

Angle of Repose

by
Wallace Stegner

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 4

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About the author

Wallace Stegner was founder and director of the Creative Writing Program at Stanford University, where he tutored and encouraged many other Western writers such as Edward Abbey, Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, and Scott Momaday. Stegner, who died in 1993, was an ardent environmentalist who also wrote nonfiction works and memoirs about life in the West. *Angle of Repose* was made into an opera in 1976 as a result of a Bicentennial commission by the San Francisco Opera.

Discussion questions

Stegner wrote, "The west does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long." *Angle of Repose* disputes several common myths of the early west. What are some of them?

In what ways do both Susan and Oliver Ward deserve our sympathy? How was each responsible for the difficulties in their marriage? Does their marriage represent in some ways a national tension between east and west?

Additional readings

Ernest J. Finney. *California Time*, 1998.
Mary Hallock Foote. *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*, 1992.
Wallace Stegner. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, 1943.
Wallace Stegner. *A Shooting Star*, 1961.

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An influential writer, teacher, and interpreter of life in the American West, Wallace Stegner grew up in Utah, North Dakota, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, and Saskatchewan. His family—like so many other families in the West—moved from place to place, ever chasing the prospect of a better life elsewhere. “I grew up without history,” Stegner wrote, “in a place where human occupation had left fewer traces than the passage of buffalo and antelope herds. I early acquired the desire to find some history to which I myself belonged.” The discomforts of rootlessness and a longing for a sense of “home,” common themes in Stegner’s novels, comprise the central focus of his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Angle of Repose*.

The book’s narrator is Lyman Ward, a retired University of California professor, recently divorced from his unfaithful spouse. He has lost a leg to a debilitating bone disease and is confined to a wheelchair. Striving to distance himself from his losses and to recover his sense of identity and purpose, Lyman moves into the home where he spent part of his childhood with his grandparents in Grass Valley, California, and undertakes research for a book about his grandparents’ lives. Stegner borrowed the basic outline for this story from his own research into the letters of Mary Hallock Foote, a noted frontier novelist and illustrator.

Lyman’s grandmother, Susan Burling—like Mary Hallock Foote—grew up in the cultivated and genteel society of New York during the Edith Wharton era, between 1870 and 1890, surrounded by people acclaimed for their literary and artistic achievement. Susan Burling, also like Foote, marries a Westerner, an engineer of a background and temperament quite unlike her own.

Both women spend the rest of their lives in the West, following their husbands from job to job, mining camp to mining camp, dream to dream. They are ill-suited for life on the frontier, yet they make a go of it, albeit haltingly, raising families and stubbornly pursuing their own literary and artistic careers. They typify the person with Eastern roots, displaced in the West and struggling to adapt, whose life became a familiar American drama as the country expanded to its Pacific shores.

Lyman’s grandfather, Oliver Ward, meets Susan Burling at her home in New York, where he is one of many invited guests. The two spend a brief moment alone together, during which Susan paints and Oliver—as is his way—says little. Yet they correspond by mail over the next several years while Oliver works as an engineer in a California mine. One day Oliver returns to Susan’s home and proposes marriage. By this time he is well accustomed to the rigors of life on the frontier and all the more out of step with the refined behaviors of Eastern gentility. He carries a revolver into Susan’s home, flaunting his rustic lifestyle. Susan’s friends are aghast and warn her against marrying a ruffian of dubious pedigree. They caution her that life in the West could be nothing but unpleasant and far inferior to the more civilized New York. Nevertheless, Susan and Oliver marry and Susan later joins her husband in a mining camp in the Sierras.

During her train ride west, already dismayed by the coarse conditions of her new surroundings, Susan writes home:

. . . lonely little clusters of settlers’ houses with the great monotonous waves of land stretching miles around them, that make my heart ache for the women who live there. They stand in the house door as the train whirls past, and I wonder if they feel the hopelessness of their exile.

Life in exile is the prevailing attitude Susan adopts toward her residence in the West, and for years she nourishes the notion of returning east as soon as Oliver establishes himself as an engineer of consequence. She writes from the mining camp that the “undertone” of her marriage is such that “. . . this is not our real home. . . we do not belong here except as circumstances keep us,” and she assumes her husband feels the same way. But Oliver, says his grandson, had other ideas. He was one of the “makers and doers,” a true frontiersman who “wanted to take a piece of the wilderness and turn it into a home for civilization.”

Readers’ opinions may differ as to whether Susan’s complaints about frontier life are justifiable. Lyman Ward concludes that his grandmother “felt imprisoned” in her husband’s life. Oliver Ward leads his wife and children through a long string of failed dreams, deceptive opportunities, impermanent jobs and rustic homes at important early mining and irrigation projects in California, Colorado, Mexico and Idaho.

Day by day, the marriage grows more sullen as dreams deflate and collapse, one after the other. Susan harbors an unspoken resentment toward her husband as the cause of her “exile.” Oliver’s failed inventions and schemes force Susan to support the family with income from her writings and illustrations. He is often absent on distant explorations and occasionally drinks too much to numb a gnawing sense of personal failure. Susan, meanwhile, escapes first into letters and visits with her more refined friends back home and eventually into the arms of Oliver’s most trusted friend, Frank Sargent, an assistant engineer.

The downward spiral of the couple’s history reaches its conclusion the day their youngest daughter drowns while Susan dallies with her lover. Susan’s lover commits suicide, her husband leaves her, and her son turns cold toward her forever. Eventually, Oliver invites Susan to live with him in California, in the very house where their grandson, Lyman Ward, now composes the saga of their tumultuous relationship. There, in Grass Valley, the couple reaches an “angle of repose” (“angle of repose” is an engineering term for the slope at which a rolling stone will come to rest). They spend the next several decades together—distant and alienated, but determined.

As a result of his investigation into his grandparents’ marriage, Lyman Ward decides to be more forgiving of his own wife’s unfaithfulness, and allows her back into his life. “Wisdom,” he concludes, “is knowing what you have to accept.” This wisdom is perhaps the angle of repose where Susan and Oliver Ward finally came to rest.