt as a living example of archetypal pioneer values), followed by specific textual references to look at the individual western myths forwarded within the books themselves.

emotional”” (Crèvecoeur 7).

Henry Nash Smith opens the prologue of *Virgin Land* with a reference to Crèvecoeur’s third letter, the most anthologized of all of his work: “What is an American? asked St. John de Crèvecoeur before the Revolution, and the question has been repeated by every generation from his time to ours,” Smith writes. He continues: “Poets and novelists, historians and statesmen have undertaken to answer it, but the varying national self-consciousness they have tried to capture always escapes final statement” (3). According to James C. Work, a scholar who edits the collection *Prose & Poetry of the American West*, Crèvecoeur’s work leads from a somewhat obvious inquiry into American identity to a less direct glimpse of early western American mythologies:

His “frontier” was certainly not the West by any modern definition, but de Crèvecoeur offers us, through his classic *Letters*, the first truly literate insight into the American character, describing traits that would merge and interact with the forces of the New Land and that would eventually become the trademarks of the Anglo-American westerner. (36)

Richard Slotkin takes Work’s argument a step further by suggesting that Crèvecoeur not only invokes the wilderness frontier in his careful details and hints of early archetypes, but he also pushes for a move into the wilds and away from the confines of a European-influenced “civilized” society:

His book is useful at this point as a summary compendium of the variety of American heroes, as seen by both Europe and America. In addition, it suggests the nature and extent of the vocabulary of symbols on which the creators of the Boone legend were able to draw for their version of the American myth. ... His response to the

evils of civilization is not to withdraw behind the hedge of civilization; rather, his sufferings determine him to move still more deeply into the land. The solution to the problems and distresses of living in a wilderness America is, not a return to Europe, but a move outward to a frontier less trammelled by Europe and civilization. (*Fatal* 260, 264)

Slotkin, who labels Crèvecoeur's book an "epistolary fiction," clearly sees the work as America's earliest literary introduction to the western archetypes and assumptions to come.

I believe the structure of *Letters from an American Farmer* is intriguing when one considers how Crèvecoeur is toying with narrative voice as he moves from a place of intimacy to one of more distanced omniscience, suggesting with his correlating themes the effects of a trek into the mythical untamed American wilderness. Crèvecoeur writes twelve letters that center themselves in three disparate places: Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, and Charleston, South Carolina. The Nantucket chapters are the most personal, offering intimate glimpses into early American life. In these chapters, Crèvecoeur employs the personal voice of James the Farmer as James shifts from a discussion of his own work on his Pennsylvania farm to the efforts of other early Americans and the conglomeration of those efforts into a larger sense of American identity. The Martha's Vineyard chapter is notably more objective, venturing into a reporterly account of early American whaling techniques. James's voice is no longer clear; instead Crèvecoeur offers what one might now consider a Melville-like listing of the details involved in the art of whaling. The Charleston, South Carolina, chapter –

which focuses on plantation slavery – is the most disturbing and emotional, and yet here Crèvecoeur establishes the greatest distance between his narrator and the story at hand by allowing an authorial omniscience to override James's voice.

The further Crèvecoeur drifts from the calm of what he sees as a Lockean sense of natural order, the more the narrative is distanced from the comfort of a clear and consistent autobiographical voice. Like Bercovitch's "errand into the wilderness," the risks taken in stepping so decisively away from the civilization that is known and familiar and into the wilds of a new frontier often lead to an American consensus – even if that consensus involves erroneous or even immoral assumptions, such as the Wild West hero who insists on taking the law into his own hands with the approval of a society that values such fierce independence.

From a literary standpoint, Crèvecoeur uses his fictional-autobiographical form to blur the lines that separate public self from private self, fact from fiction, rationalist thought from Romantic thought, and persona from creator. He layers recognizable genres – epistolary, propagandist, sentimental, autobiographical – in such a way that all are drawn to the forefront and questioned. Nothing in *Letters from an American Farmer* is conventional or neatly defined, just as nothing in the so-called "savage" American West is reliant on tradition or broadly accepted mores; instead everything is raw, immediate, untapped. For Crèvecoeur's readers, on the other hand, autobiography provides a stable place where one can expect truth and hear personal confessions – and, perhaps, even reach a point of

consensus in the midst of an untrammelled and unexplored frontier. From a cultural standpoint, autobiography grants Crèvecoeur the authority necessary to introduce questions of national consciousness that persist in the United States to this day. Crèvecoeur was the first to so directly ponder who Americans are, how they differ from the rest of the world, and who they might become. The most immediate example of Crèvecoeur's linguistic influence on this nation is found in the contemporary concept of the American "melting pot" of cultures: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world," Crèvecoeur writes in his third letter (70). Some of the other still-prevalent western American myths that first appeared in Crèvecoeur's book include the myth of simplicity as virtuous, of the Lockean right to profit from one's labors, of glorified nature, of colonialism as the United States' manifest destiny, of continual regeneration, of the endless benefits of hard labor, of the ability to successfully dominate nature, of national humility, of a class-free society, of guaranteed religious freedom, of a boundless frontier, of the importance of individuality, of freedom from the taints of history, of equal opportunity, of American exceptionalism.

In his essay "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," Stegner, like Slotkin, credits Crèvecoeur with such early western American mythical ideologies as the misconception of lawlessness as attractive and the notion of extreme individualism. Stegner's discussion of "Crèvecoeur's wild man, the borderer

emancipated into total freedom” leads to some of his most frustrated and confessional remarks regarding western mythologies:

I spend this much time on a mythic figure who has irritated me all my life because I would obviously like to bury him. But I know I can't. He is a faster gun than I am. He is too attractive to the daydreaming imagination. It gets me nowhere to object to the self-righteous, limited, violent code that governs him, or to disparage the novels of Louis L'Amour because they were mass-produced with interchangeable parts. Mr. L'Amour sells in the millions, and at times has readers in the White House.

But what one can say, and be sure of, is that even while the cowboy myth romanticizes and falsifies western life, it says something true about western, and hence about American, character. (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 111)

Here lies the complexity of the western literary struggle: While western authors may bemoan the literary proximity of dime westerns, particularly when non-westerners assume that a genre Western is all the region is capable of producing, they cannot simply ignore the myths if they are to accurately and effectively pull a sense of history into their work. And without a sense of history, Stegner believes, the present can be little more than one of L'Amour's mass-produced interchangeable parts.

Like Crèvecoeur, James Fenimore Cooper saw more popularity in Europe in his early publishing years than in the United States. In fact, it wasn't until the 1920s that critics began to recognize Cooper as the nation's first great social critic. Most scholars agree that Cooper's placement as the first professional American novelist, an originator of western mythology, and national social critic

demand that one first overlook a host of literary faults – and some critics, Samuel Clemens among them, were unable to look past what they considered irresponsible historical and literary missteps. In *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, scholar Richard Chase does succeed in looking beyond such technical faults as unsatisfactory character development and narrative disorganization to declare Cooper one of the nation's earliest mythmakers:

If Cooper is of only secondary importance as an artist, he is of the first importance both as a creator and critic of culture. ... Exactly because he conceived of his duty as public and national, and also, of course, because he was among the first on the scene, Cooper was able to formulate some of the principal attitudes and dilemmas of American fiction. (46-47)

When Cooper's most famous protagonist, the Natty Bumppo of his five-novel series *The Leather-Stocking Tales*, is isolated from Cooper's novels and analyzed as a historical character in his own right, he easily becomes a mythic figure – not unlike Don Quixote – capable of existing “apart from any and all books,” Chase continues (55). The editors of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* also decide to overlook Cooper's faults in favor of his contributions: “[S]yntactical awkwardness, arbitrary plotting, and heavy-handed attempts at humor” number among Cooper's literary downfalls, yet he will always rank as “a major source for the student of ideas in America,” they argue: “What most appeals to modern readers are his profoundly ambivalent dramatizations of such enduring American conflicts as natural right versus legal right, order versus change, primeval wilderness versus civilization” (Baym 980, 981).

In *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith points to the undeniable similarities

between the popular and heroic Daniel Boone and Cooper's Natty Bumppo (60). Bumppo achieves his popularity as an older hero, and consequently the many western literary heroes created in his image through the nineteenth century tend to be older and not necessarily of romantic interest, Smith continues (68). Slotkin also discusses the developing myth of Daniel Boone with reference to Bumppo, and he opens his chapter on what he calls "The Leatherstocking Myth" with a poignant quote from D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*:

True myth concerns itself centrally with the onward adventure of the integral soul. And this, for America, is Deerslayer. A man who turns his back on white society. ... An isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man, who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white.

You have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolated, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted. (*Regeneration* 466)

Slotkin is again pointing to his thesis that early western American society learned to rebuild itself through violence, and here he suggests that Cooper's Natty Bumppo, as an archetypal Daniel Boone, plays a role in forwarding that normalized sense of violence.

In his introduction to a 1989 edition of *The Last of the Mohicans*, western novelist A.B. Guthrie wholeheartedly defends the man he characterizes by the title of one of Cooper's own books: "the pathfinder." Even the accusations that Cooper's work has been the genesis of many erroneous myths are unfounded, Guthrie argues:

In his time Cooper was attacked as the creator of “the noble red man,” whereas, as all true racists knew, the only good Indian was a dead one. The fact is that Cooper created more ignoble Indians than he did noble ones. ... He was an innovator. He took the stuff at hand, the words, the waters, the Indian, and the white backwoodsman, and he made drama of them. He planted his stories in history. To chosen Indians he gave redeeming human qualities that the great majority of white Americans at the time were unwilling to grant. As a forerunner of the many novelists to follow, he gave vitality and sweep and worthiness to his creations. (x-xi)

Guthrie discusses Cooper’s use of history further, suggesting that authors who succeeded Cooper frequently wrote for money and were either careless or dismissive of western history, an omission that separates them from the serious literature of Cooper. Like Cooper, Stegner also valued such an emphasis on western history and its incorporation into a successfully complex work of literary fiction. The quandary lies between the literary use of history versus history as a dime novel blueprint allowing little deviation from the expected western genre formula; Cooper, both Guthrie and Stegner would argue, embraces the former.

Like Guthrie, Richard Etulain also steps boldly forward to praise an author whom he views as a founding father of western American literature and its accompanying mythologies:

During the first half of the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper did more than any other writer to popularize the frontier. His widely read Leatherstocking Tales in the 1820s and 1830s provided American and European readers with a valiant hero who battled the wilderness and “barbaric” Indians to open the frontier for those coming behind. But at large costs, for Natty Bumppo was unable to remain in eastern society, never found a suitable mate, and was forced to live out his life isolated from family and

hearth. So influential was Cooper's story line that it appeared repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century and profoundly influenced dime novelists and Local Color writers after the Civil War. (*Telling 2*)

I agree with both Guthrie and Etulain that whether or not Cooper was a brilliant literary stylist – and plainly he was not – his influences on western literature and on American literature as a whole are undeniable and unshakeable. With Crèvecoeur one sees the mythological western ideologies beginning to take shape; with Cooper one sees the beginnings of a western American literature that privileges not only the Bumpo-influenced loner hero, but also such elements as the setting as a unifying and emotive literary device, and the narrator as a consistent, likeable, and trustworthy voice. Consider, for example, the reader's first introduction to Natty Bumpo in *The Pioneers*:

His face was skinny and thin almost to emaciation; but yet it bore no signs of disease – on the contrary, it had every indication of the most robust and enduring health. The cold and exposure had, together, given it a color of uniform red. His gray eyes were glancing under a pair of shaggy brows that overhung them in long hairs of gray mingled with their natural hue; his scraggy neck was bare and burnt to the same tint with his face, though a small part of a shirt collar, made of the country check, was to be seen above the over dress he wore. (20-21)

Bumpo is a quintessential loner, with Cooper's details indeed suggesting the extension of a mythical western hero-type – the very idealized archetype that Stegner later fights to extract from the trenches of a western American literature that he hopes to redefine.

In this series of landmark influences on the development of western American literature arrives an easterner whose time in the West was relatively short-lived but whose impact has been unquestionably enduring: Washington Irving. Irving, a New York City-raised writer who spent more than two decades living overseas, published his works at the same time as Cooper but achieved a far more notable level of popularity in his lifetime. The editors of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* label Irving “the first American to achieve an international reputation” (Baym 934), and Richard Slotkin writes that Irving “was already the ‘dean’ of American letters when, in the 1830s, he turned his attention to the subject of western exploration” (*Fatal* 119). After a seventeen-year stint in Europe during which he achieved an international reputation as author of such tales as “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Irving sailed home to the United States in 1832 to a somewhat cool reception among those who believed he had become “too Europeanized” (Baym 935). In an effort to prove his patriotism and delve more deeply into what he saw as the heart of the nation, Irving embarked on several westward excursions, the most notable of which was a lengthy trek south to Oklahoma territory that resulted in his 1935 travel book *A Tour on the Prairies*. A year later, Irving published *Astoria*, a history of the Pacific Northwest fur trade of John Jacob Astor, and just one year after that, he detailed the early nineteenth-century Rocky Mountain expeditions of Captain Benjamin Louis Eulalie de Bonneville in *The Adventures of Captain*

Bonneville.

In his foreword to a 1956 edition of *A Tour on the Prairies*, Richard Batman writes that Irving's western tours did indeed put him in touch with the American images and themes that had slipped to the wayside during his time in Europe. Generally speaking, Irving's use of western mythologies is similar to Cooper's, although Irving's experiences as a historian and especially as a government official add dimensions beyond Cooper's abilities. Irving boasts more insight and interest in the future of western policies, for example, such as his contention that the frontier was far too arid and intractable to attract agrarian settlements but might continue to provide nicely for trappers and hunters (Slotkin, *Fatal* 119-120).

According to Slotkin, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* boasts Irving's most indelible contributions to western frontier mythology. Irving met Bonneville at Astor's New York home, and Irving, who was eager for a new story to follow his tales of Astor's adventure, readily paid Bonneville one thousand dollars for his personal maps and manuscript. Irving's book details Bonneville's years from 1832 to 1835, when he led more than a hundred men through the Rocky Mountains and the Utah Basin along what would become the Oregon Trail (Irving, *Bonneville* N. pag.). Unlike Irving's earlier western book *Astoria*, Slotkin writes, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* incorporates "some of the novelistic coherence that comes from having a central character to provide a strong focus

and viewpoint,” and Bonneville himself ultimately becomes the mythical Mountain Man (*Fatal* 120). Like Crèvecoeur’s yeoman farmer and Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Bonneville separates himself from the chaos of a commercialized civilization and is “content with his ‘natural’ lot,” Slotkin continues (*Fatal* 121).

Both Richard Etulain and Henry Nash Smith agree with Slotkin that perhaps because of his East Coast/European grounding, Irving harbors a certain fear and abhorrence of the very “savage” frontier about which he writes. He does not, for example, believe in a steadily advancing frontier, for Irving’s frontier image is far too wild to allow for such a clean shift to civilization:

Bonneville’s heroism lies in his capacity to resist the spell of such wilderness, which turns lesser men into renegades; and to overawe and rule the racially hybrid crowd that accompanies him – prophecy that Bonneville’s sort of military man will be able to overawe the future [“hybrid races like the mountain Tartars of the Caucasus”], and keep the border safe. But his will be a heroism in defense, not in advance. (Slotkin, *Fatal* 122)

On the other hand, Irving was known as a stylist with the writerly eye of a landscape painter (Irving, *Tour* xvi), and in the early pages of *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* are Irving’s full and engaging sensory details of this new frontier:

From the middle to the end of May, Captain Bonneville pursued a western course over vast undulating plains, destitute of tree or shrub, rendered miry by occasional rain, and cut up by deep water-courses where they had to dig roads for their wagons down the soft crumbling banks, and to throw bridges across the streams. The weather had attained the summer heat; the thermometer standing about fifty-seven degrees in the morning, early, but rising to about ninety degrees at noon. The incessant breezes, however, which

sweep these vast plains, render the heat endurable. Game was scarce, and they had to eke out their scanty fare with wild roots and vegetables, such as the Indian potato, the wild onion, and the prairie tomato, and they met with quantities of “red root,” from which the hunters make a very palatable beverage. (19)

Although Irving’s time in the West was short-lived and his fame for the three western books slight in comparison to his lengthy literary career, I believe Irving’s unstated fear of the West is precisely where he adds the most to western mythology. Irving believed that only a superhuman adventurer like Bonneville could successfully broach the frontier, let alone conquer it, and in Irving’s richly detailed descriptions of a difficult land and the other-worldly heroes who set out to explore its boundaries lie the archetypal characteristics of a Stegner-defined early frontier hero as well as an idealized landscape.

When Samuel Clemens’s story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” was published in a New York journal in 1865 and Bret Harte’s “The Luck of Roaring Camp” appeared in 1868 in the new western journal *Overland Monthly*, the literary center for western local-color writing shifted to the San Francisco Bay area (Etulain, *Re-Imagining* xxiv). As somewhat reluctant realists whose gruff western characters typically maintained a romanticized sensibility, both Clemens and Harte set the standard for western vernacular writing. Clemens left California shortly after, traveling first to Hawaii and then to Connecticut, where he eventually settled; Harte, too, moved first to

the East Coast and then to Europe, but not before he saw a meteoric rise and decline in his literary popularity. In his essay “The Western Synthetic: Bret Harte,” Stegner wonders why a man whose short stories bear “little honest observation of people or of nature, no real character, no accurate picture of a society however fleeting, no true ear for the lingo, no symbolic depth, no valid commentary upon the human condition, no inadvertent self-revelation, and no real weight of mind” could possibly hold a place in the western American literary canon, and yet Harte’s stories still appear in historical literary anthologies, and, most importantly, his influences on the western archetypes that appear again and again since the mid-1800s are undeniable (*Sound* 234).

Raised in New York, Harte followed his mother to California in 1854 at the age of 18 and worked a variety of odd jobs – as a shotgun messenger with Wells Fargo, a teacher, a miner, an apprentice typesetter (*Work* 157) – until he graduated to the position of reporter for various California newspapers in the mid-1860s. He had already begun to establish a literary reputation for himself when he was hired as the first editor of *Overland Monthly*, and his first publication in that journal, the short story “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” skyrocketed him to literary fame from San Francisco to the East Coast. In 1870, Harte published this story and several other local-color tales in his collection *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Stories*, and his popularity proved so great that when he and his wife moved east to accept an unprecedented ten-thousand-dollar one-year contract

from *Atlantic Monthly* for twelve poems or stories, the local press followed their trip. Unfortunately Harte's sudden rise to fame must have proved overwhelming for him, because he produced only mediocre pieces over that year and his contract was not renewed. In the next few years, Harte held a number of political appointments, including the positions of American consul in Rhenish Prussia and later in Glasgow, and he eventually settled in London, where he published unsuccessful repetitions of his earlier stories and was mildly popular as a chronicler of the American West (Lamar 472).

In his introduction to a 1995 edition of Harte's *Selected Stories and Sketches*, David Wyatt declares Harte "the pivotal figure in the history of the short story" (xxii). Wyatt believes it is Harte's intentional writing that solidifies his mark on the short story, suggesting that he may have been an early precursor to the fictional denouement or the emotional epiphany that is created when a writer consciously strives to draw a reader's emotions to a certain peak. Wyatt quotes Edgar Allan Poe to better define Harte's contribution: "Without a certain continuity of effort – without a certain duration or repetition of purpose – the soul is never deeply moved" (Harte xxii). Although Harte prefers a more simplified and confined version of the short story than many of his successors, Wyatt continues, his surface-level handling of both character and detail are as intentional as the sentimental inclusions of such solitary authentic details as the engulfing red dust or an old tin box crammed with dollar bills. In his *Prose & Poetry of the*

American West, James C. Work also emphasizes Harte's "keen sense of style"; Harte was a self-taught writer who learned to imitate such writers as Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Washington Irving, and Charles Dickens with impressive accuracy, Work writes (157). In fact, Harte so instilled himself with his readings of literary classics that both Work and Stegner suggest that Dickens may have played a role equal to the miners and prostitutes of the California gold rush in helping to formulate Harte's characters. Stegner argues that the characters of Harte's short stories have had their greatest impact on western archetypes not because they are complex or even life-like, but because they are conscious literary creations:

His characters seem made because they *were* made, according to a formula learned from Dickens: the trick of bundling together apparently incompatible qualities to produce a striking paradox. Thus Harte's gamblers, though Lotharios with ladies of easy virtue, are chivalry itself when Innocence makes its call on them, as in "A Protégée of Jack Hamlin's." Thus the virulent Mother Shipton starves herself to death to give her rations to Piney in "The Outcasts." Thus the best shots have only one eye, the strongest men only three fingers, the most dangerous men the gentlest manner, the roughest men the softest center, the most pompous men the most forthright bravery at twenty paces. (*Sound* 227)

Since Harte "showed the world how," Stegner continues, Western writers and movie producers alike have had a hard time creating a gambler, stage coach driver, prostitute, or schoolmarm that doesn't echo with the archetypal extremes of Harte's short stories (*Sound* 226).

Just as many contemporary western writers have found themselves limited

by the very label “western writer,” Harte found himself “imprisoned in his own creation,” Stegner writes (*Sound* 230). Unfortunately Harte was unable to draw on a variety of wider life experiences, as Clemens was, and once his sudden rise to fame pulled him away from the local stories that fueled his fiction as he moved to the East Coast and later overseas, Harte found himself strapped both for money and for ideas and consequently unable to take the risk of experimenting with anything beyond what initially secured his popularity. Although he died in a kind of self-exile in London, separated even from his wife and ignored by the American reading public for what was then considered an old-fashioned sense of sentimental romanticism, Harte’s handful of sharply and consciously drawn mythical western figures are still present today. According to Stegner, one simply cannot ignore this many-faulted writer of early western folklore whose characters undoubtedly will endure:

Despite gross simplifications and despite a failure of superficial realism, his creations have lasted and become stereotypes precisely because they *do* approximate myths. They are all of them – rough but sentimental miners, dishonest but loyal partners, wicked but chivalrous gamblers, virtuous but tender schoolmarms, unvirtuous but tender prostitutes – shapes of the essential American Innocence that Mark Twain, James, Howells, and many more have asserted and personified. With all their faults upon them, the inhabitants of Red Dog and Poker Flat belong somewhere in the same literary tradition with Leatherstocking and Huckleberry Finn. (*Sound* 236)

Consider, for example, when Harte describes poor, pregnant Cherokee Sal at the beginning of his story “The Luck of Roaring Camp”: “Perhaps the less said of her the better. She was a coarse, and, it is to be feared, a very sinful woman.

... Dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable, she was yet suffering a martyrdom hard enough to bear even when veiled by sympathizing womanhood, but now terrible in her loneliness” (7). The only woman in Roaring Camp, Sal is tough and determined, despite her lonely pregnancy, and certainly the prototype of many hardy frontier women to come.

I agree with Stegner that Harte is perhaps best remembered for his rather shallow but wholly memorable western characters, but I believe one also cannot overemphasize the impact of Harte’s role as a conscious literary stylist. Whether or not that style is particularly successful is debatable, but this sense of authorial self-awareness as a literary creator was something new to the West, and something that is both echoed and greatly improved in the works of Wallace Stegner. My overarching argument here and in the chapters to come is that Stegner succeeded in asking the careful questions necessary to forward this nation’s discussion of the western mythologies that can constrict western literature, and perhaps he finds the beginnings of this conscious eye to the West and its characteristics in the works of such writers as Bret Harte.

Samuel Clemens was born and raised in Florida, Missouri, and traveled to the Nevada Territory in 1861 with his brother Orion while he was in his twenties. He soon moved to California, where he became a reporter for the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* – at which time he adopted the pseudonym Mark Twain –

and later for the San Francisco *Californian* and the *Sacramento Union*. Five years later, Clemens had moved to the East Coast, although his brief stay in the West had a decidedly lasting impact on his fiction – particularly as he experimented with the more readable and realistic style of vernacular prose. What Clemens brought that was new to the development of American literature was a masterful skill with language, both written and spoken. In *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Richard Chase describes Clemens as a “master” of language, and he cites *Huckleberry Finn* as the novel that introduces the narrative ease and literary truth of American colloquial speech; from *Huckleberry Finn* arose a multitude of imitators, including such writers as Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, Chase writes:

Apart from any and all of its meanings *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) delights the reader first and last by its language. The book makes a music of words which is beautifully sustained and modulated to the very end. The language is original and it has proved to be one of the most important discoveries – for it was discovered and adapted rather than being created out of the whole cloth – that have occurred in American literature. (139)

Henry Nash Smith follows a similar line as Chase and declares *Huckleberry Finn* “the first masterpiece of vernacular prose” (242).

Richard Slotkin believes Clemens’s brief stay in the West was essential to his formation as a writer. As he sought a new and more honest literary voice than those writers who had preceded him, Clemens looked to the West, Slotkin argues. In his 1872 fictionalized account of his years in the Nevada Territory titled

Roughing It, Clemens repeatedly employs an innocent narrative voice that presents the idealized myths of the American West, and then dismantles them through the more realistic details of his own personal experiences. Slotkin calls Clemens's process of debunking the archetypal West "demystification":

Such literary "undoing" was essential to the creative task of *Roughing It* in which [Clemens] was not merely retailing his past life but looking for a literary language appropriate to his vision. The language of traditional romance was not merely inaccurate in depicting reality; its highfalutin manner and presumption of moral omniscience were a persuasive falsification of reality which could distort human behavior in the real world. Whereas the Southwest humorists, whose works [Clemens] read and whose techniques he imitated, had seized instead upon the vernacular, they generally did so with the purpose of emphasizing the quaintness and impropriety of Frontier speech. [Clemens] reverses the ideological charge of the contrast, locating truth and virtue in the vernacular. (*Fatal* 518)

That said, Slotkin chooses to further read the vernacular of *Huckleberry Finn* symbolically. The issue of myth versus reality is a dominant issue throughout the novel, for example, as Huck must continually dance between deception and truth, battling to protect himself from those who mean him harm but at the same time maintaining an internal clarity of what is and is not. The contrast between life on the river and on shore again exemplifies the contradiction between myth and reality, Slotkin continues, and in many ways the novel becomes a story of a newly closed frontier since Huck cannot ultimately escape the controlling civilization of life on the shore. But even more important, according to Slotkin, is the complexity of Clemens's own indecisive stance between the civilized world and

the so-called “savage” West. Unlike Irving, Clemens does not fear the unknown wilderness; rather, he champions its childlike hopefulness, particularly in the face of a confining metropolis:

The symbolic language of [Clemens’s] works is the product of reading, experience, introspection, and creative effort, and therefore is a personal and peculiar system. But in its major tropes, symbolism, and structuring principles it is clearly cognate with the myth/ideological system that took shape around the Indian wars and labor struggles of the Last Stand period. The linkage of Indian and class warfare, the expectation of massacre as its result, was basic to both systems. What is different is the greater complexity and ambivalence of [Clemens’s] own system – a result of his divided identification, both for and against society, for and against the wilderness. (Slotkin, *Fatal* 522)

For Slotkin, Clemens was one of the first American writers to respond to the complexity of such issues of western myth and ideology, and the depth of his response opened the doors for other writers to tackle this “demystification” of romanticism as well.

Clemens opens *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with Huck’s description of his antics with Tom Sawyer and, ultimately, his irritation with the confinement of living with the Widow Douglas, who wants to “sivilize” him: “... and so when I couldn’t stand it no longer I lit out,” Huck says (Twain 11). At the end of the novel, when both Huck and Tom are safe again and Tom’s Aunt Sally says she is going to take Huck under her protective wing, Huck, once again, balks at the notion of civilization: “But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and

I can't stand it. I been there before" (283). Despite Slotkin's suggestion that Clemens is ambivalent in his view of the frontier West, I believe Clemens makes it quite clear in *Huckleberry Finn* that ultimately it is the hope and idealism of a mythological frontier that grants Americans the freedom to carry on. On the shores of civilization is where one finds the horrors of slavery, abusive fathers, and sheer loneliness, and it is only by clinging to the optimism of a greener frontier that one is sometimes able to endure the slings and arrows of civilization. Clemens's use of the vernacular, his ironic and astutely witty sense of humor, and his ultimate disillusionment with society all come into play when one considers that his generation was the first to receive the news that the American frontier was officially closed – whether or not, of course, one chooses to believe in hindsight whether such a statement proved true. For Wallace Stegner, the unwitting fear of the unknown frontier of Washington Irving would have been far more worrisome than the increasing negativity and frustration of Samuel Clemens. Both men contributed greatly to the development of a mythological and a literary West, but Irving's contributions were – as Slotkin describes Bonneville – defensive rather than advancing, while Clemens demonstrated a keen understanding of the erroneous myths at work and sought to write anew, in a new kind of language, a more truthful story of America and its unfolding West.

Hamlin Garland marks a somewhat perplexing moment in this progression

of western literary writers, because in the more than fifty volumes he published in his lifetime, his narrative style varies so greatly that it is at times difficult to reconcile, for instance, a beautifully crafted Garland short story with the trite cliché-filled pages of a Garland western romance. According to *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, “At his best Garland is a superb, albeit perhaps unconscious, ironist; at his worst he is unable to see the realities of life for the glittering surface of cliché that covers them” (Lamar 421). Despite his inconsistencies, however, Garland – like Bret Harte – is best remembered for a brilliant handful of stories that have secured a place in the western literary canon because of the new approaches they offer the field of western literature, particularly in terms of character development.

Garland was born in Wisconsin but soon traveled by covered wagon to first Iowa and then the Dakota Territory, where his parents struggled to run a family farm. At the age of twenty-four, Garland moved to Boston, where he taught and eventually began to write about the hardships he had endured as a boy (Lamar 420). His first book, *Main-Travelled Roads*, is arguably his best remembered, although he later wrote a series of autobiographies including *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), *A Daughter of the Middle Border* (1921), *Trail-Makers of the Middle Border* (1926), and *Back-Trailers from the Middle Border* (1928); Garland won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Daughter of the Middle Border*. In between his early emphasis on short fiction and later on autobiography and

reminiscences, Garland wrote a number of western romances, of which the best known is *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop* (1902). In his introduction to the 1891 edition of *Main-Travelled Roads*, W. D. Howells describes the grim realism of Garland's short stories:

The stories are full of those gaunt, grim, sordid, pathetic, ferocious figures, whom our satirists find so easy to caricature as Hayseeds, and whose blind groping for fairer conditions is so grotesque to the newspapers and so menacing to the politicians. They feel that something is wrong, and they know that the wrong is not theirs. The type caught in Mr. Garland's book is not pretty; it is ugly and often ridiculous; but it is heart-breaking in its rude despair. (3)

Yet despite the darkness of what Garland called his use of "veritism" – or realism – Garland's stories boast an underlying sense of romantic optimism that was unique to both the realist and naturalist movements. This "persistent strain" of optimism points to Garland's emphasis on the importance of man's moral responsibility, scholar Joseph B. McCullough writes in his introduction to the 1996 edition of *Main-Travelled Roads*. Rather than minimizing the strength of individual will in the face of larger social, cultural, and even natural forces, as such writers as Emile Zola, Garland instead allows his characters to battle the "futility of farm life" through their own sheer determination, often leading to a hopeful ending, McCullough continues (Garland xiii).

Before Garland, western farmers mostly appeared in fiction as a light-hearted archetype of those who lived in the bliss of country life; but through his stark details and often ironic twists of fate, Garland proved otherwise:

Garland's real animus ... is directed against the agrarian myth that conceives of farmers as nature's nobility, living a life of idyllic happiness in a natural world characterized by beneficence and bounty. Against this romanticized picture (a myth that descends through Thomas Jefferson from eighteenth-century primitivism) Garland pits the more somber facts of the farming life he had known as a boy living in the middle border. (Lamar 421)

A clear example of Garland's attempts to dismantle such ideological agrarian myths arises in his short story "Up the Coolly":

"The poet who writes of milking the cows does it from the hammock, looking on," Howard soliloquized, as he watched the old man Lewis racing around the filthy yard after one of the young heifers that had kicked over the pail in her agony with the flies, and was unwilling to stand still and be eaten alive.

"So, so! you beast!" roared the old man, as he finally cornered the shrinking, nearly frantic creature. (69)

For Henry Nash Smith, Garland was the first western writer to "deal with the Western farmer in literature as a human being instead of seeing him through a veil of literary convention, class prejudice, or social theory" (249). Add to the western farmer his lonely and often sorely neglected wife, and together these two characters are granted difficult but wholly human struggles in Garland's tales of the darker side of impoverished farm life in the nation's Midwest.

In addition to his interest in dismantling idealized myths about western agrarian life, Garland also focused his attentions on what he believed was an inadequate national economic system (he was influenced here by his 1884 reading of economist Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*), overall unfair treatment of women, and inhumane policies regarding Native Americans. Garland had "a

fundamental sympathy and democracy of outlook,” Thomas J. Lyon writes in *The Literary West: An Anthology of Western American Literature*, and he strongly believed in the responsibility of a writer to act as social reformer (70). Garland’s upbringing in some ways mirrors that of Wallace Stegner, which may in part explain why many of the two men’s ideologies are similar. According to McCullough, Garland’s father was a strict disciplinarian who pushed the family “from certainty to uncertainty ... in search of a better life,” while his mother quietly accepted what Garland viewed as the injustices she was forced to endure: “The contrast between Garland’s parents was to leave him with a particular tenderness toward women – a tenderness that he transformed into a recurring theme about suppressed and beaten farm women” (Garland ix). Stegner, whose father also pushed his family unmercifully from new business venture to new business venture and whose mother also – for the most part – acquiesced in dignified silence, like Garland believed in the reformist responsibilities of a writer and the need to dismantle western mythologies that dangerously type individuals in a superhuman light. As Jackson J. Benson suggests, Stegner was a realist writer who “seemed to have a special connection with the American realists,” whom he taught to his Stanford students with great enthusiasm – Garland included (*Wallace* 173-174). Although Hamlin Garland and Owen Wister were both born in 1860 and consequently were writing and publishing at virtually the same time, Garland’s darkly foreboding literary works are a far cry from the

romanticism of *The Virginian*, much as Stegner's novels and short stories also prioritize a fallibly human sense of character and therefore strive to frustrate the romanticized mythologies that saw their beginnings in Wister's 1902 publication.

- ***Pre-Wister Dime Store Westerns***

The Beadle Dime Novels of the latter half of the nineteenth century were inspired by several key figures of archetypal western heroism: Although the early western explorer/mountain man Daniel Boone clearly influenced Cooper's Natty Bumppo character, Boone presented a quandary of western heroism for many generations to follow. Was he the progressive bearer of refined order and civilization, or was he a cultural primitivist who continually fled deeper into the wilderness to escape any semblance of civilization that he left in his wake? When John Filson first introduced Boone to the reading public with his 1784 publication of *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke*, he painted Boone as a heroic harbinger of civilization who fell in love with the wilds of Kentucky but who was eager to see others join him in the region's serene and peaceful beauty. He was a loner, yes, and he did leave his wife and daughter behind to scout the new territory, but Boone went to great lengths to have his family join him and endured the warfare and hardships necessary to succeed in his new life in this unsettled territory:

To conclude, I can now say that I have verified the saying of an old Indian who signed Col. Henderson's deed. Taking me by the hand,

at the delivery thereof, Brother, says he, we have given you a fine land, but I believe you will have much trouble in settling it. My footsteps have often been marked with blood, and therefore I can truly subscribe to its original name. Two darling sons, and a brother, have I lost by savage hands, which have also taken from me forty valuable horses, and abundance of cattle. Many dark and sleepless nights have I been a companion for owls, separated from the cheerful society of men, scorched by the Summer's sun, and pinched by the Winter's cold, an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness. But now the scene is changed: Peace crowns the sylvan shade. (Filson 80-81)

Filson includes his tale of Boone's heroism as a persuasive appendix to his history of the State of Kentucky: "a literary dramatization of a hero's immersion in the elemental violence of the wilderness and his consequent emergence as the founder of a nascent imperial republic," writes Slotkin (*Regeneration* 268). Boone's bravery is at times astounding as he endures repeated attacks by Native Americans, several stretches of captivity, lengthy periods alone in the woods as he moves from place to place, and – as noted in Filson's quote above – several family deaths as a result of his bold moves through primitive Kentucky territory. Boone seems to long for companionship when he is alone, and yet at the same time he relishes the landscape around him the most when he is free to sit silently and ponder the beauty of the woods with no other human to distract or detain him. As Henry Nash Smith notes in *Virgin Land*, these seemingly conflicting qualities actually blend together over time to become the loner, civilization front-runner mountain man who appears again and again in later fictional accounts:

If Daniel Bryan's [1813 epic *The Adventures of Daniel Boone*] represents the limit of possible absurdity in making Boone the

harbinger of civilization and refinement, [John B. Jones's 1849 *Wild Western Scenes*] may stand as the opposite limit of absurdity in making him a cultural primitivist. The image of the Wild Western hero could serve either purpose. (58)

In the archetypal myths that develop, a Boone-inspired hero emerges to blow the trumpet into the wildness of the frontier and welcome the approaching settlers, while at the same time continually stepping further West in his distaste of the confines of civilized society.

The next influential western hero to emerge was Davy Crockett, who first published tales of his life in the 1833 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett*. Crockett, whose death at the Alamo raised him to martyr status as a timeless hero of the western frontier, was a state representative who created his own mythical status through his writings and political aspirations. Some historians, Slotkin included, question the veracity of Crockett's claims, suggesting instead that Crockett manufactured many details in order to make his own life experiences seem more mythically western:

Crockett therefore represented himself as rude and ignorant, until the present moment; as a hunter and farmer who lived chiefly in the backwoods; as one who had office thrust upon him, without seeking it; and as the hero of a rags-to-riches story, who rose modestly, but by his own efforts. The facts ... are otherwise. (Slotkin, *Fatal* 167)

While Crockett indeed was born to a poor Tennessee family and had to teach himself to farm and to hunt in order to survive, he was quite well-read, a successful debater and politician, and when he first arrived in the East, he looked

more like a metropolitan upper-middleclass-man than the mountain man image his observers expected. In time, however, and certainly with the aid of his adeptly persuasive writing skills, he came to be seen in Washington as the “pioneer turned politician who symbolized frontier egalitarianism and the democratic spirit and who came as close as anyone to defining the essential American character” (Lamar 274). Crockett was, in essence, a brilliantly self-made archetype whose influence on future western heroes was as indelible as that of Daniel Boone.

Kit Carson’s legend emerged in the 1840s with the publication of John Charles Fremont’s narratives of his exploring expeditions. While Fremont was seen as the military aristocrat, Carson – whom Fremont praised freely – emerged as the heroic Rocky Mountain hunter-scout. Carson led Fremont on three separate expeditions through the central Rockies, the Great Basin, Oregon, and California, and afterwards Carson stayed on in the West as a guide and Indian agent in New Mexico. With Carson, Boone’s loner tendencies were elevated to a new and mythical level, Henry Nash Smith writes:

The Wild Western hero has been secularized – if the term may be employed in this connection – and magnified. He no longer looks to God through nature, for nature is no longer benign: its symbols are the wolves and the prairie fire. The scene has been shifted from the deep fertile forests east of the Mississippi to the barren plains. The landscape within which the Western hero operates has become ... A “dreary waste.” It throws the hero back in upon himself and accentuates his terrible and sublime isolation. He is an anarchic and self-contained atom – hardly even a monad – alone in a hostile, or at best a neutral, universe. (89)

Carson achieved full hero status with the publication in 1848 of Charles E.

Averill's *Kit Carson: The Prince of the Gold Hunters*, and his role as a tough and wizened wilderness scout brought a new dimension to the image of the archetypal western hero (Smith 86).

For historian Richard Etulain, it was Buffalo Bill Cody who cemented the image both of the idealized western frontier hero and of the Wild West itself:

Buffalo Bill's Wild West did more than any other medium in the late nineteenth century to synthesize pre-existing ideas about the frontier and to present them in an entertaining, extraordinary way. By the end of the century, Americans had defined a mythic West, one crystallized and embodied in Cody's traveling arena show. (*Telling* 5)

Like Carson, Cody achieved fame as a scout, first for the Fifth U.S. Cavalry and later as a hunting guide for parties of notables. In 1872, Cody, who also had ridden for years as a Pony Express messenger, agreed to appear on a melodrama stage in Chicago; he subsequently remained on the stage for eleven seasons, often spending his summers guiding hunting parties in the West. In 1882, Cody put on his first Wild West show, which incorporated such dramatic elements as trick riders and ropers, the Deadwood stage coach, the Pony Express, and authentic Native Americans. After several years of performing in Europe, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show saw its greatest success at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (Lamar 228-229). Cody's shows were performed before sell-out crowds in the Midwest and overseas, while, at home in the West, the frontier was a violent, unruly place that continually grabbed newspaper headlines year after year with such bloody battles as Custer's Last Stand at Little Bighorn and

Hickok's death in 1876, the Lincoln County War in 1877 and 1878, and the death of Billy the Kid and the shootout at the OK Corral in 1881 (Etulain, *Telling* 7).

Whether or not Cody had talent as an actor, he was an exceptional performer who knew how to capitalize on his status as a famous frontier scout and hold his audiences precisely where he wanted them. Like Crockett, Cody also essentially defined his own mythical hero status – and it stuck.

Meanwhile, as Cody was playing to increasingly larger audiences and spreading international news of this untamed American frontier, Erastus Beadle was making a fortune off of his introduction in 1860 of the dime novel, a book that could be sold at a mere ten cents apiece and that was intended for a mass audience. As Etulain writes in *Telling Western Stories*, dime novelists succeeded in the latter half of the nineteenth century in deifying the frontier cowboy hero in such a way that created archetypes from which western authors such as Frank Norris and Wallace Stegner, more than half a century later, could scarcely break free:

Because these novelists were often like roving journalists looking for fresh stories and sensational characters, they frequently produced novels about Wild West characters before biographers caught up with those figures. For example, Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Belle Starr, and Billy the Kid first appeared in dime novels or romantic, and sometimes lurid, newspaper or magazine stories before they were the subjects of well-researched biographies. This lag meant that millions of readers, having devoured the quickly issued dime novels or journalistic accounts, already had strongly in mind a series of sensational stories about the leading Wild West characters and episodes by the mid-1890s, well before sound biographies and histories appeared. (25)

Beadle's most successful dime novel – Edward S. Ellis' *Seth Jones: or, The Captives of the Frontier* – was published in 1860 and sold more than 60,000 copies. According to *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, most dime novelists could write a complete novel in just under three days. Prentiss Ingraham, one of Beadle's most prolific authors, wrote more than six hundred novels in addition to his poems and short stories. Another popular writer at the time was Edward L. Wheeler, who created the characters of Deadwood Dick, Hurricane Nell, and Calamity Jane.

It is important to consider, with regard to both Beadle's dime novels and the important heroic figures who preceded the dime novels, just how much commercial gain played a role in the myth-creating and literary efforts of all of these key players, particularly in light of the more serious literary voices that were emerging simultaneously. Even before the publication of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* in 1902, a differentiation between those who choose to write serious fiction and those who are financially motivated to write formulaic fiction had already begun to emerge. I believe that initially the lines separating the two camps were relatively clear, and it is only with Wister's rather masterful blending of genre that one begins to see the literary novel and the dime store commercial novel conflated so that the difference between the two is no longer readily apparent. The assumption from those living outside the West becomes, therefore, one that presumes only the repetition of Deadwood Dicks and Calamity Janes, and

it has taken a whole new era of western literary writers – with Wallace Stegner at the forefront – to begin to prove that the literary capabilities of the region do indeed extend beyond what is formulaic and so wholly lacking in historical and cultural awareness.

- ***Owen Wister's The Virginian***

In the first two months after its 1902 publication, *The Virginian* sold an unprecedented fifty thousand copies. The novel remained at the top of the nation's bestseller list for more than a year, and in its first eight months alone underwent fifteen printings. By 1938, it had sold more than 1.5 million copies, and it has seen four Hollywood movies, a television series, and a successful Broadway play. One contemporary publisher has reprinted the novel twenty times (Lamar 1225). Wister's novel is a tale told by an unnamed East Coast greenhorn narrator who observes with great fascination the chivalrous and courageous life of the mysterious cowboy known as "the Virginian," a foreman of a Wyoming cattle ranch in the late 1870s and 1880s. The story centers on the tensions between the Virginian and Trampas, the local bully who taunts the Virginian during a poker hand early in the novel:

It was now the Virginian's turn to bet, or leave the game, and he did not speak at once.

Therefore Trampas spoke: "Your bet, you son-of-a-."

The Virginian's pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table, holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever, the voice that sounded almost like a caress, but drawling a very little

more than usual, so that there was almost a space between each word, he issued his orders to the man Trampas:

“When you call me that, *smile!*” And he looked at Trampas across the table.

Yes, the voice was gentle. But in my ears it seemed as if somewhere the bell of death was ringing; and silence, like a stroke, fell on the large room. All men present, as if by some magnetic current, had become aware of this crisis. In my ignorance, and the total stoppage of my thoughts, I stood stock-still, and noticed various people crouching, or shifting their positions. (18-19)

The novel’s climactic gun duel, fueled by the above insult, is the first such “showdown” in western fiction, and the line “When you call me that, *smile!*” has been immortalized over the years by the novel’s far-reaching popularity. Beyond the Trampas/Virginian tensions and the developing relationship between the narrator and the Virginian lies a romantic subplot involving the Virginian and Molly Wood, a New England schoolmarm whom he has rescued from an endangered stagecoach and whom the Virginian eventually marries.

Frequently referred to as the prototypical Western novel – the story that inspired not only hundreds of imitation novels but countless movie and television imitations as well – *The Virginian* is perhaps best known for “the strong silent cowboy, the villainous backshooter, the comic sidekick, and the supercilious schoolmarm,” as well as its popular sunrise showdown (Work 213). When the narrator first lays eyes on the Virginian after arriving in Medicine Bow by rail, for example, the reader meets a familiar John Wayne hero, red handkerchief and all:

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back;

a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, and the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. .. Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all. (Wister 3)

But when scholar Robert Murray Davis details the characteristics that make the Virginian himself the prototypical western cowboy hero in his chapter titled "*The Virginian: Inventing the Westerner*," he makes it clear that there is more to this character than simply the casual thumb-hook and the dusty boots:

The Virginian is not the exception to but the perfection of the type. "A slim young giant more beautiful than pictures"; a resourceful teller of tall tales and inventive practical joker; a man who can dominate horses and, we are continually reminded, women; a singer and extender of bawdy songs, able to talk "the elemental talk of sex, such talk as would be an elk's or tiger's ... so simply and naturally, as we speak of the seasons, or of death, or of any actuality" that it gives no "offense"; a man who can show through "dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire ... the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength"; "utterly a man in countenance and in his self-possession and incapacity to be put at a loss" but "still boyishly proud of his wild calling"; a man who is "brave" rather than "dangerous." (22)

The Virginian is not a single-dimension, shallowly predictable character. In many ways, he is quite the opposite: almost inhumanly consistent and confident in his sometimes surprising intelligence and complexities. The misconception that many western readers and even some scholars have of *The Virginian* is that it rests on a singular plain similar to that of its dime store predecessors and its popular Western successors. But Owen Wister was no hack writer pouring out type to make a fast dollar, and the novel itself runs far deeper in meaning and intention

than any one-dimensional Beadle dime novel.

Born in Philadelphia to a prominent physician, Wister was raised in a wealthy, aristocratic family and attended exclusive preparatory schools in the United States and in Switzerland. He graduated from Harvard with a music major and later completed Harvard Law School, and the Wister family took pride in its regular social invitations to the White House. Wister's first introduction to the West came in 1885 when a family physician advised him to take a rest cure for the summer on a relative's Wyoming ranch. At the time, Wister was working as a bank clerk in Boston and suffering from neuralgia and severe depression as he reluctantly followed his father's plans to attend law school (Lyon 83). Although Wister did eventually return east to complete his law degree, the summer visit had an enormous impact on him and he made fifteen subsequent visits to the West, each time taking copious notes in preparation for his novel (Work 212). With his upper-crust education and keen understanding of the social and political underpinnings of the nation, Wister certainly was not one simply to publish a hack Western for the fun of it. Wister had a clear sense of purpose in writing *The Virginian*, and, especially with his frequent slips into didactic monologues, Wister's themes step forward fairly clearly for those who take the time to look beyond the mythic archetypes to understand what is at play in the novel.

In his afterword to a 1979 edition of *The Virginian*, Max Westbrook argues that the novel is a story of American democracy and the Virginian stands

as the ideal aristocrat in a system that demands hierarchy if it is to succeed:

The Virginian's heroism is not a matter of social class or narrow realism. He is a hero, and he represents the belief that class should be a matter of performance, not the biology of excellence; and this is why sanctimonious religion, Popular Opinion, snobbish barriers, and the destructive ambitions of Trampas all melt before the Virginian's willingness to work and fight for what he believes.
(331)

The Virginian essentially is against democracy in its traditional form and instead pushes for "a class order whose power is greater in progressive potential than that of popular government," Slotkin writes in *Gunfighter Nation*. "Like Roosevelt," Slotkin continues, "Wister sees the primary achievement of the Frontier as the production of a new racial type, selected from among the Anglo-Saxon 'democracy' and trained by the frontier experience in the skills and psychology of command" (175). The novel, therefore, becomes an exploration of the myth of American success: The assumption that all are created equally and treated equally under the law is a farce, the Virginian tells Molly repeatedly, particularly in Wister's "The Game and the Nation" chapters. And in the Virginian – a self-made southern man who ventures West with little education or specific training but who demonstrates a subconscious understanding of fundamental human decency and social mores – is an idealized example of this aristocracy that is earned not by birthright but by actions.

Both Slotkin and historian Richard White write that in the frontier West, human nature is unrestricted and the basic inequalities are consequently more

clearly exposed: “For in the West, where life is basic and men are self-reliant, the ‘quality’ rises above the ‘equality,’” White writes (622). Richard Etulain describes Wister’s frontier as a “laboratory for democracy” (*Re-Imagining* 9). And in that laboratory, Slotkin argues, exists a struggle not between white republican and red savage but between “true aristocracy” and false democracy: “The political allegory around which Wister builds his narrative thus moves from the proof of his Darwinian thesis, that all men are created unequal, to the demonstration that ‘the quality’ are naturally entitled to rule ‘the equality’” (181, 182). Like Roosevelt, Wister had a natural fear of democracy, Slotkin continues, because he did not want to see less educated, less intelligent citizens usurp power from his own aristocratic class (181). For Wister, this “true aristocracy” must allow a mythical western frontier “bootstraps” mentality in which any man who is worthy might step into the game – although in Wister’s mind, “any man” excludes not only women but non-Anglo-Saxons as well.

It is my contention that the Western novels and films that imitate *The Virginian* neatly bypass much of Wister’s political intention and instead focus on the singular traits and plotlines that lead to an engaging and fast-paced story. Somewhere along the way, *The Virginian* became known only as a Louis L’Amour-style formulaic Western that has passed on significant but limiting archetypes. Some of the more recognizable Virginian-inherited narrative elements include the memorable but decidedly pared-down characters of the Virginian,

Molly, and Trampas; the sunrise showdown; several of the Virginian's more memorable single lines; a new level of western male bonding found in the relationship between the narrator and the Virginian; and a more central and all-encompassing love story that ends – surprisingly for a turn-of-the-century Western – in marriage. In addition, rather than recognizing the political and cultural pretentiousness, racism, and sexism inherent in Wister's thematic intentions, as well as the struggles of a young nation to better define itself, Wister's political leanings have been transformed into a few idealized and enduring archetypes: the myths of the self-made man, of the land of opportunity where anyone can aspire to be President, and of an individual's right to act outside the law when a situation warrants a more drastic approach. While it is a natural and expected process for authors to choose to imitate particular characteristics or ideologies of those who have preceded them (whether on a conscious or subconscious level), the problem with Wister's *The Virginian* arises when the reading public and critics alike begin to conflate the once-separate strands of western literature and Beadle dime novels until the only novels expected from the West are one-dimensional cowboy stories that may incorporate prototypical Virginian-style characters and action scenes but that never allow for the complexity of what Wister hoped to achieve.

Contemporary writers such as Wallace Stegner and Ivan Doig, therefore, become typed as offspring of this presumably single-dimensional *Virginian* tale and find themselves unable to step outside their expected western archetypal boxes – much

as Bret Harte found himself inescapably mired in the expectations of his critics and reading public. The two separate strands of literary westerns and commercial popular Westerns continue, of course, but it is only with an ear attuned to the nuances of the western literary canon that one remembers to recognize the differences between – as Stegner writes – the escape entertainment writers who rely on a blueprint and the serious writers of fiction who must create anew.

- ***Post-Wister Western American Literature***

Like Hamlin Garland, Jack London adds to the western Wister mystique a furthered sense of character development; London's characters are wholly human – or animal – and his stories and novels add a fiercely masculine brand of individuality and independence to the American experience. Unlike many of his predecessors, London does not record in his fiction brief dips into a western lifestyle that is otherwise not the norm for him; on the contrary, London lived what he wrote, and his adventurous and highly energetic life was legendary. London was raised in Oakland, California, where by the age of eighteen he had worked in a cannery, as a seaman, as a jute-mill worker, and as a coal shoveler in a power plant. At one point, London and his friends raided commercial oyster beds along the waterfront, and London traveled across the country as a hobo before he was arrested in New York state for vagrancy and spent thirty days in jail (Baym 811). London harbored a curiously contradictory passion for both the

idealized socialist theories of Karl Marx and the darker, less utopian ideas of Charles Darwin and Friedrich Nietzsche. He was an active member of the socialist party for many years and championed the rights of the lower classes to which he once belonged, and yet his fiction also reflects the brutal necessity of survival of the fittest. After briefly joining the Klondike gold rush in 1897, London came down with scurvy and returned to Oakland the next year to begin writing of his experiences.

He began publishing his adventurous short stories almost immediately, and when his collection *The Son of the Wolf* was published in 1900, London garnered national fame for his portrayal of a ruggedly brutal side of American individualism and survival. London was an exceptionally dedicated writer who for much of his life faithfully wrote at least one thousand words per day; before he died in 1916 at the age of forty, he had produced twenty novels, two hundred stories, more than four hundred nonfiction works, and thousands of letters that have since been collected (Baym 812). His still-much-loved novel *The Call of the Wild* hit the best-seller list in 1903, and London was the best-selling American author in the world when he died at home in California on his fourteen-hundred-acre ranch “of a mysterious combination of ailments” (Lyon 93).

Thomas J. Lyon writes in an introduction to Jack London’s work in *The Literary West* that London is especially accomplished at “describing experience – and even mechanical process – at a pitch of intensity that reveals a character’s

innermost life” (93). James D. Hart, editor of *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, argues that London is “most convincing in his depiction of individualistic struggle and primitive violence” (386). David E. Shi, author of *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920*, defines London’s sometimes brutal depiction of life on the edge of survival as “savage realism” or “ultra realism” (212). Unlike the cold, unforgiving details of an Emile Zola-inspired breed of naturalism, the realism championed by such authors as Garland and London also incorporate the humanism and political idealism of its authors. In *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury write that London’s exuberantly radical depiction of the survivalist side of American life was just what his dedicated audiences craved: “He turned naturalism into a romantic popular and populist celebration – away from a philosophy of despair or ironic victimization toward a celebration of will and vitalism” (244).

It was London’s fascination with violence – which is clearly reminiscent of Richard Slotkin’s theories of regeneration through violence – that held him in the public eye, according to the editors of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*: “At a time when America’s frontier was closing and President Theodore Roosevelt was urging the strenuous life, London adapted the physical ruggedness and psychological independence of English author Rudyard Kipling’s heroes (such as Kim) to the American experience” (Baym 812). Even through the

simultaneously animal and human eyes of a lone wolf named Buck at the close of *The Call of the Wild*, London's complex mix of violent individualism, rugged determination, and underlying hope is evident:

In the summers there is one visitor, however, to that valley, of which the Yeehats do not know. It is a great, gloriously coated wolf, like, and yet unlike, all other wolves. He crosses alone from the smiling timber land and comes down into an open space among the trees. Here a yellow stream flows from rotted moose-hide sacks and sinks into the ground, with long grasses growing through it and vegetable mould [sic] overrunning it and hiding its yellow from the sun; and here he muses for a time, howling once, long and mournfully, ere he departs. But he is not always alone. When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, he may be seen running at the head of the pack, through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat a-bellow as he sings a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack. (62)

Buck's lonesome song carries hope – an idealistic western hope that sometimes denies the odds of survival as it persists – and London's details paint a frontier that is at once both unforgiving and healing. Although there are echoes of Wister and others in London's western American frontier, London's frontier is more raw and fetid, perhaps therefore allowing him the brutish storylines that made him so famously popular.

According to Richard Etulain in *Re-Imagining the Modern American West*, London's career incorporates several different American frontiers: London's earliest works, including *The Call of the Wild* and many of his short stories, emphasize the frontier as a "primitive shaping force," Etulain writes (16). Again London's work carries echoes of his predecessors – Wister, Cooper, and others –

but London's rugged frontier plays a much more human and consistently unforgiving role. Next London turns to the frontier of class conflict, according to Etulain, a theme that focuses his fiction on the lives of tramps and the battles between owners and laborers. As London began more regularly to portray the American tramp as a sympathetic hero of the shifting frontier, however, he received increasing pressure from his publisher to step back from themes so clearly unappealing to the American public. Although London "disagree[d] vociferously with these attitudes," he ultimately turned to new themes, Etulain writes (19). In his third and final frontier, London begins to praise the study of scientific agriculture – fertilizers, crossbreeding, crop rotation – as an answer to the nation's frontierless future (19):

In the era of the closing frontier, Jack London suggested a plan – not a solution but a scheme that would bring about a new culture built on the judicious use of agricultural land, the beneficial employment of natural resources, and what he considered a new brotherhood of people. Stressing less his earlier Northland and class-conflict frontiers, he promoted a new oxymoronic frontier, one that combined farmland and technology into a civilized wilderness. In this new culture Jack London was convinced that an open marriage of the machine and the garden could and should exist. (20)

In his search for new frontiers, London plainly recognized the dangers of losing the hopeful optimism of the nation's ideological western frontier land. Although London did not discuss in his essays or letters the cultural assumptions or resonating mythologies inherent in the frontier mindset that runs through his fiction, he clearly recognized its power. And contemporary western writers such

as Wallace Stegner and Ivan Doig undoubtedly draw from a London-inspired emphasis on the humanly complex inner lives of his otherwise mythically rugged western characters.

Just as Hamlin Garland and Jack London instilled in western American literature a sense of well-developed character and individuality, Willa Cather extended this priority on unique, fully drawn characters to embrace a growing sense of community as well. Although Cather wrote novels, short stories, poems, and essays prolifically for more than forty years, she is arguably best known for her early phase – those years when she published her immigrant frontier novels, including *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918). Cather, whose family moved from Virginia to Nebraska territory when she was nine years old, dabbled in journalism, teaching high school, and magazine editing before turning full-time to writing fiction in her late thirties. She lived in the small town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, until she moved on her own to Lincoln at age seventeen to study at the university, and those early foundational years in Red Cloud are what fueled much of her fiction. Until the publication of her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather was on staff at *McClure's* from 1906 to 1912, and it wasn't until she returned home from the East Coast as a newly successful editor and published author that she began to see her homeland with openness and compassion. She called New York City home for much of the rest

of her life, although she traveled frequently to Europe and various regions of the United States; and despite her eagerness to escape what she saw as the toils and trials of western life, Cather held to a lifelong sense of reverence for the immigrant pioneers who raised her. Thomas J. Lyon describes Cather's emotional ties to the West as an "ambivalence," since in adulthood she returned only for occasional visits, and then not at all after her mother died in 1931. According to Lyon, Cather's description of her first childhood year in the Nebraska Territory exemplifies her overall relationship with the West:

Speaking of her first year on the plains, she said the landscape looked "as naked as the back of your hand," and added, "So the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life." (119)

After publishing the frontier novels for which she is best remembered, Cather joined the Episcopal Church and shifted from an emphasis on highly independent heroines to spiritual considerations in such novels as *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor's House* (1925). And toward the end of her writing career, Cather became fascinated by the American Southwest, turning to historical fiction in such novels as *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) (Baym 948-949).

In *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury write that Cather's unique emphasis on the endurance of women allows her to tackle issues of nature versus culture: "Perhaps the most striking

interfusion of social manners, moral scruples and the dark world of unyielding nature is to be found in the work of Willa Cather” (246). In *Prose & Poetry of the American West*, James C. Work describes Cather’s fiction as a curious blend of romanticism and harsh realism. Most impressive, Work writes, is not only Cather’s poetic prose but her personal dedication to such priorities as faith in one’s dreams, the beauty found in human spirits, and the heroic tenacity of those who strive to rise above their own limitations (290).

Richard Etulain places Cather as one of the first western regionalists; the trend of regionalism emerged in the 1920s as Cather was mid-career. Cather marks a transition from frontier to regional literature with an eye that looks beyond the vanishing frontier, Etulain writes: “Rather than placing her greatest emphasis on newcomers battling new lands and peoples or on a vanishing frontier, she stressed the development of communities and the growing sense of place among several of her characters” (*Re-Imagining* 93). Etulain also points to Cather’s frequent pairing of a traditional immigrant Old World with the nation’s New West as a technique that sets her apart from her western literary predecessors: “Through these links between the Old World and the New West, between past and present, as well as through the passing of time, Cather not only moves beyond the static settings of so many frontier writers but also illustrates the ever-changing complexities of history and culture that were so intriguing to regionalists” (95-96). At the close of *O Pioneers!*, for example, Alexandra’s

renewed enthusiasm for life exemplifies this notion that a younger generation raised by Old World parents can find success and happiness in a New West: “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!” (180).

Doris Grumbach, who writes the foreword to a 1988 edition of *O Pioneers!*, agrees with Etulain about the importance of history in Cather’s fiction, and she lists this sensitivity to the past as one of the Cather-inspired themes in all immigrant novels, including “the nobility and beauty of the wild prairie; the brave, enduring foreigners who suffer as they farm it; and the slackness and veniality of the next generation, who inherit the cultivated richness of farms that no longer satisfy them” (Cather xvii). For Grumbach, Cather also introduces to western literature a kind of mythical attachment to the land: “It was bigger, greater, than those who peopled and struggled with it,” Grumbach writes (xvi). Wallace Stegner also points both to Cather’s use of setting and to her recognition of the importance of history in his 1979 interviews with Etulain. In her novels *A Lost Lady* and *One of Ours*, among others, Cather incorporates the curious juxtaposition of the West’s heroic past and comparatively meager present, according to Stegner (*Conversations* 129). And although Stegner and Etulain’s discussion of Cather’s use of history ends there, I believe one can argue that not only does Cather introduce to western American literature a shift from the fierce

individuality of the vanishing frontier to a growing sense of community and place, but she also begins to recognize the weight that a glorified western past has placed on the shoulders of its younger generations. Doris Grumbach states it nicely when she writes at the close of her introduction that Cather herself has become a part of this mythologized western past:

On her tombstone is inscribed a prophetic sentence from *My Antonia*: "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." ... She was quite right when, in her introduction to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (1925), she wrote that Jewett's best stories "melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself." She might have been writing of her own. (Cather xxix)

Alongside Cather, O.E. Rolvaag continues this transition from frontier fiction to regional fiction with his epic trilogy *Giants in the Earth* (1927), *Peder Victorious* (1929), and *Their Father's God* (1931). A native of Norway who moved to the United States in 1896 at the age of twenty, Rolvaag depicts in his fiction the pioneer experience of Norwegian immigrants fighting to establish themselves on the Dakota prairies. After leaving his childhood fishing village of Donna, Norway, on a ticket to America sent by an uncle already living in South Dakota, Rolvaag farmed for a few years with his uncle before attending college and eventually landing himself a professorship at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, where he taught Norwegian literature for more than twenty years.

Lincoln Colcord, who writes a 1927 foreword to Rolvaag's novel *Giants*

in the Earth, argues that Rolvaag's literature is primarily Norwegian rather than western American. As Colcord outlines the many European "points of technique and construction" that set Rolvaag apart as a Norwegian writer, he lists what I believe are key differences between the serious western literature of a Garland or Cather and the simplicity of Western dime store novels (and Colcord is assuming that western American fiction falls only in the category of dime store novels): an emphasis on psychology of character rather than mere plot; the "human cost of empire building" rather than the idealized glamour of frontier life; and the "gloomy fatalism of the Norse mind" rather than the eternal optimism of a nation with a seemingly endless frontier (Rolvaag xi). Granted Rolvaag's novels were written in Norwegian and first found fame in Norway before they were translated into English and subsequently published in the United States, but one must not let the added step of translation shadow a view of a man whose contributions to the literature of the American West are undeniable. Like Cather, Rolvaag was able to look beyond the closing frontier to an American society where community would comprise the essential foundation for human survival, and immigrants from a variety of European nations would be able to establish lives that both revered the Old World and welcomed in the ways of the New West.

Like Cather, Rolvaag, too, emphasizes the importance of history through the generational tensions in his novels, and, rather than merely painting a portrait of the rugged frontier, Rolvaag also takes the time to explore the communities that

arise as these men and women struggle to survive amidst a natural world that too often threatens to snatch their very souls. Beret Hansa, the pioneer wife in *Giants in the Earth* who is slowly driven mad by the loneliness of prairie life, typifies this battle against the natural world in her longing for a greater and more established community; and like most post-Wister literary western novelists, Rolvaag's eye to the inner lives of his characters is intuitive and telling:

As her eyes darted nervously here and there, flitting from object to object and trying to pierce the purple dimness that was steadily closing in, a sense of desolation so profound settled upon her that she seemed unable to think at all. It would not do to gaze any longer at the terror out there, where everything was turning to grim and awful darkness. ... She threw herself back in the grass and looked up into the heavens. But darkness and infinitude lay there, also – the sense of utter desolation still remained. .. Suddenly, for the first time, she realized the full extent of her loneliness, the dreadful nature of the fate that had overtaken her. Lying there on her back, and staring up into the quiet sky across which the shadows of night were imperceptibly creeping, she went over in her mind every step of their wanderings, every mile of the distance they had traveled since they had left home. (38)

In *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, James D. Hart describes Rolvaag's fiction as a combination of realism and mysticism (571), while Richard Etulain writes that among the numerous farm novels that emerged between 1920 and the end of World War II, Rolvaag's works arguably do the most to step more firmly into a sense of western regionalism beyond frontier life:

Moving beyond the frontier depictions in Garland's best-known short stories, Rolvaag's stark and sometimes tragic accounts of Scandinavian newcomers to the bleak upper Great Plains are not limited to initial contacts between setting and pioneers. Garland's shorter fiction centered on such conflicts and the westward

movement, whereas Rolvaag's novels illustrate the regionalist's attempt to present a longer, larger view of these relationships. (*Re-Imagining* 98)

Although Rolvaag's fiction has not seen the enduring popularity of Willa Cather's – perhaps because Rolvaag focuses his work on such a select group of people – Rolvaag's trilogy unquestionably has moved western American literature further along on the road of regionalism, where the archetypes of frontier fiction take a backseat to larger narrative concerns of setting, character development, and a keen use of history. Whether one chooses to view Rolvaag as primarily Norwegian or primarily western American, as a writer he harbored both a general regionalist's and an American westerner's desire to do much more than merely repeat a folk tale or record a history. Rolvaag's novels are both heartfelt and artistic, intuitive and literary, and, like Cather before him and Stegner to follow, Rolvaag demonstrates a growing sense in the West of the importance of history and the dangerously presumptuous mythologies that can follow in its shadow.

- ***Post-Wister Dime Store Westerns***

In his essay "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," Wallace Stegner laments what he calls the "fiction factories" that first seized the liveliest of the western characters and plotlines and solidified them into easy-to-write, palatable Western formulas. The process began with the Beadle dime novels, Stegner writes, and continued with Wild West Shows, pulp Western magazines,

Hollywood movies, and finally television, and unfortunately the formulas are proving as effective today as they were one hundred years ago: "...[T]hey do not change; they are only reassembled from interchangeable parts. They remain predictable, serene, and timeless, fantasies of self-reliance and aggression, sexually symbolic or curiously asexual, depending on which critic you read, apparently good for another century and perhaps forever" (*Sound* 190). One key difference between a literary western and a popular dime store Western is what Stegner refers to as an "amputated present"; not only do such formulaic Westerns center themselves comfortably in a glorified past that has come to represent more of a legendary and even fairy tale West than a historical depiction of the era at hand, but they also completely neglect the contemporary West. Whether it is simply their creators' disinclination to incorporate the present or an "emotional inability" to do so, according to Stegner, popular Western novels and films rarely venture much beyond the early part of the twentieth century (*Sound* 192). And when a literary western writer is so bold as to venture into the contemporary West, the result is often overlooked as a western writer's seemingly accidental step into non-western territory, Stegner continues; he cites as an example his own 1961 novel, *A Shooting Star*, which takes place primarily in mid-twentieth-century California (*Sound* 193).

One difficulty in re-separating the Wister-joined strands of western literature and formulaic Western fiction comes in what Stegner sees as the West's

continued reluctance to let go of its manly brand of heroism, coupled with a non-western reluctance to revisit such a potentially tired and simplistic myth:

... [E]ven when fine and honest writers take a hard look at the myths ... they do not ever question the validity of heroism. And that is one of the biggest reasons why to some modern critics the literature we call western seems remote, unreal, uncontemporary, anachronistic, belated. For heroism does not survive into modern literature, or seems not to, and writing which deals with the heroic and the rural seems to have little to say to people whose lives are fully urban and whose minds have grown skeptical or scornful of heroes. (*Sound* 198)

Another problem with the persistence of a Western fictional formula is that it seems to take no note of change or the passing of time; as Stegner suggested earlier, the simple and interchangeable formula is the same as the one employed a century ago and predictably will remain the same for another century. And without a sense of time or, in particular, of the present, the Western formula is incapable of recognizing a future either. Its only recourse, according to Stegner, is “to come closer and closer to the stereotypes of the mythic” (199). As one considers the indelible shape of this overarching Western mythology, it is helpful to discuss – at least briefly – the popular Western writers who have chosen to employ the formula in their fiction, and to consider how and why their contributions have succeeded in further perpetuating this mythological West.⁵

Born in Zanesville, Ohio, in 1875, Zane Grey was a voracious reader of

⁵ As with the literary writers addressed earlier, I believe it is important here to consider both the writer and/or text itself as myth (hence the inclusion of biographical information), as well as the myths within the specific texts.

Western dime novels who visited the West to meet the trappers, hunters, miners, and cowboys who became heroes in his fiction. One of his early novels, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), sold more than one million copies and ensured his popularity not only nationally but worldwide. With an exceptional ability to write prolifically, Grey frequently published more than two books per year; he wrote seventy-eight books in his lifetime, most of which were Westerns. Despite his immense output of formula Westerns, Grey always fancied himself a writer of historical romances; as is frequently the case with writers of dime store-inspired Westerns, Grey aspired to accomplish something more lasting and literary than he ultimately was able to achieve. According to *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, however, Grey proved to be one of the genre's more dangerous perpetuators of empty archetypes:

He is remembered primarily as the author who almost single-handedly succeeded in convincing today's reader that absolutely no merit could ever be discovered in any novel about the West. ... At his worst, Grey wrote sentimental escape literature marked by unthinking racism and pompous moralizing against various kinds of simplistically conceived sin, all presented in a pretentious and awkward style; unfortunately, his best was little better than his worst. (Lamar 454)

As Lassiter and Jane in *Riders of the Purple Sage* stand on a rocky ridge at sunset, for example, attempting to ward off the men who are chasing them by rolling a boulder down to block the outlet to Deception Pass, Grey's prose slows dramatically – and rather painfully – to exaggerate each moment, each breath:

He staggered to his feet – staggered to a huge, leaning rock

that rested on a small pedestal. He put his hand on it – the hand that had been shot through – and Jane saw blood drop from the ragged hole. Then he fell.

“Jane – I – can’t – do – it!” he whispered.

“What?”

“Roll the – stone! ... All my – life I’ve loved – to roll stones – an’ now I – can’t!” (373)

Several of Grey’s novels inspired Hollywood films, further broadening his influence as what many critics consider a dissipater of time-worn western myths and common cliché.

Max Brand was born Frederick Schiller Faust and wrote his primarily Western novels under at least nineteen different pen names, the most widely recognized of which is Max Brand. Born in Seattle, Washington, in 1892, Brand is best known as the author of *The Untamed* (1919), *Trailin’* (1920), and *Destry Rides Again* (1930), and as creator of the character Dr. Kildare, who later transcended from the page to film and ultimately to television. As hero Dan Barry first appears in the opening pages of *The Untamed*, for example, he is clearly a Wister-influenced cowboy hero:

A horseman rode out on the shoulder and checked his mount. ... It was impossible to tell why one respected this man, but after a time there grew a suspicion of unknown strength in this lone rider, strength like that of a machine which is stopped but only needs a spark of fire to plunge it into irresistible action. Strangely enough, the youthful figure seemed in tune with that region of mighty distances, with that white, cruel sun, with that bird of prey hovering high, high in the air. (1-2)

Like Grey, Brand, too, harbored higher literary aspirations: Two books of poems and essays – *The Village Street* (1922) and *Notebooks and Poems of Max Brand*

(1957) – point to Brand’s hopes to write more serious western literature, although the vast majority of his publications remained mired in simplistic formula and myth (Lamar 125).

Like his predecessors, Luke Short also produced an impressive number of novels in his lifetime, often publishing more than one per year. With fifty-one titles to his name, Short is best known for his fiction that made it to the big screen, including *Ramrod* (1943), *Albuquerque*, and *Coroner Creek*. At the close of *Ramrod*, for example, Rose typifies the beautiful but passive female character for which Short is known:

She had been sitting in a chair against the wall, and now, seeing him, she came slowly to her feet. The despair and sadness still lingered in her face, and only her pride covered it.

Dave closed the door behind him and looked long and hungrily at her, and then his face altered gently, and he said, “That’s a beautiful dress, Rose.”

She looked down at her skirt, her face stiff with uncertainty, and said, “It is, isn’t it?”

“Would it do for a wedding dress?” Dave asked.

For one brief second Rose looked at him, and the light came into her face and her dark eyes, and Dave held out his arm. She was against him, then, clinging tight to him, her body warm against him. (216)

Short was born in Kewanee, Illinois, but, after trapping furs in northern Alberta, Canada, and working as an archaeologist’s assistant in New Mexico, he wrote most of his fiction from his homes in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Aspen, Colorado.

Louis L’Amour, whose more than one hundred novels and short story

collections had sold more than two hundred million copies worldwide at the time of his death in 1988, is decidedly the best known of the formula Western writers. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan saluted L'Amour's "enormous contributions to Western folklore and our frontier heritage" by awarding him a Congressional Gold Medal (Etulain, *Telling* 94). Born in Jamestown, North Dakota, L'Amour held a variety of jobs, including prize fighter, miner, fruit picker, ranch hand, seaman, and longshoreman, before turning full-time to his writing after returning home from World War II. According to Richard Etulain, L'Amour clearly reflects the influences of his predecessors: "L'Amour's Hondo Lane is a direct literary descendant of Zane Grey's Lassiter, Max Brand's Dan Barry, and the sun-bronzed heroes of Luke Short. These are courageous, direct, never-give-an-inch, masculine heroes who dominate the story lines of the novels they inhabit" (96). And although L'Amour, like Stegner, frequently lamented the lack of critical respect that Western writers received, he, like his predecessors, clearly had a difficult time stepping beyond the archetypes of a bygone glorified West. Consider, for example, the opening lines of *Hondo*:

He rolled the cigarette in his lips, liking the taste of the tobacco, squinting his eyes against the sun glare. His buckskin shirt, seasoned by sun, rain, and sweat, smelled stale and old. His jeans had long since faded to a neutral color that lost itself against the desert.

He was a big man, wide-shouldered, with the lean, hard-boned face of the desert rider. There was no softness in him. His toughness was ingrained and deep, without cruelty, yet quick, hard, and dangerous. Whatever wells of gentleness might lie within him were guarded and deep. (1)

As is evidenced above, regardless of the danger of Stegner-defined mythologies, L'Amour firmly believed in the strength of the frontier's male cowboy hero: "‘When you open a rough, hard country,’ he has said, ‘you don’t open it with a lot of pantywaists’" (Lamar 608). L'Amour's best-known works include *Hondo* (1953), *Flint* (1960), *The Day Breakers* (1960), and *Bendigo Shafter* (1979).

Even as one focuses on the literature and genre fiction of the American West, it would be a mistake to overlook the influence of the Hollywood film industry on the region's mythologies; many Western film directors merely adapted the simple and interchangeable dime novel Western formula to the screen, further perpetuating to an ever-widening audience the regional archetypes that Wallace Stegner fights to uncover and ultimately erase. Much as Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour helped to build the image of a glorified American West, so, too, did such early Western film actors as William S. Hart and John Wayne. And, as Etulain writes in *Telling Western Stories*, the myth's progression was often simultaneous in both the written world and in the film industry:

... [Zane] Grey and William S. Hart often depicted parallel Wests with good bad men proving their worth in dramatic conflicts with evil villains and demanding physical terrains. Concurrent with Grey's best-selling status from the early teens through the 1920s, Hart played to large, appreciative audiences in such films as *Hell's Hinges* (1916), *The Toll Gate* (1920), and *Tumbleweeds* (1925). (87)

As sound was introduced to film in the 1920s, the silent Westerns were replaced by hugely popular singing Westerns that boasted such new heroes as Gene Autry

and Roy Rogers. And John Ford's making of *Stagecoach*, which was released in 1939, marks the beginning of the John Wayne Western with which most are readily familiar.

For Jane Tompkins, author of the 1992 study *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Western novels and films together provide a kind of release for their audiences, and the blueprint formulas – violence included – are precisely what readers and movie-goers crave:

The entire purpose of the pattern I've described is to get the audience to the point where it can't wait till the hero lets loose with his six-shooters. ... Vengeance, by the time it arrives, feels biologically necessary. It's as if the hero had been dying of thirst, and suddenly he's given the chance to take a drink of water; it's as if he's been waiting eight and a half innings to come up to bat. Whatever the appropriate analogy is (the most common one is sexual) the violence, by the time it arrives, fills a visceral need. (228-229)

For Tompkins, the mythologies and patterns forwarded by Westerns are not problematic, as Stegner sees them, but actually helpful in understanding the cultural and emotional tenor of this nation. Likewise, in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*, Robert Burgoyne views these popular Westerns – and the Hollywood film industry in general – as a place to study how the nation's social identities have been formed by opposition and antagonism: "...fear and hatred of the other have exerted just as powerful an influence on the molding of ethnic and racial identity as the positive and organic traits that supposedly distinguish one group from another" (2). Although Burgoyne's reference to frontier-driven

cowboy-versus-Indian and law-versus-outlaw oppositions is relatively brief, his argument suggests a sociological role of Western archetypes that is not just tiresomely annoying but dangerous to the relational foundations of this country.

While my intention here is to focus on western literature, surely such a screen study – reminiscent, at least in part, of Slotkin's regeneration through violence theories – can be used to further dismantle and frustrate the erroneous mythologies that have grounded much of the region's literature in a kind of mire of cliché and unfounded expectations. Wallace Stegner, unfortunately, sadly neglects issues of race as he strives for a more realistic definition of the contemporary West. After his publication in 1945 of *One Nation*, a study of racism in the United States that was impressively ahead of its time, he offers little further mention of racial minorities in either his fiction or his nonfiction studies – a curious fact for a historian and scholar so intent on rewriting a more all-encompassing history of his home region.⁶ Regardless, both the Beadle dime store novels and their more contemporary successors, such as Max Brand and Louis L'Amour, have had an enormous impact on still-extant Western archetypes; and with the 1902 publication of Owen Wister's deceptively literary western *The Virginian*, the lines between the serious literature of the West and formula pulp fiction became muddled in such a way that still frustrates contemporary western writers today.

⁶ I will discuss this issue further in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2

The Myths that Shape Stegner's Fiction

As Jackson J. Benson writes in his 1996 biography of Wallace Stegner, Stegner's role as a western American writer who both questioned and sought to dismantle existing mythologies was bold and not always readily accepted by his reading public. It can be disorienting and alarmingly uprooting to be told that the stories one has been raised to believe as true are exaggerated, and that one's history, ultimately, is untrue; one's first human reaction is defensiveness, if one chooses to listen at all, and as both Richard Slotkin and Sacvan Bercovitch suggest in their studies, when an author/historian like Wallace Stegner seeks to unravel the mythologies of the West, his work threatens the accepted realities and histories of all Americans – not just westerners. As Benson describes, the process of uncovering problematic and deep-rooted mythologies can be a painful one, but it is undeniably necessary if Americans are to better understand who they are as individuals and as a nation:

The role of a realist such as Stegner is to tell us disagreeable truths, to pull away the masks and tear down the attractive facades that allow us to pretend and cover the reality. This is not an activity that is likely to endear the writer to a wide audience. His role as a moralist in his fictions has been to challenge us, not only to participate in difficult decisions in an often ambiguous world, but to participate in the even more difficult task of adjusting our attitudes toward our roles, our relationships, and the earth we have inherited, once the myths have been exposed for what they are and

the masks and facades have been torn away. (15)

The clearest discussions of the myths that Stegner calls to the forefront are in the essays of his 1969 volume *The Sound of Mountain Water*. In the essay “Born a Square,” for example, Stegner lists several of the minor myths that I will examine further in later chapters: “This western naïveté of strenuousness, pragmatism, meliorism, optimism, and the stiff upper lip is our tradition, such as it is,” he writes (184). In the essay “History, Myth, and the Western Writer,” Stegner lists some of the myths that describe the western cowboy hero: “The virtues required to survive all these testings are the ‘manly’ virtues of tenacity, courage, the ability to bear pain and hardship, an assured self-trust, generosity, a certain magnitude of spirit” (198). In his introduction to *The Sound of Mountain Water*, Stegner defines the mythic West as a West that every American child has grown up believing. The myth is a dream of lawlessness – “of total emancipation from inhibition, law, convention, and restraint” – that has been fostered in the wide open environment of the American West, Stegner continues. And even though Americans are beginning to recognize the confines of these archetypal beliefs, Stegner argues, they still manage to call to mind such tired myths when, to employ a bit of western folklore, the chips are down and they need something to spur them into action:

The mythic western hero, an apostle of the most rugged individualism, is a curious hangover, and may often be caught sanctifying odd practices and policies. ... This mythic cowboy is really a citizen of a Poictesme, a Cockaigne, a Never-Never land,

but he is propped with the most niggling realism. Try to write a Western with your gun lore crooked, or with holes in your lingo. He is sometimes – and this is the principal danger of what would otherwise be only wistful or amusing – invoked to justify new outbreaks of rugged individualism, irresponsibility, intemperance, and the economics of the raid. (32)

It is in part by Stegner's efforts, then, that such volumes have emerged as the 1990 publication by the Western Governors' Association titled *Beyond the Mythic West*. In his foreword to the book, North Dakota Governor George Sinner calls to mind precisely this notion of erroneous western archetypes that Stegner has sought to uncover:

When we ask people the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the phrase "The American West," most will say cowboys and Indians. The genesis of this book, then, is partly founded in the desire to define the true West, the West beyond the narrow myth, the West of marvelous peoples and rich cultures, the West that is looking forward to the future. (ix)

But while discussions of the American West undoubtedly have transcended to a higher level than the merely anecdotal histories and fables of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I believe there still is a distance to go. Slotkin describes the process of mythopoesis as a gradual embedding of myth into the language and, therefore, the subconscious of a culture, and to emerge from such deeply ingrained cultural and social assumptions will demand a consistent mindfulness of not only the words individuals use but how they think of themselves and of their history. Stegner himself admits briefly at the close of "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" that he has not wholly escaped the very myths that he hopes to expose and

tear down: “I share the nostalgia that I have attributed to most writers of the West,” he writes. “I share their frequent distaste for the uglified and over-engineered and small-spirited civilization that threatens to turn us into one gigantic anthill” (201). And while he continues his admission with an argument for the conscious recognition of both history and reality, of both past and present, for my purposes here, I believe it is important to take a step back and note more specifically the ways that Stegner himself occasionally falls victim to the very archetypes that he calls to the forefront. In so doing, I believe one can arrive at a deeper understanding of Stegner’s work, as well as a greater consciousness of what it will take for future literary writers from the American West to continue Stegner’s efforts at pulling out of a glorified past and into a more real contemporary world where western American literature can emerge as complex and lasting, rather than mindlessly repetitive and formulaic.

Although Stegner spent a lifetime debunking erroneous western mythologies both in his fiction and in his critical nonfiction works, he never specifically lists them in a single place, instead opting to draw out a particularly irksome myth here or there to use as an example of how the West’s history has been skewed over the years. And while other Stegner critics occasionally mention an isolated myth in relation to Stegner’s works – most notably Jackson J. Benson, Richard Etulain, Merrill and Lorene Lewis, and Forrest and Margaret Robinson – none thus far has examined Stegner’s efforts to question and ultimately dismantle

western mythologies for more than a paragraph or perhaps a page at a time. The list that I will provide below, therefore, is of my own devising – taken, of course, from the scattered pages of Stegner’s writing, but not to be mistaken as an outline that Stegner himself wrote down. I have formalized the list into two key mythologies, each underscored by related myths, as follows:

1) The Myth of the Western Cowboy Hero

- rugged individualism
- self-reliance
- aggression (all quarrels lead to violence)
- pragmatism
- toughness (stiff upper lip)
- emancipation from the law, convention, restraint, and the past
- faith in honesty, property, and sanctity of contract
- kindness toward the poor, women, and children

2) The Myth of the Romantic Old West

- unlimited resources
- timelessness
- optimism
- meliorism
- unrestricted freedom
- unlimited opportunities (get-rich-quick schemes and dreams of a personal Big Rock Candy Mountain)

When one considers the myth of the western cowboy hero, Stegner counters neatly most of the sub-myths listed above: in the failures of such men as Bo Mason and Oliver Ward, Stegner demonstrates that community and cooperation were far more necessary for the survival in the Old West than rugged individualism and self-reliance; through the often unwarranted violence of Bo Mason and the men who beat up Ian Price, one sees Stegner deny the myth of

aggression that accompanies the tough cowboy image; and with the often psychological struggles of such characters as Joe Allston and Lyman Ward, an emancipation from the law, convention, restraint, and the past is equally problematic. As for a faith in honesty, property, and sanctity of contract, and a kindness toward the poor, women, and children, Stegner demonstrates through such characters as Bo Mason and Oliver Ward, among others, that a blending of such goodness with aggression and ruggedness is simply incongruous. In terms of the myth of the romanticized Old West, Stegner again refutes the sub-myths I have mentioned above in many of his fictional works: in the efforts of both Oliver Ward and Sabrina Castro, the West's resources are exposed as clearly not unlimited; through the musings of Lyman Ward and Sabrina's mother, Deborah Hutchens, Stegner shows that the West is far from mythically timeless; and through the continual starts and stops of such men as Bo Mason and Oliver Ward, both the presumably unrestricted freedom and unlimited opportunities of the American West are equally untrue.

Where I believe Stegner falters somewhat in his attempts to unpack the West's erroneous mythologies is in his handling of western optimism and meliorism, of western pragmatism, and of western toughness. In some ways, Stegner himself is a prototypical product of the American West: Raised by immigrant, pioneering parents who mirrored many of the stereotypes that he addresses, Stegner emerges as an exceptionally self-disciplined and hard-working

humanist who harbors an eternal optimism for the future and high expectations of those around him. As I have stated already, to break free from the social and cultural assumptions of one's childhood is a Herculean task, and although Stegner succeeds in drawing to the forefront those myths that define the American West, he occasionally slips into such assumptions subconsciously, incorporating in his own outlook on life and, subsequently, in his fiction, the expectation that others will think as he does. And while a presumption of optimism or pragmatism is not necessarily harmful to others, Stegner does run onto dangerous ground in his lifelong fictional presentation of a mostly homogenous West. Although through such projects as *One Nation* and *DISCOVERY!* one sees Stegner's cognizance of other cultural beliefs and of the West as a richly diverse region, this awareness does not emerge in his fiction, and his treatment of Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, to name a few, is dangerously limited, as I will discuss further at the close of this chapter.

- ***The Myth of Western Optimism/Meliorism***

As Stegner sees it, the myth of western optimism suggests an eternal hopefulness that dreams of a distant Big Rock Candy Mountain despite the hardships of, for instance, hundreds of endless miles across grueling grasslands in a rickety prairie schooner; without such optimism, many of the early pioneers might never have made it to the western region, and they taught their children to

value such optimism just as they had. The myth of western meliorism simply carries optimism a step further by assuming that, regardless of circumstances, human society has an innate tendency toward improvement, and the conscious efforts of individuals can help to catalyze that innate tendency. Stegner cites optimism and meliorism as myths of the American West because, presumably, too often fictional westerners are imbued with a blind sense of optimism that denies the realities of external forces, such as nature or cultural mores, and their faith in society, likewise, too often looks past the likely potential for lawlessness where laws are not enforced. But Stegner himself returns time and again to an optimism that overrides even the hardships of his own unstable upbringing under the dictatorial hand of a sometimes violent father, and there is evidence of this optimism in nearly all of his literary works.

In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, for example, all four of the novel's key characters cling to their own brand of hope in an effort to mask the disappointments of life. For Bo Mason, Stegner's example of an archetypal westerner whose beliefs in the West's unlimited resources and limitless opportunities are clearly presented in a negative light, each business failure hits him with the physical tangibility of a punch to the gut, and yet Bo manages each time – after a brief spate of depression or of reacting violently toward what he sees as his sons' misbehaviors – to think of some new venture to distract himself from the doldrums and begin plotting anew. Just as Bo is growing discontented

with his hotel in Hardanger, North Dakota, for instance, Pinky Jordan arrives with his pockets full of gold dust and exciting tales of the Klondike. Next, as Bo realizes that his café venture in Redmond, Washington, is not what he had hoped, he sets his sights on the frontier town of Saskatchewan, Canada. Bo's farming days, unluckily attempted through some of Saskatchewan's coldest winters and driest summers, also prove a bust, but Bo soon turns to rum-running and what he sees, yet again, as the realization that still one more profession has been beckoning since the beginning and he simply had not recognized its call. With disappointment after disappointment, coupled with his grief over the deaths of his son Chet and his wife Elsa, Bo Mason lives an emotional life in which he is quick to anger, quick to laugh jovially, quick to fall into a depressed despair. Stegner handles the western myth of optimism best with Bo because, although his continued ability to bounce back after repeated failures and loss sometimes seems ludicrous – especially when he is living in Nevada, his wife is ailing, and he is getting older, and one wants to smack a taste of reality into him when he yet again comes home over-excited by the prospect of making his fortune in the gambling business, a venture that one knows will, once more, end in defeat – it is when Bo ultimately fails to feel emotion that he has reached his limit. When he is sitting in a hotel lobby in Utah just after quarreling with his sometimes girlfriend Elaine Nesbitt, Bo's empty mood hints at the violent end to come: "The anger had ebbed away, leaving the old dead weariness" (544). And as Bruce is driving home from

law school to bury his father, he slowly begins to understand how downtrodden his father's eternal optimism must have become:

As he shifted to ease his aching back he thought of the old man, always chasing something down a long road, always moving on from something to something else. At the very end, before that fatal morning, he must have looking down his road and seen nothing, no Big Rock Candy Mountain, no lemonade springs, no cigarette trees, no little streams of alcohol, no handout bushes. Nothing. The end, the empty end, nothing to move toward because nothing was there. He began to see, dimly, why his father had shot himself, and half to believe that he had. (552).

Stegner is perhaps most conscious of the myth of western optimism with Bo:

While Bo's lifelong insistence on a blind sense of optimism waivers throughout the novel between mythical and nonsensical, his suicide in the end suggests that life without such unfailing hopefulness simply is not possible for Bo.

With Elsa Mason, however, the myth becomes tucked more neatly beneath Stegner's reverence for his own mother, despite her role – much like Elsa Mason's – as her husband's soft-spoken enabler. Elsa truly is the eternal optimist: Even when her husband beats up a patron outside his Hardanger hotel, even when her husband seemingly inadvertently dumps boiling water down her shoulder and arm while they are running the café in Washington state, even when her husband disappears again and again as she endures cancer treatments and struggles to battle the pain of her illness both in Nevada and in Utah, Elsa forgives him his faults and hopes for the best. Once again, Stegner is presenting a type of westerner with Elsa: the nesting woman whose desire for a home continually pulls her wayward,

pioneering husband back to the confines of cultural expectations. But even Elsa, whose quiet strength buoys the reader through Bo's often childish escapades, ultimately is inhumanly hopeful about a future that she must realize is dictated by greed and the determined search for sudden wealth. Granted, Stegner mostly grants glimpses of Elsa through her adoring youngest son, Bruce, who cannot help but see his mother as his own savior against a violent and moody father, but at times in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* the reader does hear from Elsa herself, and overall it becomes evident that she, like Stegner, is gripped by a mythical sense of both optimism and meliorism. Even in the depths of despair over her marriage, when Bo is off seeking his fortune in Saskatchewan after bickering with her over how to raise Bruce, and Elsa has taken the boys home to her father's house, Elsa compares her own crisis with the sadly stilted life of her best-friend-turned-stepmother and finds hope in her own lot:

"He's not a good man," Sarah said.

Elsa sighed and shrugged. "Maybe not. I don't know what a good man is any more. But he wasn't all to blame. He ..."

She stopped, looking at Sarah's faded hair, the plump colorless face, the quenched and somehow petulant look in the eyes. She said before she thought, "I loved him once, we were awfully happy at first."

Sarah turned away and went into the kitchen, and Elsa looked after her, thinking. As she went upstairs to dress for the train trip she knew that unhappy as she was she was not as unhappy as Sarah, and that seemed a strange thing. (176)

Even in the darkest throes of her battle against breast cancer, Elsa continually forgives Bo his idiosyncrasies and chooses to view the difficulties of their lives

together as a necessarily rigorous path.

The reader hears the least from Chet, Bruce's athletic older brother, but what the reader does hear is tinged with a mixture of Elsa's eternal optimism and, occasionally, Bo's search for a Big Rock Candy Mountain. In the brief times that the reader hears his voice, it is clear that Chet is ashamed of his father: of the secrecy of his rum-running, of the volatility of his emotions, of the trials he has put their family through. And for Chet, optimism often comes not in the determined hopefulness of Elsa but in his ability to simply erase certain unpleasantnesses from his mind and eventually focus on where he wants his life to go. Consider, for example, when officers raid their Salt Lake City home, forcing Chet aside with the muzzle of a gun and lying in wait until Bo walks in with an armload of undelivered whisky:

"Come on, you too." [The deputy] motioned to Chet, took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and shook them.

Bo's eyes went narrow and black. "He's got nothing to do with whatever you're charging me with," he said. "He's just a kid."

"Would you like to handle this?" the deputy said. He handcuffed the two of them together, and for just an instant their eyes met, Chet's smoky, sullen, a little scared, Bo's bleak and gray. "Don't worry, kid," Bo said. "This smart bastard is just showing off. You'll be out of this in an hour."

"That's all right," Chet said. He went along out to the deputies' car, feeling his chained hand brush against his father's as he walked, and his whole mind was emptied as if water had washed through it. (423)

When Chet leaves home to marry Laura, he again finds hopefulness in his own escape from a life with a difficult father and an overly passive mother. Like Elsa,

Chet always manages to look ahead with a sometimes blindly insistent optimism that echoes of Stegner's own western ties.

In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, next to Elsa, Bruce is the one who bears the brunt of Bo's unpredictable mood swings and endless search for new get-rich-quick schemes. Like his mother, Bruce is a nester who would far prefer a permanent home surrounded by friends and family to the adventurous turmoil of chasing dreams from state to state. Bruce is perhaps the most human of the four main characters, in that he is able to face despair and find a way to move around it. After his mother's death and an argument with his father in which he accuses Bo of being an uncaring father and husband and the two ultimately part ways, Bruce realizes the permanency of life without his deceased brother, his deceased mother, and a father who never wants to see him again:

Late in the afternoon he took his suitcases to the Ford, came back for the books that would have to be returned to the library on the way, and closed the door of the apartment, leaving his key on the table inside. There was his whole life ahead, but he went toward it without eagerness, went almost unwillingly, with a miserable sense that now he was completely alone. (530)

By the end of the novel, however, even after Bo Mason has committed a murder/suicide and left Bruce to pick up the pieces, Bruce manages to find hope in the legacy that his family has left him:

There were things he had learned that could not be taken away from him. Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and re-creations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new, a subtle blending of masculine and

feminine, selfish and selfless, stubborn and yielding, before a proper man could be fashioned.

He was the only one left to fulfill that contract and try to justify the labor and the harshness and the mistakes of his parents' lives, and that responsibility was so clearly his, was so great an obligation, that it made unimportant and unreal the sight of the motley collection of pall-bearers staggering under the weight of his father's body, and the back door of the hearse closing quietly upon the casket and the flowers. (563)

Even at his father's gravesite, even after the deaths of every member of his family so that he is ultimately completely alone in the world, Bruce pauses over "the brightness of the sun, an excessive sparkling brightness" and the "sweep of the spring-green slopes up to the worn peaks above Dry Canyon" (562, 563). Like it or not, he is a westerner to the core, with a westerner's sense of mythical optimism that arises most directly from Wallace Stegner himself, who subconsciously but unfailingly passes the myth along through his literature.

In *All the Little Live Things*, the myth of optimism/meliorism also is evidenced in the lives of Marian Catlin, her husband John, Joe Allston, and his wife Ruth. In many ways the novel is a lesson in optimism, particularly as Marian Catlin battles immense personal struggles with her breast cancer, her progressing pregnancy, and her devastating attempts to separate herself emotionally from her six-year-old daughter in hopes of easing Debby's pain when the end ultimately arrives, and yet through it all Marian manages to maintain a brave and even sparkling outlook on life. Her husband John is sometimes awed and sometimes overwhelmed by his wife's exceeding optimism, but always supportive. Ruth

Allston, although a quieter, less vivacious woman, shares Marian's optimism, and although she, too, is sometimes awed by Marian's sheer bravery, Ruth never questions the younger woman's hopefulness in the face of such a bleak future. If the novel is a lesson, narrator Joe Allston is its unwitting student, with his sometimes crass negativity and crankiness that softens decidedly as he watches Marian wage a losing battle against the too often unforgiving forces of nature. The novel is sandwiched in a present-tense frame that tells of Joe and Ruth's return home after the deaths of Marian and her baby, and in the opening pages of the frame Joe Allston mulls the lessons of optimism that Marian has imparted:

Sympathy I have failed in, stoicism I have barely passed. But I have made straight A in irony – that curse, that evasion, that armor, that way of staying safe while seeming wise. One thing I have learned hard, if indeed I have learned it now: it is a reduction of our humanity to hide from pain, our own or others'. To hide from anything. That was Marian's text. Be open, be available, be exposed, be skinless. Skinless? Dance around in your bones. (12)

For Joe Allston, such unfailing optimism is a difficult lesson, but eventually he accepts its grace, much as a new believer hopefully and willingly takes a leap of faith into a particular religion or spiritual life; doubtlessly Stegner himself is not even aware that *All the Little Live Things* ultimately teaches its readers to embrace a western myth that clearly has carried Stegner through the tougher times of life.

Perhaps one of the most poignant scenes of Marian's faith in optimism comes when she confesses to Joe and Ruth that her cancer has returned, she has only two or three months to live, and she has decided to favor her pregnancy over

the rigors of radiation treatment:

If we didn't shed tears, we held them back only to spare her. She herself did not cry. She wore one unchanging expression: fortitude had been turned on and left burning.

I suppose we must have suggested the last-ditch treatments we had seen other friends suffer through, trying to reverse the inevitable – cobalt, male hormones, radiation.

She said she was not going to take any radiation treatments. The baby.

Patiently she waited while I burst out at her, calling her a sentimentalist, crazy. I said she was making the choice that the heroine of a sticky novel would make. When I was through she said, "It isn't a choice, Joe. It's a race." (252-253)

For Marian, an easterner with the heart of an archetypal westerner, life is a lesson in fortitude: the hard times must be embraced fully for those are the tests that build stamina and character. Marian bears the soul of a determined pioneer woman, and Stegner uses her to demonstrate his awe of such self-discipline and eternal optimism. For better or for worse, he is endorsing a mythical sense of optimism; and perhaps, in the desperate case of young Marian Catlin, her optimism is for the better.

In *Second Growth*, the myth of optimism/meliorism arises again with Helen Barlow's failure to embrace such faith resulting in her death, while Abe Kaplan and Andy Mount emerge hopeful even in the light of otherwise potentially despairing circumstances. Here again, as in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner offers very little middle ground between total acceptance of an unfailing sense of optimism and death – or suicide, as is the case for both Bo Mason and Helen Barlow. Caught between the overprotectiveness of elderly, ailing parents,

the conservative expectations of a small community, and the attractive boldness of the seductive Flo Barnes, Helen retreats even further into the interior life that she long ago established for herself as a safe retreat: "In her mind, deep in the defensive skull, Helen Barlow had a hiding place. When she was in it, it was like being in the lagoon of an atoll behind protective reefs, or in a hidden valley among mountains" (78). She is unable, as Marian Catlin prescribes, to dance around in her bones, and therefore she eventually succumbs to the interior darkness that refuses to let her see the hopefulness that buoys such women as Marian Catlin, Elsa Ward, and Flo Barnes.

When Abe Kaplan takes Ruth to a Sunday concert on the Westwick lake, his enthusiasm for the music, for Ruth, and for their future – despite the probability that as Jews they will never be fully embraced in this small New England village – is contagious. Even Ruth, who plays the role of skeptic to Abe's optimism, begins to realize, much as Joe Allston eventually realizes, the benefits of subscribing to this western-influenced myth of optimism:

Now as the light faded the mackerel sky went deep rose along its fluted edges, and then dulled to gray. A whisper of after-sunset breeze stirred wavelets against the sides of boats and rocked the quiet canoes and flapped the edge of a furled sheet on a sailboat. The stirrings and low talk in the boats fell away to a murmur, to silence; the music grew stronger across the water. The sense of being among people was lost; boats dissolved gradually in the dusk, and except when someone on the dock changed records there was no light except a remote glimmer from the cottage back among the cedars. Over the liquid world the music crept like some soft whimpering beast, self-pitying and affectionate. ... Ruth Liebowitz sighed. "That was wonderful," she said. "Oh, I think this is simply

a *grand* idea.” (53)

For Andy Mount, his departure from Westwick is both frightening and too good to be true. He fears, as he slides into the front seat next to Henry Ball for a ride to the train that will carry him out of New Hampshire and off to school, that something will shatter his good fortune: “Something, he felt, waited to catch him up; he was starting with a loose rope around his feet that would trip him as soon as he moved. It couldn’t be possible that this was the morning, that on this day in this sun and wind he would jump this horizon and be loose in the half-terrifying freedom of another world” (236). For both Abe Kaplan and Andy Mount, this mythical faith in individual optimism and in the good of community is more than a mere life lesson; as Stegner demonstrates through the do-or-die mentality of his novels, such western hopefulness is a kind of spirituality that is necessary to guide one through life. For Stegner, who admits that as a Christian he is remiss, western optimism is the beacon that draws him forward. But even when a myth bears the positive quality of optimism, one cannot fail to recognize that it entangles even Stegner’s greatest myth-busting intentions and ultimately emerges in his literature as a value that Stegner presents as essential to a well-lived life.

- ***The Myth of Western Pragmatism***

Another myth that traps Stegner in its subconscious subtlety is the myth of western pragmatism, or, as Stegner sees it, the life view of a realist rather than an

idealist:

A little realism would have helped my family a good deal. Instead of expecting to make a big strike somewhere, which is a very good American notion, encouraged by free land, by opportunity, by freedom of action or nearly complete freedom of action, I would have liked to see a little more just plain stick-to-it-iveness at times. The longest journey begins with a single step – I believe that more than I believe in the fortune over the next rise. I could see my father always refusing to make the first step. He always wanted the step to be a hundred-yard broad jump. Broad jumping is not the way you travel. It leads to a succession of falls. (Hepworth 105)

As a western myth, pragmatism becomes an erroneous assumption that all westerners are capable of sage deduction, and that all humans, ultimately, will be pragmatic enough to choose the most moral and humane course that life presents them. Such a faith in humanity smacks of a mythical western sense of optimism, of course, and this myth of pragmatism appears perhaps most clearly in the sometimes cold confidence of Lyman Ward's outlook on life in *Angle of Repose*. As he ponders the peacefulness of his daily research, for example, Lyman suggests that he is more relieved than bothered by his current disconnection from family:

I thank my stars that I have no such commitments to the present as Ada was telling me about last night ... Rodman takes care of himself, I'll give him that. My problem is to keep him from taking care of *me*. As for Rodman's mother, she no longer lies in wait for me as I go from kitchen to study and study to porch or garden. She has no associations with this house. I bypass her, somewhere on the stairs, on my way to the strenuousness, aspiration, and decorum of my grandmother's life, and the practicality and masculine steadiness of my grandfather's. (31, 32)

With a wife who has left him for the plastic surgeon who removed his leg, a son whose haughty disrespect is irksome, to say the least, and a painfully progressive

bone disease that has trapped him nearly motionless in a wheelchair, Lyman Ward has every reason to want to bury himself in the past of his grandparents rather than face the grim reality of his own future. But his practical nature calls him to the present again and again, insisting that he face and find some way to rationalize the difficulties of his life. Lyman's apparently contented disconnection from family becomes more suspect as the novel progresses, and by the closing chapters his loneliness begins to prevail, but overall Lyman lives a life that is wholly pragmatic – as a writer, as a historian, as a grandson, and as a father and ex-husband who is insistently clinging to his own independence despite his rare debilitating disease.

His pragmatism again shows through when, after a frustrating visit from his son Rodman, Lyman expresses his irritation by listing, one by one, six “results” of Rodman’s visit. The results range from Lyman’s refusal to move to a retirement home to his disdain of Rodman’s suggestion that he “give up this business of Grandmother’s papers and write a book on ‘somebody interesting,’” and with each new item Lyman simply states Rodman’s wish and counters with his own reasoning why he chooses to do otherwise (22). Rather than rant and bemoan the unfairness of an ungrateful, pushy son, Lyman attempts pragmatically to rationalize his own views against Lyman’s until he is confident that the decisions he has made are the correct ones. It takes a great deal to bring Lyman to the emotional agony of the novel’s final pages, when he is pondering whether to

call his ex-wife, who is seeking a reconciliation: “If she does not come of her own volition, or at Rodman’s urging, I can even conceive, in this slack hour, that I might send for her. Could I? Would I?” (568). Ultimately, though, it is his internal pragmatism that prevails when Lyman suggests that his answer lies in whether he has the personal strength “to be a bigger man than my grandfather” (569).

Although Lyman harbors a deep affinity for his brave and pioneering grandmother, Susan Ward, he clearly disapproves of her critical attitude toward Oliver over the years and of her eventual infidelity, both of which he sees as likely outcomes of a romanticized and decidedly non-pragmatic view of life. Lyman instead reserves his greatest reverence for his grandfather, Oliver, whose deep-seated pragmatism Lyman considers both intelligent and necessary to the Ward family’s survival amidst the hardships of the Old West. After Oliver surveys the mine outside Michoacán, Mexico, and decides that it is not viable, for example, his first reaction is pragmatic honesty rather than the game-playing of political savvy, and his negative report greatly disappoints his Mexican hosts. Oliver fully realizes the gravity of his conclusions, but he refuses to compromise his integrity as an engineer by allowing false hopes to fester where no likely results will emerge. Susan, in her typical overly critical view of her husband’s decisions and reactions, interprets Oliver’s pragmatism as childish naïveté. She would rather see her husband play the political hardball that is expected of him, regardless of

how it may compromise his principles. And besides, she already has her heart set on living a romantic foreigner's life amidst the tropical and servant-laden mansions of Michoacán, and Oliver's decision threatens to shatter all of her hopeful dreams:

“You just ... blurted it out?”

He watched her with his head slightly turned. Almost absently he unbuckled the belt and tossed it, heavy with revolver and bowie, onto the bed. His eyes were on hers as if he were concentratedly bending something. “I just blurted it out,” he said. “I’m just a big green boy too honest for his own good. I’m not smart enough to play these poker games with grown men. I don’t know when to keep my mouth shut profitably.” (344)

Oliver knows, as one sees by Lyman's presentation of his cold reaction to Susan, that she considers his pragmatism adolescent. Throughout their marriage, Oliver is able to honor Susan's romanticism, albeit sometimes from afar, but Susan, unfortunately, is never able to do the same for his practical nature, and over the years the criticism begins to wear on him. Even Oliver's reaction to Susan's supposed infidelity with young Frank is coldly pragmatic rather than imbued with the tragic emotion of a man who is able to express himself freely before a loving wife: They separate for a time, but in the end, Oliver holds stubbornly to his wedding vows and the two of them live out their years together in a kind of loveless truce.

When Lyman steps free of his own defensiveness of his grandfather's intelligence and professional accomplishments to ponder whether accepting Susan back into his life was the wisest course of action, Stegner begins to debunk the

western myth of pragmatism. And yet I do not believe that Lyman questions the wisdom of his grandfather's pragmatism so much as he questions whether it was well-placed. Perhaps, Lyman realizes, Oliver's fierce determination to uphold his marriage vows was simply a result of mulish stubbornness rather than pragmatism, and the truly pragmatic conclusion to Oliver's crisis – and, of course, Lyman's as well – involves a separation instead. When, therefore, such pragmatism is merely displaced rather than proven erroneous, I believe the myth prevails and Stegner, despite his best myth-busting intentions, exposes his own attachments to an enduring but potentially limiting archetypal assumption.

Through the first-person narration of Lyman Ward, one hears direct echoes of Stegner's own philosophies and personal preferences, and Lyman's affinity for his neighbor and housekeeper Ada Hawkes provides further evidence of Stegner's entanglement in the western myth of pragmatism. Ada, who is presented in opposition to her earthy and romantic daughter Shelly – much as Oliver's pragmatism runs counter to Susan's romanticism – is a stalwart of Lyman's more conservatively pragmatic generation and the one woman whom he allows to aid him in his most intimate tasks, such as house cleaning, bathing, and preparing for bed each night. In her detached practicality, Ada allows Lyman to retain his fierce western pragmatism while still accepting her assistance, not that any of this comes easily for Lyman:

Bless God, she is six feet tall and strong as a man. She is cheerful, dependable, common. She deals with my person and my

problems as matter-of-factly as she would change a baby's diaper. I suppose I *am* her baby, as my father was in his last years. Does she wish all the Wards would die off and give her a rest, or would she be empty without one of us to look after? Does the sight of my nakedness trouble her when she undresses and bathes me? Is she given cold shivers by my stump? Turned to stone by my rigid Gorgon head? Does she think of me as an old friend, as poor Lyman, as that unlucky Mister Ward, as a grotesque, or simply as an object to be dealt with, like a caked saucepan?

Whatever you think, come on, Ada. I need that bath and that bed and that bedtime bourbon. Whatever you think, I have learned to think nothing. I run by routine, I accept from hired women services that I would never have accepted from my wife before I became a grotesque. When you block the doorway with your bulk, and shuffle in on your bunioned arthritic feet making comfortable noises, my soul rushes out of me with gratitude. (28)

Shelly, on the other hand, unnerves Lyman with her history-denying, freedom-loving ways and her braless attire, but Ada is steady and sound and, thankfully for practical Lyman, as mythically pragmatic as he.

In Stegner's first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, the myth of pragmatism prevails regardless of those who must suffer in its stead. For Margaret MacLeod Stuart, pretending that her sister Elspeth's pregnancy was the result of an affair with their former hired man Ahlquist is a kind of martyrdom that helps to assuage the pain of her husband's affair with decorum and solicitude: "They never spoke of the false front they offered to friends and neighbors, never planned it, never agreed upon it. It was simply there, a part of Margaret's implicit insistence on decency and decorum, a part on their side of a hopeless and endless expiation" (103). Margaret's pragmatism is a pioneer-inspired stoicism, and while both Alec and Elspeth are equally stoic in their tight-lipped acquiescence to Margaret's plan,

neither is comfortable with it. Alec's first response to Margaret's suggestion that he lie is anger, but, challenged by Margaret's own fury at his affair, Alec's anger soon turns to defensiveness. But even that emotion fades into pragmatic acceptance of what must be as Margaret's anger pierces into Alec's acknowledgement of his own guilt:

"I'll not try to deny the child, Margaret."

"But you will!" said Margaret. "You've left me little enough, but that little I'll keep. If I have to I'll tell it myself, on my own sister, that Ahlquist is the man. You've taken what really counted, but I'll keep the husk of it, the name of it. You hear?"

And Alec, seeing her with the mask off, feeling the depth of her hurt, nodded slowly, knowing that whatever she demanded of him in future he would agree to.

"So be it then," he said. (117)

For Elspeth, the Ahlquist deception only calls to mind her own culpability, and her guilt, over the years, nearly kills her:

And Alec still, in company, called [Margaret] "my lady" in a ritual of respect, and Elspeth fought back the strangling desire to cry, learned to smile and nod and inquire about common-places. And always behind the united family front was the intangible shadow of estrangement, an atmosphere of loveless frigidity nurtured by wrong and fattened by the silence that seemed to the three to have soaked into the very walls of the house, to have become a haunting presence that shouted soundlessly through the footsteps on the stairs or echoed in the slamming of a door. (103)

Elspeth's pragmatism is a kind of pioneer martyrdom much like her sister's, and something that one assumes she would have embraced readily whether or not Margaret had been pushed by Alec to furiously defend her rationale in presenting to the world a lie rather than facing the deeper shame of the truth.

As with Oliver Ward's decision to honor his marital vows, however, one is left wondering whether the course chosen by sisters Elspeth and Margaret is truly pragmatic or merely stubbornly moral. They, of course, believe that the only practical recourse for Elspeth and Alec's infidelity is a cover-up that denies what has occurred to all who might look in. Even Elspeth, Alec, and Margaret themselves gradually begin to assume the roles of their own deception: The women age surprisingly prematurely, and Alec, despite his efforts to sneak laughter into his son's life, dies suddenly at a young age, presumably in part from the weight of their shared deception. Poor young Malcolm, unfortunately, must pay the most grievous price of all by growing up innocently in a home that is emotionally cold and muddled by guilt and untruths. Malcolm is the one who questions the wisdom of the sisters' apparent pragmatism, ultimately turning instead to his own practical solution to what for him has been a childhood of sorrow and unspoken lies. When Alec dies, Malcolm wants only to discover the truth of his parentage before setting out, as he knows he must, on a new path that will hopefully set him free from the deceptions of his early years. As in *Angle of Repose*, the myth of western pragmatism once again prevails, and I would argue that although Stegner clearly is cognizant of the myth and its possible entrapments, even his characters' challenges of the pragmatism that rules their lives – as in the cases of both Oliver Ward and the MacLeod sisters – ends in a new kind of pragmatic solution rather than one that incorporates the hopeful

possibilities of romantic idealisms; even Stegner cannot break free from the western assumption that only sage and pragmatic deduction will lead to success and, ultimately, survival.

The myth of pragmatism emerges again in Stegner's later novel *Recapitulation*, where Bruce Mason returns as an adult to Salt Lake City to face the reality of a childhood dominated by a decidedly non-practical and often violent father. In Bruce, as in Stegner himself, one sees a boy whose greatest rebellion against his fortune-seeking father was to deny the romanticized dreaminess of a mythical West and instead build for himself a protective hedge of practicality and conscious self-discipline. Even in his reminiscences of painful childhood moments, such as a time when his father berated Bruce and his mother for walking in on a whiskey patron and his girlfriend kissing amorously in the family parlor-turned-speakeasy, Bruce tends to search his own psyche for practical answers to the strong emotions that inevitably bubble to the surface:

His childhood had been a disease that had produced no antibodies. Forget for a minute to be humorous or ironic about it, and it could flare up like a chronic sinus. Which was unjust – his father was not always like that. It was just as possible to remember times when he had filled his son with admiration and pride. Was he an incurable grudge-holder? Was he going to pursue the poor devil with his hatred as if he had never survived adolescence? Was he never going to be reconciled to his mother's unhappy submissive life? If he had known that this would be the net result of his returning, he would not have returned. (57)

Bruce has driven from his California home to Salt Lake City to oversee the funeral of a distant aunt, and he returns unmarried but professionally successful, and

savoring a forty-five-year distance from the childhood that Stegner recounts most fully in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*; his last visit home was to bury his father following the horror of Bo Mason's violent murder/suicide, and Bruce's current visit, despite his interceding years of adult maturity, brings back all of the pain and unanswered questions that have been dormant for so many years. Bruce's pragmatism is evident from the beginning, both as a reminiscing adult and even in the immediacy of his childhood memories, and coupled with this insistent pragmatism is a kind of other-worldly self-discipline: "He said, and believed, that the more he asked himself to do, the more he could do," Bruce mulls (132). As he drives slowly past one of his family's many former Salt Lake City homes, for example, Bruce pragmatically acknowledges his own tendency to fictionalize and create anew the memories that are flooding through him with each newly remembered image:

He had rolled almost past, and was already craning backward to see the corner and the dark house. But now he stepped down hard on the brake, for he didn't want to outrun what leaped into his mind, vivid and intact, cunningly lighted. He was improving on it, expanding it, preparing exposition and climax and denouement, even as it materialized. In the moment when it returned to him, he was already beginning to transform it from tableau to story. (133)

For Bruce, even what is essentially the creation of myth is a practical, all-too-human occurrence that must be recognized as such if one is to keep one foot securely planted in a sense of greater reality.

Recapitulation is an outwardly quiet novel that revolves around Bruce's

rediscovered memories; very little immediate action propels a plot that instead focuses on the inner life of a man who is confronting the challenges of a past that is decidedly incongruent with the present he has painstakingly molded for himself. Within such personal revelations, one might assume that the emotional discoveries would be wrenching, at best, but even in the depths of his own surprising rediscoveries, Bruce manages to cling to the lifeline of western pragmatism. As he prepares to leave Salt Lake following his aunt's dismal funeral and the conclusion of his social duties, Bruce does not despair or bemoan the inner realizations he has come to during his brief stay in his hometown; instead he merely creates another checklist, much like Lyman Ward's list-making response to his son Rodman's pestering visit, and crosses off the items that are no longer relevant:

As he drove down to the hotel and turned his car over to the youth in the glass office, he was busy in his head with one final check-off. Around Bruce Mason as he once was, around the thin brown hyperactive youth who had so long usurped space in his mind and been a pretender to his feelings, he drew a careful rectangle, and all the way up on the elevator to pack his bag he was inking it out.
(288)

While Bruce's pragmatic approach appears to serve him well in the long run, preventing, perhaps, an uncontrolled collapse into self-pity or – worst of all – the despairing depression that led to his father's suicide, in presenting yet another character who relies on a calculated deduction of how his own emotions will and will not dictate his life, Stegner reveals his own entrapment in the myth of western

pragmatism. Stegner, who himself suggests in *The Sound of Mountain Water* that western pragmatism has been raised to a mythical level over the years, recognizes consciously that it can be dangerous to limit oneself to a reading of human emotion that disallows the diversity of a more even blending of, for example, a Susan and Oliver Ward or an Ada Hawkes and her daughter Shelly. But subconsciously Stegner returns time and again to a definitive reverence for those characters whose pragmatism prevails in the end, ensuring them the security of controlled emotions and a comfortably self-disciplined, check-listed life.

- ***The Myth of Western Toughness***

A third and final myth that I believe entraps Wallace Stegner in its culturally embedded subtleties is the myth of western toughness, or the pioneer-inspired assumption that personal strength equals a stiff upper lip even in the face of dire hardships. And while, as with most myths, a thick-skinned western toughness may on the outset appear to be a desirable characteristic, not everyone is capable of or even chooses to surmount life's challenges with such stubborn intractability; and sometimes, more importantly, an emotionally cognizant and sensitive approach may be the preferred reaction in situations that otherwise might not be resolvable by sheer human stubbornness. Three of Stegner's novels offer the best examples of his subconscious entanglement in the western myth of toughness: *Crossing to Safety*, *The Spectator Bird*, and *A Shooting Star*. In *Crossing to Safety*, Charity Lang is the epitome of pioneer stoicism and

toughness. In her younger days, she is a list-maker and a crowd-dominating organizer who unfortunately, like Susan Ward, allows her high expectations of her own life to drift into a harsh criticism of what she considers the deficiencies in her less rigidly strenuous husband. Unlike Charity, Sid Lang is a dreamer and a poet. And while he acquiesces to his wife's expectations that he pursue an Ivy League teaching career comparable to those enjoyed by others in Charity's high-society East Coast family, Sid much prefers those captured moments of solitude when he can escape his wife's watchful eyes and simply write or read poetic verse. Charity, of course, sees nothing hardy or profitable in Sid's somewhat amateurish abilities as a poet, and she keeps a sharp eye on his whereabouts to ensure that he is not wasting time. As I have discussed already, the Lang marriage is a difficult one for Larry and Sally Morgan to watch, but the time-honored friendships shared by the foursome overrides the Morgans' discomfort. And despite Charity's obviously controlling toughness, Larry and Sally enjoy her energy and her sparkling love for life. Only once does Charity's mythical toughness come down directly on the Morgans, when at a dinner party she briefly chastises Sally for her manners, but otherwise the friendship is a congenial and generous one in which the couples openly share their dreams, their disappointments, and a rare and snappy intellectual rapport. Mostly Charity's pioneer toughness falls on poor Sid, who, like Oliver Ward, demonstrates a loving admiration of Charity's energy that is not, unfortunately, very frequently returned by his wife. Early evidence of the

tenor of the marriage to come arises when Charity and Sid spar over his interest in poetry while still courting. Sid has just recited a stanza of poetry and declared to Charity's Aunt Emily that what he would really like to do with his life is retire to the woods and "just walk and read and think and write poems," and Charity, as one would expect, is rather appalled by what she sees as flippancy and laziness:

"That's a splendid poem, but it's not a plan for a *life*. It's defeatist, it's total retreat. Poetry ought to be a by-product of living, and you can't have a by-product unless you've had a product *first*. It's *immoral* not to get in and work and get your hands dirty."

"You can get your hands dirty in nine bean rows."

"Yes, but what are you doing? Feeding your own selfish face. Indulging your own lazy inclinations."

"Charity, really," her mother said.

Sid was not offended. "A poem isn't selfish. It speaks to people."

"If it's good enough. Has any poem ever moved you to action?"

"I just quoted you one."

"That's not action, that's *inaction*! Really, Sid, the world needs people who will do things, not run from them. ... All I'm saying is that poetry isn't *direct* enough most of the time. It doesn't concern itself with the vital *issues*. It may be nice to know how a poet feels when he looks out his window into fresh snowfall, but it doesn't help anyone feed his *family*." (90-91)

In Charity's arguments, one clearly hears her pioneer toughness emerging as a dangerously dominating characteristic that prevents her from seeing the benefits of Sid's less dictatorial approach to life; in this, Stegner is attempting to expose the western myth of maintaining an eternal stiff upper lip.

And while Stegner consciously unpacks the myth through his exploration of Charity's often caustic character, particularly when she is ill with breast cancer

and her western toughness is severely tested, Stegner allows the two quieter characters of Larry and Sally Morgan – indeed, the novel’s true westerners – to exhibit a certain mythical western toughness as well. Because their stoicism is more understated, I believe Stegner’s attempts to move beyond the myth are foiled by the calm but persistent toughness of the Morgans. Neither Larry, the first-person protagonist, nor Sally are complainers, despite the fact that they are living financially poor lives without the aid of family, and Sally has endured a lifelong battle with the physical effects of polio. In fact, their stoicism is so understated that the reader often forgets Sally’s crutches until someone in the novel mentions their existence, even if only in an off-handed way. When Sally and Larry are quietly discussing Charity’s illness, for example, and Larry pauses to survey his wife briefly before continuing with a memory of a past Christmas Eve, the reader is reminded of the couple’s own life struggles, even in the face of Charity’s battle with cancer: “Sally’s legs hang quiet in their braces, her feet are placed precisely on the metal step of her chair. The sunlight lies diagonally across her breast, the shadows of leaves or thoughts move on her face” (280).

Toward the close of the novel, Sid compares his own ties to Charity’s controlling nature with Larry’s unwanted lifelong attachment to Sally’s crutches. While Larry is not offended by his friend’s comparison, especially since Sid is speaking from the throes of grief over his wife’s impending death, he is surprised at its boldness and feels sorrow for what he believes Sid has missed in life:

Of all the people I know, Sid Lang best understands that my marriage is as surely built on addiction and dependence as his is. He tells me what under other circumstances would infuriate me – that he takes some satisfaction in my ill luck, that it gives him comfort to see someone else in chains. He says too that he would not be unchained if he could, and he knows I wouldn't either. But what he doesn't understand is that my chains are not chains, that over the years Sally's crippling has been a rueful blessing. It has made her more than she was; it has let her give me more than she would ever have been able to give me healthy; it has taught me at least the alphabet of gratitude. Sid can take his guilty satisfaction in my bad luck if he pleases. I will go on pitying him for what his addiction has failed to give him. (339-340)

The western toughness that is most mythologically obvious in the image of the cowboy hero or of the determined westward pioneer may be rather neatly dismantled in such abrasive characters as Charity Lang or Susan Ward, but where Stegner stumbles in his myth-busting efforts is in the quieter personalities of Larry and Sally Morgan in *Crossing to Safety* or, likewise, Oliver Ward in *Angle of Repose*. I would argue that because these characters harbor such a quiet fortitude, Stegner has not consciously included them in his effort to unpack the archetypal stoic westerner. But in their unspoken reverence of such values, a reverence that Stegner himself holds, these characters carry the myth much further than the clashing noisiness of Charity or Susan ever could.

In *The Spectator Bird*, Joe Allston's temperament echoes that of Charity Lang. Although he is not nearly as controlling a personality, Joe can be equally abrasive and his sarcasm clearly demonstrates his desperate need to hide behind a cover of western toughness. Just after his journals have carried him to the

moment of his brief but passionate kiss with the Danish Countess, Joe finds himself pacing his rural outer drive in an effort to calm emotions that have not surfaced in several decades. Despite the pain of arthritis and the cold of the night, Joe continues walking, around and around, enduring his physical and emotional sufferings as a kind of penance for his betrayal long ago:

The walking did me more good than the thinking, even though my toe joints had me wincing, and my hips felt as if I had jumped off a ten-foot wall. ... I kept on walking, lap after lap, leaving my shadow behind me as I turned at one end, finding it still with me when I turned at the other. My feet hurt me so that I hobbled, on my head fell dew as insubstantial and chilly as moonlight. I must have been on at least my fortieth lap when, turning at the far end, I heard heels on the asphalt back by the house, and saw Ruth's shadow coming toward me as if through silvery, settling dust. (209-210)

Despite Joe's outward stoicism, Stegner seems to be suggesting, a shadow of unaddressed emotional turmoil follows him each step of the way – an argument, perhaps of the dangers of succumbing to a mythical toughness that disallows a straightforward handling of one's emotional life.

Joe's romantic interest in the Countess also speaks to a reverence for western toughness in that she truly embodies the essence of what it takes to maintain a stiff upper lip in the face of undue hardships. With a family scarred by incest and a psychologically unstable father who used his own children to conduct ongoing experiments in genetic engineering, the Countess perseveres. The face she presents to the world is bravely stoic, even though underneath it all Joe senses that she has little sense of stability or trust, and in his attraction to her Joe longs to

comfort those empty places where only a determined sense of toughness remains. With both Joe Allston and the Countess, Stegner nearly succeeds in dismantling the myth of western toughness by presenting two characters who, although in vastly different ways, live with emotional lives hindered by unanswered questions and long-ignored longings.

But, once again, it is in the quietest characters that one finds Stegner's subconscious stumbling into the throes of the very myth that he seeks to unravel. Although Ruth Allston speaks relatively little and her character is minor in comparison to Joe and the Countess, her calm stoicism speaks volumes regarding the faith that Stegner himself places in such a virtue. She is not an enabler, as Elsa Mason is, but a quiet, uncomplaining strength much like Sally Morgan. While Ruth has sensed decades ago her husband's fleeting love for the Countess and she even questions whether he will return to the United States with her at the end of their Danish trip, Ruth bears the pain of Joe's betrayal in stoic silence, considering his decision to stay with her as evidence enough of his allegiance to their marriage. Even when Joe confesses the kiss he shared with the Countess decades before, Ruth's only response is to hug her husband's arm more tightly and suggest that Joe's realization at the time of their enduring bond was answer enough. Ruth's burden, much like Sally's crutches, has been the knowledge that her husband could be still pining, albeit silently and without considered recourse, for another woman; but, like Sally and her disability, the reader continually

forgets Ruth's burden until someone else in the novel mentions the crutches in the corner or her inability to rise on her own. Here again lies the mythological western toughness that smacks of Margaret Stuart's martyrdom and too often denies those who embrace it the ability to truly heal from the wounds that they daily face.

In *A Shooting Star*, yet another kind of western toughness emerges in the tumultuous life of Sabrina Castro. While Sabrina's mother, Deborah Hutchens, may begin to suggest a quiet strength similar to Ruth Allston or Sally Morgan, I do not believe her character is developed fully enough to carry the argument that I have made above regarding the more understated stoic characters of Stegner's novels. Instead, I believe *A Shooting Star* presents an interesting example of a contemporary woman who aspires to such western toughness, fails miserably and nearly kills herself as a result, then manages to find that strength again as a means of her ultimate survival. As in the cases of Ruth Allston and Sally Morgan, I do not believe that Stegner is consciously using Sabrina Castro to debunk the myth of western toughness, and therefore it is in her eventual reliance on the myth that one finds Stegner again subconsciously entangled in the regional assumptions that have come to define the American West. In the novel's opening pages, Sabrina is driving to her mother's house to escape the confines of her marriage and ponder her own recent affair. She is emotionally distraught and disappointed both with herself and with what she sees as her husband's inability to fill her needs, but

beneath the despair, one still catches glimpses of the inner strength that surely was present when she first married her physician husband and embarked on a life of high society:

Pausing for a red light while a trucker next door stared down at her from his high cab, she emerged from her automatism long enough to despise the cheap and frantic glitter of everything, and she tasted in her throat the poisonous carbon compounds of automotive waste. She flickered her eyes off the trucker's admiring glance, knowing exactly how she appeared to him – a good-looking woman in a late-model convertible, something out of a motor ad, a cliché of desirability, absolutely at home on this main street of Vanity Fair. Then the stain of red light on the trucker's face went amber, he lunged to his gears, and she put her foot down and drew smoothly ahead. (5)

Although Sabrina does not have to endure such hardships as Sally Morgan's debilitating polio or Ruth Allston's unspoken knowledge of her husband's infidelity, she is a 1950s American trophy wife whose intelligence necessarily takes a backseat to the surface expectations of high society. Her brand of suffering, then, is noble not for its physical hardships, since her husband ensures that she is wealthy enough to buy anything she needs, but for the relentless emotional and intellectual vacuity that accompany her lifestyle.

As Sabrina slips deeper into despair over her failing marriage, her relationships with her mother and her brother Oliver, and her own lack of decisive direction, she tries desperately to cling to the emotional toughness that was once her pride. She cannot even seem to muster the strength to tell her brother to back off:

This morning, of all mornings, she should be able to find something better to do than quarrel with Oliver. Her headache lurked at her temples like a light turned low. Back in her mind, waiting for her attention, was the emotional explosion that she knew she had coming, and beyond that was the need for some decision about what to do with her life. Her dilemma screamed at her like a man pinned in a burning car, and Oliver discussed real estate. (317)

It isn't until Leonard rejects her sexual advances that she reaches the depth of her depression and nearly fires a bullet into her brain, much like Bo Mason does when he learns that his mine venture has failed and, coupled with his overwhelming loneliness, his seemingly endlessly renewable sense of unlimited optimism runs dry. But even in her near-hallucinatory state as she stares at her image in a mirror, gun in hand, Sabrina is overwhelmed with thoughts of others: the people she has wronged unforgivably, those who will unsuspectingly walk in on her body, the unannounced child in her womb. She fires instead at her image in the mirror and then is shocked by the explosion, the all-consuming odor of gunpowder, and the idea of those she must have frightened out of sleep with her near-dawn desperate act: "Gasping for air, letting her heart shudder back to a slowing pound, she half felt that it had not happened; already it had the improbability of hallucination or dream. And that left her right where she had been before, where Burke's final rejection had put her. But on that she shut her mind, clamped it fast and locked it" (382). Even in her most desperate moment, one sees in Sabrina evidence of the emotional denial that often comes with a mythical sense of western toughness. When she decides to shut her mind on her suicidal despair, she is locking away an

emotional pain, much like Ruth Allston or the Countess, and instead choosing to assume the survivalist attitude of a pioneer-inspired western stoic. A key difference of Sabrina's problems in *A Shooting Star*, as opposed to most of Stegner's other fictional works, is that Sabrina's West is contemporary and her problems are all-too modern.

When Sabrina finally resigns herself to accept Burke's offer of divorce, move in with her mother, and forgo what she initially sees as her independence in order to have the support she needs to raise her unborn child, her disappointment in her own failures is short-lived; Sabrina has, after all, already set her mind stoically on a future into which she refuses to allow the emotional upset of her past:

Though she did not know it, she had already lost her independence, which had been a fraud from the beginning, and was about to lose some of what she had called her security. It was a moment like the breaking of something fragile and prized, but not after all very valuable. You felt sorry not for the loss of the thing itself, but for the person who mistakenly valued it, thinking it essential to her contentment. And you tried hard – no repentance! no God-damn repentance! – not to feel sorry for yourself. (405)

For Sabrina, as for many of Stegner's fictional characters, western toughness is an entirely necessary device to mask the inner pain or possibility of emotional upheaval that they do not wish to deal with. As I discussed earlier in this section, on the surface level the myth of western stoicism can seem desirable for its sense of inner strength and individual bravery. But, as Stegner suggests in his nonfiction writings, toughness becomes mythical when an individual can no

longer release himself from the self-discipline of presumed toughness to allow for emotional resolution. Any of the above myths – the myth of western optimism/meliorism, the myth of western pragmatism, and the myth of western toughness – also becomes erroneous when one assumes that everyone from the American West boasts such characteristics. For Stegner, a western man himself who spent a lifetime trying to break free from the emotional restraints of a childhood of chasing his father's continually changing Big Rock Candy Mountains, the challenge of keeping such western myths at the forefront at all times in his fiction ultimately proved difficult. With those characters whose archetypal qualities clearly mirror the stereotypes that he sought to dismantle, Stegner succeeds in showing, for example, how the romanticized vision of the West's unlimited opportunities is erroneous. But occasionally even Stegner is tripped up by the subconscious subtlety of society's deeply imbedded western mythologies, and one sees his personal priorities, such as the above-listed archetypes, emerging unchallenged in the lives of his characters.

- ***The Homogeneity of Stegner's West***

The fourth and final myth that I want to discuss is one that Stegner does not address specifically in his works but that, unfortunately, becomes apparent in his fiction simply because of its omission of whole groups of western American people: the myth of a homogeneous white immigrant West. In many ways this

myth is not as pervasive as, say, the myth of a West with unlimited resources, since most dime store Westerns do indeed incorporate at least Native Americans into their storylines; the problem there arises when Native Americans are pigeonholed as either romanticized nobles or villainous savages. Although Stegner writes about the plight of Native Americans in several isolated nonfiction essays, not a single Native American appears in his vast oeuvre of fiction. In fact, there are no African Americans in Stegner's literature either; he does include the occasional Chinese American, as in his short story "The Chink," a poignant autobiographical tale inspired by Stegner's Saskatchewan days, but those appearances can be counted on one hand. Overall Stegner's fiction is surprisingly homogenous, especially considering his conscious attempts to break through the glorified mythologies of the American West. How can one attempt to tell the tale of the West, particularly with an emphasis on the importance of blending history with the present, and omit an entire indigenous population? And how can one insist on the rich diversity of the region and then portray only one side of the western experience? Granted, Stegner is an autobiographical fiction writer whose most successful works are drawn from his own life experiences, and he admits that he had little to no contact with Native Americans over the years, but one might expect more from a man who is attempting to rewrite this nation's image of the American West in a more comprehensive and realistic light.

The most thorough discussion of Native Americans in Wallace Stegner's

work appears in his 1945 project *One Nation*. In a chapter titled “Least-Known American: Re-birth of the American Indian,” Stegner praises the new long-range federal policies of the 1920s and 1930s aimed at preserving “the Indian’s right to personal dignity as an Indian” (142). With the government’s help, Stegner writes, Indians can learn to help themselves and, ultimately, become an equal part of American society. Although prejudice still exists, he continues, the situation is improving, and Stegner argues confidently that the eventual goal of assimilating all minorities into “one nation” will indeed one day be attainable (142-143). While his essay is clearly outdated by today’s standards, Stegner was ahead of his time by suggesting in 1945 an ideal of a non-segregated diversity including all of this nation’s ethnic and religious minority populations. Stegner’s foresight in the *One Nation* project completed under the guidance of *LOOK* magazine is admirable, particularly at such an early point in Stegner’s promising career; but still Stegner seldom returns again to such issues of diversity, inequality, and social justice.

Two other places where one finds nonfiction accounts of Native Americans in Stegner’s work are in *The Sound of Mountain Water* and in *Wolf Willow*. In the first volume, Stegner includes a chapter titled “Navajo Rodeo,” which portrays in rich detail the festivities of a makeshift Navajo rodeo on the edge of a reservation that attracts both Navajos and non-Indian tourists. Stegner openly admires the jovial competition and, in his closing paragraphs, bemoans the

hardships – both physical and cultural – that the Navajo people must endure by the hand of the American government: “It is a bad life and a hard one,” he writes, “a life always close to the edge of real hunger, a life made ambiguous by the Indian’s mixed status as both citizen and government ward” (101). In *Wolf Willow*, Stegner’s combination history-memoir-fiction of Saskatchewan, Canada, Stegner includes four chapters that deal at least in part with the Native American populations along the Canadian border: “Half World: the Metis,” “The Medicine Line,” “Law in a Red Coat,” and “Capital of an Unremembered Past.” In these chapters, Stegner offers brief histories and tales of the tribes in the Saskatchewan area, and he laments his own incomplete childhood education, which included little about the region’s indigenous people:

I wish I had known some of this. Then, sunk solitary as a bear in a spider-webby, sweaty, fruit-smelling Saskatoon patch in Chimney Coulee on a hot afternoon, I might have felt as companionship and reassurance the presence of the traders, *metis*, Indians, and Mounties whose old cabins were rectangles of foundation stones under the long grass, and whose chimneys crumbled a little lower every year. (121)

Again, Stegner expresses a kind of sorrow for the hardships the Native Americans have had to endure, and he blames, at least in part, the mythologically manifest destiny-minded ignorance of his own white race.

Curiously, only a handful of critics mentions Stegner’s obvious omission of Native Americans from his literature, and none of those pauses for very long to consider the reasons or ramifications. In an essay titled “Stegner, Storytelling, and

Western Identity,” Elliott West notes that although Stegner addresses Native Americans in the chapters of *Wolf Willow*, his fictional works sadly skip over this faction of western history:

[W]e can come away from his better-known novels like *Angle of Repose* and *Big Rock Candy Mountain* with little sense that American Indians have had much to do with the West, past or present. This is especially ironic, and not only because Native American traditions offer the kind of storied connection between today and yesterday that Stegner called for. Indian narratives, especially recent ones, also bear striking parallels to something more fundamental – Stegner’s personal experiences and the path that led him to call so insistently for new and better stories. (Rankin 67)

In an essay titled “Stealing Glances” that prefaces his interviews with Stegner, James R. Hepworth argues that Stegner exhibited a hands-off approach to Native American culture because he believed that each disparate population of the American West, whether Native American, Anglo American, Chinese American, or African American, could best tell its own particular stories without being inappropriately colonized by other storytellers: “Indians, I believe Stegner correctly reasoned, could do best for themselves by writing their own novels, histories, short stories, poems, essays, articles, and literary criticism. They might even, God help us, eventually establish a voice for all of us in the West,” Hepworth writes (13). Stegner himself expands on this argument in a 1971 interview with English professor John R. Milton, in which he suggests that it is not the same for a western writer to include Native Americans in his work as it is, for example, for William Faulkner to incorporate African Americans in his: “The

Indian is a little harder to take up because he didn't live in the house. He didn't play with you as a child. You didn't have a copper-colored mammy. Maybe you do in South Dakota, but in much of the West, Indians are very much out of sight" (55-56). Even in New Mexico, where the Native American population is large and prevalent, whites would have to make a point of going on the reservation or to a trading post to meet any Indians, Stegner continues, and few ever do.

An interesting, albeit brief, debate over Stegner's minimal handling of Native Americans in his work emerged in 1996 with the publication of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's book titled *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice*. In a ten-page chapter titled "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner," university professor and Crow Creek Sioux Tribe member Cook-Lynn accuses Stegner of perpetuating erroneous myths about Native Americans with his essays in *Wolf Willow*. Because Stegner is "one of the giants of American letters," and, in particular, literature of the American West, he holds a notable responsibility to avoid the perpetuation of wrongful history, Cook-Lynn argues. Like Stegner, she warns of the dangers of erroneous mythologies, and – ironically – she angrily accuses Stegner of playing a key role:

Because I am an Indian, born and raised on a northern plains Indian reservation in this century, I argue with Stegner's reality. The culture I have known imagines a different continuity and intimacy with the universe, which in large part still exists. It exists in communities all over the region, in language and myth, and in the memories of people who know who they are and where they came from. Unless someone comes forward to say that Western history did not stop in 1890, Indians will forever be exempted from

Descartes's admonition concerning humanity: "I think, therefore, I am." Worse yet, fraudulent public policy toward Indians has been and is even now imposed through the conversionary use of imagined realities. (30)

Although Cook-Lynn's overall premise that Stegner could have been more cognizant of his role at the forefront of the literary canon of the American West with regards to incorporating a de-mythologized look at the lives of Native Americans – particularly in his fiction, I would argue – is understandable, her anger unfortunately clouds her arguments. With references only to *Wolf Willow* and Richard Etulain's interviews with Stegner in *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature*, Cook-Lynn makes assumptions regarding Stegner's personal philosophies and intentions that simply cannot be made based on such a limited understanding of his work. When she criticizes Stegner for lamenting his lack of history, for example, instead suggesting that Stegner purposefully ignores the extant history of America's indigenous people, Cook-Lynn fails to acknowledge that although a greater sensitivity to the history of the Native American people might have enriched some of Stegner's work, he could not simply assume a regional history that was not his. Cook-Lynn also argues that Stegner's affinity for Saskatchewan muddies his ability to recognize that racism was just as prevalent there as in the United States: "A broader look at history might suggest that the idea that Indian hating was nonexistent and empire building less violent in Canada than in the United States is simply a delusion of the imagination," she writes (37).

In his 2001 collection *Down by the Lemonade Springs: Essays on Wallace Stegner*, Jackson J. Benson includes an essay titled “Why I Can’t Read Elizabeth Cook-Lynn” that neatly counters many of Cook-Lynn’s arguments. Although Benson falls victim here, as in his 1996 biography of Stegner, to an inability to admit that Wallace Stegner might ever do wrong, his counter attack is, for the most part, effectively argued. Benson begins by criticizing Cook-Lynn for writing that “there are few of us who have not read [Stegner’s] works,” since his research over the years has proven quite the opposite: Nine out of ten people across the nation still have never heard of Wallace Stegner, Benson writes, and Cook-Lynn’s attempts to place Stegner on a pedestal of vast popularity is misleading and, when he must bear the brunt of her anger, even slanderous (60):

It may be that in a general sense her hostility is justified – certainly the American Indian has been terribly victimized over the centuries: betrayed, exploited, condescended to, brutalized, and, sometimes even worse, ignored. But I would suggest that her rage is misdirected when she uses Wallace Stegner as her straw man and makes him into an icon of white ignorance and persecution. Furthermore, there is something cheap and underhanded in using Stegner’s name and reputation in order to popularize and sell her book. She has slandered and falsely accused a good man. (60)

Benson further criticizes Cook-Lynn for frequently taking Stegner’s words out of context. When Stegner writes of “the end of the West in 1890,” for example, he is not suggesting an end to the American Indian, as Cook-Lynn suggests, but an end to the Wild West period of white settlement, Benson writes. In the final pages of his chapter, Benson’s own anger and defensiveness of Wallace Stegner emerge,

and his counter-accusations become, I believe, unnecessarily personal. He accuses Cook-Lynn of harboring her own “unqualified hatred” and racism against white America, and he minimizes the violent plight of the Native Americans by suggesting that the American frontier was indeed an inevitability: “God did not put the Indians down in the middle of North America and tell them This is your land; no one else can live here,” he writes (70). Overall, I believe Benson sets forth a much more convincing argument than Cook-Lynn’s, although it is unfortunate that his discussions also become clouded by anger and unnecessary defensiveness. Unfortunately neither Cook-Lynn nor Benson ventures into a discussion of the complete omission of Native Americans in Stegner’s literary works, a fact that I believe is far more troublesome than the few short nonfiction essays where he does discuss Indians.

Although I believe it certainly does not excuse Stegner’s fictional presentation of a predominately homogenous American West, Stegner is not alone in his tendency to focus only on the West’s white immigrant experience: Both Henry Nash Smith and Richard Slotkin have endured similar criticisms, and one might wonder whether, at least in the case of Stegner and Smith, their educational foundations in a generation that believed in the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner may have played a key role. While historians of the American West in the early part of the twentieth century focused on a pioneer experience that saw 1890 as a definitive close to the American frontier and, therefore, to many of the

ideologies that accompanied the frontier, later western historians have drastically amended that view. Patricia Nelson Limerick, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, played an important role in the conversation with her 1987 publication of *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. In addition to her emphasis on an American West with a continuous history that does not start and stop near the close of the nineteenth century, Limerick calls for a much more inclusive view of westerners, whether they are Anglo, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, or African American. Blake Allmendinger, among others, follows the discussion with his 1998 book *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature*; in a chapter titled “The White Open Spaces,” Allmendinger, like Limerick, emphasizes a need to move well beyond the restrictive thinking of Turner’s frontier theories.

It is unfortunate that Stegner did not write more about these issues of ethnic diversity and inclusiveness, and that he was not alive to judge for himself Cook-Lynn’s charges against him, but I believe his most cogent argument explaining his literary neglect of Native Americans comes in his admission during the Milton interview that Native Americans simply did not play a recognizable role in his life. Stegner’s contention to Hepworth that the West’s varied populations should be allowed to speak for themselves is an intriguing one, and it is unfortunate, again, that he did not address this further before his death in 1993. It seems to me that Stegner is decidedly remiss in not recognizing his own

apparent perpetuation of a myth of western homogeneity in his exclusion of minority populations from his literary works. If he truly believed that Native Americans, African Americans, and Chinese Americans must be left to speak for themselves, as he suggests in *One Nation* and in his comments to James Hepworth, why would he permit stories such as “The Chink” to be a part of his collected tales? And, more importantly, why wouldn’t this philosophy of allowing others to speak for themselves in order to avoid the possibility of further colonizing or marginalizing already downtrodden minority populations not appear in his many discussions of literature, writing, and teaching? Overall, as I have argued already, Stegner has made an indelible mark on not only the literature of the American West but also on the very mythologies used to describe both westerners and Americans, and it would be unfortunate to become bogged down by a discussion of the places where Stegner – who was often the first to even recognize the aforementioned mythologies – subconsciously allows the myths to dictate his own thoughts and works. Stegner has carried the examination of western mythologies further than any writer or historian before or since his time, and for that one should look with gratitude toward the ways that this new literature of the American West has been allowed to emerge afresh and without the presumptions of formulaic simplicity that so limited the writers of Stegner’s generation.

Chapter 3

Stegner's Nonfiction

For a writer who is best known for his novels about the American West, Wallace Stegner wrote an admirable amount of nonfiction, and it is through these essays, histories, and biographies that one can begin to formulate a sense of Stegner's lifelong efforts to redefine western American history and literature. Stegner published fifteen full-length nonfiction books in his lifetime, with three additional nonfiction collections published posthumously, and together these publications sketch a kind of life's journey toward self-discovery – both in terms of his own role as a writer and amateur historian and a more general exploration of the American West and its defining characteristics (see Table 3). As I have argued in the preceding pages, Stegner's career has aided in encouraging a more complex effort to define and step beyond the archetypes that limit this nation's understanding of the West, and in his nonfiction one can best pinpoint the places where Stegner identifies those myths and suggests the means of debunking that he later attempts through his fiction. Although Stegner himself once modestly remarked that his sheer volume of publications, particularly magazine and journal articles, was not always inspired by literary or high-minded political intentions – “I've written reams of grocery-buying junk during my lifetime,” he wrote in a 1981 letter (Colberg xxvii) – his hundreds of nonfiction essays, book

Table 3

Stegner's Nonfiction

Wallace Stegner published fifteen notable nonfiction books in his lifetime, including two biographies, two books on teaching and writing, three collections of political essays, one collection of interviews, and seven books of regional essays about the America West. Three posthumous collections include a second gathering of interviews, a third book on teaching and writing, and a final collection of regional essays. Stegner also wrote numerous pamphlets, book introductions, single book chapters, and magazine and journal articles, as well as served as editor of a variety of nonfiction and fiction collections; the below listed are only those nonfiction works written in full by Stegner and published in complete book form.

| Year | Title |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <hr/> | |
| 1942 | <i>Mormon Country</i> |
| 1945 | <i>One Nation</i> |
| 1952 | <i>The Writer in America</i> |
| 1954 | <i>Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West</i> |
| 1962 | <i>Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains</i> |

Frontier

- 1964 *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*
- 1969 *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West*
- 1971 *DISCOVERY! The Search for Arabian Oil*
- 1974 *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto*
- 1981 *American Places*
- 1982 *One Way to Spell Man*
- 1983 *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and*

Literature

- (1996 rev. ed.: *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature*)
- 1987 *The American West as Living Space*
- 1988 *On the Teaching of Creative Writing: Responses to a Series of*
Questions
- 1992 *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and*
Writing in the West
- 1998 *Marking the Sparrow's Fall: Wallace Stegner's American West*
- 1998 *Stealing Glances: Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner*
- 2002 *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*

introductions, and edited volumes published over a nearly sixty-year writing career cannot be dismissed lightly. But because the vast majority of Stegner's best-remembered and oft-quoted works have been collected into single volumes, I will spend my time here focusing on his book-length nonfiction and the arc of personal growth and intention it describes.

I believe Stegner's lifelong career can be relatively comfortably defined in terms of three key strands: Stegner as writer and teacher; Stegner as conservationist; and Stegner as de-mythologizer, a final category that incorporates the previous roles and involves an attempted redefining of his native American West in an effort to recognize and, when necessary, override the erroneous archetypes of a glorified Old West. These categories are, of course, fluid and interchangeable: Texts that I am listing in the first two categories, for example, can easily be argued into the third category, and – in some cases – the reverse may be true as well. But even while these definitions may shift into and over one another, they are helpful in demonstrating how Stegner's literary and regional beliefs are grounded in the varied essays collected in his nonfiction books. With the two volumes of collected interviews by Etulain and Hepworth informing the rest, I have divided Stegner's nonfiction works accordingly: (1) Stegner as writer and teacher – *The Writer in America*, *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*, and *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*; (2) Stegner as conservationist – *One Nation*, *DISCOVERY!*, and *The American West as Living*

Space; and (3) Stegner as myth-buster – *Mormon Country*, *The Gathering of Zion*, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, *The Uneasy Chair*, *Wolf Willow*, *The Sound of Mountain Water*, *American Places*, *One Way to Spell Man*, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, and *Marking the Sparrow's Fall*.

- ***Stegner as Writer & Teacher***

Although he published one volume that provides a kind of commentary on American literature – the lectures collected in *The Writer in America* – Stegner for the most part was wary of the ways that the philosophically ethereal nature of literary criticism ran counter to his beliefs as a writer of realism and both a teacher and student of mythopoesis. When James R. Hepworth remarks during an interview with Stegner that he would rather teach fiction and poetry than contemporary literary theory, for example, Stegner agrees:

Someone once remarked that the moment you begin to conceptualize you have lost touch with reality, and that literary theory is all about conceptualizing and literature ought to be about reality, somehow. Literature ought to be particular, not general. And you might be able to generalize from it, but it takes a secondary act to do that, and the thing itself ought to be just as alive as the tape. That's why I would have to agree with you, by and large, about a career in criticism. It doesn't seem to me to be more than a second-best choice. Maybe third. (59)

In their 1977 Stegner biography, Forrest G. and Margaret G. Robinson describe Stegner's critical stance as "traditional, conservative, and commonsensical" (69).

In their brief 1972 biography, Merrill and Lorene Lewis write that Stegner is a

moralist, not a behaviorist, and a realist, not a naturalist (38); but even so, his literary philosophies are difficult to pinpoint, they write:

It is impossible to place Stegner in any of the several literary traditions that have dominated twentieth-century prose writing. His insistence that the basis for fiction lies in personal experience and his use of the techniques of impressionistic realism – as well as his belief that the subject of fiction is the conduct of individuals – suggest that his own work, both in its conception and in its craftsmanship, has roots that go back to Henry James, Joseph Conrad, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. (37)

The central theme of all of Stegner's work, the Lewises continue, is a search for self and a search of place, both personal and regional, artistic and cultural (5). In his 1996 biography, Benson describes Stegner as a realist, a moralist, and a truth-seeker for whom writing was not a game but a "challenge to the soundness of your character": "On this basis, his readers, as well as many critics, recognized a qualitative gap that raised Stegner above most other writers: he was simply different – more genuine, closer to his work somehow, and broader in outlook. He was an artist large in spirit who could see beyond his own shadow" (*Wallace* 397). Stegner held a lifelong belief in the artist's moral responsibility to his or her readers, a value that clearly dictated much of his career and, in particular, his efforts at pinpointing and redefining the West's erroneous mythologies. As he writes in the 1976 *Daedalus* essay "The Writer and the Concept of Adulthood," serious writers are as responsible to their readership as a minister to his church or a politician to her public. The difference, Stegner explains, is that a writer is responsible not to a social conformity but to "his personal vision of truth and

social justice, to his gift": "His vision and the integrity with which he pursues and promotes it are elements needed for a larger and more human synthesis, which in the nature of things will again harden and will need once more the services of iconoclasts" (40).

As a teacher of both creative writing and literature, Stegner had a reputation as a thorough scholar and wholly supportive mentor who often went beyond what was necessary to encourage his students. While at Stanford University from 1945 to 1971, Stegner taught some of the greatest talent of his career, including such writers as Wendell Berry, Edward Abbey, Larry McMurtry, Ernest Gaines, and Ken Kesey, and he valued seminars that were open and supportive rather than competitive. Little is written about Stegner's teaching years at Stanford without at least a passing mention of Ken Kesey and the pair's rather tumultuous relationship, although both Stegner and Kesey have since denied that their differences were as openly dramatic as some might suggest. Mostly they disagreed at a fundamental level, as two of such differing generations might, about such values as Stegner's belief in cooperation, hard work, and debunking simplistic western mythologies versus Kesey's lackadaisical attitude toward work and fondness, for instance, for the image of a rugged individualist cowboy-type, which he recreates in part in his central character McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Benson, *Wallace* 252-254).

Stegner's classroom clearly was one that valued writerly dedication and

self-discipline, well-drawn and complexly human characters, a sense of history and of the importance of the landscape, a realist's eye for detail, and a traditional notion of moral responsibility. But as one looks deeper than such surface-level narrative techniques and writerly intentions, I believe it is essential that one consider how Stegner's broader teaching philosophies mirror his efforts at debunking western archetypes: Stegner wanted his students to eschew the modern trends of shock and narrative experimentation and instead embrace a more thorough exploration of who or why something is as it is: a look at history, interrelationships, and human motivation. When Hepworth asks Stegner to define originality in fiction, for example, Stegner sets aside the contemporary assumption that originality necessitates a jarring approach to narrative structure or voice: "To be original I would think you have to see so deeply into characters that you say something that makes a reader really pause, that isn't necessarily what he would have thought himself, at that point" (57). If one considers shock value and narrative experimentation as the surface-level archetypes that Stegner fights, then I believe that in teaching as well as in cultural criticism, Stegner is calling for a more enlightened discussion that finds its genesis beneath the level of what is most apparent on the page and – in the case of western archetypes – at the movies. One cannot ignore what is happening on the most basic surface level, but one also must be wholly aware of the depths that lie beneath.

In *The Writer in America* (1952), Stegner attempts to both present an

overview of American literature and, in many ways, define and defend the role of the 1950s American writer. The lectures were part of a program intended to draw parallels between the arts in the United States and the arts in postwar U.S.-occupied Japan, and Stegner writes in his foreword to the book that his lectures are intentionally generalized since his audience presumably knew little about contemporary American literature. For my purposes here, these lectures shed further light on Stegner's philosophies as a writer and teacher, and ultimately point to his role as a western historian who fights for a return to the "particulars" of western American history in lieu of a reliance on misplaced generalities.

On the Teaching of Creative Writing (1988) is a very slim volume based on informal discussions Stegner had with several professors before an audience at Dartmouth College while he was a writer in residence there in June and July of 1980. Although most of the book deals more specifically with such topics as setting up a creative writing program and "managing the environment" of a writing seminar, the essays offer a glimpse of the Stegner who firmly believes in a self-disciplined writer of moral, concrete stories whose responsibilities both to his readers and to his own ideals are life- and work-defining.

Stegner's daughter-in-law, Lynn Stegner, collected the essays gathered in the posthumous publication *On Teaching and Writing Fiction* (2002). While several of these essays introduce ideas specific to teaching and to the young writer, the voice in many of them is more uniquely and honestly Stegner's than in

his two previous collections of articles on teaching and writing – a result, perhaps, of a lifetime of writing and teaching and, presumably, increasing confidence in his own abilities as an educator and as a voice for American literature. Stegner writes, once again, that fiction writing must be grounded in what is concrete (17), and essays on the use of obscene language and the role of deconstructionist critics lend credence to this notion that Stegner indeed was a moral, truth-seeking writer with a penchant for realistic details and an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility toward his readers and toward his own unique value system.

- ***Stegner as Conservationist***

Although he was something of a reluctant political activist, Stegner was an activist nonetheless, and one of this nation's earliest proponents of resource conservation. For nature writer Rick Bass, Stegner's work was the genesis of Bass's profession, and Bass firmly believed Stegner proved an inspiration for generations of writers to come:

For a Western artist, to speak about the wilderness system of the West is to speak indirectly about the work of Wallace Stegner; it is to speak about the vision of wilderness that he put forth in works such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Angle of Repose* and the essay collection *The Sound of Mountain Water*, among so many others. As a team of oxen pulls in a double-yoke, he used his talents as an artist and as an activist, all his life, to help give us what we have now: what we have as a community of artists and what we have as a community of those who love the landscape of the West. (25)

Jackson J. Benson suggests in his biography that Stegner's interest in resource

conservation may have stemmed from his unhappy childhood. Stegner's father was the quintessential proudly individualistic, resource-grabbing, fortune-hunting, rugged cowboy pioneer and, to top it off, he was unkind and even abusive towards Wallace, who was a sickly, bookish child. Stegner's mother, on the other hand, came to embody the kind cooperation and open tolerance of those in the West who worked together to better their homes and their lives. Stegner adored his mother and abhorred his father, and in time he came to recognize the two as a synecdoche for the tension between rugged individualism on the one hand and cooperative community on the other, Benson writes:

It may seem like a gigantic jump from childhood unhappiness to adult environmentalist, but the very ethic espoused by his mother of charity and concern for all is at the root of Stegner's concern for the earth, and his hatred of his father's opportunism and greed is at the root of his resistance to the forces of exploitation. (*Wallace* 22-23)

When Stegner immersed himself in the research and writing of his 1954 biography/history of the geologist and explorer John Wesley Powell, he began questioning the age-old western myth that in the land of milk and honey, resources are limitless and its residents are free to use and abuse as they see fit. Powell, who is best remembered as the commander of the first expedition to descend the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in 1869, was one of the first to announce to the world in his 1878 *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* that the West's resources were actually finite and that only careful planning and regulation of the arid West's most essential resource, water, would

allow the growing populations to survive (Meine 148).

In the 1950s, Stegner became involved with the Sierra Club, and – after landscape photographer and good friend Ansel Adams talked Stegner into running for a leadership position – he served on its board from 1964 to 1968. One of Stegner’s best-known conservation essays is an eight-page piece written in a single afternoon in response to a request from Sierra Club president David Brower for a wilderness manifesto. Later published as “Wilderness Letter” in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, the 1960 essay argues persuasively for wilderness preservation, carefully suggesting the danger of the western myths that Stegner later fights vehemently against; in this early essay, however, Stegner’s gentle handling of the assumptions that Americans held so dear probably is what made his letter so successful, rather than tossed aside as yet another offensive or too-inflammatory tract. When President John Kennedy appointed Stewart Udall his secretary of interior in 1961, Stegner sent Udall a copy of *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* as a congratulations and, after reading the book, Udall invited Stegner to serve as a special assistant regarding matters of western conservation; Stegner worked as an adviser for Udall and the Kennedy administration during the latter half of 1961.

In his 1990 introduction to *Wilderness at the Edge: A Citizens Proposal to Protect Utah’s Canyons and Deserts*, Stegner explains the politics of conservation in terms of the western archetypes that he also addresses both in his fiction and in

his essays on literature:

Between the extremes, between the interested and the disinterested, there is a large group of the confused, uncertain, and misled; but the conflicting parties are still the Birdwatchers and the Roughriders, the responsible stewards of the earth and those galvanized by the spirit that “won the West”: that reduced the beaver and bison to remnants, clear-cut the mountainsides, overgrazed and plowed up the grass, set the topsoil to blowing, pumped down the water table, dried up the springs, trampled the riparian zones of streams and silted up the gravelly spawning creeks, dammed and diverted the rivers, [and] left its ghost towns in a hundred gulches and the outwash of its monitors at the mouths of a hundred canyons ... (3)

In his 1994 article “Wallace Stegner and the Environmental Ethic:

Environmentalism as a Rejection of Western Myth,” Brett J. Olsen writes that the role of western mythology in shaping the reality of the American West has led to a “visible bevy of seemingly comical, yet potentially disastrous ironies” (124). To illustrate these ironies, Olsen points to such current commonalities as plowing up desert land to build golf courses and planning countless “thirty-acre ranchettes” across the Rocky Mountain West – or, to put it even more bluntly: “practicing rugged individualism with espresso in hand, communing with nature at a high cost to their more indigenous human and nonhuman neighbors” (125). All of this is represented in Stegner’s fiction, Benson writes in *Down by the Lemonade Springs: Essays on Wallace Stegner*, and although Stegner is careful to avoid didactic preaching, characters frequently express concern for their surroundings. “And what was extremely important to him was that he accomplished this task without perverting his fiction by making it a vehicle for overtly preaching a

message,” writes Benson, who argues that the most explicit examples of Stegner’s myth-exposing conservationism are in the novels *A Shooting Star* (1961) and *Crossing to Safety* (1987) (41).

One Nation (1945) is a curious book in Stegner’s oeuvre because it looks at a variety of racial and cultural populations in the United States and attempts to uncover the prejudices evident in this country in the 1940s. Because it was published so early in Stegner’s career, one might have assumed at the time that Stegner would follow it with additional essays and/or fiction addressing, if not racism, at least the cultural issues of minority populations in this diverse nation, but Stegner rarely, if ever, returns to such topics for the remaining nearly half-century of his career. The editors of *Look* magazine hired Stegner to travel to several sections of the country accompanied by *Look* photographers and interview members of minority populations. Each of Stegner’s articles was published in *Look* as he completed it, and in 1945 the pieces were collected into a single book.

DISCOVERY! The Search for Arabian Oil (1971) is another anomaly in Stegner’s collection of nonfiction publications, mostly because it describes the history of the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) and, as Benson writes, its “corporate and national exploitation of national resources ... [in the] discovery and development of the oil fields of Saudi Arabia” (*Down* 56). In her essay “Stegner and Stewardship,” scholar Ann Ronald criticizes Stegner for the egregious hypocrisy of publishing such a book as an ardent conservationist.

Ronald, who writes that few know of the book's existence – as if Stegner had spearheaded some kind of conspiracy to hide the book – points to such specific personal contradictions as an apparent indifference to mineral exploitation in *DISCOVERY!* that runs counter to his definitive anti-mining arguments in *The Sound of Mountain Water* just two years earlier. Overall, she criticizes Stegner for serving as a public relations mouthpiece for a corporation that had showed little concern for the environment: “The whole point of the book is to boast of the changes one powerful corporation brought to the land,” she writes (Rankin 91-92).

Benson, on the other hand, dismisses Ronald's arguments by stating that she does not acknowledge that for Stegner, this project – much like *One Nation* – was commissioned for about triple his current salary, and, in the case of *DISCOVERY!*, the book was an in-house history that, at least initially, was distributed only to employees and stockholders (56). Benson continues with a critique of Ronald's inability to recognize in the writing Stegner's own hesitancy regarding the issues, which I think also points to Ronald's conflation of the philosophies of conservationism and environmentalism, the first of which allows for the “wise use of resources” beneath the auspices of a larger corporation or government agency:

It may well be that *DISCOVERY!* “glamorizes a process while dismissing its effects,” although it seemed to this reader that while reading the book, one may become aware of certain implicit conflicts in its author. Stegner admires progress but is suspicious of it, likes the can-do enthusiasm of the oil-field workers but displays an underlying unease with a project so motivated by

exploitation of the land for money, even though the land is largely barren. In other words he shows very human mixed emotions. (*Down* 58).

The book reads like a novel in parts, and I believe the issue that needs to be addressed here is not whether Stegner compromised his conservationist values – like Etulain, I, too, am not convinced that he does – but how Stegner’s public relations-necessitated glorification of an American corporation that smacks of archetypal resource-grabbing ruggedness runs counter to his lifelong efforts of dismantling such western stereotypes. At the beginning of the book’s third chapter, however, even Stegner suggests that the story he is writing is more than mere history: “From the point of view of the men who made the beachhead, what they came to do was a job like other jobs. From the perspective of history and with the map in mind, it was an assignment to challenge the most rash; seen in retrospect it has the nostalgic, almost mythic quality of an action from the age of giants” (23). I believe this kind of admission of the fairy tale quality of the Aramco story that Stegner tells points to precisely the complex self-awareness that Benson suggests and Ronald apparently misses: Here Stegner realizes the dangerously mythic qualities of his story, and yet, perhaps because *DISCOVERY!* is a commissioned public relations piece, Stegner is able to set aside his otherwise stringent sense of personal values to simply tell an in-house corporate story as his readers would like it told. The lesson here, perhaps, is simply to avoid reading too deeply something that Stegner would have considered “grocery-buying junk”

anyway. Regardless of how neatly these commissioned political tracts *One Nation* and *DISCOVERY!* fit in with the rest of Stegner's nonfiction collection, both are worth recognizing for their early political leanings and for the issues of myth and genre-muddling that they suggest.

The American West as Living Space (1987) is a considerably more quintessential Stegner collection of essays on resource conservation in the West. As Stegner explains in his preface, the book evolved from a series of three lectures delivered at the Law School of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in October of 1986. By the 1980s, environmentalism had fully overshadowed the less confrontational style of conservationism, but Stegner clearly still had a voice despite his more notably non-militant approach to problem-solving. In his later years, Stegner's role in the environmentalist movement was to bring history, erroneous mythology, and even literary sensibilities to bear on questions of how and why this nation should focus on preserving the resources of the West. As in his first essay in *The American West as Living Space*, "Living Dry," Stegner repeatedly pinpoints the defining characteristic of the American West as its aridity – a characteristic that led to many of the Hollywood-style stereotypes of the dust bowl West, as well as the dire need for politicians and citizens alike to recognize the necessity of full ecosystem management, rather than merely protecting apportioned segments of water.

In his final and frequently quoted essay "Variations on a Theme by

Crèvecoeur,” Stegner carries readers from his discussions of aridity and other specific characteristics of the western landscape to the people who inhabit the western wilderness. Stegner plays on Crèvecoeur’s famous nation-defining question from *Letters from an American Farmer* – “Who is the American, this new man?” – by arguing that Crèvecoeur’s idealized American farmer is not the American image that westerners polished into their mythical folk hero. Instead westerners were attracted to Crèvecoeur’s secondary American, a man he thought would disappear as the frontier disappeared: “It was Crèvecoeur’s wild man, the borderer emancipated into total freedom, first in eastern forests and then in the plains and mountains of the West, who really fired our imaginations, and still does,” Stegner writes (73). Oddly enough, Stegner continues, American society interpreted western job descriptions quite differently from what reality portrayed. The lone cowboy, for example, was one of the West’s least independent figures: “The cowboy in practice was and is an overworked, underpaid hireling, almost as homeless and dispossessed as a modern crop worker” (69):

There is a discrepancy between the real conditions of the West, which even among outlaws enforced cooperation and group effort, and the folklore of the West, which celebrated the dissidence of dissent, the most outrageous independence. Bernard DeVoto once cynically guessed that the only true individualists in the West wound up on the end of a rope whose other end was in the hands of a bunch of cooperators. (69-70)

Although it is a brief volume, *The American West as Living Space* demonstrates a characteristic that is common in most of Stegner’s nonfiction works – and that is

demonstrated repeatedly in this next section on “Stegner as De-Mythologizer”: Stegner rarely remains on one branch of his life’s passions without pointing to another, and often yet another. Here, for example, one begins with a clear discussion of the West’s dryness and the ramifications of minimal precipitation, followed by a brief look at what should and should not be done in answer. Then one slips from specific issues of resource conservation to a broader consideration of western archetypes with regard to aridity, and from there one can begin to make connections to Stegner’s fiction. Even in his role as conservationist, Stegner continually has a finger on the archetypal definitions of the West, and the persistent mythologies that accompany those erroneous archetypes.

- ***Stegner as De-Mythologizer: (Re)-Defining the American West***

As has been my contention throughout this discussion, any of Stegner’s books – nonfiction or fiction – could be argued into this remaining category of dismantling archetypal myths in an effort to redefine the American West. Some of Stegner’s earlier works contain more subtle suggestions of western mythologies, while his later works – particularly *The Sound of Mountain Water*, *One Way to Spell Man*, and *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* – overtly list and discuss many of the characteristics that Stegner sees as idealized and therefore detrimental to an accurate understanding of the contemporary West. Interestingly, it is here that Stegner most clearly demonstrates his role as historian.

He calls himself an “amateur historian,” presumably because he is not trained in specific scholarly methods of detailing and recording history – and some critics have indeed criticized Stegner for blurring lines that simply should not be blurred, such as the boundaries between factual history and fictional narrative. But Stegner’s brand of history, although perhaps not as scholarly as trained historians might like, is precisely what has allowed him to begin to uncover the mythologies that confuse contemporary discussions of the West.

In his essay “Finding the Place,” published in Clarus Backes’ 1989 collection *Growing Up Western*, Stegner writes that his exposure to Mormon society while living in Salt Lake City as a child is what prompted his own interest in personal and regional history: “Their obsession with their history ... made me aware that I had grown up entirely *without* history, and set me on the trail to construct some for myself” (175). Because Stegner’s father had so frequently discarded career after career in search of something more, moving the family from state to state until the Stegners finally settled in Salt Lake City while Stegner was in grade school, Stegner never had a chance to settle in and establish the roots he longed for; it wasn’t until he moved to California as an adult in 1945 that Stegner felt like he had finally found a home and could begin to uncover the personal history that emerges in his writing. According to Rob Williams in his 1998 essay “‘Huts of Time’: Wallace Stegner’s Historical Legacy,” Stegner was heavily influenced by two western historians: Walter Prescott Webb, a Texas historian

whose regional work encouraged Stegner to explore the relationship between human society and physical landscape, and Bernard DeVoto, whose personal narrative voice, use of primary historical documents even in his fiction, and willingness to pass historical judgments all colored Stegner's development as a narrative historian (Rankin 124). In his effort to discover a new kind of historical study, Stegner came up with what he called a "middle ground" between fiction and history, a place where he felt comfortable to both explore and record the personal experiences of his home region. And, according to Charles E. Rankin, editor of *Wallace Stegner: Man & Writer*, Stegner accomplished this feat admirably: "Stegner staked the middle ground between history and literature, triangulated it with personal experience, and explored the terrain as thoroughly, probingly, and sympathetically as any American writer has done in the twentieth century" (12).

The problem with the mythic Western novel, Stegner explains, is that it employs myths – such as the personification of individualism or idealized self-reliance – in ways that apply to only a small percentage of true westerners and negate the truth of what the region's history truly entails (Hepworth 104). "The Diamond Dick kind of stuff" only confuses history, Stegner continues, particularly when dime novel readers and Western movie-goers assume that what they are exposed to is how things really were: "If you want a usable past, you almost have to cut that off. I have to take the scissors and separate myself from Jack Schaefer

if I'm trying to write about a West that I think is real, not mythical" (Hepworth 39). Therefore, while Stegner began his delve into regional history as a personal exploration of his own sense of a rootless past, his search next developed into a determined effort to eliminate the restrictions western mythologies place on the region's literary writers. In "Born a Square," one of Stegner's best-known discussions of myth and the western writer, Stegner explains his position:

[T]he western writer is in a box with booby traps at both ends. By "western writer" I do not mean the writer of Westerns; I mean the writer who has spent his formative years in the West. When I say he is in a box, I mean that he has a hard time discovering what is in him wanting to be said, and that when he does discover it he has difficulty getting a hearing. His box is booby-trapped at one end by an inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition, and at the other end by the coercive dominance of attitudes, beliefs, and intellectual fads and manners destructive of his own. ... [A] writer from the West finds himself so unfashionable as to be practically voiceless. (*Sound* 170-171)

When David Dillon asks Stegner what a western writer is to rely on when the old glorified myths are removed, Stegner responds that any western writer should simply look around at the reality surrounding him rather than to Tombstone, Arizona, "an aberration of the West" (Arthur 53).

Generally speaking, Stegner's mythical West is a nostalgic tale of emancipation: emancipation primarily from the expectations of eastern society, but also from the law, from unwanted ties to family, and even from personal restraint. And Stegner's premise for dismantling these mythologies, of course, is an unwarranted emancipation from a past that is replaced by such idealized

characteristics and fables. As I have stated in the preceding chapter, I believe these Stegner-defined mythologies can be viewed on two planes: firstly, in terms of the West in general, and secondly, in terms of the West's cowboy hero, which has evolved into perhaps the most recognizable result of these archetypes. The mythologies that Stegner lists as associated with the western region in general include unlimited resources, timelessness, optimism, meliorism, unrestricted freedom, and unlimited opportunities (which lead into the get-rich-quick schemes associated with a search for a personal Big Rock Candy Mountain). The mythologies that Stegner associates with the western cowboy hero include self-reliance, rugged individualism, aggression (all quarrels necessarily lead to violence), pragmatism, toughness (a stiff upper lip), and emancipation from inhibition, law, convention, restraint, and the past (rootlessness); and, rather unimaginably coupled with these tough-man images, come a faith in honesty, in property, and in sanctity of contract, as well as a kindness to the poor, to women, and to children. When one lists these archetypes together in one place, it becomes more clear how ludicrous it would be to expect a single hero or even a singular region to encapsulate all of them at once, and yet that is precisely what the dime store novels and subsequent John Wayne Westerns manage to do. As Stegner argues repeatedly, these mythologies have become timeless expectations that many people now have of the West, and, as Richard Slotkin explains in his progressive development of a cultural myth, the archetypes that begin as tall tales

become most difficult to recognize and, consequently, irksome, when they seep into the language as dead metaphors that are no longer recognized as such. Language is what shapes how one thinks, and when one is no longer able to pinpoint the places where the West's glorified past has ground itself into subconscious assumptions, both as a region and as a nation, the West's past does – as Stegner argues – become unusable, and the task of a literary writer in search of a historical foundation becomes seemingly insurmountable.

Stegner's fascination with Mormons, as is evidenced in his two histories *Mormon Country* (1942) and *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964), stems from a certain childhood nostalgia for the community that accepted him and allowed him to participate in its rituals even though he never became a believer, an appreciation of the Mormons' strong sense of history and community, and a fascination for a society that in many ways managed to sidestep the western archetypes that have otherwise come to define the region. Stegner's self-admitted nostalgia for the Salt Lake City area and its Mormon inhabitants lends an unabashed flavor of admiration to both his histories, and these two books, alongside Stegner's brief chapters on Catholicism and Judaism in *One Nation* and brief passages in *DISCOVERY!* on eastern religions, are the only places in his oeuvre that address religion. The Mormons, overall, are a very un-American group, Stegner tells Richard Etulain: "People do what they're told, most un-American really, and it's stimulating to see what that sort of society can

do under certain circumstances, particularly under the circumstances of catastrophe or disaster” (*Conversations* 104). In place of a Frederick Jackson Turner-influenced pioneer credo of nationalism, democracy, and individualism, Mormons would insert sectionalism, theocracy, and community, Stegner continues (104). But despite the obvious differences between a disciplined Mormon society and the often lawless Wild West, Stegner recognizes parallels between the dream of the Big Rock Candy Mountain and the Mormon dream of a New Jerusalem. As I discussed in the Introduction in light of Sacvan Bercovitch’s theories of the Puritan-driven search for a New Jerusalem, Stegner compares the motivations of Bo Mason in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* to endlessly seek his own personal Big Rock Candy Mountain and the faith in a new God-given homeland that inspires the Mormon pioneers (*Conversations* 114-115).

In the pages of *Mormon Country*, one sees the beginnings of Stegner’s attempts to locate that “middle ground” between fiction and history, as well as a discussion of the Mormon people as an almost myth-less society. Stegner writes most of *Mormon Country* with a casual reporterly narrative voice, detailing the history and flavor of the society from their arrival in Utah through the mid-twentieth century. Stegner himself occasionally enters the narrative as he offers details of personal travels through the area, but mostly the book is told in an omniscient third-person historical voice. Consider the beginning of the second chapter, with its casual Stegner-esque parenthetical:

Wherever you go in the Mormon country, whether through the irrigated Snake River Plains of eastern and southern Idaho, the infrequent oases among the Great Basin ranges of Nevada, the desert springs and flash-flood river bottoms of northern and central Arizona, or the mountain valleys of Utah, western Wyoming and western Colorado, you see the characteristic marks of Mormon settlement: the typical, intensively-cultivated fields of alfalfa and sugar beets and Bermuda onions and celery, the orchards of cherry and apple and peach and apricot (and it is not local pride which says that there is no better fruit grown anywhere), the irrigation ditches, the solid houses, the wide-streeted, sleepy green towns. (21)

Although some might consider such an intimate tone risky for a historical nonfiction account, what is even more surprising is that the preceding chapter reads like a novel: “Just as the sun slipped down over the Pavant – Sigurd mountain to her – the girl came out and sat down on the porch steps. It was May. The lilacs, though almost over, filled the air under the great cottonwoods with scent, and the snowballs were out at the corner of the house,” the book begins (3). Although the bulk of *Mormon Country* is told in the first casual historical voice, one is occasionally surprised with sections that begin, for example, “Archie Walters was a carpenter from Sheffield” (74), as Stegner clearly attempts to allow individuals to tell the tale at hand. *Mormon Country* is classified as a history, but Stegner was trying to accomplish something more than mere reportage as he began his lifelong search for what he believed was a more humanly accurate sense of place, of belonging, of personal history.

Midway through the book, in a chapter titled “Myth and Legend,” Stegner suggests that while the Mormons “are a singing people, and always have been,”

their music centered on spiritual hymns; they do not carry in their history the myth-making ballads present elsewhere in the pioneer West, particularly in mining camps and railroad towns. In addition, the only Mormon newspaper, *The Deseret News*, is a solemn, orthodox publication that never bows to the humor, storytelling, or exaggerated gossip of newspapers and magazines elsewhere in the mid-nineteenth century West; therefore, the Mormon people also did not have the same yellow journalism in place to help kick-start the fables and assumptions that later became western archetypes, Stegner writes: “No balladry, no gentlemen of the press. It is hardly the West at all” (143). Richard Slotkin, who argues in *Regeneration through Violence* that myths typically begin as true stories that become exaggerated over time, repeated – as Stegner suggests – as ballads or in somewhat tawdry publications or simply by word of mouth until they become embedded in the language and culture of a society, would agree with Stegner’s contention that the Mormons managed to create an exceptionally gossip-free culture in which myths simply were not allowed to perpetuate. Mormon Country was a highly disciplined, organized, and censored society, and Stegner is not suggesting that this lack of myth is necessarily appealing. For Stegner, it is merely a point of interest and a further example of how Mormons managed to successfully set themselves apart from the rest of the Old West.

In *The Gathering of Zion*, published twenty-two years after *Mormon Country*, however, Stegner revises this conclusion, particularly with regard to the

Mormon pioneers. In a chapter aptly titled “The Man That Ate the Pack Saddle,” Stegner tells the tale of Daniel W. Jones, a Mormon pioneer who becomes trapped after volunteering to help rescue handcart emigrants caught by snowstorms in the mountain passes: “The story of the Mormon Trail is as pat with crises as a horse opera; especially in 1856, ordeal along that thoroughfare was not climactic but serial” (260). When Stegner describes Jones as he later protects a Mormon fort from a bullying group in search of provisions, Stegner parodies a Western movie:

This whole scene goes like pure horse opera, and just possibly is. The apostate bully shouts his demand at the cabin, the camera pans first over his hard-faced henchment and then over the faces of the defenders sweating behind their barricades. Then the door opens and the hero walks out alone into the open yard, in as orthodox a walk-down as ever Gary Cooper made. ... There is a moment of quiet while the mouth tastes metal and the held breath may let go any minute to the sound of gunfire. At the breaking end of that silence the hero says he wants to say one thing. His voice, not loud, carries even to the rear rank of horsemen, but his words are addressed to Tom Williams. (171)

Although Stegner does not address in his introduction to *The Gathering of Zion* or elsewhere why his understanding of Mormon mythology has changed, one can assume that his new conclusions are based both on further research and a new emphasis in *The Gathering of Zion* on the Mormon Trail rather than the broader look at Mormon history found in *Mormon Country*. As he writes in his introduction to *The Gathering of Zion*, “Having endured, and crossed to safety, they began at once to transform their experience into myth” (3). Stegner recognizes in *The Gathering of Zion*, in ways that he does not in *Mormon*

Country, the methods by which this highly patriarchal and ordered society selects its histories. Two decades later, then, the Mormon culture has become for Stegner not a myth-laden society as his home region, but a society that has interestingly – and perhaps dangerously – learned to define and control its own myths. Again, although he never becomes a part of it, Stegner still admires the enduring faith and discipline of the Mormon world: “Where Oregon emigrants and argonauts bound for the gold fields lost practically all their social cohesion en route, the Mormons moved like the Host of Israel they thought themselves. Far from loosening their social organization, the trail perfected it” (6).

As for the “middle ground” Stegner begins to explore in *Mormon Country*, I believe he presents a more mature version of it in *The Gathering of Zion*, where the transitions are less jolting and the narrative voice is more consistently uniform. Stegner admittedly takes generous liberties with his historical interpretations in *The Gathering of Zion*, offering fictionalized scenes, complete with dialogue, involving Mormon founder Joseph Smith and his followers, for example, without the space breaks and narrative shifts in his previous Mormon novel that make it easier to recognize whether Stegner is presenting fact or fiction. This smoother blending of genres can be arguably misleading, particularly when a reader is unable to detect Stegner’s admiration of the Mormon people overshadowing his tale, but it is still interesting to note the progression from Stegner’s puzzle-piece approach in *Mormon Country* to his smooth-surfaced

narrative in *The Gathering of Zion*. In his introduction to the latter novel, Stegner writes that he is attempting to follow historian George Bancroft's rule of narrative history plus judgment: "Present a man in his own terms and judge him in yours" (13). Stegner employs this approach consistently in his nonfiction works, and it is one means by which Stegner attempts to dismantle western myths.

In Stegner's two biographies, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (1954) and *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto* (1974), Bancroft's influence is evident again as Stegner tries to locate his middle ground with respect to the subjects of his biographies. As biographies can be, these two in many ways are as revealing about their author as they are about their subjects: In the Powell biography, Stegner's suspicion of western mythologies begin to emerge, as well as his realizations of the necessity of resource conservation in the West. And in the DeVoto biography lie the beginnings of Stegner's concept of history, literature, and a combination of the two. Stegner admits in his interviews with Richard W. Etulain that his approach to history is a result of personal interest and involvement, rather than scholarly interest, which explains why his biographies can be read as equally revealing of Stegner himself: "I wouldn't have written Powell if I hadn't known the Southern Utah plateaus, and I wouldn't have written Benny DeVoto's biography unless I had known him. All the history and biography that I've done has been an offshoot of personal experiences and

personal acquaintances” (*Conversations* 166). As Charles E. Rankin describes in the introduction to his essay collection, evidenced here is Stegner’s middle ground between history and literature, triangulated with the personal experience of, in Powell’s case, growing up in Utah, and, in DeVoto’s case, sharing a lifelong professional relationship and friendship. In Stegner’s interviews with James R. Hepworth, he admits that such personal ties to his subjects invariably lead to a kind of “whitewashing”: “[Y]ou have to be honest without being unkind, I think, honest without being a muckraker” (72). Stegner’s version of biography calls for an exploration of his subject’s life and career, and although he says he does not intend to sidestep all “warts,” as he calls them, when minor incidents or characteristics seem unnecessarily gossipy in light of grander accomplishments, Stegner lets them slide. But he acknowledges that this kind of historical selection can be viewed as bordering on fiction: “There’s certainly a large component of invention that goes into any biography: if nothing else, selection, because simply by selection you begin to change the reality. ... I wouldn’t say there’s any invention of fact in *The Uneasy Chair*, but there’s certainly some invention in what you might call the storyline” (70).

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian has attracted an exceptional amount of political attention over the years, ever since Stegner first mailed a copy to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall in 1961 and it became tradition for all new secretaries of the interior to receive a copy of the book at the beginning of their

terms. As Stegner writes in his introduction to the biography, his interest in John Wesley Powell is grounded in Powell's geographical explorations and enlightened recognition of the West's aridity, rather than in his fame or personality. The biography, therefore, brings Powell quickly into adulthood and focuses primarily on his professional accomplishments:

I am interested in him in other ways [than personality]: As the personification of an ideal of public service that seems peculiarly a product of the American experience. As the source and mouthpiece of ideas three quarters of a century ahead of their possible fulfillment, yet rooted in that same American experience. As the father of government bureaus far-reaching in their own effects and influential in the models they provided for other and later government agencies. Above all, as a champion and an instrument of social understanding and social change. (vii)

Powell's interest in the West was not founded in unsubstantiated dreams, Stegner continues, but in the scientific pragmatism that was his training. Powell had a faith in science as truth, and he understood "the human habit of referring sense impressions to wrong causes and without verification," Stegner writes (viii). As Powell's career peaked in the 1870s and 1880s, the West's mythologies were forming, and yet Powell was able to look beyond those archetypes and form his own unique and intelligent conclusions; Stegner admires this feat openly throughout the biography, and in his later efforts to break through these same myths, I believe one can see Stegner's attempts to emulate the man he so admired. The romanticizing of the West that Powell battled included the geographical misconceptions that led to "acute political and economic and agricultural

blunders, to the sour failure of projects and lives, to the vast and avoidable waste of some resources and the monopolization of others, and to a long delay in the reconciling of institutions to realities,” Stegner writes (176). Powell fought such erroneous myths as only a scientist could: with factual geographical correctives in the maps and pictures he made and distributed. For Stegner, a war against literary and historical mythologies is far more difficult to substantiate and correct, but in Powell he unquestionably found the strength and determination to persevere. In *The Uneasy Chair*, Stegner’s admiration is both professional and personal, although tempered by an obvious difference in DeVoto’s and Stegner’s personalities. DeVoto, who was often an explosive, opinionated man, “had no gift for living small or living dull,” Stegner writes, which runs counter to his own preference for privacy and quiet (213-214). When DeVoto publishes *Mark Twain’s America* in 1932, for example, Stegner describes the book’s defiance of genre:

It was not literary criticism, nor was it biography, nor was it what Arthur Schlesinger suggested, the social history of Mark Twain. It was “an essay in the correction of ideas,” though he was not naïve enough to suppose that literary ideas were really susceptible to correction. ... The stance is absolutely characteristic, a stance he adopted at the beginning of his career and maintained to the end. Facts. The *ad hoc* approach. Suspicion of theories, of systems, of absolutes, of beautiful thinking and beautiful simplicities. (112)

Not only is DeVoto toying with genre, as Stegner does as well, but he is also casting doubt on “beautiful thinking and beautiful simplicities,” just as Stegner questions the simplistic archetypes that color his region. In terms of narrative

style, DeVoto opts for a “romantic history conceived in literary terms,” as in *The Year of Decision: 1846*, emphasizing the artistic nature of history that calls for an emotional response to the text, rather than mere comprehension (240). Such an expectation demands a literary sense of proportion and appropriate emphasis, and DeVoto confidently advised students and fellow writers to use fictional devices to play up select moments in history: “A historian, he said, should not stop at second simply because some taboo of his trade said that historians did not hit home runs. Go for the fences,” Stegner writes (240). As Stegner’s senior by twelve years and a boldly opinionated friend whose work Stegner followed attentively, DeVoto set the course for many of Stegner’s most ardent personal values: resource conservation, experimentation with genre, the importance of history, and, perhaps most importantly to Stegner’s later work, the questioning of simplistic western archetypes.

I believe Stegner’s nonfiction books *Wolf Willow* (1962) and *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969) rank as groundbreaking, both personally and professionally. In *Wolf Willow*, Stegner makes his most decisive effort at blurring genre, which certainly speaks to his attempts to step beyond blueprint-inspired dime store Westerns: “Since it uses both autobiography and reminiscence, as well as fiction, it’s a librarian’s nightmare. How do you catalogue it?” he jokes with Richard Etulain (*Conversations* 62). As he defends his approach to narrative history in the essay “On the Writing of History,” Stegner says that he wrote *Wolf*

Willow as a history, even though the book includes nearly a third reminiscence and more than a third fiction. Perhaps in today's literary language, *Wolf Willow* is most easily classified as "creative nonfiction": a combination of history, autobiography, and fiction that seeks the most effective use of narrative voice possible to portray the images and sensations of, in this case, Stegner's childhood home from 1914 to 1920 in southern Saskatchewan. As Stegner discusses in "On the Writing of History," historical narrative employs only one voice, that of the historian's, while fiction opens a world of possibilities (*Sound* 210); in other words, sometimes a writer can better avoid sentimentality or a too-narrow vision by working through fiction to incorporate a multitude of voices.

Stegner divides *Wolf Willow* into four sections – "The Question Mark in the Circle," "Preparation for a Civilization," "The Whitemud River Range," and "Town and Country" – that are each comprised of a number of short essays, most of which fuse autobiography with history. As Stegner presents the history and geography of frontier Saskatchewan, he also incorporates personal memories that help him to further explore the human side of the region. His most curious inclusions – the ones, presumably, that perplex librarians – are the novella "Genesis" and the short story "Carrion Spring," both of which fall under the book's third section, "The Whitemud River Range," alongside an opening essay titled "Specifications for a Hero" that denies the mythical cowboy image in its attempts to define the hero-types that Stegner and his childhood pals admired.

“Genesis” is the story of Rusty, a young red-headed Englishman who joins a late fall cattle roundup to experience the romance of cowboy life and instead finds himself caught in a dangerous blizzard with a group of vulgar and sometimes selfish men who must band together if they hope to survive. The story dismantles the western ideal of rugged individualism, suggesting instead that the true survivors of the West had to learn to cooperate if they intended to triumph over nature’s often brutal surprises. The short story “Carrion Spring” carries throughout the gruesome metaphorical stench of rotting carrion as a chinook wind begins to melt the Saskatchewan winter snows, uncovering the carcasses of cattle that did not survive the exceptionally cold winter of 1906 and 1907. Molly Henry is a young wife who has just endured her first Saskatchewan frontier winter: six months of mind-numbing isolation. When the chinook blows, Molly secretly hopes at the story’s beginning to pack up her husband Ray and their few belongings and move home to civilization in Montana. But her husband’s dreams ultimately convince her, and by the story’s end she is even prepared to take on debt to stay in this land that her husband hopes to settle. Little in “Carrion Spring” is picture-perfect or idealized, particularly with the continual reminder of the carrion stench, but somehow Molly and Ray’s optimism still transcends. Both “Genesis” and “Carrion Spring” attempt to dismantle western mythologies, while at the same time extending Stegner’s vision of a childhood home that he describes in his opening essay as “the place where the Plains, as an ecology, a native Indian

culture, and as a process of white settlement, came to their climax and their end”

(4).

For Stegner, Whitemud, Saskatchewan, grows to represent all that is both true and ill-defined of the frontier West:

From one point of view Whitemud is an object lesson in the naivete of the American hope of a new society. It emphasizes the predictability and repetitiousness of the frontier curve from hope to habit, from optimism to a country rut, from American Dream to Revolt against the Village – in Clarence King’s phrase, the pilgrimage from savagery through barbarism to vulgarity. That curve is possible anywhere in America, but nearly inevitable on the Plains, because on the Plains the iron inflexibilities of low rainfall, short growing season, monotonous landscape, and wide extremes of temperature limit the number of people who can settle and the prosperity and contentment of the ones who manage to stick. (287)

Stegner even describes his boyhood cronies, himself included, as a curious stand-off between the self-reliant individualism of “junior Boones and Bumppos” who carried guns and came and went as they pleased, and the imposed proprieties of their mothers and Sunday school that kept them somewhat in line (292-293).

Overall *Wolf Willow* is the portrait of a frontier region: a place and a moment defined by its people and its landscape; and as one looks at the portrait, Stegner works hard to prevent assumptions, instead painting afresh and hoping – as he continually does – that this might be one way to downplay the West’s legendary history in favor of a more usable past.

The Sound of Mountain Water is groundbreaking not for its experimentations with genre, as in *Wolf Willow*, but for Stegner’s forthright

opinions and definitive voice regarding such key issues as conservation, history, mythology, and literature. Many of these beliefs have been gestating in such earlier books as *Mormon Country*, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, *Wolf Willow*, and *The Gathering of Zion*, but here is where I believe Stegner finds the voice that continues through his many nonfiction publications to come. As Stegner writes in his introduction, he hopes in *The Sound of Mountain Water* to write a book that challenges how this nation thinks about the American West:

[T]his is not a volume of conservation essays or literary essays, though it contains some of both. It is a book of confrontations (not in the contemporary sense!) with the West, a series of responses and trial syntheses. The West being what it is, a Westerner trying to examine his life has trouble finding himself in any formed or coherent society (again Utah is an exception). His confrontations are therefore likely to be with landscape, which seems to define the West and its meaning better than any of its forming cultures, or with himself in the context of that landscape. (11)

In *The Sound of Mountain Water*, Stegner employs a variety of literary approaches, from factual geographical descriptions to journalistic editorial to a diary-like memory of a road trip, in order to pull together the varied voices needed to best paint the portrait he intends of a sometimes glorious but grossly mislabeled American West.

In “At Home in the Fields of the Lord,” Stegner faces point-blank his longing for a personal sense of history:

I have always envied people with a hometown. They always seem to have an attic, and in the attic albums of pictures, spellers used in the third grade, go-carts and Irish mails with the scars of young heels and teeth on them. In the houses of these fortunate ones there

is always some casual friend of thirty or forty years' standing, someone who grew up next door, some childhood sweetheart, some inseparable companion from primary days. ... None of these forms of moss clings to a rolling stone, and I was born rolling. If I met a playmate of forty years ago, we would not recognize each other even as names. (157-158)

As he continues to debunk the western myth of idealized rootlessness, Stegner goes on to describe Salt Lake City both as a childhood home and as a contemporary city – and as a place that influenced greatly who he became as a writer and a westerner. In “On the Writing of History” a few essays later, Stegner addresses head-on the skepticism others have expressed of his attempts to locate a middle ground between fiction, history, and personal experience – evidence of his continued efforts to rewrite the erroneous dime novel blueprint: “It is my impression that too many trained professionals consider narrative history, history rendered as story, to be something faintly disreputable, the proper playground of lady novelists” (202). And although Stegner admits that “any method has its dangers,” he argues vehemently that while a “good” history book holds to the intellectually rigorous methods set forth by generations of historians, a “great” history book is one that tells a story that “dramatizes a power struggle in terms of the men who waged it” (204, 203). “To imagine historiography without this possibility,” Stegner continues, “is like imagining Christ without His parables, or Abraham Lincoln without his anecdotes” (205). The essays collected in *The Sound of Mountain Water* are referenced more frequently in critical discussions of Stegner than any of his other essays, a sure sign that here is where Stegner has

discovered his own critical voice regarding the American West, and I believe it is important to note, too, that these opinions resonate not just in the essays and historical pieces to follow but in Stegner's subsequent fiction as well.

Stegner's remaining four nonfiction works – *American Places* (1981), *One Way to Spell Man: Essays with a Western Bias* (1982), *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (1992), and *Marking the Sparrow's Fall: Wallace Stegner's American West* (1998), the last of which was published posthumously by his son Page – form what I would consider his definitive myth-busting collection. In these books, as in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, Stegner writes about the American West in terms of specific geography, regional history, personal memories, dangerous mythologies, and, ultimately, the proactive definitions and actions that he believes must be recognized next. By this point in his career, Stegner has located his voice as a westerner, a cultural critic, and a somewhat reluctant politician, and excerpts from many of these collected essays have found their way into decidedly nonliterary venues such as *Outdoor* magazine – a tribute, surely, to Stegner's regional and national influence.

Written together with his son Page and incorporating the photography of Eliot Porter, *American Places* is a now-typical Stegner blending of history, personal narrative, and – in this case – stunning photography of the nation's natural wonders. In their final chapter, Wallace and Page Stegner argue that over the centuries the American dream has located itself in the West, partly out of a

“centuries-old habit of dreaming westward” and partly for the threefold reasons of (1) the West’s sheer youthfulness; (2) the region’s open spaces, which create the illusion that more usable land is available than the West’s aridity truly allows; and (3) the national habit of assuming that federal land is free for all to use, including its overuse and abuse (213). The idealism of the West, therefore, is not merely a regional misconception but a way of thinking that affects the United States as a whole, the Stegners argue, and consequently all Americans – westerners and nonwesterners alike – should be concerned about vanishing landscapes and undue mythologies. *American Places* is the first time Stegner so clearly pulls western archetypes into a national discussion, which I believe is a strategic move that wisely demands a wider recognition of the American West as a contemporary and frequently cosmopolitan region rather than the glorified and nostalgic tales of yesteryear.

One Way to Spell Man collects essays published in a variety of major periodicals in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The title essay, “One Way to Spell Man,” is a defense of art as a means for seeking truth. The trick of artistry, Stegner writes, is to use sensory images to create a new world where experiences are encountered afresh by the reader, and part of the miraculous and mysterious wonder of art lies in that complex act of creation:

It would be the wildest folly to think of reducing art to the laws and the orderliness that are the ideal and monumental strength of science. Only a Philistine would even attempt to do that. For art reduced to law and order is only cliché; and it cannot be predicted,

because it cannot be born until it *is* born. Creation, says Ezra Pound, is what has not yet found its way into language – into any language. (16-17)

Although Stegner is not writing specifically about literature or genres here, I believe there are parallels to previous discussions of the literary western versus the dime store Western novel: The former is an act of unpredictable creation, whereas the latter is a non-artistic reduction to mere order and formula.

The second part of *One Way to Spell Man* looks at defining the West both regionally and in terms of its literature. What I believe is interesting to note is a shift in Stegner's focus since the publication of *American Places* from a solely regional discussion to a look at how the development and mythologies of the American West resonate back on the ideologies of the nation as a whole. With his increasing confidence as a cultural critic has come a realization that not only are his lifelong explorations of personal history and regional definition valid, but it is plausible to argue that the heart of the nation's optimism lies in the American West, where the region's erroneous mythologies then become dangerously limiting not just for those west of the hundredth meridian but for all Americans.

Although I have not seen it presented as such, I believe *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* essentially is a chronological sequel to *One Way to Spell Man*, with essays that were published in major periodicals during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Here Stegner's seemingly disparate interests as teacher, writer, conservationist, historian, and, overall, myth-buster have

distilled over the years until they are no longer so easily separated. He now slips easily from a discussion of western archetypes to a more personal mention of his father's myth-influenced sensibilities to, ultimately, a call for a proactive stance on restoring the West's natural resources. Although Stegner still employs the *Wolf Willow*-inspired experiments with genre, such as a short story sandwiched between a personal memory and a literary discussion of John Steinbeck's short stories, the overall result is more successfully the single unit that Stegner had hoped to achieve with *Wolf Willow* – and that is perhaps best evidenced by the ease with which Stegner now melds these issues in his introductions and even in individual essays.

In "Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning," Stegner writes in the past tense, rather than the present tense, about his writerly frustrations as a typed regional writer: "We rode under the shadow of the big hat, but as they used to say of Ronald Reagan, we were big hat, no cows. Nothing could convince them in New York or Massachusetts that there was anything of literary interest in the West except cowboys" (136). But Stegner's optimism clearly has grown, as is evident in his glowing list of successful contemporary western writers; what is needed now, Stegner writes, is a perceptive and nationally influential critic who can read western writing "in the spirit of those who wrote it":

Such critics will come. I can remember when every new book by William Faulkner – and these included all five of his greatest – was greeted with incredulous laughter and ribald contempt by the smart reviewers in New York. But as Faulkner

himself might have said, they mought of kilt him but they didn't whup him. All it took to establish his quality as a writer fit to speak to the world was the books themselves, a little time for his peculiar variety of genius to sink in, some applause from abroad, especially France, and one perceptive and authoritative critic, Malcolm Cowley.

While we await the day for that critic to arrive, we can settle back and enjoy without apology the books that western writers are bringing us. (141-142)

And I believe that it is thanks to Stegner's myth-dismantling efforts that the West can enjoy, rather than agonize over, such a wait.

Page Stegner writes in the preface to *Marking the Sparrow's Fall* that he accepted editorship of his father's posthumous essay collection in part as an extension of the collaborative project the two began with *American Places*. After his years of battling an idealized western optimism, it is fascinating to hear Stegner in "The Twilight of Self-Reliance: Frontier Values and Contemporary America" offering a kind of emotional boosterism to what he sees as downtrodden younger generations:

These days, young people do not stride into their future with the confidence their grandparents knew. Over and over, in recent years, I have heard the cold undertone of doubt and uncertainty when I talk with college students. The American Dream has suffered distortion and attrition; for many, it is a dream glumly awakened from. (206)

Written in 1980, the essay argues that the western mythical figures of Daniel Boone and others do indeed endure, although they have become more "wistful" over the years. In the end, Stegner calls for a renewed vision of America: "not as Perfection, not as Heaven on Earth, not as New Jerusalem, but as flawed glory and

exhilarating task” (212). Although he does not state it overtly, I believe Stegner’s discussion suggests in the despair and discouragement of younger generations a kind of hope for the fertile ground necessary to replant the historical and cultural definitions that would aid in an improved understanding of what the United States once was as a nation and as a diverse people and, most importantly, what it has the potential to become.

Chapter 4

Stegner's Fiction -- *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*

Wallace Stegner's most epic and ambitious novels undoubtedly are *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943) and *Angle of Repose* (1971). Stegner himself admits that despite their vastly different characters, settings, and narrative structures, the two tell a remarkably similar story – something that Stegner says he did not notice until after completing *Angle of Repose*. And while they are, I believe, Stegner's two best novels, it is also important to note the progression that the two novels demonstrate as Stegner matures from an admittedly structurally disjointed first writing of his mostly autobiographical look at the American West in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* to his more focused Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angle of Repose* nearly thirty years later. The progression is most interesting in terms of Stegner's own self-awareness as a literary western writer, as an amateur historian, and as a vehement fighter of hollow western archetypes; each role is decidedly present in the first novel, and more subtle and consequently more poignant in the second. In both *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*, Stegner seeks his "middle ground" uniting fiction, history, and memoir, and both novels demonstrate clear recognition and dismantling of the western myths that trouble Stegner throughout his career.

In his 1943 review of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in *Saturday Review*,

American literature scholar Howard Mumford Jones describes the novel as “a vast, living, untidy book” (Robinson, *Wallace* 116). In discussing the novel, Stegner critics such as Jackson J. Benson and Richard W. Etulain frequently note Jones’s review and its praise of “the living force of the narrative” (Robinson, *Wallace* 116). While many critics describe *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* as stylistically immature and unfocused, Jones points to the novel’s western spaciousness and the reader’s impression “that a whole world has arisen out of nowhere around him” (Robinson, *Wallace* 116). In his Stegner biography, Benson writes that many Stegner readers still consider *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* his best novel: “It does have a vitality, a sense of authenticity that he would never surpass in his later work, and he deals with certain aspects of the Western experience – its mobility, its gambling spirit of optimism, its boom-and-bust mentality, its rugged individualism as opposed to family obligations – that no one has treated with more power and conviction” (129). In her article “*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*: Trial and Culmination,” Kerry Ahearn describes the novel as “the product of conflicting impulses”: “it is a narrative of parts not unified by technique” (21). Although she argues that *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* “misses being a really great work” because of its stylistic deficiencies, Ahearn defends Stegner’s preference to focus his creative energies on narrative techniques other than stylistic experimentation in light of what she considers over-extended modernist trends: “The hallmark of literature in the first

half of our century has been stylistic innovation as a means of rendering the complexities of human psychology,” Ahearn writes, and such “stylistic one-upmanship” has been greatly overrated by critics who quickly dismiss such a seemingly old-fashioned affinity for realism as Stegner’s.

As for Stegner himself, in his 1970s interviews with Etulain, he calls *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* a “piecemeal book”: “I would have been better off, I suppose, if I had put even more time on *Big Rock Candy Mountain*” (*Conversations* 46). Stegner explains that although *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* marked a clear break in his career from the novella and short story form to a much longer novel, he was not consciously trying to produce a magnum opus; he was just “writing what came naturally” (46). And while Stegner says that at the time he was “not a very skilled writer” and, consequently, the novel essentially is an episodic “nonstructure,” he believes much of the novel’s meaning lies in a readerly “growth of understanding ... [a growth] *into* understanding” that justifies both the vastness of the novel and the often criticized authorial commentary at the end (52, 57):

I had God’s plenty of material for that book. I think I liked Howard [Jones’] word “overflowing,” because it did overflow on me. He didn’t mind that and neither did I. I winced a little bit at the word “untidy,” because though I thought it was sometimes clumsy, I didn’t think it was untidy. I thought I had cleaned up the messes at the edges. I like that word “vast” too; that doesn’t bother me. It is a big book and ought to give a sense of a great profusion of life. (59)

When he reread proofs of the novel before it was reissued by the Franklin Library

in a series of signed leather editions, Stegner tells Etulain that he found the book troubling at times: “It felt clumsy to me, a little too obvious, a little too direct, a little too straightforward, too nineteenth-century” (52).

In *Angle of Repose*, on the other hand, Stegner says he makes use of many of the “technical options of the modern novel” – something he neglected to do in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Consequently, Stegner concludes, *Angle of Repose* ranks technically “many, many cuts above *Big Rock Candy Mountain*” (52). I believe the only structural problem with *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* lies in its editing: It is not a seamless novel, unfortunately; indeed, if one looks closely enough, one can see each seam and even the places where Stegner removed scraps of material or added a patch or two. As Stegner describes to Etulain, he began the novel with his most fictionalized and non-autobiographical section – his parents’ early years in North Dakota – and the narrative pace and voice are vastly different from, for example, the time spent on Bruce Mason’s post-high school years when Stegner’s manuscript had already reached some eight hundred-odd pages and he needed to move things along more expediently. Overall the novel is hugely ambitious, and its broad and at times messy scope reflect wonderfully the tenor of a newly closed frontier that was rife with freshly seeded archetypes. And even with the structural deficiencies in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, one can see the beginnings of Stegner’s efforts to break through such hollow western mythologies as the ideals of rootlessness, blind optimism,

and rugged individualism.

- ***The Big Rock Candy Mountain***

The Big Rock Candy Mountain is the epic-size tale of the Mason family: Bo, Elsa, and their sons Chet and Bruce. Although Stegner fictionalizes individual scenes and the introductory chapters when Bo and Elsa first meet, the majority of the novel is autobiographical, mirroring his childhood experiences in the early 1900s as he, too, grew up with a domineering, fortune-seeking father; a kind, nesting mother; and an athletic and popular older brother who dies in early adulthood from a sudden illness. The novel is indeed episodic, shifting from scene to scene along a journey motif as the Mason family follows Bo's career whims from North Dakota and Minnesota to Washington state in the first three chapters, to Saskatchewan, Canada, in chapters four and five, to Great Falls, Montana, and Salt Lake City, Utah, in chapters six and seven, and finally to Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, and Lake Tahoe in chapters eight, nine, and ten. The narrative viewpoint changes frequently, with Elsa's voice taking precedence in the first three chapters, Bruce's voice in chapters four and five, Bo's and Chet's voices in chapters six and seven, and finally Bruce's voice again – accompanied by a heavy amount of reflection and editorial commentary – in chapters eight, nine, and ten.

The novel opens with a young Elsa battling motion sickness as she travels

by train from her father's home in Minnesota to her uncle's place in the small frontier town of Hardanger, North Dakota, in 1905. Elsa's mother has died recently, and her father and best friend, Sarah, have married; Elsa, who feels betrayed by all involved, including her deceased mother, decides to flee to the West, where she hopes to make a fresh start for herself. She meets Bo almost immediately when she arrives much too early in the morning in the deserted streets of Hardanger, and although she is mildly attracted by his swarthy good looks, already something slick and arrogant in the way Bo carries himself makes her suspicious:

She was standing on the sidewalk, clasp and unclasp her fingers to restore the circulation after the weight of the telescope, when a young man came out of the pool hall. He was tall, slim, but heavy in the shoulders. His black hair was parted in the middle and pomaded flat over a forehead dark as an Indian's from the sun. His sleeves were rolled up to expose powerful arms, thick in the wrists and roundly muscled.

"Hello!" he said, staring at her. Elsa flushed. The man had a merry and speculative glint in his eye; his stare bothered her as the smirk of the man at the station in Fargo had. (5)

Their courtship progresses quickly, though, as Elsa finds herself entranced by Bo's confidence and charm, and, despite a persistent doubt about his character that rests almost subconsciously in the deepest recesses of her thought, Elsa marries him. When they first meet, Bo is running an illegal saloon disguised as a bowling alley, and they later buy the Hardanger hotel and fight to keep it afloat for five years before Bo gets the itch to move on. Next, with their two young boys in tow, they live in a makeshift tent in Washington state as Bo tries to get a café up

and running. Here Stegner offers evidence of Bo's cruel and abusive side as his business frustrations get the best of him and he ultimately turns his anger on his family – particularly Bruce, his youngest and disappointingly sickly, clingy son. When three-year-old Bruce continually refuses to walk all the way out to the outhouse alone in the dark and one night defecates along the path instead of braving the short journey away from the tent, Bo goes into a fury and presses Bruce's face into his own feces until Elsa is able to wrestle the two apart and lock Bo out of the tent.

After the boys spend a brief spell in a Seattle orphanage while Elsa tries to support them and the three head home to Minnesota despite Elsa's anxiety about facing her disapproving family, Bo woos Elsa with apologies and promises and the family moves to a homestead in Saskatchewan. Here, just outside of the small frontier town of Whitemud, is a taste of the final frontier, and until Bo declares the family wheat farm a failure and they move south to Montana, Bruce and Chet seem to enjoy this rough, country boy life. Their stay in Montana is brief as Bo begins to learn the ways of rum-running across the Canadian border and a run-in with thieves one night convinces him to move on yet again. When the family arrives in Salt Lake City, Chet and Bruce in particular are taken with the close community of the Mormons, and although they never adopt the faith, for the first time they feel at home. Both Chet and Bo narrate these chapters, offering a first true sense of Bo's longings, guilt, and frustrations, and of Chet's anger and denial

about his father's choices in life.

The novel progresses quickly in its final chapters: Bruce moves to Minneapolis to attend law school, Chet marries young and then dies suddenly after a brief bout with pneumonia, and Bo and Elsa decide to build a dream home in Lake Tahoe as Bo steps into the new world of casino management and high-stakes gambling. When Elsa dies slowly of breast cancer and Bruce must care for her in his mostly absent father's stead, the scenes are bitter and painful as emotions rise, raw and untapped, to the surface. When Bo, not knowing what else to say in his grief over his dying wife, complains of a boil on his back, Bruce is so overcome with childhood anger that he cannot see the nature of his parents' relationship. Bruce sees only the injustice of a man who has dragged his wife across the West for decades, never allowing her the small luxury of a stable home or new clothes; he cannot understand that, however unjust or difficult, Elsa has chosen the life she leads and may even harbor a love for this man she caretakes with her steadfast and quiet manner:

[Bo] stared at her with whipped, bewildered eyes, rolled his shoulders, winced. "I've got a damn boil coming on my back," he said. "Every time I move it half kills me."

"Oh dear!" she said. Her instant sympathy, the spectacle of her lying there in the bed she would die in, crucified by unbearable pain every few hours, and wasting sympathy on a great booby's boil made Bruce so furious he couldn't stay in the room. When his mother called him to fetch iodine and a bandage he brought them sullenly, looking sideways at his father's milk-white body stripped to the waist, the angry red swelling between his shoulder blades, and his mother propped on one weak arm, all her attention and strength focused on painting and dressing the boil. He couldn't

stand it. He escaped again. (491)

After Elsa's death, Bruce returns to law school and Bo ends up destitute in a residential hotel in Lake Tahoe, betting what little he has on a doomed Nevada mine. When the Della Mine is a bust, Bo's loneliness and frustration get the best of him and in a scandalous suicide-murder, he fatally shoots a woman in the hotel with whom he had had sexual relations and, presumably, hopes for the future, before killing himself as well. Bruce returns to Lake Tahoe to collect his father's meager belongings and plan a funeral service, and the weight of his frustratingly rootless past confronts him head-on:

As he followed the handful of people out through the entrance into the sun of the court, he could feel no grief for his father, nor for this mother and brother whose graves were grassy beside the new raw hole at the cemetery. He could think only of the brightness of the sun, an excessive sparkling brightness, as if there were some meaning in it, or a blessing, and he saw the sweep of the spring-green slopes up to the worn peaks above Dry Canyon. His past was upon him, the feeling he had had two or three times that he bore his whole family's history in his own mind, and he remembered the time when he had gone with his mother and father on a picnic to the Bearpaw Mountains, the wonder and delight of his childhood, and the shadow behind it of the things that his mind had caught from infancy, from other times, from some dim remoteness that gave up its meaning slowly and incompletely. (562-563)

For Bruce, this so-easily glorified childhood of chasing closing frontiers and meandering adventurously across what remained of the Old West carried an uneasy sense of human grappling left unresolved, and abuses committed and too easily dismissed.

Most critical discussions of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* focus at least in part on the novel's structure – or lack of structure – and those that venture into more thematic analyses stop surprisingly short, I believe, of delving into what Stegner is truly uncovering in his lifelong efforts to dismantle western mythologies. In Merrill and Lorene Lewis' brief 1972 biography of Wallace Stegner, for example, they discuss the novel's repeated themes of youthful rebellion: from Elsa's flight to her uncle's home after her father decides to marry her best friend and Bo's flight from an abusive father, to Chet's sudden elopement and Bruce's escape to law school (15). The Lewises end their discussion there, however, without considering the roles that might be played in such escapism by the western mythologies of emancipation, mobility, self-reliance, and enduring optimism. In Ahearn's 1975 article, she describes *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* as a novel of victims: "*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is dominated by an eagerness to show blame again and again; it is a son's novel, an attack on paternal blindness" (15). Bo Mason is too blind and faulted, Elsa is too innocent, and Bruce is too angry and victimized, Ahearn argues. And while she suggests early in her argument that Stegner is attempting to show "the falseness of the candy mountain idea (the 'idea of the West') and the deprivation that results from following it," with Bruce and Elsa continually falling victim to Bo's rootlessness (14), Ahearn's discussion becomes an analysis of character psychology and problematic narrative structure rather than Stegner's conscious treatment of the

myths at hand.

In their 1977 biography of Stegner, Forrest and Margaret Robinson discuss death – Elsa’s disease and demise, in particular – as a key element in Stegner’s view of the human condition: “Her disease symbolizes all that threatens order, coherence, personal identity, a sense of place and security in space and time” (114). And yet I believe their argument can be carried a step further by considering death and disease in light of a glorified West where a saloon brawl frequently ends in the single smash of a liquor bottle over a victim’s head, knocking him quickly and cleanly senseless, rather than the more likely messiness of shattered glass, splattered blood, and a victim who is quite possibly maimed and in need of countless hours of rehabilitation therapy and plastic surgery, if he survives. In Elsa’s demise, therefore, lies the truth of human death: Not only is it inevitable, but it is often slow, painful, and horribly undignified. In Forrest G. Robinson’s 1982 article “Wallace Stegner’s Family Saga: From *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* to *Recapitulation*,” he suggests that the anger and distrust between Bo and Bruce Mason arise from a kind of sexual tension. Bruce’s intense and unrequited love for his mother falls under the shadow of a father “whose erotic energy expresses itself directly and with unmistakable confidence and authority,” Robinson writes (106-107). And while Robinson further generalizes to suggest that much of Stegner’s work includes male protagonists who “bridle at domestic intimacy and reap little save guilt and frustration from such children as

they produce,” he neglects to carry the argument further to incorporate a discussion of the male cowboy hero, the myth of rugged individualism, and the ways that Stegner purposefully presents protagonists who fail to fulfill a glorified vision of individuality paired happily with eventual domesticity.

In his 1973 article “Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence,” Robert Canzoneri argues that although moments in Stegner’s work may be read in terms of myth, it is dangerous to take such readings too far. “[Stegner] does not use myth in his fiction beyond occasional allusion or as it may be involved in a character’s analysis of a situation,” Canzoneri writes, and he then proceeds to list what he calls “self-evident truths” regarding myths: Myth cannot take precedence over reality, he argues, and, artistically speaking, relying on the formula of myth carries “less virtue” than relying on the details of life itself (802). Perhaps one should grant Canzoneri the thirty years of discussion regarding mythology that has occurred since his article was published, but even so his limited view of myth in Stegner’s work is troubling. Canzoneri clearly sees western mythologies as either driving or not driving Stegner’s fiction; he passes entirely over the possibility that Stegner might at times be the one in control. My argument, on the other hand, is that Stegner indeed is the first western literary writer to take conscious and consistent control over the erroneous archetypes of his region, and – although he is not always entirely successful in his endeavor – I believe, unlike Canzoneri, that mythology plays an enormous underlying role in Stegner’s fiction as he works to

break down what he sees as persistently hollow definitions of the West. In an effort to make a discussion of the archetypes tackled in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* more approachable, I have condensed the Stegner-inspired myths I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 down to three key categories: (1) rootlessness, (2) blind optimism, and (3) rugged individualism.

Rootlessness is a broad archetype that appears repeatedly in Stegner's work – both fiction and nonfiction – and encompasses such sister archetypes as mobility and a sense of unrestricted freedom to go where one pleases. As with most myths, rootlessness is initially grounded in truth, as many westward pioneers in the mid-nineteenth century left behind family and livelihoods in search of something new. And when the search for a new home took several attempts, as is the case with the Mason family, a sense of place, or rootedness – particularly one that has its foundations in the formative years of childhood – can be difficult to come by. In her 1971 article “*The Big Rock Candy Mountain: No Roots – and No Frontier*,” Lois Phillips Hudson writes that despite the fact that Stegner ultimately found a home and established roots in California, he still spent a lifetime battling a less tangible but persistent sense of rootlessness. Because frontier history typically ranks as merely the history of a myth, Hudson continues, Stegner felt compelled to write his history, and therefore his personal truth, “from scratch” (5-6). Without the literal accuracy of such fiction as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Hudson writes, Stegner would have remained culturally rootless,

without ever becoming part of a viable literary tradition (6).

In his interviews with Etulain, Stegner discusses the significance of western women as representative of the western desire for roots (*Conversations* 48), and this symbolism is evidenced in Elsa's continual longing for something more solid and consistent. As she puts young Chet and Bruce to bed in their makeshift tent outside Redmond, Washington, for example, Elsa dreams of the community and companionship that would surely come from a more established sense of place:

After the light was out she opened the door and stood for a minute breathing the balsam air. It was very dark, the heavy trees a black impenetrable wall across the lighter cleared ground, their tops triangular blacknesses against the sky. She shivered. So lonely a place. The Klondike couldn't have been any lonelier. Ever since her marriage she had wanted for neighbors, in the hotel and on her father's farm and later in Seattle when they knew no one, but now for a moment the desire to have people nearby was like a muscular ache. If there were only a smoke in the daytime, a light at night.
(97)

Later in the novel, as Bruce considers that even their supposed rootedness in Salt Lake City was broken by the twelve houses they lived in during the first four years, and he laments his mother's missed opportunities for an attic to hide family history in or simply a way to settle down and be a part of something:

Long afterward, Bruce looked back on the life of his family with half-amused wonder at its rootlessness. The people who lived a lifetime in one place, cutting down the overgrown lilac hedge and substituting barberry, changing the shape of the lily-pool from square to round, digging out old bulbs and putting in new, watching their trees grow from saplings to giants that shaded the house, by contrast seemed to walk a dubious line between

contentment and boredom. What they had must be comfortable, pleasant, worn smooth by long use; they did not feel the edge of change.

It was not permanence alone that made what the Anglo-Saxons called home, he thought. It was continuity, the flux of fashion and decoration moving in and out again as minds and purses altered, but always within the framework of the established and recognizable outline. Even if the thing itself was paltry and dull, the history of the thing was not. (374)

This idealized sense of western freedom, then, in Stegner's eyes is hardly the happy-go-lucky, unrestricted mobility that allows one to cut all ties and simply roam contentedly. For some individuals this may work, Stegner suggests, as was the case with many mountain men in the early to mid-nineteenth century. But for most people, a sense of belonging, of place, and – as Stegner writes above – of continuity is essential to personal happiness.

As Bruce drives west from law school to his parents' home in Nevada for the summer, he ponders his own personal meaning of "home": "Where do I belong in this country?" he asks. "Where is home?" (458). Bruce runs through the names of the towns he has lived in, even the part of Minnesota where his mother's relatives live, and wishes that he could go home to a place where his twenty-two years gathered together in a series of related associations:

The whole nation had been footloose too long, Heaven had been just over the next range for too many generations. Why remain in one dull plot of earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there? The whole race was like the fir tree in the fairy-tale which wanted to be cut down and dressed up with lights and bangles and colored paper, and see the world and be a Christmas tree. (460)

As Benson writes in his biography, Bruce thinks of his family as a band of secretive outlaws, always on the run and never able to form proper relationships with neighbors or a broader community (136). When Bruce ponders his own sense of rootlessness at the close of the novel, Benson continues, his questions of “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” are clearly shared both by Stegner himself and by most Americans, who must find a place for themselves in society rather than assuming the pre-assigned role of a more established society: “These questions are even more relevant to the Westerner, who typically, like Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, Boone Caudill, or Tom Joad, is orphaned or cut off from family roots, from ordinary society, and constantly on the move” (137). In Stegner’s novel, I believe one sees the idealized sense of freedom often associated with such emancipated rootlessness transformed into a reality-based self-analysis that borders on wistfulness and, without some kind of eventual resolution, can result in great personal unhappiness.

The blind optimism of the West that is often associated with a gambling spirit, a boom/bust mentality, and the meliorism mythically guaranteed by a sense of unlimited opportunities drives the Mason family as well. Bo Mason’s dream of the Big Rock Candy Mountain is first evidenced in the arrival of Pinky Jordan at their hotel in Hardanger, North Dakota. When Pinky prepares to pay for his whiskeys, he pours gold dust into his palm and asks whether Bo has a gold scale. Bo, who has found himself stuck in the hotel for years, unable to make the

business into the proverbial gold mine he had hoped, is awakened by Pinky's talk of the Klondike in Alaska (81-82). For the first time, Elsa admits the extent of her husband's wanderlust:

He was born with the itch in his bones, Elsa knew. He was always telling stories of men who had gone over the hills to some new place and found a land of Canaan, made their pile, got to be big men in the communities they fathered. But the Canaans toward which Bo's feet had turned had not lived up to their promise. People had been before him. The cream, he said, was gone. He should have lived a hundred years earlier. (83)

Soon after, Bo sets out for the Klondike, although his plans are foiled when the boys fall ill and Bo instead buys a small café in Richmond, Washington.

Each subsequent move to a new town or a new home is inspired by Bo's dreams of a personal candy mountain, as when he returns to the homestead in Saskatchewan with a new car, a gold watch for Elsa, and dreams of moving down to Montana to establish himself as a soon-to-be-wealthy rum-runner:

"We've been stuck in this backwater too long," he said. "You're going back where there are lawns and trees and cement sidewalks and automobiles that make that one out there look like a donkey cart. You're going to have a fur coat and nice clothes – and you aren't going to make them yourself, either. The kids are going to a high school and I'm smoking nothing but two-for-a-quarter cigars, starting now. We've been chasing pipedreams too long. This is the time we make it go." (328)

Elsa listens to her husband's excitement, as she always does, but once again their stay is foreshortened by a change of plans – this time thieves make off with Bo's load of liquor and new car, inspiring him to move the family on to Salt Lake City – and the candy mountain dream morphs into something new. Ironically Bo and

Elsa's "summer cottage," a home that Bo builds himself near Reno, rests on the east slope of the Big Rock Candy Mountain: "The water in front, beyond the strip of gravelly beach, was in the mornings clear emerald, and sometimes at moonset clear gold," Stegner writes (464). Just up the road is the monument to the doomed Donner Party, a tragic testimony to the hollowness of the western myth of eternal optimism. As Stegner describes it, the monument is "a symbol of all the agony in the service of dubious causes, archetype of the American saga of rainbow-chasing, dream and denouement immortalized in cobblestone and granite" (464). And just below Bo Mason builds yet another dream: a majestic home to live in while he rakes in money from his Reno gambling house. But when Elsa's cancer progresses and problems arise at the casino, life, again, takes a different course than Bo had planned. The myth of western optimism is foiled again and again in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and Elsa and Bruce, unfortunately, continually bear the brunt of Bo's failed dreams.

The western archetype of rugged individualism is another large category that encompasses several sister myths, including self-reliance, the acceptability of aggression, and the emancipation from inhibition, law, convention, and restraint. In the archetypal examples of rugged individualism found in such men as Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Owen Wister's *Virginian*, these tough-man characteristics are typically coupled with such appealing sensitivities as honesty and kindness to women and children. But I believe Stegner purposefully presents Bo Mason as a

man who is so caught up in living the archetype of western individuality that he neglects to allow himself the well-roundedness of a complementary softness of character; the archetype, therefore, is dismantled because Bo certainly is no ideal, particularly when his violent and abusive sides show through. As William C. Baurecht writes in his essay "Within a Continuous Frame: Stegner's Family Album in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*," by watching his father's failures and frustrations, Bruce comes to respect a new kind of western hero-type:

Bruce learns that nurturance and responsibility to the family are essential to being manly, lessons he absorbs primarily from his mother. Suffering, sacrifice, frustration with repeated failures, and perseverance, not heroism through scenarios of traditional success, are man's destiny. Yet, these tribulations may create an admirable but silent heroism, such as Elsa's and even Bo's, as expressed in the creation and maintenance of their family. (Arthur 103)

Both Forrest and Margaret Robinson and Merrill and Lorene Lewis, in their respective Stegner bibliographies, agree that Bo Mason's supposed pioneer virtues are precisely what lead to his decline. As the Lewises write, "Pioneer virtues have become twentieth-century man's vices" (17). And according to the Robinsons, Bo functions as the energy that propels the novel forward, and when he begins to decline, so, too, do the West's hollow archetypes (114). As Elsa describes his near-mania during a winter period of waiting on new plans while in Washington, Bo reveals an almost bipolar obsession with self-reliance and success :

Inactivity was like a disease in him. He needed the excitement of starting something, getting something going. Being cooped up in the house made him grit his teeth. Haunting the mailbox for letters that didn't arrive set him swearing. And when he lost thirty-five

straight games of solitaire without winning once, he threw down the cards and glared, and she knew from the look in his heavy-lidded eyes that he made an omen out of it, it was bad luck for the Klondike project. Before she could think of a way of distracting his mind from it, he was back at the table again, swearing he would sit there and play till he beat it if it took him till spring. (95)

Bo demonstrates a clear propensity for violence, shrouded in the rather mythical manly action of shooting a bird, when he reacts to meeting his new British neighbors in Saskatchewan whose haughtiness drives him to affirm his own masculinity. Mr. Garfield gives Bruce a .22, asking that Bruce will never use it to kill anything more than bloodthirsty wildlife, “the cruel ones like weasels and hawks” (221). As the Masons drive away and Bo and Elsa bicker angrily over Elsa’s admiration of the Garfields and Bo’s clear jealousy of her admiration, Bo turns his anger on a distant harmless sparrow. While mimicking his new neighbor’s abhorrence of shooting animals and ignoring the protests of his wife and son, Bo fires the .22, knocking the sparrow to the earth. Elsa is infuriated by Bo’s needless machismo, and young Bruce reacts first with horror for the poor dead bird and then hatred for his father (228-229).

The mythical emancipation from restraint and law arises with Chet as well, when he and his buddies vandalize an abandoned shack. Their actions in contemporary society would surely rank as felonious, but in Saskatchewan in the early 1900s, the boys clearly egg each other on and are soon blinded to their own culpability. When Chet realizes his friends are laughing at his sparring, for example, “with a Dead-Eye Dick draw he yanked up the horse pistol and aimed it

at the bed” (314). When Elsa, who frequently functions as the novel’s symbolic anti-myth character, finds Chet in jail, she asks that he spend the night in hopes that he will learn the error of his ways: “Don’t give him the idea that what he’s done is smart, or manly, or anything,” she tells the jail keeper. “I want him to know that being in jail is a disgrace” (324). Unlike Bruce, Chet toys with his father’s example of western aggression and rugged individualism, only to ultimately decide – true to Stegner’s myth-busting intentions – that his father’s lifestyle is shameful and deceptive.

Another mythical element of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* that should not be ignored is Stegner’s use of death, as the Robinsons discuss briefly but, I believe, incompletely in their biography. For Stegner, death is the reality that runs counter to the idealized mythologies of the West as the land of milk and honey, of limitless opportunities. Although glorified tales of the Old West often include death in terms of a sunrise showdown on a wide and dusty main street or a justified posse hunt of an unlawful and unjust bad guy, such deaths were frequently neat and contained: a single shot, a quick and presumably painless hanging. But Stegner’s realism denies such glorifications; in real life, whether in the American West or anywhere else, death is rarely neat and rarely contained, and Stegner does not shy from the truth of such emotional and physical agony – whether it is the pain of the dying or of those on the sidelines. Chet’s, Elsa’s, and Bo’s deaths are all plainly examples of the brutality of death. For Chet, the end

comes swiftly and suddenly when he is newly married, with a young daughter, and only twenty-three years old. For Elsa, death is a slow and agonizing process that demands undue endurance both from her and her loved ones. And for Bo, who surely could not leave this world without leaving behind some kind of an indelible mark, death is both shocking and slower than he had expected: When the police arrive at the hotel to investigate the murder/suicide, Bo is still alive but bleeding profusely, and he dies a short time later; even in death, Bo's plans are foiled by reality.

Other examples in the novel include the deaths of Chet and Bruce's pet bunnies just before they leave their home in Redmond, Washington. The side of the bunnies' hutch has rusted away and the bunnies are apparently tempted by the holes under the well cover. For Elsa, the rabbits' deaths are symbolic of her troubled marriage and her fear of an unknown future: "She did not look behind her, but she knew exactly how Bruce and Chester felt when they knelt at the lip of the well and saw the white, furred-out shapes of their pets floating, lifting motionless to the motionless lifting of earthbound water in a dark, earth-smelling hole under the rain" (130). A particularly poignant moment comes when the family is driving away from their Saskatchewan homestead, headed for Montana and – again – an uncertain future. Bruce has sold his crippled colt to a neighbor man with assurances that the man will find Socks a good home despite his broken front legs. Bo and Elsa, though, know that the man has only purchased the colt

for its hide, and as the family drives past the local dump, Bruce catches sight of the hobbles on his colt's skinned and stinking body. The family's venture into the West's wide open spaces is anything but idyllic as they all struggle to shake the image of the poor colt's mangled body:

So they left town, and as they wound up the dugway to the bench none of them had the heart to look back on the town they were leaving, on the flat river bottom green with spring, its village snuggled in the loops of river. Their minds were all on the bloated, skinned body of the colt, the sorrel hair left below the knees, the iron braces still on the broken front legs.

Wherever you go, Elsa was thinking, whenever you move and go away, you leave a death behind. (332)

On its most basic and surface level, the Masons' lives contain all of the elements of a glorious adventure reminiscent of the pioneer West: a brave and boldly rugged father, a kind and properly acquiescent mother, and constant moves to new and more exciting challenges in a quest that surely was rarely dull. But I believe that Stegner's most ground-breaking and enduring accomplishment in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is to take these clear elements of western mythologies and turn them over to reveal the undersides, where nothing is quite as one expects and very little follows the excitement and pleasantries of a well-told western adventure story. Instead there is abuse, loneliness, despair, death, anger, and even hatred. As a native westerner and a lover and defender of his region, Stegner does not intend to merely darken the extant archetypes with the cruelty of a less forgiving reality; instead he attempts in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* to write the history anew, and more often than not reality couples good times with bad,

hope with despair, and even generosity with evil. Despite the newly exposed underbellies of the archetypes at hand, one does not close *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* with a sense of despair. Instead Stegner succeeds masterfully in accomplishing just what reviewer Howard Mumford Jones suggests in his 1943 review: Stegner builds a world in the American West that is fuller, richer, and more human than the empty worlds of timeless mythologies and idealized fables. And I would argue that if death and despair are a part of that new, broader western world, so be it. At least this new history of the West encompasses a reality that is meaningful to its inhabitants and to those who take the time to read and learn from both its glorious successes and its unfortunate failures.

- *Angle of Repose*

Angle of Repose is a technically complex, layered novel that brings to the forefront such disparate questions as the relationship between past and present, whether that of an individual or of a whole region; the reliability of history; and the challenges of marriage. Overall, it is a novel about perspective: who is looking, how they are looking, and what they have chosen to remember or pass on. On the foremost layer is Lyman Ward, a retired history professor who is suffering from a debilitating bone disease that has taken his right leg and confined him to a wheelchair. The disease has caused Lyman's bones to harden and calcify, at times causing him excruciating pain, and his head has fused itself to his neck so that he is no longer able to turn from side to side but instead must gaze in

one direction – a single perspective, as I will discuss further later in this chapter. The year is 1970 and Lyman has moved back into his grandparents' home in Grass Valley, California, where he grew up, and he is slowly sifting through his grandmother's letters and reminiscences as he writes a biography/novel about her life. The reader hears from Lyman frequently: his discoveries and frustrations as a writer; his own physical and sometimes mental anguish, particularly regarding his failed marriage; and his fierce reverence for the past, especially in light of the free-wheeling 1960s and 1970s whose fun-loving, history-denying doctrines infuriate Lyman. Whether or not Lyman is a reliable narrator depends on the critic, and, of course, one's own perspective, although I believe that to take Lyman at face value is to deny much of the complexity of *Angle of Repose*.

The story that Lyman is telling is, in fact, the greater focus of the novel, and that story revolves around Lyman's grandparents, Oliver and Susan Ward. Susan, whose life is based roughly on the life of illustrator Mary Hallock Foote, is a romantic, East Coast-raised woman who follows her new husband west to the frontier town of New Almaden, California, in 1876. Susan is a well-bred, domineering woman, and – like Elsa Mason in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* – she continually fights to make a home for her children. Oliver is a mine engineer who, although also raised on the East Coast, adapts easily to the West's sense of freedom and opportunity. Unlike Bo Mason, who is a man born too late to enjoy the fullness of the West's boom/bust mentality, Oliver is a man – not unlike John

Wesley Powell – whose ideas are a generation or more ahead of his time.

Unfortunately, new ideas demand financial backing, and Oliver's intelligence forces him to keep moving from town to town in search of the project that will finally make proper use of his talents and know-how.

Much like Elsa's first sight of Bo, when Susan first meets Oliver at a New Year's Eve party in New York in 1868, she is both attracted to and put off by certain elements of his character: "He had such an earnest, inquiring face that she felt like throwing the drawing pad at it," is Susan's first reaction. Moments later, though, she tempers her opinion somewhat: "He had an air of quiet such as she had known in men like her father, men who worked with animals. He did not look like one who was easily upset, or talked too much, or thought he had to be entertaining" (38-39). Later, though, it is precisely that calmness of character that irritates Susan as she longs for the cultivated, high-society talk of the East while living sometimes in near squalor amidst filthy miners. Susan's early suspicions about her husband fester further when he neglects to send train fare for her and their hired girl, Lizzie, and Susan must dip into her savings to pay her own way. As Lyman suggests throughout the novel, Susan is a romantic and a lifelong easterner for whom the West presents enormous challenges to what she perceives as a universal reality. Susan comes to the marriage greatly influenced by her dear New York society friend, Augusta Hudson – with whom, as Lyman suggests, she shares a relationship that hints of lesbianism before following her husband West –

and Augusta's husband Phillip, a literary editor who helps boost Susan's career.

Even Susan's romantic views of marriage are colored by the Hudsons'

expectations:

Her version of marriage was that for perhaps two years she and Oliver would live in the West while he established himself. Then they would return, and somehow or other the discrepancies between Oliver's personality and Western leanings and the social and artistic brilliance of the Hudsons' circle would all be smoothed away. They would trade evenings, their children would be inseparable. Of course it would take a little time. (70)

But "a little time" becomes a lifetime for Susan as she, like Elsa Mason, follows her husband across the West.

After only a year in New Almaden, Oliver is pushed out of his position as resident engineer at the local mine – presumably because he has suggested much-needed improvements that reflect poorly on the mine's chief operator, his boss – and the two must move to Santa Cruz. There Oliver dreams of selling a new kind of "hydraulic cement," since in 1877 the concept and benefits of a sturdy material like cement are virtually unheard of, but, true to many of Oliver's schemes, his ideas are so far ahead of his time that he is unable to find financial backing, and after six months he decides to take a job as a mine inspector in Leadville, Colorado. It is in Leadville that the reader meets the young and handsome Frank Sargent, an assistant and close friend of Oliver's who later becomes a dangerous romantic interest for Susan. The reader also meets Pricey, the curiously awkward Englishman who reads poetry obsessively in the evenings but seems wholly out of

place in such a rough, typical Wild West town as Leadville. After Pricey is savagely beaten by thieves in search of information regarding Oliver's plans for the mine and the couple's young son Ollie fights the spiking fevers and wracking chills of malaria for nearly two months, Oliver begins considering yet another move. In 1880, Oliver and Susan leave Ollie with friends and travel to Michoacan, Mexico, where Oliver inspects a mine to see whether it would be worth his while to stay and set up operations. When he decides that the mine is not worth the trouble, Susan, who has fallen in love with the romance of wealthy Mexico, is horribly disappointed. As Oliver searches for a new project in Idaho, Susan returns home to New York and the Hudsons with Ollie. Susan chooses not to tell Oliver of her second pregnancy in hopes that he will take as long as he needs to find the right job rather than feeling rushed by an impending birth; Oliver, understandably, is pleased but hurt when he learns that Susan has given birth to a daughter, Betsy.

Oliver next turns his engineering talents to dams, irrigation, and the revolutionary concept of selling water rights to allow farmers to plant crops on otherwise useless desert land across the arid Rocky Mountain West. Susan, Ollie, and Betsy join Oliver in Boise, Idaho, where they set up home in a canyon camp from 1882 to 1887. Their daughter Agnes is born in Idaho, but when Oliver's ideas once again prove to be ahead of his time and he is unable to secure further financial backing, the family is forced to make other plans. Susan takes the

children to Victoria, Canada, while Oliver remains in Idaho, and next they move to a “model farm” on Mesa Ranch in Idaho. Susan sends Ollie to boarding school in New Hampshire when he turns twelve, a move Ollie resents horribly, and Oliver and Susan’s nearly fifteen years of marital tension reach a narrative climax on Mesa Ranch. When Susan berates Oliver for his increasing dependence on alcohol and demands a promise that he will stop, she makes the egregious error of adding Frank Sargent to the equation:

“I can’t understand,” Susan said. “I try, but I can’t. Doesn’t it *shame* you to be ... enslaved that way? Doesn’t it humiliate you to think that you can’t resist that temptation when someone like Frank, living out on the railroad with the roughest sort of men, never touches a drop? Why can’t you be like Frank?”

And that was the greatest mistake of all. “Because I’m not Frank,” Oliver said, staring at her reflected face. “Maybe you wish I was.”

In confusion and distress she broke off their reflected look, turned away. “No,” she said, away from him. “I just don’t see why you won’t promise.” (434-435)

In a tragic incident toward the end of the novel, Susan and Frank slip away for a talk while Oliver and Ollie are in town, and five-year-old Agnes wanders off. She is found an hour later, drowned in her father’s aptly named Susan Ditch. Frank uses a saddle gun the next day to kill himself, and the increasing distance between Oliver and Susan is ultimately cemented by their horrible, guilt-laden loss.

Lyman’s approach to the matter is careful and clearly tinged with reverence for his grandmother; his commentary is typical of his narrative intrusiveness:

Up to now, reconstructing Grandmother’s life has been an easy game. Her letters and reminiscences have provided both event and

interpretation. But now I am at a place where she hasn't done the work for me, and where it isn't any longer a game. I not only don't want this history to happen, I have to make it up, or part of it. All I know is the *what*, and not all of that; the *how* and the *why* are all speculation. (524)

Oliver and Susan's story moves quickly from this point forward, from a two-year separation with Oliver surveying mines in Mexico and Susan living in Boise, to their eventual move to the home in Grass Valley where Lyman now lives. It is difficult not to be stirred by the strength, determination, and ultimate hardship of their long marriage, just as the narrator is.

Interspersed through the Wards' story are scenes with Lyman, who clearly interprets their marriage from the standpoint of his own unwanted separation. Lyman, whose mother died young and whose father was inattentive, was raised by his grandparents. And while he shows an exceptional regard for both of them, he reminds the reader continually throughout the novel that his grandmother's harsh judgments of Oliver are just that: rigid, unforgiving, and skewed by her own often misled perceptions. Lyman's own wife, Ellen, ran off not long before with the surgeon who removed Lyman's leg; when the surgeon is killed in an accident and Ellen returns to ask forgiveness, Lyman refuses, considering the situation through his grandparents' eyes and wondering, as he says on the novel's final page, "if I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather" (569). Also notable to Lyman's story are Ada, the neighbor and childhood friend whom he has hired to help him with such basic daily tasks as bathing, preparing meals, and getting into

bed each night; Shelley, Ada's hippy daughter whose continued contact with her harassing young husband concerns both Ada and Lyman and whose live-for-the-present, commune-supporting mentality irks Lyman almost daily while the two work together on his grandmother's papers; and Rodman, Lyman's stern and rather condescending son, who would rather see his crippled father in a nursing home than wasting his time holed up in his great-grandparents' old home burying himself in an uninteresting and irrelevant past. The novel's closing scene is both ambitious and daring of Stegner. In it, Lyman dreams that Ellen has come for a visit, and the two talk rather ironically about Oliver and Susan's doomed marriage, with Ellen calling up sympathy for Susan's grievous mistake and Lyman vehemently defending his grandfather's honor, even though one can see him bristling at the thought that Ellen will interpret such defensiveness as her ticket back into his life. The dream ends in a near-wet dream with Shelley aggressively bathing him, much to his horror, while Ellen stands just outside the bathroom, and what begins as an erection exploding in a great urination that upon waking he describes as "a piss-the-bed dream if I ever had one, but confusingly like a wet dream of adolescence too" (567). The novel leaves him pondering whether to call Ellen and, like his grandfather, accept her back, but ultimately one sees that even with his great admiration for his grandfather's marital steadfastness and morality, Lyman will not take the same path; despite his grandfather's admirable stoicism, he chose an unhappy and downtrodden path, and one can see that Lyman will

learn from this lesson and step forward in a different and thankfully more enlightened direction.

In the 1970s, Stegner called *Angle of Repose* “the most ambitious book I have done, and maybe technically the most expert” (*Conversations* 98), and many critics – including William Abrahams of the *Atlantic Monthly* – agreed.

According to Abrahams in his 1971 review,

“We have been cut off, the past has ended ...” So it would seem. But a novel like *Angle of Repose*, admitting the possibility of the past as still a part of fiction, suggests its possibility still as a continuing part of our lives. Between art and life, past and present, the moment and its aftermath, Mr. Stegner reminds us, there are still connections to be made, and we are the richer for them. His novel stands out already; it may prove a landmark. (Arthur 33)

But the *New York Times Book Review* failed to even review the novel. Editor John Leonard told Stegner’s publishers that the reviewer who was assigned to *Angle of Repose* disliked and dismantled it so thoroughly that Leonard was unable to publish the review. After *Angle of Repose* beat John Updike’s *Rabbit Redux* to win the Pulitzer Prize, the *Times* published a highly critical and belated review some six months after the fact. According to Stegner, “The *Times* did not treat the novel; it attempted to destroy it” (96). Since that time, the popularity of *Angle of Repose* has only increased, with most critics praising the novel for its depth and originality. In her article “*The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination*,” Kerry Ahearn describes *Angle of Repose* as a new attempt to deal with the same themes as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*: “But I believe

that in terms of maturity and complexity and mutual reinforcement of idea and structure, *Angle of Repose* stands superior,” she writes (21).

In a chapter published in Charles E. Rankin’s book *Wallace Stegner: Man & Writer*, Richard W. Etulain argues that “in several respects *Angle of Repose* represents the high point of the western novel since World War II (52). In *Down by the Lemonade Springs: Essays on Wallace Stegner*, Jackson J. Benson calls *Angle of Repose* “Wallace Stegner’s masterpiece, the crown jewel in a multifaceted writing career” (133). And in his book *Telling Western Stories*, Etulain praises *Angle of Repose* as an innovator among western literary novels:

Stegner’s premier novel not only garnered international acclaim, it built on traditions already established in western regional fiction, linked them to new interpretations of the American West and produced a new kind of western story. Nearly thirty years later, *Angle of Repose* remains a rich, valuable paradigm for those who wish to escape the earlier western narrative that boxed in so many writers in the previous century. (111)

Etulain compares Stegner’s novel *Angle of Repose* to the works of Louis L’Amour, using L’Amour as a means of better defining Stegner’s literary separation from writers of dime store Westerns: L’Amour typically limits his plots to early frontier years, unlike Stegner’s broad span of four generations and an entire century in *Angle of Repose*. And while L’Amour occasionally compares East and West in his novels through wholly westernized main characters, Stegner presents Oliver and Susan as carriers of a multitude of East Coast sensibilities, allowing for a more in-depth examination of how the East has influenced the

West, and vice versa. Stegner writes a “more inclusive, complex form of western storytelling,” Etulain continues: “Few other western writers aimed as high, and none since Willa Cather and John Steinbeck achieved as much as Wallace Stegner in *Angle of Repose*” (118). Yet Stegner was well aware that overall he had lost “the popularity contest” with Louis L’Amour, according to Etulain. When asked to describe the differences between himself and L’Amour, Etulain writes, Stegner “replied with a chuckle, ‘Oh, a few million dollars’” (118).

In Anthony Arthur’s 1982 collection *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, Mary Ellen Williams Walsh published a chapter titled “*Angle of Repose* and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study” that makes some rather egregious ethical accusations regarding Stegner’s use of Mary Hallock Foote’s letters and papers and source material for his novel. Walsh argues that Stegner borrows much too freely from Foote’s work, particularly her letters to Helena DeKay Gilder, without proper acknowledgement; he fictionalizes Susan Burling Ward’s story at such moments as her affair with Frank Sargent and the role she played in Agnes’ death, which could lead to erroneous interpretations of Foote’s character and personal life; and his creation of Lyman Ward is drawn directly from a character in Foote’s unpublished short story “The Miniature,” in which the protagonist is a cripple confined to a wheelchair. The bulk of Walsh’s chapter moves chronologically through *Angle of Repose*, providing documentation of Stegner’s use of Foote’s papers by referring to specific scenes in the novel and

then citing where they occur in Foote's writings. Some of the ethical questions Walsh raises at the end of her chapter are as follows: "Does writing 'fiction' allow Stegner to ignore the constraints that are in effect for other scholars who must identify passages quoted and paraphrased from another writer? ... Does Stegner escape responsibility under the aegis of artistic license for sensationalizing Mary Hallock Foote's life ...?" (206). While I can see the merit in some of Walsh's ethical ponderings, I am disappointed in her claims firstly because she never bothered to question Stegner himself about his intentions or his conversations with Foote's heirs regarding the novel, and secondly because Walsh clearly has no concept of Stegner's lifelong attempts to consciously blend history and literature in search of a new "middle ground." Walsh's chapter maliciously suggests that Stegner was trying to get away with both plagiarism and a remarkably lazy means of creative invention; but Stegner's prior oeuvre points to a progression towards precisely this kind of novel where fact and fiction blur into one creative rewriting of regional western history.

In his Stegner biography, Benson calls the accusations forwarded by Walsh, a professor at Idaho State University and coeditor of the Foote letters with Foote's granddaughter Evelyn Foote Gardiner, "a nasty piece of character assassination" (355). And Stegner himself told Etulain that he was "a little irritated at that particular holier-than-thou attack" (*Conversations* 86). Not only had Stegner corresponded regularly with Foote's granddaughter Janet Micoleau

during the novel's research, writing, and publication, but he never read the unpublished Foote story upon which Walsh claims he based his Lyman Ward tale (87). Stegner opted not to use real names when Micoleau asked that he protect the family's identity since he was writing a novel rather than a biography, and he further protected Foote's heirs by making his acknowledgement a personal note rather than a public announcement of his source material: "My thanks to J.M. and her sister for the loan of their ancestors. Though I have used many details of their lives and characters, I have not hesitated to warp both personalities and events to fictional needs. This is a novel which utilizes selected facts from their real lives. It is in no sense a family history" (*Angle* 9). Gardiner, however, has argued that since Stegner does not specifically credit Foote for her works, he has unethically plagiarized her writing (Benson, *Down* 143). Gardiner has said that she expected a different kind of novel: "I thought he would write something like Irving Stone's biographical novels. That he would invent conversations and all of that, but that he would pretty much stick to the facts of their lives" (142). Although Stegner did offer his manuscript to Micoleau for a prepublication read and she declined, he says that he regrets not sending a copy to her sister Gardiner as well. Interestingly, though, both the Pulitzer Prize and the ensuing accusations regarding Stegner's use of source material have brought more attention to Foote's works than they have received since the First World War.

Walsh's accusations aside, *Angle of Repose* stands as an important

example of Stegner's attempts to demystify the American West. And, as Kerry Ahearn writes in her article, while the themes and myths of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* are evident in *Angle of Repose*, the dismantled archetypes in the latter novel are notably more subtle and, I believe, therefore more poignant and lasting. Just as Stegner widens his scope from the primarily western focus of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* to a more continental focus in *Angle of Repose*, suggesting in the process a shift from the frontier novel to the regional novel, so, too, do the mythologies he challenges take on a broader meaning. Once again, I believe most critics' discussions of *Angle of Repose*, while enlightening in terms of Stegner's innovative handling of time, structure, and a dangerously intrusive narrator, do not delve as deeply as they should into the regional archetypes that Stegner is clearly questioning. Both Benson and Etulain come the closest in their analyses of *Angle of Repose*, but neither grants Stegner the credit he is due as a western writer who thoroughly and consciously works to debunk such myths. According to Etulain in *Telling Western Stories*, for example, Oliver does not become the archetypal westerner, although he does assume many stereotypical characteristics of a westerner, such as the "western realities that demand a ruggedness and courage unknown to Susan's eastern friends": "Nor is Oliver a local colorist caught up in the picturesque, picnic West. For him, the West is a place to conquer, where he can try out his dreams. Not surprisingly, then, he finds Susan's classical allusions to miners and their arduous work 'about used up'" (114). But I believe if one

takes Etulain's arguments a step further in terms of the mythologies of the western cowboy hero, one can see that Stegner essentially has taken the ideals that Bruce Mason learned in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* – the hero as rugged but also sensitive, trustworthy, and dedicated to family, unlike Bo Mason – and formed a new man.

By drawing together the history of both his own childhood experiences and the marriage of Susan and Oliver Ward, Stegner has succeeded in reaching his new middle ground and rewriting a more honorable western hero. Benson comes closer to addressing issues of myth-busting when he suggests that Stegner presents Oliver and Susan as archetypal figures: Oliver is the strong, silent, rugged boomer man, and Susan is the cultured, romantic nester woman (351). Several pages later, Benson addresses the archetypes more directly: “[I]n concentrating on the subject of marriage, the marriage of genteel, educated people who come to build and civilize, the author through his narrator gives us a very different angle on the West than is provided in the oft-repeated myth of the lone horseman” (357). But there Benson stops. Certainly the marriage of Oliver and Susan Ward breaks through the archetypes of a Kit Carson mountain man who relishes danger and long periods in the wilderness alone. But I believe Stegner is suggesting so much more with his development of these Mary Hallock Foote-inspired characters: In their marriage alone, Stegner is working to break down the myths of western timelessness (as Susan reminds one with her gentility and Oliver with

his technological advancements, time did not simply freeze on a glorified Old West), of western self-reliance (as Oliver's continual need for East Coast financial backing proves, the West did not build itself in isolation), and of history as steadfast (as Susan's romantic vision and Oliver's practical vision show, history is a matter of individual perception).

As the West became increasingly romanticized and idealized, time began to stand still on a frontier Old West where lawlessness and fierce individuality were the norm. As Etulain writes, Louis L'Amour's plots typically embrace the era of the new frontier, rather than venturing into a more contemporary West. Stegner's fiction, however, demonstrates not only an emphasis on the contemporary American West – particularly in his shorter novels – but also a conscious blending of past and present until the lines are nearly indistinguishable and the effects of the past on the contemporary present, as well as the effects of the contemporary present on society's understanding of the past, are undeniable. As the Robinsons suggest in their biography, Lyman's exploration of his grandparents' past takes him to the center of Stegner's "middle ground": a careful blending of fact and fiction to arrive at a more human perspective on history (152). When Stegner describes to Etulain his intentions in drawing past and present together, he admits that the process was technically challenging:

[Lyman] was in a box, as it seemed to me, speaking from a box rather hollowly, desperately reconstructing the life of his grandmother and desperately avoiding his own. If I could do it, I could tell one story the way a historical researcher might have

reproduced it, and I could leak the other almost inadvertently. ... At this point I am not able to say exactly how it was done except that it took a long time to work it out. (*Conversations* 84, 89)

But it is this complexity that critics praised the most in *Angle of Repose*, particularly – as William Abrahams writes in his 1971 review of the novel – in a contemporary era when most novelists prefer to allow their characters to travel only in the present: “In the passion for the Now, we are told, there is no place for the Past,” Abrahams writes. “In the land of Now there is no curiosity about the past, nor the faintest apprehension that Now is in process of becoming then” (Arthur 33). But in *Angle of Repose*, Abrahams continues, Stegner introduces a new dimension of time that reinforces the biographical past of characters and has little patience for the “cartoon like absence of depth” Abrahams argues is far too prevalent in contemporary literature (33).

Lyman’s fierce dedication to the past is a rejection of the 1960s-inspired notion that the past must be virtually erased if one is to live in an enlightened present; both Rodman and Shelley subscribe to this belief, much to Lyman’s chagrin. Lyman, of course, would sooner bury himself in what was than face the challenges of what could be:

My grandparents had to live their way out of one world and into another, or into several others, making new out of old the way corals live their reef upward. I am on my grandparents’ side. I believe in Time, as they did, and in the life chronological rather than in the life existential. We live in time and through it, we build our huts in its ruins, or used to, and we cannot afford all these abandonings. (18)

Lyman refers to the Doppler Effect as a metaphor for his conception of the past's resonating effects on the present: "The sound of anything coming at you – a train, say, or the future – has a higher pitch than the sound of the same thing going away," he explains (24). What interests Lyman is the sound of a life as it passes by, as well as the diminishing echo of receding experiences. And while archetypal western novels typically freeze time on the dusty streets of an Old West town, Lyman continually reminds the reader of both the receding echoes of the past and the onward rushing wail of the future; the contemporary West is a very real and, albeit frustrating, essential part of the western equation, even for Lyman. This mindset is exemplified in Lyman's description of Susan's 1887 restlessness when Oliver has gone to town, the children are in bed, and only the hard silence rests over her home in the Idaho canyon camp. As Lyman suggests, Susan's West was quite different from the contemporary region:

1970 knows nothing about isolation and nothing about silence. In our quietest and loneliest hour the automatic ice-maker in the refrigeration will cluck and drop an ice cube, the automatic dishwasher will slip through its changes, a plane will drone over, the nearest freeway will vibrate the air. Red and white lights will pass in the sky, lights will shine along highways and glance off windows. There is always a radio that can be turned to some all-night station, or a television set to turn artificial moonlight into the flickering images of the late show. We can put on a turntable whatever consolation we most respond to, Mozart or Copland or the Grateful Dead. (421)

On one level, Lyman reveals, as he does above, the physical changes from the Old West to the New West. But on a much deeper level, Stegner's accomplished

melding of time unveils the human changelessness in, for example, a marriage or other intimate relationship. While outward elements may change, the very basics of humanity remain. And if westerners are to see themselves in a post-mythological region where contemporary society is allowed to step from beneath the looming shadows of archetypal assumptions, they must first recognize the receding whistle of a past that was far more human and real than a glorified Daniel Boone myth would suggest.

Another myth that Stegner tackles in *Angle of Repose* is the idealized belief that the American West was built from the sheer ruggedness, determination, and hard work of its pioneers. And while such characteristics of Emersonian self-reliance clearly played a role in first ensuring safe passage across the continent and then providing the pioneers with the gumption to set up home in often desolate and lawless landscapes, the fact is – as Stegner demonstrates through Oliver Ward’s repeated professional frustrations – that the West was actually built on East Coast capital and influence. In *Telling Western Stories*, Richard Etulain writes that although all of Oliver’s professional dreams prove possible, they are only achieved after Oliver has moved on and someone else has managed to secure financial backing: “Oliver’s schemes and partial successes are destroyed because he remains under the lion’s paw of undependable eastern money,” Etulain writes (115). And the East/West connections, predictably, do not end monetarily, Etulain continues. In presenting two very disparate views of the West from two

native easterners – Susan’s romanticized version and Oliver’s practical view – Stegner “makes clear how much eastern visions defined what the West meant to most Americans,” Etulain continues (115). In his comments to Etulain, Stegner says that he was hoping in *Angle of Repose* to achieve a broader look at America as a whole and the influences that have brought it to where it is today: “[*Angle of Repose*] is not only a comparison of the frontier and the New West; it’s a comparison of West and East. It attempts to be something relatively comprehensive about certain kinds of American experiences” (*Conversations* 90). And it is in the complexity of an examination of not only Old West versus New West but also East Coast versus West Coast that I believe there is a shift from a frontier western, as those of James Fenimore Cooper or Bret Harte, to the farther-reaching regional novels of Willa Cather or O.E. Rolvaag.

Lyman is quite blatant in his efforts to discredit this erroneous myth in the novel’s opening pages: “I am impressed with how much of my grandparents’ life depended on continuities, contacts, connections, friendships, and blood relationships. Contrary to the myth, the West was not made entirely by pioneers who had thrown everything away but an ax and a gun” (41). And nearly one hundred pages later, Lyman calls attention again to this typical error in thinking: “There are several dubious assumptions about the early West. One is that it was the home of intractable self-reliance amounting to anarchy, whereas in fact large parts of it were owned by Eastern and foreign capital and run by iron-fisted

bosses” (134). As Oliver decides he must move on from his position as mine engineer in New Almaden, his first such move, Lyman again steps in to remind the reader that nearly all of the early West was owned by interests in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and London. One can see Stegner’s maturing progression of thought if one considers that in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, he uses Bo Mason’s character to begin questioning the reality of western self-reliance and ruggedness; Bo Mason clearly was unable to go it alone, although in that novel the reader blames Bo’s impulsiveness for his inability to succeed. It is not until *Angle of Repose*, however, that the reader truly hears through the equally frustrating failures of Oliver Ward why it is that the protagonists are unable to locate their personal lands of milk and honey. Rugged individualism and self-reliance, Stegner demonstrates, are a dangerous farce in a region where contacts with East Coast money frequently proved essential, especially with such motivated and intelligent young upstarts as Oliver Ward.

In dismantling the myth of history as steadfast, Stegner takes a twofold approach: On one level, he troubles the myth through the conflicts of Susan’s romanticized, mythical West and Oliver’s more truthful sense of reality. On a more metaphorical level, Stegner questions the limitations of an individual’s narrowed vision through his Lyman Ward character, whose perceptions of the world are colored both by his inability to look in more than one focused direction at a time and by his frequent editorialized musings that force one to challenge his

reliability as a narrator. In her article “Inside Out: The West of Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*,” Janet Occhino writes that while it is Lyman’s physical rigidity that allows him to face in only one direction at a time, the reader is limited, too, by the fact that Lyman is the conduit through which these tales of the Masons must pass, and Lyman plainly is a humanly flawed and sometimes unsure personality (31). I believe Stegner’s decision to grant Lyman such rigidity that he is unable to turn his head may also point to the dangerous single-mindedness of those who view the West only through myth-influenced lenses. As Stegner himself says about Lyman, “I was creating a situation which involved tunnel vision of the wheel chair. I really wanted that, and I couldn’t figure any other way to settle it” (Benson, *Wallace* 345).

Audrey C. Peterson grants both Stegner and Lyman Ward an enormous amount of credit in her article “Narrative Voice in Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*.” Stegner deserves credit for creating a narrator who is so wholly convincing that he unquestionably controls all levels of his fiction – and he reminds one frequently of that fact, Peterson argues. And while Lyman’s narrative voice is a powerful entity in driving forward and defining the novel’s action, his intrusiveness and manipulation do not suggest “a loss of credibility,” Peterson writes (Arthur 176). By his own personal despair and quandaries, Lyman clearly misleads the reader, Kerry Ahearn writes in her article “*The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination*,” yet he

probably misleads the reader no more than he misleads himself (23). And, as Ahearn further points out, finding an unreliable narrator in such clear realism as Stegner writes is not a common occurrence (23). According to Stegner, Lyman's perception is the most skewed regarding his own life and situation:

A lot of the poignancy of child-oriented stories is precisely the discrepancy between perception and understanding; the reader understands more than the speaker does. I didn't want the reader, in this case, to understand *much* more than the speaker does, but I did want him to understand that Lyman Ward was holding off on his own story, that he could be trustworthy about his grandmother but not himself. (*Conversations* 89)

I am not sure I buy Stegner's contention that Lyman is trustworthy in his discussion of his grandparents, since he continually criticizes his grandmother for her judgmentalism and praises his grandfather for remaining morally committed. As a novelist and historian, Lyman's frequent narrative asides – even as he is in the midst of describing a moment of action – further place his reliability in jeopardy; few readers care to be reminded that the story they are reading is the creation of another's mind, as Lyman often insists on doing as he sometimes hesitantly muddles his way through.

When Lyman meets up with his childhood friend Al Sutton at the beginning of the novel, for example, he is struck by Al's quadruple-focal glasses. Al is a cohort in impeded vision, as Lyman tells the reader when he is discussing with Al the necessity of keeping the machines in his laundromat clean:

Al stood chuckling, scratching his elbow. "I don't th'pothe a profethor would ever need anything like thethe. But I'm always

having to fixth the mathineth. Ever try to thee with your head
inthide a Bendixth?”

I get the message. Space being curved, tunnel vision and
the rigid neck could leave a man focused on the back of his own
head. I don’t know what the effect of quadruple focals on a
historian might be – nausea, maybe – but there might be virtue in
trying them on.

Whose head *isn’t* inside a Bendix? (77)

On some level, Lyman recognizes the limited perceptions of individuals. In two
scenes late in the novel, Lyman the novelist is wrestling with how to tackle his
grandmother’s poor choices. When Frank Sargent returns to the Idaho canyon
camp for a brief visit and discovers Susan home alone, for example, Lyman
breaks into the narrative to announce his own limitations as author. And his
subsequent diversion, which continues for more than two pages, is both amusing
and telling:

What would Susan Ward and Frank Sargent have said to each other
in the two hours before Oliver and Ollie returned from town?
Having brought them together, I find it difficult to put words in
their mouths. Their words, like their actions, would have been
hedged by a hundred restraints. She was incorrigibly a lady, he
was self-consciously honorable. The novels of their time, to which
they were both addicted, were full of hopeless and enduring loves
too lofty for treacherous thoughts or acts. (449)

And, two pages later: “And now I can’t avoid it any longer. I *have* to put words
in their mouths. Not very personal words at first. Questions and answers.
Probes. Time-fillers” (451). And so Lyman proceeds, cognizant of his limitations
both as a fiction writer and, perhaps, as his grandmother’s grandson. Later, when
Susan and Frank have another moment alone, although this time it is at Mesa

Ranch, Lyman is even more forthright in his honesty as a fallible historian:

“What went on on that piazza? I don’t know. I don’t even know they were there.

I just made up the scene to fit other facts that I do know” (508).

As I mentioned earlier, Stegner also uses the tensions between a truthful reality and romanticized mythology to illustrate this notion that history is not steadfast, as western archetypes might suggest, but that it is wholly subject to individual interpretations. As Susan travels to New Almaden for the first time, her romantic notions are both literally and metaphorically swallowed in the dust of western reality: “In San Jose a stage with black leather curtains waited; they were the only passengers. But her anticipation of a romantic Bret Harte stage ride lasted only minutes. Dust engulfed them. She had Oliver draw the curtains, but then the heat was so great that they suffered at a slow boil” (81). Here Susan’s perception of what the West should be – of what her personal history should be – is subsumed by the reality of a region that is not a glorified land of limitless opportunity but a very true and gritty reality to which Susan must gradually learn to adapt.

A final thematic and mythical element that is similar to Stegner’s frequent images of death in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is the theme in *Angle of Repose* of perfect unions or marriages. In his conversations with Etulain, Stegner admits that he has been troubled for many years by the effects of the sexual revolution on the sanctity of marriage: “I suppose I was preaching a little bit from my stump

about marriage,” he says. “*Angle of Repose* is a book about marriage, as somebody says somewhere in the book – I guess it is Lyman. Since his own marriage has collapsed he’s interested in this one that didn’t, even though it had all the provocations that his had to fall apart” (*Conversations* 94). In defining the parallels of the three kinds of marriage that he introduces in the novel – the Wards’, Lyman’s, and the one between young people in the 1960s – Stegner uses the phrase “progressive decline.” He is gravely disappointed, in other words, in a culture that has become so permissive in allowing “escape hatches” for nearly any kind of marital strife that arises. Marriage in *Angle of Repose* becomes mythical, therefore, in that Stegner presumably sees a 1960s generation viewing marriage as an effortlessly joyful union: an idealized myth of romance that is somehow unimpeded by the hassles of everyday life. When the slightest difficulty does arise in contemporary marriage, Stegner says, its participants too quickly search for the easy way out and end up dissolving a union that might have lasted if it had been viewed in a realistic light to begin with.

The overarching scientific metaphor of *Angle of Repose* describes the marriage of Oliver and Susan in the rather non-romantic image of the angle at which an object will ultimately come to rest. For Lyman, his grandparents’ marriage came to rest at an unfortunate stalemate; although they remained together, Lyman seems to believe that Oliver never forgave Susan for her suspected infidelities, and they lived their remaining years with little shared

companionship and even less physical affection. As Lyman tries to explain to Rodman, his interest in his grandparents rests not in the western history involved but in the human side of life:

What interests me in all these papers is not Susan Burling Ward the novelist and illustrator, and not Oliver Ward the engineer, and not the West they spend their lives in. What really interests me is how two such unlike particles clung together, and under what strains, rolling downhill into their future until they reached the angle of repose where I knew them. That's where the interest is. That's where the meaning will be if I find any. (211)

And the meaning for Lyman becomes personal as he searches for the reasons why his wife left him and how he is to respond to her requests for a reconciliation. For Lyman early in the novel, marriage is mythological only in that it should be steadfast regardless of the circumstances; but as he delves deeper into his grandparents' lives, and, most importantly, into his own failed relationship, he begins to realize that his myth may be wrong. Like the myths of time, western self-reliance, and the steadfastness of history, therefore, the myth of perfect and effortless marriage has been unpacked in *Angle of Repose* to reveal the human trials and tensions that compose a truthful reality rather than a romantic dream. While Stegner's other works, both nonfiction and fiction alike, tackle numerous western assumptions in an effort to redefine the region in opposition to a glorified, archetypal Old West, his two best novels, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*, tackle the mythologies that troubled Stegner for a lifetime and that broadly encompass nearly all of the erroneous assumptions that he so

persistently questions throughout his lengthy career.

Chapter 5

Further De-Mythologizing Patterns in Stegner's Fiction

As I have stated in earlier chapters, few critics have addressed Stegner's ability to ask the nuanced questions necessary to call to the forefront the dangers of current idealized western mythologies. Jackson J. Benson spends the most time on Stegner's use of western mythologies in his 1998 publication *Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction*, which focuses specifically on Stegner's short stories. In a brief chapter titled "Western Mythology and Stories Related to Adolescence," Benson contrasts the mythologies of rugged individualism, inherent in the lonely cowboy hero, and of a romanticized Old West with Stegner's preference for a realistic style of writing intended to break through the glorified ideals of romance:

As we have seen in these early stories dealing with his childhood experiences, Stegner introduces a theme, opposition to "rugged individualism" (a phrase coined by Herbert Hoover), that he would pursue throughout his career. He would condemn the doctrine as false and dangerous and see its pervasive influence in our society, particularly in the West, and its persistence into the late twentieth century as signs that our society had not yet grown up. For Stegner, the West was not settled and built by the lone adventurer on horseback; social maturity involved cooperation and required the individual's assumption of responsibility to others. (18)

Benson then cites the only two "cowboy stories" that Stegner wrote – "Genesis" and "Carrion Spring" – as examples of Stegner's realism, "as well as his need to discover and set down the history of the place where he grew up" (19). In

“Genesis,” which was first published in *Contact* in 1959 and later included in both *Wolf Willow* (1962) and *Collected Stories* (1990), Stegner uses the romantic visions of a young greenhorn Englishman, Rusty Cullen, to dismantle the myth of rugged individualism. Rusty, who becomes a ranchhand during the brutal Saskatchewan winter of 1906-1907, soon learns that “what would pass for heroics in a softer world was only chores” on the Saskatchewan plains (20). As Benson suggests, the ultimate breakdown of the myth of individualism occurs when the cowboys must tie themselves together with their lariats to survive a sudden blizzard; rather than heroic lone rescues, cooperation and self-sacrifice become a necessity if one is to survive the unforgiving whims of nature. In “Carrion Spring,” which first appeared in *Esquire* and also was later collected in *Wolf Willow* and *Collected Stories*, Stegner offers a glimpse of the new marriage of Molly and Ray Henry, who have just survived the 1906-1907 Saskatchewan winter in their isolated ranch house. At the beginning of the story, Molly assumes that the couple will be heading back to Montana now that they have weathered the brutality of the winter and a chinook wind has begun to melt the relentless snows. The stench of dead and rotting cattle, killed in the winter blizzards and now exposed by warming temperatures, is nearly unbearable, and here the mythological romantic West is colored by the reality of dreams spent, but, in Molly’s case, optimism is renewed in the image of a lavender crocus shoot and the hopes of her husband: “If this is a ‘cowboy story’ it is a very different one, one

that only uses the western circumstances and surroundings to explore the complex relationship between a husband and wife,” Benson writes (21-22), and, I would argue, to break down the erroneous archetype of a glorified land of milk and honey.

In this chapter, I will look at Stegner’s remaining fiction, beyond his two larger novels *Angle of Repose* and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, in an effort to further uncover the ways that he introduces and unpacks the western mythologies listed in Chapter 2. Although Stegner’s short stories – most of which are collected in *The Women on the Wall* (1950), *The City of the Living and Other Stories* (1956), and *Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner* (1990) – certainly are important to his overall oeuvre, I will let my brief discussion above and Benson’s analysis in *A Study of the Short Fiction* suffice as I instead move on to his many remaining novels. In this chapter, I will begin with a look at Stegner’s early novels, including *Remembering Laughter* (1937), *The Potter’s House* (1938), *On a Darkling Plain* (1940), and *Fire and Ice* (1941); then turn to what I consider his middle phase, including *Second Growth* (1947), *The Preacher and the Slave* (1950), and *A Shooting Star* (1961); then look at his mature novels, including *All the Little Live Things* (1967), *The Spectator Bird* (1976), and *Recapitulation* (1979); and finally close with a more in-depth look at Stegner’s final novel, *Crossing to Safety* (1987).

- ***Stegner's Early Novels (1937-41)***

Stegner's first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, is a short novella that he wrote in a mere six weeks in hopes of winning a Little, Brown \$2,500 prize for a first short novel, which he did, and in its pages are many hints of the themes that arise more fully later in his work. I believe *Remembering Laughter* is the best of his early novels, because although he is experimenting rather daringly and not always successfully with narrative style and story, as he does in the latter three, in this first novel Stegner borrows a family story from his wife, Mary – a technique of blending history and fiction that serves him well in the most successful of his later, more mature novels. Set on an Iowa farm at the turn of the century, *Remembering Laughter* is the story of Alec and Margaret Stuart, young landowners who welcome Margaret's younger sister Elspeth into their home. Although the two sisters are equally beautiful, Elspeth is the freer spirit whose insatiable curiosity and enthusiasm mesmerize Alec; Margaret, although kind and well-meaning, harbors a more prim, genteel side. While Margaret recognizes Elspeth's increasing restlessness, she is unable to prevent the inevitable, and soon Elspeth and Alec are alone in the barn in shared guilty passion. Margaret discovers the pair, a shadow falls over the once-cheerful farm, and when Elspeth admits she is pregnant, Margaret gives Ahlquist, the hired man, money to return to his homeland in Norway in hopes that the neighbors will assume he is the father of Elspeth's child rather than Alec. When Malcolm is born, he is raised believing

that Margaret and Elspeth are his aunts, Alec is his uncle, and his parents died somewhere along the way. He grows up in a household that is sour and stern, save those fleeting moments when Alec is able to steal him away into the fields and restore to his life the laughter that is so sorely missing. When Alec dies suddenly, Malcolm confronts his aunts with the truth of his past, and Margaret and Elspeth must bid farewell to the one spark of joy that their meager lives have held. The novel begins and ends with the dour solemnity of Alec's funeral, with both Margaret and Elspeth looking twenty years older than their relatively youthful ages of forty-seven and forty; and it is in a lengthy flashback between the prologue and the epilogue that the reader hears of the farm's more lighthearted days, as well as the ensuing betrayal.

Remembering Laughter is reminiscent of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* for its novella length and for the infidelity between a man and his wife's sister, although Stegner says that he had not yet read Wharton when he wrote his novel (*Conversations* 29). Stegner admits that he wrote *Remembering Laughter* quickly and without noble literary purposes – with his eye instead on the monetary award that helped to ease his financial struggles at the time – and yet in his use of a present-tense frame one finds an early attempt at bringing together the past and the present. When Richard Etulain asks Stegner whether the flashback was a first experiment in connecting past and present, Stegner rather humbly agrees: “I suppose it was, though it was certainly – like so much of what I'd done – totally

unconscious. I guess some sense of form, some rudimentary groping notion that you don't just splatter it out chronologically, must have been in my head while I was dealing with that rueful little legend left over from an earlier time"

(*Conversations* 29). Both Jackson Benson and Forrest and Margaret Robinson note that either because of the abbreviated novella length or because Stegner is still such a young writer in 1937, with only two published short stories, the characters in *Remembering Laughter* are distanced from the reader in such a way that the novel reads more like legend than the intimate, engaging stories of Stegner's later career. Stegner has not yet embarked on the careful details of his later reliance on realism, Benson writes (*Wallace* 71), and, according to the Robinsons, the novel's stylistic limitations lead it dangerously close to mere melodrama:

In hands less skillful than Stegner's, *Remembering Laughter* might have become implausible melodrama. The plot is a little too neat; crucial episodes hinge on improbable coincidence. Stegner avoids what is potentially awkward in the story by converting weaknesses to strengths. In matters of tone, pace, and style, he moves away from strict, highly detailed realism toward a compact and symbolic manner that approaches parable or myth. The narrative is brief; the episodes are few, though they combine to form a tight, rather straightforward thematic unity. (99-100)

Benson points to such early Stegner-esque themes as the heavy foreshadowing of bad things to come, the search for identity, and emotional repression in the novel (*Wallace* 71), while Merrill and Lorene Lewis write that in all four of Stegner's early novels, a young person is attempting to break away from some kind of

disagreeable past, a theme that is repeated in such novels as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (10-11).

While I agree that *Remembering Laughter* indeed is a decidedly less complex, less developed Stegner novel, its early hints of western mythologies are helpful in tracing a career-long progression of examining and dismantling myth. Elspeth arrives in Iowa from Scotland with images of a romanticized American farm life, and Alec revels in both poking fun at and adding to her innocent optimism. When Elspeth delights that Alec and Margaret have met her at the train station with their own horse and carriage, for example, Alec at first laughs, then solemnly tells her, “I had to get something to haul away the bodies of Indians Margo and I killed prowling around the house” (12). Elspeth initially is unsure whether to believe Alec’s tall tales and looks continually to her sister for reassurance, but as the stories grow more unbelievable and Alec’s mood more gleeful, Elspeth soon laughs companionably with her sister and brother-in-law. In these early pages, Margaret represents the grim but mostly agreeable East; she is, after all, living quite happily and willingly on her Iowa farm, although she determinedly clings to semblances of civilization with her careful manners, her ever-ready front parlor, and her impeccable grooming. In Elspeth, Stegner offers the youth and vitality of a new West, eager to move forward, blindly optimistic, and convinced beyond doubt of the unlimited opportunities that lie ahead. Alec is the cheerful myth-buster-turned-grim mythmaker, a seemingly contradictory role

that changes as Alec grows from a jocular storyteller who pokes fun at Elspeth's assumption of such myths as self-reliance, rugged individualism, meliorism, and unlimited opportunities, to a somber man who reluctantly agrees to rewrite the family past in an effort to prevent gossip and further embarrassment. Margaret and Elspeth, the proper East and the eager West, grow to resemble one another beneath the weight of self-created family myth, until both appear aged to a point that is far beyond their years and the reality of who they are beneath their masks.

After Ahlquist leaves and Margaret, Elspeth, and Alec raise the new baby, Malcolm, in the cold silence of their once-joyous Iowa farm, Stegner turns to the "slow, timeless revolution of the seasons" to demonstrate the passage of time beneath the shadow of their new mythical reality. Stegner's prose offers both the demonstration of landscape as the one enduring quality to this life they have chosen and hints of the realism that becomes Stegner's later trademark. Here the farm is no glorified pastoral ideal but a shifting, changing reality where human choices are made and the cycle of life continues regardless:

And the years, – the stifling nights of summer, windless and humid, the hot oppressive blackness when the three lay awake in different rooms listening to the petulant discomfort of the child and the curtains hung slack in wide-open windows; the interminable days when clothes clung to perspiring bodies and the oaks drooped under the fierce sun and the darkened parlor was the only passably cool room in the house; the slow ripening of September, the golden fields, the farm alive with strange men, huskers and threshers powdered with the bright dust of harvest, and in full view from the window of the haymow the incredible streak of flame that was the creek bed; and in October also the still wavering fall of leaves, – and in the intervals between labor and labor the wild

regret that was never to die, but was to be hidden in silence and unforgiving and the avoidance of outward feeling until over it grew a shell of habit, so that for days at a time the three forgot the reasons for their watchful silence and the bleakness of their house. ... (122)

Stegner concludes the epilogue with a reminder that although Alec and Malcolm – the women’s greatest physical reminders of the rift between them – are gone, the women have condemned themselves by the myths they have created to a life of unreality: “They were two old women sentenced to the prison they had made for themselves, doomed to wear away slowly, toughly; to fade and wither and dry up inch by inch in the silence of their house” (150). While none of Stegner’s prior critics have extended a discussion of myth and *Remembering Laughter* beyond the suggestion that his story borders on legend and his characters are, as Stegner himself says, figures who “stand a little taller and a little more distant; they’re like stage figures, in shrouds and cloaks” (*Conversations* 37), I believe one can read Stegner’s first novel as an early look at the very human quandaries introduced when individuals, or, ultimately, a society, choose to lay truth aside and weave tales that they believe more comfortably define the reality they choose. Whether or not Stegner is consciously examining mythologies in *Remembering Laughter*, he clearly sets the stage for later discussions by creating characters who initially revel in storytelling that is meant to entertain and later are nearly consumed by the depths of a family myth from which they cannot allow themselves to emerge.

The Potter's House, a short novel published in a limited run of only 490 copies in 1938, is probably Stegner's least successful fiction publication and, therefore, of little use in an examination of Stegner's role as a western myth-buster; the novel is important primarily as it marks a turning point in Stegner's career from short-form experimentations to longer, more decidedly western projects that employ both realism and an in-depth sense of character. *The Potter's House* is the story of a deaf-mute potter, his deaf wife, their three deaf children, and the one hearing child, Mabel, whom the wife resents. Proud of Mabel's ability to hear, the potter pays for music lessons for her, a luxury the family can scarcely afford. When he agrees to his brother's suggestion that he undergo voluntary sterilization to prevent more non-hearing children, his wife feels slighted by his decision and leaves their once-peaceful home. She is later jailed for drunkenness and indecency, and repeatedly refuses her husband's pleas for a reconciliation. Stegner describes the novel as "a little experiment" in which he was attempting to write a story completely devoid of any auditory images (*Conversations* 31). Forrest and Margaret Robinson criticize the novel for its sentimentality and decided distance from anything familiar to Stegner:

The book's utter improbability, a key element in its failure, can be traced to the fact that the story has no apparent connection to the events or loci of Stegner's background. *Remembering Laughter* was made out of materials from closer to home, which helps to account for its success. *The Potter's House*, on the other hand, was remote from Stegner's experience; it strikes us as "made up."
(102)

Benson criticizes all three of Stegner's early novels after *Remembering Laughter* – *The Potter's House*, *On a Darkling Plain*, and *Fire and Ice* – as “well-made but contrived” and, ultimately, failures to some degree. *The Potter's House* in particular fails, Benson writes, because Stegner does not “feel the drama” of the situation at hand, and, most importantly for my intentions here, because Stegner writes about places and situations about which he knows very little. Where one sees Stegner attacking the mythologies of the West is in those stories that are most familiar and intimate to the author himself.

In *On a Darkling Plain*, published in 1940, the reader gets an early glimpse at Stegner's discomfort with the myths of western self-reliance and rugged individualism – the loner cowboy hero who can survive on his own and who is, in fact, most revered for his mountain man ability to weather crises without reliance on fellow humans. Although *On a Darkling Plain*, like *The Potter's House*, does not yet contain the plot complexities or thorough character development of Stegner's later novels, Stegner does locate the story on the plains of Saskatchewan during the flu epidemic of 1918, a setting and a time that are both reminiscent of his own childhood. Edwin Vickers, a character who makes a second appearance in Stegner's work during the flu epidemic chapter of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, is a Canadian World War I veteran who purchases a homestead on the western plains in hopes of hiding from society and somehow finding himself in the openness of the wide prairie. What Vickers discovers

instead is the necessity of human contact – for basic survival needs, for his own mental health, and, ultimately, to draw together as a community when the flu epidemic arrives in Saskatchewan. Shortly into the novel, Vickers befriends the neighboring farmer, Abel Sundstrom, and his daughter, Ina, who persuades Vickers to watch for her daily smoke signals. Vickers reluctantly learns to enjoy Ina's company, and when the lecherous Kenny Wilde brings the flu to the Sundstrom household, Vickers does not hesitate to come to their aid, even though the move ultimately costs him his life.

Stegner has criticized the novel for not yet relying on the autobiographical fiction form of his later years:

The trouble with that book, and there's plenty of trouble with it, is that it's entirely *made*. It's an imagined novel, and war heroes I knew not one damn thing about. I knew nothing about war. I wasn't even grown up when I wrote the book. So, the experiences of this character Vickers are purely hypothetical, disastrously so, I would say. (*Conversations* 32)

Although Forrest and Margaret Robinson criticize *On a Darkling Plain* for its overstated themes and several contrived scenes, they agree with Benson that the novel marks another turning point in Stegner's literary career as he begins to develop confidence in his ability to handle an extended, realistic narrative: "There is a confidence in this third novel that is lacking in the first two," the Robinsons write, "a confidence that stems from Stegner's close personal acquaintance with his material and that takes its most striking expression in the novel's freedom from artifice" (107). Despite what I agree are the novel's tendencies toward

overstated themes and underdeveloped characters, *On a Darkling Plain* is notable for its early attack on the myths of rugged individualism and self-reliance: Saskatchewan frontier life is not the idyllic existence that allows a man to separate himself cleanly from the world as he searches peacefully for his own sense of self, Vickers discovers; survival on the western frontier instead demands a reliance on others that is both open-minded and reciprocal, lest one slip into the lonely depravity of such an unsavory character as Kenny Wilde.

The final short novel in Stegner's early phase, *Fire and Ice*, marks a definitive step away from the western themes of *Remembering Laughter* and *On a Darkling Plain* as Stegner instead explores the national political climate on a Midwest university campus during a time when the Spanish Civil War dominated international news with fanaticism-versus-communism debates. Paul Condon is an overachieving student who holds down four jobs to keep himself in school and who diligently donates a percentage of his meager earnings to the Young Communist's League. Condon's hatred of capitalism and the middle class culminates, however, in a violent scene in which he finds himself alone in his room with Miriam Halley, a pretty and presumably capitalist middle class student who wants to interview Condon about his jobs for the school newspaper. After too much whiskey, Condon nearly succeeds in raping Halley and later wakes up in jail. Condon blames the Communist Party for his behavior, arguing that the opportunism and ready-made answers of Marxism did not allow him the room

necessary for his own self-discovery. According to the Robinsons, the novel's didacticism destroys its artistic aspirations: "In brief, *Fire and Ice* reads more like an argument than a story. As art, then, the novel is about as close to failure as Wallace Stegner has come" (110). Stegner himself has described the novel as his attempt to address the "hysterical dichotomy" of political left versus right during his early teaching years at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. And while he felt driven to address the current political climate at the time, Stegner rather reluctantly admits that his early novels are far from his best work: "I wish they weren't there sometimes, certain things. *On a Darkling Plain* embarrasses me. *Fire and Ice* embarrasses me, too, because it's politically naïve in the same way that *On a Darkling Plain* is psychologically naïve" (*Conversations* 36).

Again, despite the narrative immaturity of *Fire and Ice*, I believe one can draw thematic suggestions from its contents that point to later Stegner themes: Here Stegner clearly is not comfortable with the apparent neatness of, for example, Communist political doctrine. The human condition is far too complex to allow for pat solutions, as is evidenced in the explosive violence that Condon exhibits when he is confronted with a figure whom he believes represents all that he both envies and despises. Condon is not a simple man, the political and social systems that define his life cannot be simple equations, and the mythologies that define the West as a region cannot be simple archetypes.

- ***Stegner's Middle Phase (1947-1961)***

Stegner's middle phase proved to be a rather soul-searching and frustrating period in his novel-writing career, particularly after the triumph of his 1943 publication of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. His three middle novels – *Second Growth*, *Joe Hill*, and *A Shooting Star* – are all decidedly disparate in narrative voice, and none of the three were very well received by critics. In fact, when residents of Greensboro, Vermont, responded angrily to the striking similarities between the characters in *Second Growth* and their own citizens, Stegner initially withdrew his novel from the publisher, fearing that he and Mary would be unable to summer in Greensboro again. Stegner let his publisher talk him into revising the book, but he still worried about the problems his fictionalized history might cause (Benson, *Wallace* 172). A few years later, the poor sales and harsh criticism that followed the 1950 publication of *Joe Hill* – again for dangerously melding fact with fiction – led Stegner to set aside the novel form for more than a decade before he published *A Shooting Star* in 1961, a novel that steps rather widely astray from his theory that autobiographical fiction serves him best as a fiction writer. Regardless, one can still find embedded in all three of Stegner's middle phase novels an increasing effort to question existing western mythologies, especially in his bold approach to the historical novel *Joe Hill*, whose critical reception has improved as time has distanced readers from the emotional debates surrounding the controversial union leader Joe Hill. It is important to note, too,

that even when Stegner found himself professionally frustrated with one genre, he continued to publish in other genres – in this case, both collected and individual short stories and nonfiction essays – at an astoundingly prolific rate; *Second Growth*, for example, was written during Stegner's most productive period as a writer of short stories.

Although *Second Growth* is set in a New England village, rather than in the West, I believe there are clear connections between Stegner's exploration of western myth and the efforts of the older generation of Westwick, New Hampshire, to consciously maintain the mythological town in which they grew up. Much like in *Remembering Laughter*, the dismantling of myth in *Second Growth* is much larger than selecting individual archetypes that are then proven wrong; instead the entire novel becomes a look at how the human creation of myth that Richard Slotkin describes in *Regeneration through Violence* – a historical occurrence that grows into a tall tale and then becomes embedded in the language of a society, subconsciously influencing the thoughts and beliefs of its members – can be a dangerous and horribly constricting cycle, especially when one is not aware that it is happening. As Forrest and Margaret Robinson write, the main character of *Second Growth* is not a character but the town itself (121). Over time, Westwick – a fictional town modeled after Greensboro, Vermont, where the Stegners frequently spent their summers – has grown from a quiet, conservative New England village to a snobbish resort town that primarily attracts

distinguished university professors. A divisiveness grows between the native Westwickers and the “summer people,” the latter of which threaten the insular quaintness of the original town with their liberal ideas and contemporary mannerisms.

The three characters who figure most prominently in the novel are members of a younger generation who must learn to absorb or reject the ways of small-town Westwick if they are to lead peaceful and fulfilling lives. For Helen Barlow, her own timidity proves fatal. Bored with the town and the restrictions of her puritanical, handicapped parents, Helen is both attracted to and frightened by Flo Barnes, an aggressive lesbian woman who visits for the summer. Helen is unable to overcome the conflict between her attraction to Flo and her fear of the town’s disapproval, and she withdraws even more than before, until ultimately she commits suicide. Abe Kaplan is an opinionated, atheist Jew who moves to Westwick seeking solitude. After he marries Ruth, a Jewish woman who visits one summer, the pair struggles to find acceptance in a town that initially closes its doors to those of the Jewish faith; only the summer people are open-minded enough to see the Kaplans as intelligent, compassionate people. When Abe risks his life in an attempt to thwart Helen’s suicide, the town offers a measure of respect, yet the couple still remains on the margin as the older generation retains its upper hand. The final character who receives focus in the novel is Andy Mount, a young boy whose aspirations and childhood woes are reminiscent of

Stegner's. Andy, too, grows up with a domineering father and passive but caring mother; when his father burns down his barn in an attempt to collect the insurance money and his mother is jailed as an accomplice, Andy is sent to live with a local family that mostly takes advantage of him as free labor. When a private school headmaster offers Andy a prep school scholarship, Andy is unsure whether to accept and leave the only life he has ever known. It takes Helen's suicide and the sudden irreversible stroke of John Mills, another local who has offered Andy an apprenticeship, to convince him to move on. But even as he rides the train out of Westwick and into his new future, the decision to leave remains a wistful one, as becomes clear in the novel's closing paragraph:

At Wells River they would run out of yellow New Hampshire and into green Vermont, and away down along the Connecticut River they would run out of green Vermont into red Massachusetts. The world went on, incomprehensibly huge, and there were a thousand frontiers to be crossed. He went willingly, even eagerly, but he went with the spectral taste of ripe blackberries on his lips and with his eyes already homesick for the autumn woods and the mown meadows and the tarnished silver farms, for the limited responsibilities and the worn-out obligations and the narrow security that it would be fatal to accept. (240)

Death, illness, and the continued influx of the summer people's liberal ideals have left Westwick unsure of its identity or what direction it will turn next; the future, Stegner suggests, rides on the decisions of its younger generation – the ones who will provide Westwick with its much-needed second growth.

As with his earlier novels, Stegner describes *Second Growth* as one of his lesser novels, in part, perhaps, because for him it was an exercise in narrative

description rather than a larger literary project:

It's a minor book, surely. I wrote it pretty fast, and I wrote it primarily for the color. I wanted to say how rainstorms come in off Mount Mansfield, and things like that. I had more things like that to say than I had a story. The story was sort of inept. I still like the book descriptively, but I don't think it's very important in other ways. (*Conversations* 66)

The Robinsons praise Stegner's development of Andy's character, a success they believe comes from Stegner's own close emotional ties to his Andy's background; such Westwick outsiders as Flo Barnes and the Kaplans fall psychologically short, in the Robinsons' opinion, however, presumably because they are figures far outside of Stegner's experiences. Problems arise, according to the Robinsons, when Stegner's sociological study of assimilation and rejection in small town New England is laid bare by shallow characterizations. When the characters are well-developed and real, the study works; when they fall flat, the novel becomes didactic and condescending:

At its best *Second Growth* develops themes that are regional in the deepest sense – literally true for one particular spot of ground, they are widely applicable on a more symbolic plane. Stegner seriously weakened the novel, however, by settling too often for flat characters and prose in which the suggestiveness of art gives way to bald, rather common place sociology. (123)

Jackson Benson compares *Second Growth* with Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, pointing to the commonality of characters who are emotionally repressed by the social pressures of their towns: "It is a book in the American tradition of exposing the reality behind appearances, the Freudian underbelly of the puritanical

respectability of small-town USA,” he writes (*Wallace* 166).

I agree that at its most basic level, *Second Growth* is indeed an interesting study of the repressive tendencies of small-town America, particularly in contrast with the pressures to change introduced by the liberal ideologies of an outside over-educated population that visits the town only occasionally but still maintains a vested interest. But I also believe that *Second Growth* can be read as something deeper than merely a sociological study of the Faulkner-esque third-person plural, especially when one considers the themes and intentions of Stegner’s overall oeuvre. Stegner rarely allowed himself to be limited by the externally imposed geographical or cultural borders of a society. In fact, many of his characters – from Malcolm MacLeod in *Remembering Laughter* to Bruce Mason in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* – spend whole novels seeking the breaking point at which they can separate themselves from the restrictions of society and/or family. But for Stegner the limitations are much larger than merely those imposed by an old-school small-town ideal. The limitations that Stegner explores again and again in his fiction and nonfiction include the dangerously subconscious mythologies and assumptions that extend through family, immediate social settings, and deep into the larger national culture as well. In *Second Growth*, therefore, I believe that Stegner’s examination of the restrictions of small-town America can be expanded comfortably to a broader look at the dangers of the self-imposed western and national mythologies that increasingly define who Americans are as a nation and

as individuals. For Helen Barlow, the conflicts between the assumptions of myth and the reality of who she is prove insurmountable. For Abe Kaplan, the erroneous myths are hurtful but manageable if it means even partial acceptance in the society he has chosen for his home. And for Andy Mount, the myths carry a wistful sense of nostalgia; but even in his youth he recognizes their dangers when he admits that the “narrow security” they offer “would be fatal to accept” (240).

The Preacher and the Slave, which was later retitled *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel*, is the first novel that Stegner bases on an extensive amount of historical research. Although Stegner began his project fully expecting to exonerate Hill, who gained international attention as a martyr for the union movement when he was executed in 1915 for the double murder of a Salt Lake City grocer and his son, Stegner’s research led him to a different conclusion: “As for Joe Hill,” Stegner says, “I think he was probably guilty of the crime the state of Utah executed him for, though I think the state of Utah hardly proved his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. ... [E]very old-timer I have found who knew Joe Hill admits that he was a stick-up man” (Robinson 126). Supporters of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) presented their troubadour, who wrote such songs as “Casey Jones – the Union Scab,” “Workers of the World – Awaken!” and “The Preacher and the Slave,” as a musical union man who was put to death by a Mormon political stronghold that did not want to see the Wobblies gain as much power as they had in the early part of the twentieth century. Claiming that

he was shot in an argument over a woman rather than during a robbery-turned-homicide, Hill insisted that the onus to prove his guilt lay in the hands of state prosecutors, and he refused to identify the woman. After nearly two years of complicated legal litigations, the state of Utah found Hill guilty and executed him by firing squad.

Interestingly it is not the characterization of Joe Hill that interests Stegner in his novel so much as the development of a persistent myth that insisted on Hill's role as union martyr and ultimately led to vehement protests against the conclusions Stegner draws in his novel and in two articles about Hill that were published just before the book. The second article, which appeared in *The New Republic* in 1948 and openly challenges the legend of Joe Hill, brought both letters of protest and an IWW picket line outside the offices of *The New Republic*: "There is no fury like that of the adherent to a myth, scorned," Benson writes (*Wallace* 180). Consider, for example, the 1970 Joan Baez song "Joe Hill" :

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night alive as you and me.
Said I, "But Joe, you're ten years dead,"
"I never died," said he.
"I never died," said he.

"In Salt Lake, Joe," I said to him standing by my bed,
"they framed you on a murder charge."
Says Joe: "But I ain't dead!"

"The Copper Bosses shot you, Joe, they killed you, Joe," says I.
"Takes more than guns to kill a man," says Joe, "I didn't die!"

And standing there as big as life and smiling with his eyes,
Joe says: "What they could never kill went on to organize."

“Joe Hill ain’t dead,” he says to me, “Joe Hill ain’t never died,
when workers strike and organize Joe Hill is by their side.”

From San Diego up to Maine in every mine and mill,
where working men defend their rights,
it’s there you’ll find Joe Hill.

Although Baez’s song was popular some two decades after Stegner’s novel was published, it speaks to Joe Hill’s enduring role as a martyr and as an idealized western hero. Both the Robinsons and Benson agree that *Joe Hill* is perhaps one of Stegner’s most obvious attempts to dismantle a western archetype, and they place Joe Hill in the role of the lone western cowboy hero. The problem with so blatantly debunking a myth to which people lay emotional claim is that those who believe in the myth, as is evidenced above, are quickly offended. According to Benson, “[Joe Hill] was another variety of the ‘lone horseman’ who, Stegner assures us over and over again, was not at the heart of the Western experience. This, of course, was not a message most readers wanted to hear, nor was a debunking of the Joe Hill myth. In this regard the novel was ill-fated from the start” (*Wallace* 178).

As for Stegner, the novel’s poor reception so disappointed him, particularly coupled with the struggles he had in finding a comfort zone with the Greensboro reaction to *Second Growth*, that he set his novel writing aside for a decade. As he tells Richard Etulain, he was struggling to locate his narrative voice, and somehow in the critics’ eyes he seemed to keep missing the mark:

I gave up writing novels after *Joe Hill*. That book got a feeble press and no notice and didn't sell anything, and nobody understood it. ... I didn't have anybody's backing, and I thought, "Oh, Christ, I'm throwing pearls before swine and sounding off in the wilderness where there are no receivers tuned in. This is hopeless." And so I just quit writing fiction. ... I frankly thought I was a kind of anachronism. I thought I was a nineteenth-century prairie child trying to write for the twentieth century – and it wouldn't work. (*Conversations* 71-72)

Despite his readers' inability to see beyond the apparently offensive destruction of a legendary myth, however, I agree that *Joe Hill* is Stegner's second successful effort at presenting and then dismantling the myth of the western cowboy hero. Although both Bo Mason and Joe Hill harbor striking differences from one another and from the image of the typical loner cowboy hero, each fits the archetype with remarkable ease, and for each that very same archetype leads to personal destruction in the end – one by suicide and one by firing squad.

As Stegner presents him, Joe Hill boasts a surprising number of the minor archetypes that define the myth of the western cowboy hero I listed in Chapter 2: self-reliance; aggression; pragmatism; toughness; and emancipation from law, inhibition, convention, restraint, and his past. As for a faith in honesty, property, and sanctity of contract, and a kindness to the poor, women, and children, here is where the legend separates most clearly – and, presumably, offensively to those who believe in the legend of Joe Hill – from the character that Stegner presents in his novel. Those who believe that Hill was executed wrongly also typically believe that he was a quiet, musical man who abhorred drink, dishonesty, and

immoral carousing with women. Stegner, however, presents Hill in a different light. When Hill's increasing hatred of his boss, McHugh, for whom he does physical labor for a few days to earn passage to San Pedro, California, gets the best of him, for example, he robs McHugh in a manner that is both calculatedly violent and decidedly counter to the archetypal qualities of kindness and a faith in sanctity of contract:

Deliberately and without heat he swung the clubbed gun and brought it down on McHugh's thinning hair. The blow made a dull meaty sound, like a pick in soft dirt, and as McHugh pitched sideways Joe caught him and eased him to the floor. With a swift stretch he reached the Coleman lamp and turned the valve. For the moment before the light began to fade he stood waiting above the rancher's body. The gold watch, he saw, had slid out of his pocket as McHugh fell, and lay face up on the floor, a Swiss watch, thick and heavy, that told the second, the minute, the hour, the day and month and year. Fat and rich, a prize worth a hundred dollars, it lay at Joe's feet. (164-165)

The means by which Stegner dismantles the myth of the western cowboy hero, therefore, lies in his presentation of a man who embodies the bulk of the archetypal qualities, but who, like Bo Mason, ultimately is a suspicious and dangerous member of society. Unlike other Stegner critics, I believe Joe Hill provides a more successful unpacking of the cowboy myth than Bo Mason because the task is more subtle in *Joe Hill*.

In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, for example, Bo Mason is a likeable character for a remarkably brief portion of the novel; once he has spoken sharply with his wife and sons and proven his own selfishness with regard to the trials he

forces his family to endure, the reader is securely on the side of Elsa, and later Bruce. The loner cowboy myth, therefore, is unraveling from the novel's opening chapters, and it comes as little surprise when Bo's lifetime of poor decisions leads him to a lonely and hopeless murder/suicide. In *Joe Hill*, on the other hand, Stegner allows three of the novel's four points of view to empathize with Joe Hill, maintaining the innocence of their legendary hero until his emotional execution on the novel's final pages: the voice of an unnamed Wobbly frames the novel, offering a nostalgic look at Hill's martyrdom; the voice of Joe Hill himself, including many of the songs for which the historical Joe Hill was famous, is allowed to gradually build a mythical image of the man whose life proves satisfyingly adventurous and, true to the myth, emancipated from many of the typical demands of society; and the voice of Gustave Lund, Hill's good friend, provides an emotionally supportive but undecided view with regard to Hill's guilt or innocence. The fourth point of view, an omniscient narrator used primarily to move the reader from scene to scene, intrudes occasionally to offer critical judgments about Hill's behaviors that eventually lead one to question his innocence. While the reader, too, clings to the ideal of Hill's martyr status, Stegner carefully drops moments and ideas, such as the above quoted robbery scene, that ultimately make the reader question Hill's honesty right alongside Stegner. The myth of the cowboy hero is dismantled gradually, therefore, an approach that can prove far more effective than what occurs in *The Big Rock*

Candy Mountain because it allows the readers to believe that they have come to this conclusion on their own, rather than being told forthrightly what to believe.

After a decade's hiatus from fiction, *A Shooting Star* was Stegner's one career attempt to write popular fiction, and although he admits that he is not necessarily proud of the result, he certainly succeeded in achieving his goal: *A Shooting Star* was a Literary Guild selection and was translated into more languages than any of his other novels. Despite its "soap-opera problem," says Stegner, *A Shooting Star* was a financially profitable project: "I suppose that's what put me back on the fiction bandwagon," he tells Etulain (*Conversations* 74). Stegner says his intentions in writing *A Shooting Star* were to present the image of the advantaged, over-educated woman of the 1950s who is not allowed to do much more than play the part of decorative housewife: "[I]n the 1950s a woman had nothing to rebel with but her body. She often became either a drunk or a nymphomaniac or both, and that's what she did in this book. But that's close to soap opera material. I was walking a tightwire all the way, knowing the dangers but hoping I could get by them" (74). I believe *A Shooting Star* is one of Stegner's weaker novels not necessarily because of its soap-opera tendencies but because, as in such earlier novels as *The Potter's House* and *Fire and Ice*, Stegner has strayed from the narrative voice with which he is most comfortable. He is experimenting again, still searching for that comfort zone in which to focus his fictional efforts, and although moments of *A Shooting Star* are both intriguing and

engaging, for the most part the novel falls flat with the shallowness of non-literary popular fiction. As Benson writes in his Stegner biography, the novel lacks the intimacy of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* or many of Stegner's later novels:

"Stegner has often spoken of his role as author as that of a ventriloquist, but when he was not playing himself, as in the autobiographical novels, it would seem he could only fully succeed when he projected a voice close to his own" (275).

Despite its need for a fuller sense of characterization, *A Shooting Star* harbors interesting suggestions of the importance of exploring one's past.

As he does in *Angle of Repose*, Stegner relies on the diaries of a family friend's mother to provide the scaffolding for his fiction. Set primarily in contemporary California, *A Shooting Star* is the story of Sabrina Castro, a thirty-five-year-old society woman who is married to a successful physician and finds herself bored and unhappy with the lack of direction in her life. Early in the novel, she flees to her mother's home; her mother, who is as lost in the past as Sabrina is dangerously focused on the present – a parent-child dichotomy that is reminiscent of Lyman and Rodman Ward in *Angle of Repose* – cannot understand her daughter's restlessness. Stegner introduces further themes of conservation, denying the western myth of unlimited resources, when he has Sabrina encourage her mother to donate land for a community park; Sabrina's brother, Oliver, is an arrogant, aggressive businessman who can only see the family holdings as a means to further their already impressive wealth. Oliver, of course, is the

unrestrained usurper of western resources, someone who is unable even in contemporary California to see beyond the western myths of unrestricted freedom and unlimited opportunities. Mrs. Hutchins exposes another side of western archetypes with her glorified reliance on the past; although Stegner makes it clear that one must understand the past if one is to move forward, his point is that one does indeed move forward rather than simply wallowing in something that can potentially become more and more romanticized the longer one ignores its influence on the future. Sabrina is the unwitting myth-buster. Although she herself is confused and ultimately becomes suicidal because, like Helen Barlow in *Second Growth*, she is unable to see beyond the conflicts of what society expects of her and who she wants to be, Sabrina is able to see the importance firstly of setting aside western land for open space and secondly of turning to one's history – preferably a de-mythologized history – for a better sense of self.

The bulk of *A Shooting Star* presents Sabrina's gradual slide into mental instability and despair as she unsuccessfully searches for purpose in her life. When her mother cannot provide the respite she needs, Sabrina turns to her good friends Leonard and Barbara MacDonald, who are raising two children on a meager salary in a small tract house. Sabrina is both amazed by and envious of the tame simplicity of their lives. At one point she accompanies her capitalist brother to Carson City to watch the auto races and finds herself embroiled in a seductive but depressingly lonely weekend with a complete stranger; shortly after

returning to the comfort of the MacDonald home, Sabrina discovers that she is pregnant. After her husband rejects her request to return home and raise the baby as his, Sabrina succumbs to desperation and tries to seduce Leonard MacDonald. When Leonard rejects her advances, Sabrina finds a gun and nearly commits suicide before instead firing at her image in the mirror.

After her brush with suicide, the novel's remaining pages allow Sabrina a slow rise to consciousness and the realization that she must recognize her own roots if she is to heal and, in particular, if she is to raise the child in her womb. Sabrina decides to return home to her mother and, as she describes, let a little air of the future into a too-darkened house focused on the past:

They sat within time, suspended or circling. Sabrina had a moment's clear vision of the two of them, her mother forty years younger, herself forty years older, transposed within the unchanged room, chatting through repetitive teas in gray or golden afternoon light shed on them from the window beyond whose protective glass the sky moved and marbled, gray and white and blue and sometimes remotely starred, but always far-off, never with a promise in it. Was that what she was submitting to? Was all her meaning inside here? She acknowledged the possibility, at least as real a possibility as her resolution of a half hour ago to turn walls into windows and let air into the old crypt of a house. (411)

Stegner does not suggest that the melding of a mythologized past and the reality of the present is a smooth process; clearly both Sabrina and her mother have struggles ahead of them as they work to join their life visions in an effort to focus on the future of a new baby. In this way, I believe *A Shooting Star* is a notable moment in Stegner's development as a novelist. Set in the contemporary West,

the novel looks primarily at the myth of the romantic Old West: Sabrina's effort to donate family land for a park suggests that the West is not a land of unlimited resources; the modern and admittedly soap-opera characteristics of Sabrina's 1950s emotional turmoil deny the timelessness of a still-cowboy West; Sabrina's soul-searching despair counters the myths of western optimism and meliorism, until she and her mother begin to find a kind of balance between optimism and pessimism by the novel's close; and Sabrina's dissatisfied lack of direction in an otherwise outwardly enviable life suggests that the West's promises of unrestricted freedom and unlimited opportunities are dangerously misleading. And over all of these gradually dismantled myths falls the now very Stegner-esque notion that family, personal history, and, ultimately, regional history are essential to a sense of individual identity.

- ***Stegner's Mature Novels (1967-1979)***

When Stegner adopts the first-person voice of Joe Allston in *All the Little Live Things* and, subsequently, *The Spectator Bird*, he truly comes into his own as a mature writer of literary fiction. As Stegner himself admits, his earlier novels primarily were experiments: in narrative voice, in characterization, in realism, in narrative structure, in finding his middle ground between history and fiction. Until discovering the voice of crotchety, opinionated Joe Allston, Stegner was a skeptic about the use of first-person singular, as he describes in an interview with Richard Etulain: "It always seemed to me a way of sprawl; you're windier in the

first person, or I thought you were. And also, it seemed to me you couldn't deal with really strong emotions in the first person because it's simply an awkwardness for an individual to talk about his own emotions" (*Conversations* 76). But with Joe Allston, Stegner finds a means of placing his own voice and opinions in the mouth of a man who has the confidence, and, sometimes, the bold stupidity, to carry things further than Stegner himself would. With Allston, Stegner finds himself both empowered and freed as a creator.

Although he discovers a new narrative tool in his use of a first-person voice, Stegner does not become a permanent convert; instead he simply gains confidence, as is evidenced in the quality of his novels from the late 1960s forward. With *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in 1943, Stegner clearly hits on a successful formula of blending personal history and fictional creation, although the novel's inherent messiness suggests his relative immaturity as a writer. Several experimental novels, many essay collections, and countless articles and short stories later, Stegner publishes *All the Little Live Things* in 1967 and again finds his footing in the mire of fictional narrative devices and stylistic options. *Angle of Repose* appears in 1971 and with its new attempt at first-person singular in the memorable voice of retired historian Lyman Ward, coupled with continual shifts backwards in time to the third-person limited view of Susan Ward, its complexities and characterizations are successful enough to earn Stegner a Pulitzer Prize. Next comes *The Spectator Bird*, another Joe Allston novel and

winner of the 1977 National Book Award. In 1979, Stegner publishes *Recapitulation*, a short novel that follows Bruce Mason beyond the pages of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Although Stegner says he experimented with a first-person voice in *Recapitulation*, he ultimately decided that Bruce's story works better in third-person limited, which also more cleanly follows the narrative approach of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Stegner's final novel, *Crossing to Safety*, is published in 1987, and while it also does not incorporate a first-person singular voice, Stegner again writes with great emotional investment and confidence, and I believe the novel is one of his best. His discovery of the Joe Allston voice, therefore, is not so specifically enlightening as to lead to a thereafter singular approach to his novels; I believe the voice simply allows Stegner to discover his own voice on the page, and one sees it consistently evidenced in his work from the publication of *All the Little Live Things* until his death in 1993. And, as his confidence in narrative voice increases, so, too, does his ability to subtly and effectively question the erroneous archetypes and mythologies of the American West.

In *All the Little Live Things*, Joe Allston is a newly retired literary agent who moves with his kind wife Ruth from the fast-paced mayhem of Manhattan to the rural hills of Northern California, where the two have purchased land and hope to find peace and tranquility in nature and avoid the human intrusiveness of neighbors. Joe is a gardener from the beginning, and it is in his determined search

for flowers, fresh produce, and the sanctity of new growth that one sees echoes of the western myths of unlimited resources and the dream of a land of milk and honey. Joe is, after all, an East Coast transplant, and his gardening efforts begin innocently enough – they begin, I would argue, at a place where Joe wants to believe the myth and see his land produce with the ease and beauty of a glorified West – but soon enough Joe has declared war on weeds and rodents. Joe finds peace, and often humorously so, in continually ridding his personal Garden of Eden of the pests that threaten to disturb what might otherwise be considered a perfect life. He is no romanticist, but a wholly pragmatic destroyer of intruders who quickly rewrites his myth to include the pesticides necessary to clean up reality a little:

So here I am contentedly sprinkling cutworm bait along my row of young tomato plants and amusing myself thinking what a quaint idea it is to perfect Eden with poisons, and wondering (let us suppose) what Adam and Eve did without rotenone, melathion, lindane, chlordane, sodium ammate, and the other deterrents. In the days when the lion lay down with the lamb, did the flea lie down with the dog, or the gnat with the itching mortal? Did the aphid make friends with the rose, or the San Jose scale with the peach tree? Did the picnicking dame consort with the poison ivy? And as I am ruminating in this fashion, I see the tomato plant at the end of the row shiver, stagger, and sink two inches into the ground. Within ninety seconds I am into the house and out again with the shotgun. (56)

Moments later, Joe fires at a twitching tomato plant and blows a two-foot circle into the earth; with his toe, he digs up an old bull gopher with fleas still scurrying across his belly. It is at this moment that Joe meets the first intruder – albeit a

welcomed one – into his neighbor-free retirement: Marian Catlin.

Marian and her husband, John, are Maine transplants who have bought neighboring property. Marian is newly pregnant, suffering from a sudden recurrence of breast cancer, and raising their six-year-old daughter Debby as she struggles to maintain her pregnancy despite her tragic illness. She is, Joe quickly learns, a lover of “all the little live things,” and her often romantic optimism both befuddles and intrigues Joe. As Marian argues when they first meet, she cannot see why Joe must battle the predators that naturally are attracted to his rather unnatural attempt at a personal Eden: “I should think you’d have a nice natural garden where things are in balance and you don’t have to kill anything,” she tells Joe after witnessing his murder of the gopher. “Is it fair to plant a lot of plants that were never intended to grow here, and then blame the gophers for liking them?” (59). Marian is a brave, upbeat, and often supernaturally strong young woman whom Joe fancies a surrogate daughter of sorts. She defies the western myths of unlimited resources, unrestricted freedom, and timelessness with her passion for conservation and her love of all living creatures, and yet in many ways she exhibits the optimism and meliorism often associated dangerously with a romantic Old West. Somehow, though, Marian’s romanticism is not blind but hopeful; besides, what more might one expect from a woman who is determined to maintain her pregnancy despite the inevitable threat on her own life, and who bravely and gradually separates herself from her young daughter in order to foster

in Debby a dependence on John that will be so essential once Marian has died?

The second intruder in Joe's otherwise peaceful world is the young hippie student Jim Peck who, with Joe's reluctant permission, sets up camp on an unused part of the Allston's property and eventually establishes a "University of Free Mind" that is accompanied by what Joe can only assume are raucous parties and free-love orgies. Joe, who agrees to let Peck camp out on his property because of Ruth's urging, finds himself increasingly irritated by this young man of what he sees as all-too-typical 1960s hippie naiveté beneath a caveat of know-it-all confidence. Peck is an interesting twist on the myth of the western cowboy hero, because while he certainly is no cowboy, he embodies many of the minor myths that accompany the larger archetype: he believes firmly in rugged individualism and self-reliance, although Joe soon discovers that Peck has sneakily tapped into his electricity and water without first asking permission; he lives a life that is romantically emancipated from the law, inhibition, convention, restraint, and the past, and in so doing becomes a rather unsavory, unclean hippie sort who is so wrapped up in his own thinking that he never even realizes that Marian Catlin is ill; and he also subscribes to his own brand of toughness and of pragmatism, which Joe shortly exposes as dangerously self-defined in a way that excludes reality and focuses only on his own selfish needs.

Another character who raises issues of western mythology is Dave Weld, the landowner who has sold the Allstons their property and whose disregard for

the land Joe finds appalling. When, in anticipation of selling his land to build suburban subdivisions, Dave clear cuts a hillside that once perfected the serenity of the Allstons' view, Joe adds his despair at the now-naked hill to his sorrow over Marian's illness and his lifelong regrets regarding his son, a hippie surfer who alienated himself from his father and died suspiciously – possibly an accident, possibly suicide – far from his parents' home:

I looked Weld's work over with bitterness. The hill that once swelled into view across the ravine like an opulent woman lazily turning was mutilated and ruined, and Weld was obviously not through yet. Only an amateur planning commission unable to read a contour map could ever have approved that site plan; only a land butcher could have proposed it and carried it out. And though I had every hope that the people backing Weld would swallow him before the operation was completed, there would be no restoring what he had ruined. It reminded me too painfully; it made me sick to look. (15)

Although Stegner presents Dave as an unwitting participant in a majority-led belief in the myths of unlimited opportunities and unlimited resources, the damage Weld both commits and allows are tantamount, in Joe's mind, to human death.

The novel's present tense is with Joe after Marian and her baby have died, John and Debby have moved away, and Jim Peck is long gone. The darkness of such moments only hint at the trials not yet seen, as the bulk of the novel occurs in the flashbacks where the reader first meets the Catlins, watches Peck set up his makeshift home, and chuckles over Joe's gardening battles and his attempts, alongside Ruth, to help Marian and John ease most gently into what will surely be Marian's final stage of life. Although many critics have pointed to the

generational conflicts between Jim Peck and Joe Allston as the heart of the novel, Stegner argues that the Peck hippie figure actually appeared as a kind of add-on, while his true intentions lay with Marian and her faithfulness to the living world around her: “The hippie just wandered into it by accident and became a rather half-witted Principle of Evil,” he tells Etulain. “The book is about ‘little live things’ and the relations one has to life” (*Conversations* 75). The Robinsons describe *All the Little Live Things* as a dark look at humanity and its often egregious foibles: “*All the Little Live Things* is its creator’s most straightforward, comprehensive meditation on the bleakness of the human condition since *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*” (141); and surely part of this bleak condition, I would argue, is society’s subconscious reliance on wholly erroneous regional and national mythologies. According to Benson, Stegner’s successful use of the first-person singular is what makes *All the Little Live Things* such an engaging moment in the progression of Stegner’s role as a novelist:

All the Little Live Things in several respects goes beyond previous Stegner novels. As pointed out earlier, it deals extensively with the subject matter of both ecology and conservation without preachiness. And in addition to breaking new ground in a novel with his use of the first-person narrator and in his use of contemporary experience, the novel is also his most entertaining, primarily because it is so witty. (*Wallace* 321)

If one joins the views of these two critical approaches together – the bleakness of the human condition presented by the Robinsons and the success of Stegner’s first-person narrative suggested by Benson – one arrives at a place where Joe

Allston's honest, judgmental voice effectively pushes toward a consideration of the unspoken western mythologies that can so dangerously and incorrectly define the West.

Although Stegner's next novel, *The Spectator Bird*, won the 1977 National Book Award, the novel is an example of Stegner's frustration with mostly East Coast-based critics whom he believed were unable to see beyond the confines of the dime store Western and grant literary credence to a serious novel or novelist from the American West. Like the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angle of Repose* in 1971, *The Spectator Bird* was never reviewed by the *New York Times*, and Stegner tells Etulain that this fact "must be, somehow, attributable to some prejudice." In his review in *Magill's Literary Annual 1977*, however, Thomas N. Walters praises the novel, clearly recognizing Stegner's ability to transcend the dime novel blueprint. According to Walters, Stegner boldly takes on such ambitious themes as old age and marriage, intertwining them masterfully with an ultimately shocking discovery of deception and Nazi-like incestuous human breeding: "Stegner's satisfying ability to limn our times is surely one of our most precious natural resources," Walters writes. "We know ourselves better for his looking for us. In this novel he has important things to say, and he says them with stylistic sureness and mature power" (Arthur 43).

The two primary western mythologies that I believe *The Spectator Bird* tackles are the myth of rootlessness, or an emancipation from the past, and the

myth of timelessness, which Stegner addresses through a masterful blending of past, present, and future until time becomes nearly one continuous entity rather than a shuffle forward, then backward, then forward again. The novel opens with a frustrated Joe Allston, who is, at age seventy, beginning a battle with old age, and who is struggling to come to terms with his own identity. Although Stegner does not mention the events of *All the Little Live Things* in this second Joe Allston novel, the reader knows by Joe's age that several years have passed since the Allstons' experiences with Marian Catlin and Jim Peck. Joe's frustration regarding his own identity ties directly into the western myth of rootlessness as an ideal: Instead of taking pride in his typically American piecemeal connection to an immigrant past, Joe regrets that he never knew his father and is wracked with guilt over the childhood and adolescent impatience he showed his Danish immigrant mother, whose incorrect English and general clumsiness embarrassed him.

As the reader learned in *All the Little Live Things*, Joe's son, Curtis, died a young and rebellious adult in a questionable surfing accident – either he slipped from his surfboard or he purposefully let go – thus leaving Joe disconnected not only from his past but from his future as well. As he begins to thumb through personal journals of a trip he and Ruth took to Denmark twenty years earlier, ostensibly to visit Joe's mother's old village of Bregninge in search of ties to his past as well as to heal from their son's sudden and tragic death, Ruth asks that he

read aloud: "I was watching you while you read it," she tells him. "It *matters* to you. ... Joe, why *not* aloud? Why not together?" (30). And although Joe is at first reluctant and uncomfortable, knowing full well the messiness that may arise regarding their marriage and his own brief but unspoken infidelity of two decades prior, he acquiesces, and the novel progresses as a careful rendering of an aging husband and wife reading together and occasionally discussing aloud a past that they seem to be discovering anew alongside the reader.

While in Denmark, Joe and Ruth stay for several months with the Countess Astrid Wredel-Krarup, a woman who knew Joe's mother and the mysterious reason why she was able to emigrate to the United States alone at age sixteen with no money and, in Joe's mind, no discernible motive. In a visit to the family estate, the Allstons soon learn from the Countess that her scientist father conducted horrifying experiments in human breeding, resulting in a family "stud book" of numerous half siblings. Although both of the Countess' parents committed suicide once the public realized the extent of her father's experimentations, her brother, Count Eigil Rodding, is continuing the experiments, Joe learns, and his mother, a servant in the Rodding home, presumably had her passage to America paid by the elder Count as a means of getting her out of the way of his "work." The drama of the Allstons' Denmark stay increases as Joe finds himself attracted to the Countess, in part for her natural beauty and in part for the loneliness of a past that has endlessly forced itself onto

her present, demanding a kind of stoic dignity reminiscent of America's westward-bound pioneers. In a suddenly passionate moment, Joe kisses the Countess, although their ardor is restrained and fleeting, as they know that they cannot have one another. When Joe and Ruth return to the United States, for two decades they never speak of the incident, although Ruth seems to know that something passed between her husband and the Countess; it isn't until they sit down together, now in their seventies, and read aloud the journals that recount a past both painful and revealing that they begin to piece together their own marriage.

In the novel's dark themes of incest and human in-breeding, a plotline that Jackson Benson compares to the classic American gothic romance (*Wallace* 370), Joe Allston discovers that perhaps this western American anomaly of rootlessness is better than the horrifying stud books and extensive family history records of the Rodding family. Clearly Joe does not see rootlessness as a romanticized ideal, since it is, in part, what was initially driving him to a rather furtive search for personal answers, but he also no longer sees his own ill-defined American past as destructive or somehow unable to provide him with the sense of identity that he craves. Rootlessness becomes his identity, and, as he is beginning to realize, that may not be such an awful thing.

As for dismantling the myth of timelessness in yet another novelistic approach to blending past and present – comparable, of course, to similar efforts

in *Angle of Repose*, *Remembering Laughter*, and even *A Shooting Star* – here I believe Stegner succeeds even more fully than in his previous novels. Benson calls this effort a means of “syncopating” time, and he credits Stegner’s use of the first-person singular for easing his ability to make the transitions neatly and efficiently: “Bringing the past into the present, making it relevant, is a recurring theme in these final novels,” he writes (*Wallace* 372). But I believe in *The Spectator Bird*, unlike in *Angle of Repose*, the transitions between past and present are nearly imperceptible. Stegner does not quote Joe’s journals as one might quote from an open book, placing the reader in the room next to Ruth to listen quietly and voicelessly; instead the reader slips cleanly from Denmark to California, from past to present and back again, with many of the remembered moments reading with an intensity and immediacy that challenges even the novel’s most present scenes. Consider, for example, the moment when Joe and the Countess kiss:

“Astrid ...”

“You have said my name, finally. I wondered if you ever would.”

“Astrid, Astrid, Astrid,” I said. “I’ll say it ten thousand times a day, in penance or prayer or praise or however you want it. But you can’t stay here. I can’t go away and *leave* you here!”

“Oh, my dear Joseph,” she said. She put up her face, and I kissed it. Her hands came up around my neck. For a second or two we were molded, fused, vulcanized together. Then she was pushing at my chest, wanting away.

I didn’t try to hold her. I couldn’t look at her. I turned and looked instead at the spread of still water. My eyes were hot. Blinking, grinding my teeth, I concentrated on the lake, the dim rushes, the dreary almost-light. Day had sneaked up on us. I could

see the tangled grass, the running blackberry vines. If anything had been watching our ridiculous, scalding, hopeless embrace in that suicide's clearing, it had withdrawn into the woods. (206)

The moment is heated, passionate, and – even in the hands of a retired literary agent – hardly the random meanderings of a personal journal. One realizes how closely the past and the present are fusing together, particularly as the novel progresses, but somehow there is not time nor an inclination to bother over such details as the improbability of journal entries that read with rather unlikely immediate personal insight and literary finesse. Instead one emerges from *The Spectator Bird* with a realization of just how much of a farce the western archetype of glorified timelessness must be; as Stegner demonstrates so masterfully in his National Book Award-winning novel, whether one likes it or not, the past is always present, and it is when one is most conscious of one's yesterdays that one is best able to appreciate what is happening today.

Recapitulation is another novel where Stegner toys effectively with ways of pulling the past into a sense of immediacy in the present. As he tells Etulain, this idea of placing importance on the past is something he has found missing in most modern literature, particularly western literature, save William Faulkner:

I think that's what western novels too frequently don't do, and some modern novels that aren't western don't do. Hemingway, for instance, has no past in him at all. ... Ordinarily we live a three-generational life. Hemingway is absolute present – present tense, people between twenty and thirty-five, no parents, no children. ... [A]bsolutely different from Faulkner. Faulkner is *rich* with associations from the past. All those hoofs that are thundering through his Sartoris stories. (*Conversations* 78)

Benson carries further Stegner's discussion of Faulkner, comparing *Recapitulation* to *The Sound and the Fury* and suggesting that, above all, *Recapitulation* is a novel about the nature of memory and of individual perspective:

To a certain extent this is Stegner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Like the Faulkner novel, *Recapitulation* is a book about time and its multiplicity of meanings in human experience, about the history of a family in its decline, and about the moving on from a rural past to an industrial present. Both the Faulkner and the Stegner works are imbued with sadness and regret and would seem to be attempts to exorcise ghosts, painful memories of loss, conflict, and rejection. (Wallace 385)

Stegner, who refers to *Recapitulation* as a "trailer" novel to *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, says that in *Recapitulation* Bruce Mason often is not sure whether his memory is "a historian or an artist and whether it may also not be a psychological healer, twisting things in order to make them more attractive or palatable" (*Conversations* 54). Stegner says that in toying with the complexities of memory and of an individual's personal perceptions, he initially battled with the narrative voice of *Recapitulation*. After the success of Joe Allston's voice in *All the Little Live Things* and *The Spectator Bird*, Stegner tried to write *Recapitulation* in a similar bold and moody first-person singular voice, but soon realized that echoes of his *Big Rock Candy Mountain* story simply could not fall under such an intimate and occasionally caustic approach. When he recognized that the shorter novel indeed was trying to be a trailer to *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner

rewrote it in Bruce Mason's third-person limited voice, and although the interplay between past and present at times proved more challenging than in his three previous novels, the new point of view fit (*Conversations* 55).

Pieced together from several disparate short stories, *Recapitulation* stands apart from Stegner's previous efforts to blend the past and present because in this novel, Bruce Mason relies on memory rather than on physical sources, such as the personal journals that Joe Allston reads in *The Spectator Bird* or the letters and diaries that Lyman Ward relies on in *Angle of Repose*. This emphasis on memory is both curious and revealing, as one begins to see the moments where individuals rewrite their own pasts – whether because of the passage of time or simply because such rewriting allows for a healthier mental state – as is evidenced in Bruce Mason's adult return to Salt Lake City, the primary town of his childhood, to bury an aunt. Although his aunt is the last remaining member of his family, Bruce, a man in his sixties who has been a lifelong bachelor, soon realizes that she is the least of the painful memories and personal trials that need burying. Immediately in the novel's opening pages, as Bruce is driving into Salt Lake City for the first time in years, one senses the strangeness of a journey that clearly will demand a thorough rewriting of Bruce's perceptions of his own past history:

Driving into that, smelling the foul, exciting salt-flat odor, Bruce Mason began to feel like the newsreel diver whom the reversed projector sucks feet first out of his splash. Probably fatigue from the hard day and a half across the desert explained both the mirage-like look of the city and his own sense of being run backward toward the beginning of the reel. Perhaps his errand had something

to do with it; it was not the first time he had returned to Salt Lake to bury someone. But those previous returns, dim and silvery in his memory, almost subliminal, were from the east, through the mountains. This route suggested something else. This was the road out which, at sixteen or seventeen, he used to drive much too fast in stripped-down Ford bugs with screaming companions in the rumble seat. They must have driven back, too, but he remembered only the going out. To see the city head on, like this, was strange to him. (8)

On the surface level, *Recapitulation* is a quiet novel, with few direct human encounters and most of the present-tense action occurring as Bruce wanders his former hometown, conjuring up distant memories as he goes. The bulk of the novel focuses on Bruce's unresolved relationship with his violent and domineering father, as Stegner says: "What *Recapitulation* boils down to, ultimately, is the domination that a harsh and dominating father can exert even after his death upon a son" (*Wallace* 384).

As Bruce reflects on his father midway through the novel, he begins to shift – influenced, perhaps, simply by Bruce's own impending old age – from blind anger at the injustices of his childhood to an attempt to understand why his father behaved as he did. He begins to wonder, for example, whether his father was as unhappy with Bruce and his mother as they were with him, or whether Harry "Bo" Mason was able to take quiet pride in the small, albeit frequently immoral, accomplishments of his life:

Even in illicit enterprises there would probably be professional pride and parental vanity. A pickpocket might be pleased if his children, in their play, paid him the compliment of imitation. Even Harry Mason, proud of his ability to make long drives, stay awake

thirty-six hours at a stretch, keep out of trouble, smell danger in advance and avoid it, might have been glad of company on his trips if either his wife or his sons had even indicated a desire to go with him. Perhaps he resented their resentment of him. Perhaps he thought of himself as a good provider inadequately appreciated. (96-97)

Other people and events from his past that Bruce is led to rethink include his friendship with Joe Mulder; his relationship with girlfriend Nola; his hatred of Jack Bailey; his friendship with Holly and subsequent introduction to the art world; his decision to attend law school rather than marry Nola; his love for tennis; and, above all, the marriage and parenting skills of his mother and father.

In an essay titled “Wallace Stegner’s *Recapitulation*: Memory as Art Form,” Merrill Lewis describes the novel as a natural extension of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, which closes leaving much of Bruce Mason’s adolescence and college years, including his changing relationships with his parents and with his own peers, unexplored. Yet *Recapitulation* is not merely a sequel to the first novel, picking up strands of story and continuing with more information and more personal memories, Lewis argues. Instead *Recapitulation* effectively is one man’s – Bruce Mason’s – initially unintentional efforts at rewriting his own history: “[*Recapitulation* is] a reflective reconsideration and re-creation of events narrated during the last seven or eight years of [*The Big Rock Candy Mountain*], the reflections of Bruce Mason himself, about himself, conducted forty-five to fifty-five years after the original events” (Arthur 210-211). Bruce’s apparent reconciliation with his deceased father by the end of *Recapitulation* does not

include forgiveness, Lewis writes, but simply a rethinking, a rewriting, and, ultimately, a larger dose of human understanding (221). To remember, Stegner demonstrates, is not simply to passively sit back and observe a film reel, but to leap backwards, if necessary, out of that same reel as a wholly active participant; to remember is to see oneself as both participant and observer, both artist and historian, both creator and created.

In connecting *Recapitulation* with Stegner's efforts to de-mythologize the American West, I believe he is clearly toying here more than ever with the notion of mythology and memory as a whole: How many times, one might be led to wonder, has the archetypal romanticized Old West been rewritten in the memories both of its participants and of its observers? If mythology is a kind of societal memory, perhaps one must learn, as Bruce Mason learns in *Recapitulation*, to draw to the forefront the consciousness of such memories so that they do not dictate one's thoughts subconsciously, as is too often the case with erroneous mythologies, but so that one is able to both recognize and use the unique perceptions and memories embedded in the West's regional past. As Bruce muses toward the end of the novel, perhaps the human tendency toward mythology, whether individual or societal, is simply inevitable:

An undocumented life had its limitations, but also its advantages. He was not bound by verifiable facts. What he liked about the past he could coat with clear plastic, and preserve it from scratching, fading, and dust. What he did not like, he could either black out or revise. Memory, sometimes a preservative, sometimes a censor's stamp, could also be an art form. (275-276)

The danger comes when one does not realize the powerful role of the individual as artist.

- ***Stegner's Final Novel (1987)***

As Benson writes in his Stegner biography, Stegner's final novel, *Crossing to Safety*, was a likely close to a novel-writing career that encompassed many of Stegner's personal memories but had not yet broached his love of New England, where he and Mary frequently spent their summers as a hiatus from their life in Northern California:

Looking back on these last years of Stegner's career, one can see that the writing of *Crossing to Safety* was one of a series of closures to his life. He had written about Saskatchewan and childhood in *Wolf Willow* and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, about his teenage years in Salt Lake City in *Recapitulation*, and about life in California in *All the Little Live Things*. But even though *Second Growth* was about Vermont, he had never really written about his own experience, the complex emotions that the people and the landscape of Vermont had brought to him over the years. (406)

Crossing to Safety is a quiet, intimate novel that Stegner says he did not intend to publish initially: "I wrote it as a sort of memoir more for Mary and myself than for anything else. ... These people were our close friends, and at the same time they had some problems which were very personal; and an honest portrait of them, as honest as I could make it, I thought might be offensive to the family" (*Conversations* xi). But when Stegner sent the manuscript to members of the

Gray family, all of the children responded that he should go ahead and publish the novel. Presumably because he first wrote it as a personal memoir rather than a novel, very little happens in *Crossing to Safety*. The entire novel occurs in one day, a day when Larry and Sally Morgan return to New England to visit their closest friends of nearly forty years, Sid and Charity Lang, as Charity is dying. The bulk of the novel occurs in flashback, and Stegner again employs the first-person singular voice that he mastered with *Joe Allston*, although Larry Morgan's voice is much quieter and more modestly contemplative. As the novel's novelist, Larry, too, wonders about the quietness of the story at hand:

How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these? Where are the things that novelists seize upon and readers expect? Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish? Where are the suburban infidelities, the promiscuities, the convulsive divorces, the alcohol, the drugs, the lost weekends? Where are the hatred, the political ambitions, the lust for power? Where are speed, noise, ugliness, everything that makes us who we are and makes us recognize ourselves in fiction? (241)

Despite its virtually nonexistent plot, I believe *Crossing to Safety* emerges as one of Stegner's finest novels primarily because of its intimacy. The story of the Lang/Morgan friendship clearly is a dear one to Stegner himself, and his characterizations and emotional explorations are both complex and revealing. And as I have stated previously, the more in tune Stegner is with his characters, the more smoothly he is able to introduce and subtly unpack the misleading archetypes of the American West.

Although *Crossing to Safety* is set primarily in New England rather than in the West, Stegner draws clear parallels between the rootlessness of the West Coast Morgans and the wealthier, family-connected East Coast Langs. Although the Morgans are less encumbered by familial expectations and a sense of social obligation than the Langs, Stegner is careful not to imbue Sally and Larry with stereotypical western characteristics. Both are optimists, especially considering Sally's crutches and lifelong battles with physical illnesses, but they are not blind in their hope for a fulfilling future. The Morgans also must subscribe to a philosophy of self-reliance to a certain degree, since they have no family to rely on, but they are hardly too proud to turn to friends in times of need, much as Stegner has suggested the region's early pioneers had to rely on one another for survival. Finally, Larry and Sally seem to enjoy a broader view of the freedom and possibilities of this nation, although, again, their outlook is not encumbered by the assumption that they are emancipated from the laws and expectations that the rest of the world must live under. They live freer lives than the Langs, but they recognize that life is not a fairy tale myth; happy endings are something that one strives for and ultimately earns, rather than sitting back and waiting passively as a Jim Peck might do.

Despite the love and attachment evidenced in the Morgan/Lang friendship over the years, darkneses color the prose in *Crossing to Safety* as well: Charity's harsh expectations of her free-spirited husband; the Langs' frequent bickering;

Charity's illness; the ups and downs of academic life; and – always in the background but rarely stepping to the forefront – the crutches that remind one of Sally's polio and, ultimately, the mortality of all living things. Here again, Stegner dismantles the ideals of a romanticized West simply by presenting a congenial, happy western couple whose lives are continually dominated by the difficulty of Sally's crippled legs. As Stegner has perfected over the years, he reminds one of the Morgans' struggle in subtle, indirect ways – a drowning mouse that disrupts Larry's late-night walk just as he is contemplating his wife's brave battle with her polio, for example:

The moon stares back at me from the pool. Then it cracks, crazes, shivers, spreads on tiny, almost imperceptible ripples. Some moth or night-flying beetle has blundered into it, I think. But when I put my flashlight on the spot from which the ripples seem to emanate (and who is ever without a flashlight?) I see that a mouse is drowning there. He is a very small mouse, hardly bigger or heavier than a grasshopper, and he apparently cannot sink. But he must have been in the water for some time, for his struggles are feeble, and as I watch, they stop completely. He lies on the surface, his ripples spread and dissipate and smooth out. (337)

But when Stegner retrieves the mouse from what seems to be his watery grave and deposits him on the grass, the creature stirs after a moment and then disappears into the weeds. It is a small but poignant moment – a reminder both of life's invariable cycles and of the complexities that prevent Stegner from ever resting on the simplified philosophies of a particular belief or ideal. If Wallace Stegner adheres consistently to any specific code in his novels, it is a code of humanity that allows the inconsistencies of being human to override any assumptions that

one might hope to impose from outside of an individual's life. Even as he works to frustrate the erroneous archetypes of a mislabeled American West, he reminds one, in such simple moments as the fluttering movements of a mouse fighting for life, that the myths do indeed harbor moments of truth. It is what one does with that truth, and how conscious one is of where the truth ends and the misperceptions begin, that makes all the difference.

Chapter 6

From Stegner's Contemporaries to Today's Western Writers

For James R. Hepworth, editor of the 1998 book *Stealing Glances: Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner* and author of the introduction to Nancy Colberg's 1990 descriptive bibliography of Stegner's works, Wallace Stegner was a "world class American writer in the tradition of Henry James, Mark Twain, and yes, William Faulkner" who deserved a Nobel Prize for his lifelong achievements as a writer, a conservationist, and a teacher: "If, indeed, there is another living American writer, man or woman, any more deserving of the Nobel Prize than Wallace Stegner, then I would like to know where to begin reading," Hepworth writes in his introduction (Colberg xxx). According to Hepworth, former Stegner student and environmental writer Edward Abbey also considered Stegner "the only living American worthy of the Nobel Prize in literature" (xviii). And while T.H. Watkins, vice president of the Wilderness Society in Washington D.C., did nominate Stegner for the Nobel Prize in July of 1987, the award eluded him in his lifetime. As Stegner writes in "Born a Square," literary western writers have found themselves entangled in the erroneous mythologies that define their region and, therefore, prevent others from reading their works without the presumption of such archetypes as the mythical cowboy hero or the unlimited opportunities of a glorified Old West:

[T]he western writer is in a box with booby traps at both ends. ... I mean that he has a hard time discovering what is in him wanting to be said, and that when he does discover it he has difficulty getting a hearing. His box is booby-trapped at one end by an inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition, and at the other end by the coercive dominance of attitudes, beliefs, and intellectual fads and manners destructive of his own. (*Sound* 170)

Like former Stegner student Larry McMurtry, who once proudly and sarcastically wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the words “Minor Regional Writer” (Rankin 73), Stegner found himself frustrated by what he saw as the limitations of his profession, and he spent a lifetime seeking to recognize, question, and ultimately dismantle the myths that he believed held western writers to an all-too limited stereotype of formula and caricature, fable and rootlessness. The literary climate has changed since Stegner wrote “Born a Square” in 1964, however, and I believe that it is because of Stegner’s efforts that today’s western literary writers have a somewhat easier time of gaining national critical attention. The battle is not yet won, as writer Craig Lesley, who heralds from Oregon and sets his novels primarily in the Pacific Northwest, will attest in his frustration to gain recognition beyond the West Coast, but I believe the nation is headed in a direction that is allowing the western literary canon that Stegner helped recognize and encourage to grow in a way that fosters both a more enlightened sense of history and an open acceptance of a culturally and socially diverse contemporary West.

Among Stegner’s contemporaries, writers from the American West who were publishing their literature primarily in the mid-twentieth century, lie the

beginnings of a Stegner-inspired conscientiousness regarding the archetypal assumptions that have too often defined the western region. With Vardis Fisher, A.B. Guthrie, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark, for example, one sees the beginnings of a more conscious step away from the archetypal mythologies that Stegner helps call to the forefront; and with John Steinbeck, one begins to see a new and, one might argue, more worldly kind of literary western. Among today's contemporary western writers, the individual voices become more pronounced – the voice of the Native American writer, for instance, or of Ivan Doig as a Montana writer – and critical discussions of erroneous western mythologies are no longer as surprising or groundbreaking as they were in Stegner's day. While it would be difficult to attempt here to address all of the notable literary writers of today's American West, I have attempted to select a variety of distinctively individual novelists to use as a guidepost to judge Wallace Stegner's effect on the current generation of western writers: E. Annie Proulx, Ivan Doig, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Craig Lesley, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie. In selecting these authors, I have expanded Stegner's definition of the American West as primarily the Rocky Mountain West to include the Pacific Northwest and corners of the Southwest, particularly where Native American voices that also stretch up along the Rocky Mountains are involved. As Stegner suggested with his publication of *One Nation* in the 1940s and again in his interviews with Richard Etulain in the 1970s, Native Americans have seen a kind of artistic

renaissance in the 1960s and 1970s that has brought their voices to the forefront. N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko catalyzed the renaissance with plot structures and narrative styles that are, for one, decidedly more circular than the typically linear plots of Anglo western novelists, for example, and the young Spokane Indian writer Sherman Alexie has been turning heads for more than a decade with his bold attacks on the anger and hurtfulness experienced by both whites and Native Americans as their cultures are brought together beyond the confines of the reservation. Whether or not one agrees with Hepworth and Abbey that Stegner was indeed Nobel Prize-worthy, Wallace Stegner has marked a kind of turning point in the development of a western literary canon; with Stegner, the nation has learned to recognize and begin to move beyond the mythologies that embed themselves in its language, its thoughts, and its dreams, and foster a literature that is rich in both history and in the diversity of today's contemporary West.

- *Stegner's Contemporaries ...*

When Stegner lists in his essay "Born a Square" the authors whom "anyone who wishes to understand what the West has amounted to in a literary way will have to study," he includes Vardis Fisher, A.B. Guthrie, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark:

They are good writers, of varying kinds; when I am feeling especially confident I put myself in their company. We have all

written books that deal with the settlement and the mythic past, the confrontation between empty land and imported populations, which is the salient historical fact about the West, as about America at large. We have all found it difficult or impossible to make anything of the contemporary West except as articles for *Holiday*, and when we have finished our most personal books, we have all taken refuge in history, fictionalized or straight. (*Sound* 178)

Vardis Fisher was both Stegner's contemporary and the first writer to suggest that Stegner himself might have a future in the profession. Stegner met Fisher while a freshman at the University of Utah, and while his aspirations at the time did not extend much beyond earning his degree and perhaps making a career of working in retail, Stegner was awed and intrigued by Fisher's caustic yet stimulating approach to education. While Fisher had not yet published any of his thirty-six books when Stegner met him, Stegner found in Fisher, who taught Stegner's freshman composition course, an intellectual and worldly challenge that began to push him beyond the cushioned walls of the Mormon society that surrounded them. According to Stegner, Fisher was "one of those teachers who liked to take can openers to unopened minds. He had the notion we were all Mormon provincials, that we'd never seen anything, and that a real idea would shock the pants off us. It was thrilling, in a way, to be treated almost like an adult" (Benson, *Wallace* 46).

Like Stegner, Fisher often wrote a kind of autobiographical fiction, and his novels emphasized an adept sense of history that sought to extend beneath the myths and uncover the truth of the Rocky Mountain West. Fisher's published

works include such projects as *Children of God* (1939), a novel tracing early Mormonism from New England through 1890 that won the Harper Prize for Fiction; *The Mothers* (1943), a poignant tale of the Donner Party; *Tale of Valor* (1958), a historical look at the Lewis and Clark expedition that demonstrates Fisher's naturalist tendencies by focusing on the grimy and often violent details of the journey rather than its noble aspirations and mythological advancements; and *The Testament of Man* (1943-1960), a highly ambitious twelve-volume series that begins with Neanderthal man and traces humankind up through the Middle Ages and then across a giant leap to the closing of the American frontier, looking at key social and cultural moments in history. In *Mountain Man*, a 1965 novel that inspired the Robert Redford film *Jeremiah Johnson*, Fisher does indeed incorporate in his description of Sam Minard many of the characteristics of what Stegner would deem an archetypal western cowboy hero:

Trapping was his trade, the Rocky Mountains and their valleys were his home, and the killing of Indians was only the clearing away of things that got in his path. He admired courage above all other virtues; next to that he admired fortitude; and third among the few values by which he lived was mercy to the weak or defenseless. ... Besides his rifle and handguns he had at his belt a Bowie knife with a honed blade ten inches long. It was a genuine Bowie, not a Green River or a Laos, or other cheap imitation. (5)

What sets Fisher's fiction apart from typically formulaic Western novels, however, is a sense of the brutal reality of the Old West; Fisher was not afraid to embrace a naturalistic West that revealed the uglier side of frontier life, rather than merely an idealized glorification.

Sam's story, for example, is a horrifyingly violent and emotionally shattering tale, but presumably relatively accurate in its depiction of a lone trapper's expectations of a world where nature is in control and society-based laws seldom hold influence. When the novel opens in 1846, Sam discovers Kate Bowden, a woman who is insane with grief over the brutal slaying of her three children and the scalping and kidnapping of her husband by Blackfoot warriors. Sam builds Kate a cabin and, with the help of other mountain men, provides her with food, blankets, and basic needs. Meanwhile, Sam marries Lotus, a Flathead princess who is soon pregnant with his child, but his world is shattered when he returns home from a trapping expedition to discover the bones of both his wife and unborn child, who have been killed by Crow Indians. Here Fisher's details echo the cold, often cruel naturalistic reality of Emile Zola or Frank Norris, which carry well beyond the glorified beauty of an idealized West:

Still drawing only half breaths and still feeling faint, he knelt among the bones and saw what until this moment he had missed. As gently as if reaching for a butterfly he picked up an object, set his rifle by the wall, and laid the object across a palm. It was the skull of a baby. He now saw, on looking round, that scattered among his wife's bones were the bones of his child. He took up one after another to look at them. His first glance had told him that his wife had been dead no more than ten days or two weeks. (102)

In his overwhelming grief and anger, Sam declares a personal war on the Crow nation, killing all the Crow warriors he can find and cutting off their right ears to make his mark. By the novel's end, Sam reconciles with a Crow chief after realizing that Crows had found Kate's frozen body and built a respectful cairn

over her remains. Fisher's last novel, *Mountain Man* unfortunately succumbs to racist assumptions regarding Native Americans, and overall demonstrates a depth of thought that does not yet equal the myth-busting hyper-consciousness of Wallace Stegner; but Fisher's work is notable for its use of naturalism, setting as character, the importance of history, and at least a partial recognition of the need to move beyond the archetypes instilled by earlier formulaic Westerns.

Stegner befriended A.B. Guthrie Jr. at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference in Vermont in the 1940s, and the two corresponded for many years. Like Stegner, Guthrie sought in his work to find a firmer historical ground in a West dominated by myth, and he often brought his background as a journalist to bear on his tales of the settlement of the American West. While Stegner rarely employed an existing western archetype without trouncing it thoroughly in an effort to expose the glorifications of the Old West as ludicrous and erroneous, Guthrie, like both Vardis Fisher and Walter Van Tilburg Clark, more often made only subtle changes to any one myth, instead allowing the mythical framework to stand so the character or idea itself was familiar to his readership, but then presenting enough differences so as to question the myth's validity. In his foreword to Guthrie's first major novel, *The Big Sky* (1947), for example, Stegner writes that what makes the novel exceptional is the way that Boone Caudill both exemplifies and modifies a western American archetype:

Caudill is an avatar of the oldest of all the American myths – the civilized man re-created in savagery, rebaptized into innocence on a wilderness continent. His fabulous ancestors are Daniel Boone, who gives him his name, and Cooper's Leatherstocking; and up and down the range of American fiction he has ten thousand recognizable siblings. But Caudill has his own distinction, for he is neither intellectualized nor sentimentalized. He may be White Indian, but he is no Noble Savage – for the latter role he is not noble enough, and far too savage. Though he retains many mythic qualities – the preternatural strength and cunning, the need for wild freedom, the larger-than-life combination of Indian skills and white mind – he has no trace of Leatherstocking's deist piety. His virtues are stringently limited to the qualities of self-reliance, courage, and ruthlessness that will help him to survive a life in which few died old. (xi-xii)

Beginning with *The Big Sky*, Guthrie completed a six-novel epic of the West: *The Big Sky* is the story of mountain men; *The Way West* (1949), which won the 1950 Pulitzer Prize, chronicles the wagon trail to Oregon; *These Thousand Hills* (1956) follows a herd of Durham cattle eastward from Oregon into Montana; and the remaining three novels, *Arfive* (1970), *The Last Valley* (1975), and *Fair Land*, *Fair Land* (1982), trace the development of Montana from the cattle empire of the 1880s through the mid-twentieth century.

In *The Way West*, mountain man Dick Summers from *The Big Sky* returns to lead a wagon train west to Oregon, and although the story is familiar and its participants are – for the most part – pioneer tough, Guthrie keeps his approach to the Oregon Trail innovative with frequent turns on the otherwise comfortable archetypes. Even in the novel's opening lines, one sees evidence of this subtle myth-busting in both the setting and the way that Lije Evans approaches his day:

The day dawned clear, but it had rained the night before, the sudden squally rain of middle March. Taking a look out the kitchen door, seeing the path lead down to the muddy barnyard and the tracks of his shoebacks splashed in it, Lije Evans was just as well satisfied that things were wet. It gave him an excuse not to work, even if he could be mending harness or fixing tools. Not that he minded work; it was just that he didn't feel like working today. (1)

A true archetypal pioneer would not have such a lax attitude toward work, and, as the scene continues and one sees Lije's enthusiasm for Oregon countered by his wife Rebecca's reluctance, Lije's need to sneak off to town to chat about Oregon with other local men also troubles the myth of wholehearted pioneer enthusiasm and hardiness.

Even Guthrie's details of the western setting are familiar in their plenitude and general flavor, but still occasionally surprising: "The sun was bulging up like a punkin," Guthrie writes at one point, for example (209), and, as the teams cross a particularly rough section of country, Lije Evans's fatigue is evident in his fractured syntax:

Violent country. Land of fracture and of fire, boiled up and broken when God first made the world. Range of rattlesnake and jackass rabbit and cactus hot as any hornet. Homeland of the poor and poisonous, and did Oregon really lie beyond? Mountains near and others far, sliding in and out of sight, plaguing people for their brashness. The great gorge of the Snake, the very gut of earth, the churning gut so steep below a horseman couldn't ride to it, so far a walker wore out climbing down and back. Eight miles, twenty, twelve. And still it didn't matter. (276)

Like both Stegner and Clark, Guthrie allows characterization to emerge through his descriptions of setting, introducing the mood for a scene or shifting the

emotion of a moment through his details of the surrounding landscape. And while this technique certainly is not new to literature, even in the mid-twentieth century it was a decided step away from the formulaic western details of a typical dime store Western. Besides the narrative innovations of such a use of setting, one also sees evidence of Guthrie's growing concern for the preservation of the American West – an ethical and political interest that, through the conservation efforts of Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, and others in the early to mid-twentieth century, began to emerge in many literary western works in opposition to the myth of a West with unlimited and unrestricted resources.

Like Guthrie, Stegner also met Walter Van Tilburg Clark at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, and the two corresponded for many years. Although Clark's literary career was, in comparison to the other two, relatively brief as he published only four novels in the span of one decade, *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940) made Clark a national literary figure at the age of thirty and later was the inspiration for a movie of the same name starring Henry Fonda. As Stegner discusses in his introduction to Clark's novel, *The Ox-Bow Incident* is a lesson in human complexities and the often ambiguous lines separating good from evil:

That novel is a long way from being a simple reversal of the vigilante stereotype or an ironic questioning of vigilante justice. It is a probing of the whole blind ethics of an essentially false, imperfectly formed, excessively masculine society, and of the way in which individuals, out of personal inadequacy, out of mistaken loyalties and priorities, out of a fear of seeming to be womanish, or

out of plain cowardice, let themselves be pushed into murder. ... And the book does not end with the discovery that the hanged men are innocent and that lynch law is a mistake. It goes on examining how *profound* a mistake. The moral ambiguities reverberate through the town. We begin to know the good guys from the bad guys by the way they deal with their own complicity in a tragic error. (xi)

Stegner laments in his introduction to the novel that critics and readers too often read the novel as either merely “a novel of excitement and suspense and nervous trigger fingers” or as simply a reversal of the western myths of emancipation from law and constraints. But unlike in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, where Trampas is decidedly a black-hat-wearing bad guy and the Virginian is one of the white-hat-wearing good guys, Clark muddles the lines in *The Ox-Bow Incident* so that the three hanged men are neither all noble nor all enviable frontier hardiness, and the men who do the hanging, likewise, are not solely malicious vigilantes out to settle a score: “Evil has courage, good is sometimes cowardly, reality gets bent by appearances,” Stegner writes (xi).

Unlike most plot-driven dime store Westerns where details of the action keep the reader turning pages, much of Clark’s novel is dialogue: the human ponderings of who should do what and then the ramifications of those decisions. Consider, for example, the slow gathering of a posse intent on avenging the death of Kinkaid, a lone cattle rancher who is found shot to death:

“We aren’t even certain which way they went, Jeff, or how long they’ve had. You just wait till we know what we’re doing. We’re all with you about Kinkaid. You know that, son.”

He kept his hand on Farnley’s knee, and stood there with

his hat off and the sun shining in his white hair. The hair was long, down over his collar. Farnley must have begun to think a little. He waited. Moore went out to them.

Osgood was standing beside me on the walk. "They mustn't do this; they mustn't," he said, waving his hands and looking as if he were going to cry. Then he thrust his hands back into his pockets again.

Gil was behind us. He said to Osgood, "Shut up, gran'ma. Nobody expects you to go."

Osgood turned around quickly and nervously. "I'm not afraid," he asserted. "Not in the least afraid. It is quite another consideration which prevents ..."

"You can preach later," Gil cut him off without looking at him, but watching Moore talk to Farnley. "There'll be more of us needing it, maybe."

"You ain't even got a gun yet, Jeff," Moore was repeating.

Osgood suddenly went out to the two men by the horse. He went busily, as if he didn't want to, but was making himself. His bald head was pale in the sun. The wind fluttered his coat and the legs of his trousers. He looked helpless and timid. I knew he was trying to do what he thought was right, but he had no heart in his effort. He made me feel ashamed, as disgusted as Gil. (31)

Rather than the single-minded western posse that leaps instantly onto its horses and gallops off across the prairie, here Clark shows the human side of the West – and, simply, the human side of humanity – as some individuals debate the ethical nature of what they are about to do and others cling to the machismo of sudden and swift revenge, resenting those who hesitate for slowing their departure. Clearly these men are not all of a single, evil mindset, much as the three innocent victims also are decidedly disparate human beings with very different reactions when faced with the inevitability of their own wrongful deaths. Even the lynching itself is messy and disturbing, suggesting metaphorically the ethical mire into which these men have slowly sunk themselves:

Mapes fired the shot, and we heard it echo in the mountain as Ma and Farnley cut their horses sharply across the haunches and the holders let go and jumped away. The horses jumped away too, and the branch creaked under the jerk. The old man and the Mex were dead at the fall, and just swung and spun slowly. But young Tetley didn't cut. His horse just walked out from under, letting Martin slide off and dangle, choking to death, squirming up and down like an impaled worm, his face bursting with compressed blood. Gerald didn't move even then, but stood there shaking all over and looking up at Martin fighting the rope.

After a second Tetley struck the boy with the butt of his pistol, a back-handed blow that dropped him where he stood.

"Shoot him," he ordered Farnley, pointing at Martin. Farnley shot. Martin's body gave a little leap in the air, then hung slack, spinning slowly around and back, and finally settling into the slowing pendulum swing of the others. (188-189)

Even as they ride away, the posse is a motley human mix of stubborn determination, uneasy regret, and raw emotion. Although he does incorporate a few individual characters who mimic western archetypes, Clark's West is far from a formulaic land of mythology; Clark's West is one where characters are humanly inconsistent, their actions carry ramifications far beyond the moment, and very little – from the novel's participants to the plot itself – is simple or predictable.

While Stegner and John Steinbeck did not know one another personally, Steinbeck was only a few years older than Stegner and, with his Pulitzer Prize in 1940 for *The Grapes of Wrath* and his Nobel Prize in 1962, Steinbeck was only a few steps ahead of Stegner in terms of his publishing career. When Steinbeck died in 1968 after publishing more than twenty-five novels and short story collections, Stegner still had a career of four novels, a short story collection, and

ten nonfiction works ahead of him. And while both men lived much of their lives in California and had connections to Stanford University – Steinbeck attended as an undergraduate only briefly – Steinbeck achieved greater success than Stegner in breaking free of the bonds of regionalism to locate a more universal appeal in his work. I would argue that much of this accomplishment rests in the different locales of each man's work: Steinbeck's work takes place primarily in California, whereas the majority of Stegner's fiction is set in the Rocky Mountain West, where archetypes and presumptions of a glorified Old West are far more prevalent. Rather than troubling himself with such mythologies as the notion of a Big Rock Candy Mountain or the cowboy hero as rootless and self-reliant, Steinbeck blended a realism similar to Stegner's with romance to explore more deeply the inconsistencies and injustices of humanity.

Steinbeck is worth noting here because although he is not typically regarded as a "western author," he did indeed herald from the West and he was a contemporary of Stegner's simply because he was writing at virtually the same time. What is interesting to consider are the different narrative approaches that Steinbeck succeeded in incorporating in his work – such as the use of romanticism and a frequent metaphorical, almost fable-like tone – that Stegner would not have dared to employ for fear of re-invoking the very archetypes that he sought to dismantle. As the Joad family is preparing to drive out of the dust of their Oklahoma yard in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, Steinbeck suggests an

image of the biblical ark, with dust for water and tightly packed family members for cargo:

Pa said, "Ma, you an' Granma set in with Al for a while. We'll change around so it's easier, but you start out that way." They got into the cab, and then the rest swarmed up on top of the load. Connie and Rose of Sharon, Pa and Uncle John, Ruthie and Winfield, Tom and the preacher. Noah stood on the ground, looking up at the great load of them sitting on top of the truck.

Al walked around, looking underneath at the springs. "Holy Jesus," he said, "them springs is flat as hell. Lucky I blocked under 'em." (146)

The fable-type romance of the moment is broken, of course, by the desperate ridiculousness of the image and by Al's untimely cursing, but for a moment Noah's name holds undeniable purpose. Consider, then, if Stegner had attempted such an open inclusion of romance, metaphor, or fable as the Masons piled into Bo's rum-laden car bound for Montana in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* or as Susan Ward and her servant girl rode the train west from New York to meet Oliver for the first time in *Angle of Repose*. Somehow the almost innumerable extant western fables and archetypes preclude the successful incorporation of new ones in what critics consider western literary novels, particularly if the author is attempting, as Stegner is, to move beyond the mythologies of an otherwise too-glorified region.

In the stirring final image of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's romanticism, particularly in a moment of dire need and desperation, allows the novel a glimmer of hope for the future as Rose of Sharon agrees to allow a

starving stranger to nurse the milk that her deceased baby will no longer need:

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (580-581)

In his effort to break through the archetypes of the region, Stegner was skeptical of such highly metaphorical images and the myths they might suggest to his readership. He fancied himself a champion of realism, but if Stegner had demonstrated a narrative interest in romanticism or a broader use of metaphorical images, I wonder if his work would have gone the way of a popular Western writer or even just a lesser literary western writer. I believe it is because Stegner clung so steadfastly to this notion of realism and of attempting to write a new and more honest history of his region that he emerged as such a successful observer and dismantler of western mythologies.

- *... And Beyond*

Before about a decade ago, E. Annie Proulx was a New England author who stormed onto the literary scene with the 1993 P.E.N.-Faulkner Award for her first novel, *Postcards*, and both the 1994 National Book Award and the 1994

Pulitzer Prize for her second novel, *Shipping News*. While writing her third novel, *Accordion Crimes*, in the mid-1990s, Proulx, who was in her sixties at the time, packed up her belongings and moved from Vermont to Wyoming. Her subsequent short story collection *Close Range* (1999) is a notable addition to the literary canon of the West for its adept and innovative handling of rural and small-town Wyoming. What is most impressive in Proulx's collection is the narrative voice, which is typically male and always believable, even when the narrator clearly is telling a tall tale. Unlike Stegner, who had to embrace a myth first to draw it to the forefront and then unpack it consciously within his prose, Proulx simply sidesteps the myths, almost as if they are not credible or important enough to warrant her attention.

In "The Blood Bay," for example, the cowboy Dirt Sheets does not suggest either the archetypal cowboy hero or the antithesis of the archetype; he simply is who he is: "a cross-eyed drinker of hair oil [who] was all right on top but his luck was running muddy near the bottom, no socks and curl-toe boots cracked and holed" (94). When Sheets and the two cowpunchers he is riding with pass a young cowboy who has frozen to death in the brutal northern winter blizzards of 1886-1887, Sheets comments rather blandly that the man wears the same size boots as he and, because the boots are frozen to the dead man's feet, proceeds to hack off the man's feet at the shins. Sheets carries the boots to the shack where they stop for dinner and a rest, after rather mindlessly continuing his hunt for stray

cattle along the way, and then lays them by the fire to defrost. In the morning he pulls the boots on his own feet, absently leaving the bare feet in a corner of the cabin, and rides off. The cabin owner and cook, old man Grice, sees the feet and assumes that his bay horse, who spends the unbearably cold nights inside the cabin, has eaten Sheets alive. Grice, who secretly is “pleased to own a horse with the sand to eat a raw cowboy” (96), pays the remaining cowpokes to keep quiet about the grisly death. When Sheets shows up at the bunkhouse that night, his fellow cowpokes nod silently and say nothing about Grice’s suspicions or the money they received: “The arithmetic stood comfortable,” the story concludes. Again, while the narrative voice clearly resonates with the gritty determination and bold stoicism of the frontier West, the story is so bizarre and surprising that it bursts through any limiting archetypal assumptions.

In a 1997 interview with *Atlantic Monthly*, Proulx says that because she grew up in a household with only sisters, she has always had a fascination for the male viewpoint: “I can write about women, but prefer to work them into more shadowy parts of the story, to carry a different weight,” Proulx says (Proulx, “Imagination”), adding that because much of her writing is set in the early 1900s and sometimes the late 1800s, men were simply able to do things that women could not. In some ways, she continues, in her fiction she can create, again and again, the brother she never had:

I always wanted a brother and I liked the things that men did;
when I was growing up, women didn’t go skiing, or hiking, or have

adventurous canoe trips, or any of that sort of thing. I felt the lack of a brother whom I imagined could introduce me to the vigorous outdoor activities that my sisters were not particularly interested in. If you live in a woman's world and that's all there is, the other side of the equation looks pretty interesting. For me the invented male character perhaps puts the brother I didn't have into a kind of reality. (Proulx, "Imagination")

In "The Half-Skinned Steer," the male voices of Mero and Rollo are exceptional in their believability, honesty, and human uniqueness. Like Sheets's voice, they, too, could easily drift into the stereotypes of archetypal cowboy heroes whose tough exterior and sensitive interior are inhumanly blended as only a hero's can be, but instead the voices Proulx offers are undiluted, honest, and decidedly male. When the men share shots of Everclear with an elderly friend's girlfriend, for example, they see no insult in silently admiring her as one might admire the conformation of a particularly well-bred colt:

The old man's hair was falling out, Mero was twenty-three and Rollo twenty and she played them all like a deck of cards. If you admired horses you'd go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks, so high and haunchy you'd want to clap her on the rear. ... She'd balanced that broad butt on the edge of the dog food chest, looking at the old man and Rollo, now and then rolling her glossy eyes over at Mero, square teeth nipping a rim of nail, sucking the welling blood, drawing on her cigarette. (24)

And later: "It was her voice that drew you in, that low, twangy voice, wouldn't matter if she was saying the alphabet, what you heard was the rustle of hay. She could make you smell the smoke from an unlit fire" (35). For the characters in Proulx's Wyoming stories, the West is not a fable or a glorified past but a sometimes daily struggle where life is difficult but the beauty of the western

landscape can offer reward enough.

Ivan Doig, who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in a family of Montana ranch hands, is best known for his memoirs *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind* (1978) and *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (1980), and for his trilogy about the fictional McCaskill family and the Two Medicine country where they live, which includes *English Creek* (1984), *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (1987), and *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana* (1990).¹ Doig, who writes on his personal web page that he does not like to think of himself as merely a “western writer,” argues that for the adept writer, regardless of where fictional settings occur, a novel’s substance can and should be “writing of that larger country: life”: “To me, language – the substance on the page, that poetry under the prose – is the ultimate ‘region,’ the true home, for a writer,” he says (Doig, *Ivan*). As a former ranch hand who holds a doctorate in history, Doig, like Stegner, prefers to see the depth of history add complexity to his fictional works, and two of his more recent novels, in particular, are evidence of that desire. In *Bucking the Sun* (1996), for example, Doig unveils a family saga of love and infidelity against the backdrop of the 1930s building of Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River in Montana. The construction literally demands a cast of hundreds, and the Duff family rests at the forefront as Owen Duff, the oldest son

¹ Doig dedicates the final novel in his trilogy, *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana*, to “Wallace Stegner: one in a century.”

and an engineer, fights to control the aggressive Missouri while he struggles, too, to keep his family life in line. The novel's poignant final image alone is tribute to Doig's efforts to look past such myths as the West's eternal optimism and unlimited opportunities, as Rosellen, whose affair with Darius has laden her with more guilt and remorse than she can bear, releases the truck's clutch in the midst of their front-seat lovemaking:

Rosellen paused in midmotion there low on him. She had to slip behind the steering wheel, a bit sideways, for this. There was just room. She kept as much of herself applied to him as she could while her left leg angled down and her left foot just touched the clutch. This ending she had found in herself. ...

"Wh—? We're going!" he let out, struggling to rise in the darkness.

Rosellen answered for everything with herself, flinging for all she was worth onto his neck, shoulders, any of him she could fight as he tried to get out from under, adding her weight and terrible determination as the truck tipping forward on the ramp started him sliding off the seat, Darius borne under her as the truck kept picking up momentum, coasting faithfully until it glided from the dam, into the gather of the water. (409)

Rosellen's West – and Doig's, for that matter – is not merely an ongoing tall tale of pioneer strength and bold new opportunities; here one must struggle through life much as one struggles in Chicago or Los Angeles or Philadelphia, and sometimes, just as in the metropolitan larger cities, the conclusion cannot promise the hope that one might have wanted.

In Doig's most recent novel, *Prairie Nocturne* (2003), Doig's sometimes nostalgic rural Montana setting belies the racial and cultural complexities at hand. The novel's protagonist is music instructor Susan Duff, a character drawn from

Dancing at the Rascal Fair who now teaches voice lessons to the upper-class children of Helena, Montana. When Susan's former lover Wesley Williamson, a married cattle baron whose gubernatorial aspirations were squelched by rumors of his relationship with Susan, asks her to take on his black chauffeur, Monty Rathburn, as a private voice student, Susan agrees. In the ensuing chapters, Susan and Monty rather slowly and carefully build a teacher-student relationship that soon develops into something far more intimate and meaningful – and potentially dangerous in the racially divided United States of the 1920s. When Susan laments the solitude of the rural town she has moved to in order to teach Monty, Doig paints a West that is somehow timeless yet still believably human:

Susan that night thought long and hard about the populace of solitude. About the dots of humankind, connected and not, strung through the weathered valleys and across the girth of prairie like constellations reflected on the ground. The Adairs, the Anguses – and those between them even when no longer there – of the flivver trip: the women hungry for any other women to talk to, even dressed-up ones from Helena; the men half-bemused and half-alarmed that they would be hearing these suffrage arguments from their wives and daughters forever after. Then episodes began to come back to her, the elongated memory shadows from the dots. The syrup sandwiches that were all the supper that could be mustered by the host family fresh from their emigrant railcar near Ingomar. The proud pledge of allegiance in Danish by the Frisian colony gathered civically in their church in their fledgling town of Dagmar. The way smoke would fall to the ground before a storm, the smell of the weather riding out to the road to meet them as the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Susan B.* chugged into view of yet another isolated homestead chimney. (59-60)

In terms of the characters in *Prairie Nocturne*, instead of a typically slow-talking, fast-shooting John Wayne type and his beautiful but utterly dependent belle, Doig

creates a spiritual-singing, one-time rodeo clown black cowboy in Monty, alongside his sharp-tongued but equally talented white music teacher whose looks are wholly superfluous to her stubborn determination and fearless passion. By embracing such social and cultural issues as racism and the New Deal construction of a controversial dam within the settings of both the old and contemporary West, Doig does indeed achieve his goal of extending his fiction beyond mere western regionalism to the very heights to which Stegner, too, aspired with his novels: the geography of life.

When N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, he was a virtually unknown Kiowa Indian painter, poet, and scholar whose breakthrough publication led to a drastic and long overdue change in the way the literary world viewed Native American fiction, poetry, histories, and essays. Prior to the 1960s, scholars typically associated Indian writings with the academic disciplines of anthropology or history; after the 1969 beginnings of what has become known as the Native American Renaissance, the literary world was introduced to the likes of Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, D'Arcy McNickle, John Joseph Mathews, Paula Gunn Allen, Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, and, most recently, Sherman Alexie. As Stegner predicted back in the 1970s when he suggested that Native American writers would one day define the literature of his

region, Native American literature indeed has introduced to the American West not only a new voice but a new narrative structure that steps beyond the Anglo mythologies of much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the late 1960s, Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* succeeded in first introducing these concepts and, ultimately, providing a relatively comfortable entrance onto the literary scene, because it fulfilled two key purposes: The novel both introduced the nation to a new voice and style, and it allowed accessibility for those not accustomed to Native American writings with its Hemingway-esque language, its general adherence to an anticipated novel structure, and the biblical suggestions of a narrator named Abel. Momaday was born to parents of Kiowa and Cherokee heritage who raised him in various Southwestern communities, allowing him varied contact with Navajo, Apache, Hispanic, and even Anglo children. With a doctorate in English literature from Stanford University, Momaday is well-versed in the literatures that predated the 1968 publication of *House Made of Dawn* and subsequent Native American Renaissance, and I believe his multicultural background and education allowed him the broader cultural vision to write a novel that was true to his own traditions and also appealing to the non-Native American literary powers that were.

House Made of Dawn is the story of Abel, a Jemez Pueblo veteran of World War II who is sent to prison and then relocated after he fatally stabs an albino Indian whom he believes is a witch. Abel's psychological well-being is

decidedly in question as the narrative sometimes drifts inexplicably from past to present and back again while his troubled mind seeks to find solace and reason in something more humanly solid. As he remembers better times midway through the novel, for example, only Momaday's use of italics offer the grounding necessary to help one begin to comprehend the workings of Abel's mind:

When Milly heard that, the way he told it, she got so tickled she didn't know what to do. She couldn't stop laughing, and pretty soon we had to laugh, too. And then she got the hiccups, and that just made it worse. We almost laughed ourselves sick. We were just sitting there shaking and the tears were coming out of our eyes and we were acting like a bunch of damn fools, I guess, and we didn't care. She was pretty when she laughed.

There was a girl at Cornfields one summer.

Milly believed him, you know, because she wanted to believe everybody; she was like that, and she made us believe it, too, that everything was going to be all right, and we were happy and making some plans about how it was going to be.

Pony, they called her, and she laughed, and her skin was light and she had long little hands and she wore a dark blue velveteen blouse and a corn-blossom necklace with an old najahe like the moon and one perfect powder-blue stone ...

I guess he believed it. But it wasn't going to be like that. It wasn't going to turn out right, because it was too late; everything had gone too far with him, you know, and he was already sick inside. Maybe he was sick a long time, always, and nobody knew it, and it was just coming out for the first time and you could see it. It might have been like that. (146)

Here Momaday, like Stegner, demonstrates an interest in pulling together past and present to uncover how the two feed and define one another. Although the above instance is skewed by Abel's mental instability, this technique is evidenced elsewhere in the novel as the book's various characters pull together to help Abel heal in his time of need. Momaday also introduced the literary world to the often

cyclical nature of Native American tales as Abel both begins and ends the novel running; the question becomes whether he is running from or to, aimlessly or purposefully, and with weight on his shoulders or with a light kick to his step. The novel is cyclical, yes, but thankfully Abel has changed.

With the publication in 1971 of a collection of poetry, *Riding the Earthboy* 40, and in 1974 of his first novel, *Winter in the Blood*, James Welch quickly joined the Native American Renaissance catalyzed by Momaday's groundbreaking 1968 novel. With Blackfoot-Gros Ventre heritage, Welch, like Momaday, boasts a multicultural background that has exposed him to both reservation life and the values and expectations of American society beyond the reservation. Welch's first two novels, *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979) introduce readers to the struggles and poverty of reservation life, coupled with a search for identity between the disparate worlds of the Montana Blackfoot reservation and life in the city. Much as Stegner's characters lament a rootlessness that drives them to seek something more solid and lasting with which to fill the emptiness – as Bo Mason relentlessly and unsuccessfully seeks his Big Rock Candy Mountain and as Bruce Mason longs for the consistent home life he never had, for example – the unnamed narrator of *Winter in the Blood* and Sylvester Yellow Calf in *The Death of Jim Loney* each undergo a sometimes desperate search for self. While one might assume that the strength and longevity

of the Native America cultural heritage would belie the Anglo western sense of rootlessness, authors such as Welch suggest quite the opposite. In an era when, for example, a young American Indian's elders insist on fluent knowledge of their native language while the non-reservation world demands an equal fluency in English, and neither allows room for the other, the youth caught in the middle can feel so torn by fiercely competing expectations that it is not uncommon to see him driven to the suicidal despair of a Bo Mason or a Sabrina Castro. As the narrator in *Winter in the Blood* battles memories of his young brother's death and a nearly nonexistent sense of his own identity, he reaches a point of desperation that only makes him want to flee:

I had had enough of Havre, enough of town, of walking home, hung over, beaten up, or both. I had had enough of the people, the bartenders, the bars, the cars, the hotels, but mostly, I had had enough of myself. I wanted to lose myself, to ditch these clothes, to outrun this burning sun, to stand beneath the clouds and have my shadow erased, myself along with it. (125)

At the end of the novel, as the narrator struggles to free a wayward cow from a deadly mud slough, he silently curses the hardships and disappointments of his life and swears to begin anew. Just as one thinks he has the cow nearly freed, his horse slips and both the cow and trusted horse sink deeper into the sucking mud. All might seem lost as the rain begins to fall and the narrator, too, is half-buried in the grime, but the narrator already has resolved to start afresh, and Welch uses the landscape to demonstrate his hope: "Some people, I thought, will never know how pleasant it is to be distant in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer

storm,” the narrator muses from the near-immobility of his treacherous mud bath. “It’s not like you’d expect, nothing like you’d expect” (172).

In Welch’s third novel, *Fools Crow* (1986), the interest he shares with Stegner in erasing erroneous mythologies by blending history and fiction becomes most evident. *Fools Crow* is the story of the gradual encroachment of whites in the 1870s on a small band of Blackfoot Indians in the Two Medicine Territory of northwest Montana. Told through the varying viewpoints of the Lone Eaters, as this band of Blackfeet is called, *Fools Crow* offers a portrait of Indian life that is colorful and complex, and ultimately as American as a Joe Allston or an Abe Kaplan struggling to find a place for himself. In the Blackfoot world, animals speak, people change their names as their personalities evolve, and white people babble a gibberish that is meaningless but somehow inherently dangerous. Fools Crow, a young warrior and medicine man who eventually earns his name by tricking Bull Shield into thinking he is dead and then rising up to kill the Crow chief, has had a vision of his people’s dire future, and he realizes that in the end they must either willingly give up their lands and their heritage or fight a bold but decidedly futile battle against the Napikwans, or white men. After the massacre of Blackfoot Indians along the Marias River, a historical event that also informs Welch’s first two novels, Fools Crow fights to bring hope among his band’s few survivors even though he, too, is skeptical of his own words and feels only “young and powerless, as though he talked into a strong wind” (386):

Fools Crow thought of the final design on the yellow skin in Feather Woman's lodge. He saw the Napikwan children playing and laughing in a world that they possessed. And he saw the Pikuni children, quiet and huddled together, alone and foreign in their own country.

"We must think of our children," he said. He lowered his eyes to the red puppy and it was quiet all around. The few survivors stared at the red puppy, who had rolled onto his back, his front legs tucked against his chest. They had no children. (386)

Fools Crow is a dramatic and emotional tale of the heritage of Welch's people, and through Welch's conscious retelling of historical events – something he does again in his 1994 history *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* – Welch, like Stegner, begins to attempt to rewrite the West's glorified and all-too-Anglo archetypal past.

Leslie Marmon Silko is frequently considered the third catalyst of the Native American Renaissance, next to Momaday and Welch, and it is her 1977 novel *Ceremony* that first earned her notable critical attention. Silko also has published a collection of poetry, *Laguna Woman: Poems* (1974); a compilation of short stories, poems, and photographs, *Storyteller* (1981); a second novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991); and a collection of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (1996). With mixed Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white ancestry, Silko, like Momaday and Welch, also was raised in a multicultural environment: both in the Laguna culture of her western New Mexico pueblo and with frequent exposure to mainstream city life as

well. Even more than Momaday or Welch, however, Silko blends Native American myths and poetry with her fiction, achieving a rich portrait of a culture that, while battling the rage and drunkenness that threatens to steal away its very foundation, still clings to the notion that traditional ceremony can provide an individual with that sought-after place of calm and centered self-realization.

Ceremony is the story of Tayo, a half-white Laguna Indian who is battling insanity – much like the unnamed narrator of *House Made of Dawn* – as he struggles to come to terms with white warfare and his own experiences as a World War II prisoner of the Japanese. As a veteran who is haunted by memories of his brother's death in the war and by his own violent war-time actions, Tayo has a difficult time adjusting to life on a New Mexico Indian reservation. Initially, he begins to sink into the immoral mire that surrounds him as his fellow Indian veterans drink excessively and rage against racism. When Tayo meets the wise, elderly half-breed Betonie, however, he begins to realize that the Navajo rituals he has tried to explore in search of his own identity are only helpful when they rise above the status of mere ritual and become an established way of life. Betonie, who has been ridiculed by some of his own people for questioning the old ways, purports that ceremonies must be evolving with the times if they are to maintain their spiritual poignancy:

“... [T]hings which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't

survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph and the people will be no more." (126)

Initially Tayo is skeptical, but in time, as he realizes that his solitary internal battles are futile and he needs to discover a means of embracing his own heritage, whatever that might be, Tayo, too, turns to Betonie's notion of a grander cosmic order. Toward the end of the novel, after Tayo has silently witnessed the drunken violence of his friends but finds new pride in his ability to resist the temptation to leap into the middle of it, he remains crouched between two boulders and stares up at the stars, recognizing the timeless beauty and promise that they hold: "They had seen mountains shift and rivers change course and even disappear back into the earth; but always there were these stars. Accordingly, the story goes on with these stars of the old war shield; they go on, lasting until the fifth world ends, then maybe beyond. The only thing is: it has never been easy" (254). As Tayo half-staggers toward home, spent but elated by the continual realization of his own humanity and renewed sense of personal identity, Silko skillfully offers her readers a mix of old and new, ancient and contemporary, to better describe Tayo's path toward self-discovery:

In the distance he could hear big diesel trucks rumbling down Highway 66 past Laguna. The leaves of the big cottonwood tree had turned pale yellow; the first sunlight caught the tips of the leaves at the top of the old tree and made them bright gold. They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise.

Hummingbird and Fly thanked him.
They took the tobacco to old Buzzard.
“here it is. We finally got it but it
sure wasn’t very easy.”
“Okay,” Buzzard said.
“Go back and tell them
I’ll purify the town.”

And he did –
first to the east
then to the south
then to the west
and finally to the north.
Everything was set straight again
after all that ck’o’yo’ magic.

The storm clouds returned
the grass and plants started growing again.
There was food
and the people were happy again.

So she told them
“Stay out of trouble
from now on.

It isn’t very easy
to fix up things again.
Remember that
next time
some ck’o’yo’ magician
comes to town.” (256)

The myths that Silko incorporates in her fiction are not the same as the erroneous mythologies of the American West that Stegner strives to debunk. For Silko, a myth is a kind of traditional ceremony: a fable that has passed down through the generations as an explanation for some quirk of humanity or in answer to why life is as it is. The danger of Anglo western mythologies, on the other hand, is that

they have neglected to remain in the realm of fable and have instead become embedded in American ideas, language, and sense of history as a notion of what is truth. Silko is aware of these western mythologies as well, and in her smooth inclusion of various literary genres within the novel form, she demonstrates the possibilities that arise when one follows Stegner's lessons and blurs the lines of history, fiction, and genre in search of a new means of both defining the history of the American West. While Stegner was writing and forwarding his literary ideals in the mid-twentieth century, the concept of pinpointing western archetypes was new enough that he was compelled to take the time to dismantle individual mythologies in his literary works, suggesting their dangers and encouraging a new sense of consciousness; as Silko joins the literary scene a few decades later, critical discussions of cultural mythologies are common enough, thanks to such scholars as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Richard Slotkin, and Sacvan Bercovitch, that Silko is able to move beyond the individual handling of particular myths to suggest a more global look at the elements of humanity – traditional rituals and ceremonies – that help one to understand and embrace life.

Native Oregonian Craig Lesley published his first novel, *Winterkill*, in 1984. Although Lesley himself is white, his fiction typically explores the tensions between the Indian and white communities of the contemporary Pacific Northwest. While valuing the sense of history that Stegner forwarded in his

lifetime, Lesley also manages to focus on the human side of life in the American West: the personal dilemmas, broken families, and individual triumphs and heartbreaks that make the archetypal western hero seem a far cry from the reality of a West where family and community are essential to one's well-being and, occasionally, sheer survival. *Winterkill* explores the struggles of Danny Kachiah, a Native American bronco rider whose father has died and whose wife has recently left him. When Danny learns that his wife has been killed in an accident, he sets off in search of Jack, a son he barely knows, in hopes of building a relationship that will help him to define his relationship with his father, Red Shirt, and aid in his own search for self. Much as Stegner does in *Angle of Repose*, Lesley alternates between past and present, suggesting the essential nature of each in defining the other, as Danny reminisces about times with his father while he searches for his young son. The past and present come together in two very different strands as Danny finds his son in one, and, in the other, discovers Red Shirt frozen to death in his truck on the edge of the reservation, still bruised from a brawl. Danny, who initially idolizes his Bronco-riding father and laments the missed opportunities his son Jack might have had to admire him as well, realizes that the past is past and his hopes now must lie with the future:

When Red Shirt had taken Danny to the rodeos, Danny had felt proud to have a place of honor. He sat with the cowboys on the fence near the chutes. As Red Shirt burst out of the gate, his chaps flying, his braid swinging under the straw cowboy hat, Danny whistled and cheered. He had grown a lot older before he realized those rodeos were small and his father's competition second-rate.

But even then, he had wanted to believe that with a fair share of good breaks, Red Shirt could have been one of the best. So now Danny watched, cheering on cue with the crowd but thinking about how to make those breaks for Jack. (208)

In Lesley's second novel, *River Song*, Danny drives his truck into a raging Northwest forest fire, looking for young Jack, who has joined the firefighters in search of adventure and easy money. While trapped in the inferno of flames and smoke, both Danny and Jack hear the mysterious whistle of a ghost, a reminder to Danny that their Nez Perce past must become a more indelible part of their lives.

Lesley next published *The Sky Fisherman* in 1995, a novel that also explores the tensions between Indian and white communities, and Lesley's most recent novel is *Storm Riders* (2000), a tale of Clark Woods, a foster parent who is facing the challenges of raising a Native American son with fetal alcohol syndrome. Wade's condition has left him both physically disabled and mentally disturbed, and when he is accused of drowning young Yukiko Kagita, Clark's role as a dedicated parent is severely tested. Reminiscent of Michael Dorris's *The Broken Cord* for its handling of fetal alcohol syndrome, *Storm Riders* is another Lesley novel that is rife with western themes – the landscape, the challenges of being Native American in a predominately white culture, and rural life – explored alongside such universal quandaries as parenthood, mental instability, family relations, and trust. Wade's Native American heritage is hardly an issue when viewed in light of his antisocial and sometimes violent behaviors, but Lesley carries the matter a step further when he introduces the dangers of ideological

white guilt in Clark's often blind parenting of Wade. At the beginning of *Storm Riders*, Clark, whose fierce determination to raise Wade is based in part on his own sense of abandonment after his father left, can hardly conceive of Wade having played any kind of role in Yukiko's death. As Wade's behaviors become increasingly more startling and potentially dangerous, however, Clark begins to realize that he may be trusting the boy more than he deserves to be. As he thumbs through a stack of family photos, for example, it is a glimpse of the emotions on everyone's faces that breaks Clark from his mostly guilt-laden sense of parenting:

Before he left for the trip, Clark had looked for some pictures to bring, and found one from Helen's first birthday party. Natalie stood at the kitchen table grinning and holding up Helen. Wade hung at her side, his stare angry and sullen. The baby twisted away from the camera, reaching her hand out to touch Wade. *My God*, Clark had thought, startled. *We never saw that anger in his face. Or the baby reaching out to him. The camera had captured a moment outside of us, outside of our lives.* He stuffed the photo back into the box and left it in Portland. (298)

While Clark's tendency to parent Wade over-generously may stem from a number of factors, including Clark's own abandonment by his father and his protectiveness of a child with a diagnosed disability, one cannot overlook Clark's understated sense of guilt regarding his white ancestry as opposed to the plight of the Northwest's Native American tribes. In taking on not only a Native American foster child but one who suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome, Clark is attempting to assuage that guilt – a step that he, too, realizes is futile when Wade proves that he is incapable of providing his father with such a complexity of assurances and

comfort.

For Lesley, the West is indeed the rich diverseness of cultures that Stegner suggested in his nonfiction but never succeeded in demonstrating in his fiction. And the Stegner-inspired sense of history that denies the tired archetypes but embraces a blending of past and present is most assuredly a part of Lesley's fiction as well. In addition, coupled with cultural diversity and the human tensions that invariably arise when one brings together disparate histories and ways of viewing the world is an indelible sense of hopefulness in the West's natural beauty. As is typical in many western literary novels, it is in the beauty of his surroundings that Clark finally finds a sense of peace regarding his son and the future of his family:

His attention shifted to the plane's shadow, first visible on the blue water, then sweeping over a stretch of fireweed meadow. It skimmed the skeleton of the old whale-oil processing plant at Killisnoo, a tumble of ragged tin siding and a dozen concrete snags. Dense green forest hid abandoned villages where countless Tlingits died from smallpox and diphtheria, their once powerful shamans helpless against the new diseases. In Clark's mind, history fragments shifted patterns like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope.

Change, the shift of fortune, lay beyond his control. Even Wade's destiny eluded him. Clark now realized that at times he had been as powerless as the old shamans in dealing with Wade's problems. However, for the moment, Wade was balanced. ... Clark had to be satisfied with that hope. (336-337)

Just as Joe Allston finds peace and redemption in his meager garden and Larry Morgan is comforted in a time of grief by the dripping greenery of a New Hampshire hillside, Lesley's characters, too, turn to the western landscape for the

sense of wholeness that is too often missing in the struggles of everyday human relations.

Although the mazelike narratives of Louise Erdrich's best-known novels are set in early twentieth century North Dakota, which extends beyond the borders of a Wallace Stegner-defined West, Erdrich is still worth considering here, firstly, because the Great Plains of North Dakota at one time indeed were considered the American West and, secondly, because Erdrich is one of very few women writers who is a mother as well and succeeds in incorporating consistently in her fiction both a strong woman's view and a mother's perspective. The daughter of a Chippewa Indian mother and a German-American father, Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine*, was initially published in 1989 and then expanded and re-released in 1993. Together with *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Love Medicine* is a series of stories that follow the lives of three interconnected families that live on and near Erdrich's fictional Indian reservation in northern North Dakota from the turn of the century through the mid-1980s. As is often the case in Native American literature, Erdrich's sense of time and character is cyclical, with frequent references both backward and forward to events and people whose influences transcend the boundaries of a typically linear Anglo train of thought. With both history and present held to the forefront at nearly all times, the characters emerge as complex puzzles whose fates are

inextricably linked to their elders and whose relations to one another are revealed gradually and in a seemingly random order until whole characters emerge.

Through her emphasis on family interrelations and universal life cycles, Erdrich demonstrates – whether consciously or subconsciously – a sensitivity to some of the very western values that Stegner sought to impart: the importance of history, of community, and of a broader consciousness than reliance on mere archetypal assumptions.

Both Erdrich and Stegner, as many western writers do, seek to uncover the nature of human longing or emptiness, whether it be from a sense of rootlessness, an undiscovered sense of self, or a mistaken sense of place in the world. One key difference in how Erdrich and Stegner handle such quandaries, however, is that Stegner frequently sets sparse scenes in order to expose a lack or a longing, while Erdrich's scenes are often rich with detail and an overabundance of warmth and activity, all of which eventually point to a similar lack or longing. When Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake City as an adult in *Recapitulation*, for example, he ponders the joys of a childhood home stocked with trinkets, family artifacts, and memories; as he is reminiscing, Bruce most often is rather aimlessly driving the streets of Salt Lake alone, pausing near once-familiar sights but rarely speaking with anyone beyond the persistent voices in his head. In contrast, when Albertine Johnson returns to her family home on the edge of the reservation after hearing of June Kashpaw's death in *Love Medicine*, Albertine's aunt and mother are so intent

on their discussion that they hardly notice Albertine until more than two full pages later:

The main house, where all of my aunts and uncles grew up, is one big square room with a cooking shack tacked onto it. The house is a light peeling lavender now, the color of a pale petunia, but it was never painted while I lived there. My mother had it painted for Grandma as an anniversary present last year. Soon after the paint job the two old ones moved into town where things were livelier and they didn't have to drive so far to church. Luckily, as it happened, the color suited my Aunt Aurelia, because she moved into the house and has taken care of it since.

Driving up to the house I saw that her brown car and my mother's creamy yellow one were parked in the yard. I got out. They were indoors, baking. I heard their voices from the steps and smelled the rich and browning piecrusts. But when I walked into the dim, warm kitchen they hardly acknowledged me, they were so involved in their talk. (12)

Even after the women do notice Albertine, they talk about her as much as to her, handing her a bowl of pickles to dice. Their reaction is not coarse or hollow; the Kashpaws simply assume, as Stegner would have liked to, that family was there and would be there through whatever life challenges lay ahead. *Love Medicine* details the sometimes incestuous entanglements of the Kashpaw family, the Lazarre family, and Lulu Nanapush's extended family, and although she freezes to death on the reservation in the first few pages of the novel, June Morrissey Kashpaw provides a central connecting point for all three families.

Another place that Erdrich shows respect for the same values that Stegner does is on the topic of realism versus romanticism. Stegner, as I have stated previously, was a confirmed realist whose determination to avoid dangerous

western archetypes prevented him from toying with romanticism at all; for Stegner, getting to the truth of the West entailed solid, hard details of the landscape and its people, with little room for airy metaphorical images or ambiguous conclusions. Erdrich's writing is poetic and visual, and she is not above moments that border on magic realism; for her, as for Silko, the myths that matter are those that transcend individuality to form a kind of familial lifeline across the generations. While Erdrich, like Stegner, strives to avoid the Anglo-influenced archetypes I have discussed in previous chapters, Native American mythologies add depth and complexity to her works, whether they are fables that are recognizable to certain factions of her readership or tales that the fictional families in question have created in order to better explain their own existence and purposes. In the beautiful details of June Kashpaw's final stroll across the snowy reservation, the moment grows more and more surreal until death becomes a certainty:

She had walked far enough to see the dull orange glow, the canopy of low, lit clouds over Williston, when she decided to walk home instead of going back there. The wind was mild and wet. A Chinook wind, she told herself. She made a right turn off the road, walked up a drift frozen over a snow fence, and began to pick her way through the swirls of dead grass and icy crust of open ranchland. Her boots were thin. So she stepped on dry ground where she could and avoided the slush and rotten, gray banks. It was exactly as if she were walking back from a fiddle dance or a friend's house to Uncle Eli's warm, man-smelling kitchen. She crossed the wide fields swinging her purse, stepping carefully to keep her feet dry.

Even when it started to snow she did not lose her sense of direction. Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the

distance. The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course. She continued. Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on.

The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home. (6-7)

Erdrich toys in her novels – both literally and metaphorically – with focus and light, distance and proximity, always ultimately returning to an ever-present web of community and family that so openly defies the western myths of self-reliance, hardy individuality, and emancipation from law and convention. While Erdrich's Native American ancestors may have held such erroneous archetypes in disdain for generations, it is important to the western American literary canon that these Stegner-defined mythologies are exposed again and again for what they really are: Anglo ideologies that rarely held true when the real forces of nature and humanity were at play in the Old West.

Still only in his thirties, Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian Sherman Alexie is one of the West's youngest contemporary writers – and the most caustic. As Alexie tells *New York Times Magazine* reporter Timothy Egan, he wants people – white people, in particular – to be angered by his works: "I'm ready for a good fight," he says. "I'm not in this to make people feel comfortable" (Egan 19). With only just over a decade of publications, Alexie has stormed onto the western literary scene, winning awards and turning heads with his direct attacks on white-led stereotypes of Native Americans. Alexie's debut poetry collection, *The*

Business of Fancydancing (1991), was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. His short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) became the basis for the movie *Smoke Signals* (1998), the nation's first American Indian-directed and acted movie. His other works include the novels *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996), and the short story collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000). According to Scott Rosenfelt, a founder of the Seattle film company that produced *Smoke Signals*, Alexie is surprisingly successful in his attempts to overturn the myths regarding Native Americans: "What floors me about Sherman is how he forces people to change the way they view Indians," he says. "They are not loincloth Indians and they are not political. They are Indians unlike anything we are used to seeing or reading about" (Egan 19). And while his fiction undeniably harbors a certain anger toward the stereotypes he is attempting to destroy, Alexie also incorporates a humor in even the direst of situations. In his short story "The First Annual All-Indian Horseshoe Pitch and Barbecue," for example, Alexie both pokes fun at and suggests the unspeakable poverty of a lone piano on the reservation:

I'd never heard any Indian play the piano until Victor bought a secondhand baby grand at a flea market and hauled it out to the reservation in the back of a BIA pickup. All that summer the piano collected spiders and warm rain, until it swelled like a good tumor. I asked him over and over, "Victor, when you going to play that thing?" He would smile, mumble some unintelligible prayer, and then whisper to me close, "There is a good day to die and there is a good day to play the piano." Just before the barbecue Victor pushed the piano halfway across the reservation, up against a pine tree, flexed his muscles, cracked his knuckles, sat down at the

keys, and pounded out Bela Bartok. In the long silence after Victor finished his piece, after the beautiful dissonance and implied survival, the Spokane Indians wept, stunned by this strange and familiar music.

“Well,” Lester Falls Apart said. “It ain’t Hank Williams but I know what it means.”

Then Nadine said, “You can tell so much about a family by whether their piano is in or out of tune.” (145-146)

In breaking through the western archetypes regarding Native Americans, Alexie does not shy from showing the darker side of reservation life, even those details that might suggest a confirmation of the stereotypes: poverty, alcoholism, laziness. But despite the angry and often painful side of Alexie’s fiction, it is his sober, humor-loving characters who prevail, and in the end western optimism wins out.

One area where Alexie has offended whites – and yet, interestingly, Stegner would have agreed with him – is in his contention that only Native Americans can accurately portray Native Americans. Alexie has been most vocal in his attacks on writer Barbara Kingsolver, whose novel *Pigs in Heaven* includes a single white mother and her adopted Cherokee daughter; he calls her depictions of Indians simplistic: “When you finish writing about Indians, you get up from your typewriter and you’re still white,” he once told Kingsolver. “When I finish, I have to go out and buy groceries, as an Indian” (Egan 18). According to Egan, Alexie’s contentions are dangerous and quite likely impossible: “What Alexie is saying, essentially, is that only Indians can write about Indians, a point that riles many writers. Taken to its logical extreme, Alexie’s complaint would severely

limit the range of most authors, including Alexie himself, who has occasionally inhabited the fictional mind of whites” (18). As I have discussed earlier, however, Stegner defended his own exclusion of Native Americans from his fiction by suggesting that writers are most successful when they write what they know; Stegner instead predicted that Native Americans would one day produce their own literature, and, therefore, ensure a sense of accuracy regarding their narrative voice, which is indeed what has occurred over the last several decades.

One place where Alexie’s depictions of white people border on offensive is in his novel *Indian Killer*. Dr. Clarence Mather, for example, is a white professor teaching an Introduction to Native American Literature course who confirms every stereotype of a white liberal claiming to be enamored with the culture but who really knows very little of substance about it. Marie Polatkin, a Spokane Indian university student who, like Alexie, is aggressively vocal in her opposition to what she perceives as pervasive white racism, is surprised both by the fact that she is the only Indian in Mather’s class and by the limited number of Indian authors on the course reading list:

She’d signed up for the class because she’d heard that Dr. Clarence Mather, the white professor, supposedly loved Indians, or perhaps his idea of Indians, and gave them good grades. But he was also a Wannabe Indian, a white man who wanted to be Indian, and Marie wanted to challenge Mather’s role as the official dispenser of “Indian education” at the University.

“He always wants to sweat with Indian students, or share the peace pipe, or sit at a drum and sing,” Binky, a Yakama [sic] woman, had said. “He’s kind of icky. He really fawns over the women, you know what I mean? Real Indian lover, that one.” (58)

Despite such occasional slips into a kind of reverse racism, Alexie is the first western writer since Stegner to so aggressively and, I believe, successfully attack age-old western mythologies that are clearly outdated and offensive. Even in Alexie's frequently caustic novels and short stories, as in the works of all of the aforementioned contemporary western writers, there are echoes of Stegner's values and hopes for a more enlightened future western American literary canon.

- *In Conclusion*

To give voice adequately to all literary writers of the contemporary West would be a nearly insurmountable task; what I have tried to do here is to include some of the most influential writers whose works reflect some kind of recognition, whether conscious or subconscious, of both the critical and literary contributions that Stegner made to the region's canon. Other writers whose works are either limited by an emphasis on nonfiction or even popular fiction, or whose contributions have simply been too limited to usurp those examined above, include Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, James Galvin, Bill Kittredge, Oliver LaFarge, Barry Lopez, Larry McMurtry, Annick Smith, John Williams, and Terry Tempest Williams. And the list goes on, particularly when one stops to classify authors in various notably western genres, such as Native American literature, nature writing, memoirs, and environmental essays. While it can be necessary to differentiate between fiction and nonfiction when engaging in a critical study of

either genre, to classify a particular author, for instance, as solely a Native American writer introduces the same limitations and assumptions that Stegner battled in the years that he was labeled a “western writer.” Louise Erdrich suggests that such labels these days often are simply an academic distinction “made to attract people to courses where you can lump authors together”: “Labels make a good headline,” she continues. “I don’t dislike it, but I find it tedious” (Erdrich, “Creative”). In considering contemporary western literature, therefore, one would do best to heed Stegner’s warnings regarding misleading classifications and simplifications and instead strive for a broader sense of the talent and literary complexity that is emerging from this region.

Afterword

While I believe Wallace Stegner's influences on the development of a western American literary canon – whether direct or indirect – are undeniably clear, a surprising number of people in this country still do not know who Stegner is. As Jackson J. Benson writes in *Down by the Lemonade Springs*, “although he may have gained popularity with a few, nine out of ten people across the country [have] never heard of him” (60). Hence my somewhat exhaustive efforts here. I believe Stegner deserves a firm and lasting place as a turning point in the development of a western literary canon. Before Stegner's impressively long and prolific career, much of the literary world assumed that all that would emerge from the American West were tedious, formulaic Westerns that only succeeded in further solidifying the dangerously erroneous archetypes of a glorified Old West. Stegner was a western writer and scholar who asked the complex questions necessary to further our understanding of the ways that such archetypes had become embedded in our language, history, and culture, and through his essays, novels, and short stories, he sought to draw those mythologies to the forefront and begin to dismantle them, one by one, in an effort to rewrite a more accurate portrayal of both the historical and the contemporary West. Although the occasional cowboy still rides across the Wyoming prairie and Native Americans

from the Pacific Northwest still attend the occasional powwow, most westerners, as is the case across the United States, live in or near metropolitan cities and know little of the rural life that once dominated the region.

While the bold but brutal expansion of the American frontier will always mark the history of the West as unique both to the region and to the nation as a whole, the literature published by writers who live west of the one-hundredth meridian must not be limited by the ideologies and blindly hopeful dreams of a westward trek that occurred some one hundred and fifty years ago. As Stegner suggests in his “Overture” in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, the literature of the American West is as diverse and culturally rich as its people, and it is only when we pause to listen to the multitude of voices already here and speaking that we will begin to see the truth of who we are and who we once were:

By such a river it is impossible to believe that one will ever be tired or old. Every sense applauds it. Taste it, feel its chill on the teeth: it is pure absolute. Watch its racing current, its steady renewal of force: it is transient and eternal. And listen again to its sounds: get far enough away so that the noise of falling tons of water does not stun the ears, and hear how much is going on underneath – a whole symphony of smaller sounds, hiss and splash and gurgle, the small talk of side channels, the whisper of blown and scattered spray gathering itself and beginning to flow again, secret and irresistible, among the wet rocks. (42-43)

We, too, must step far enough away to hear just how much is going on beneath the surface in western American literature – far enough away that the tumult does not overwhelm us, but not so far as to misread the erroneous archetypes that threaten to limit us to a reductive view of what is otherwise a richly cadenced complexity.

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