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**University of Alberta**

**Family Distinction(s):  
Representations of Nuclear Family in Canadian and American “Classic”  
Western Novels**

by

**Ruth Anne DyckFehderau**



**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of English**

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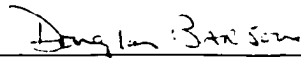
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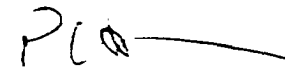
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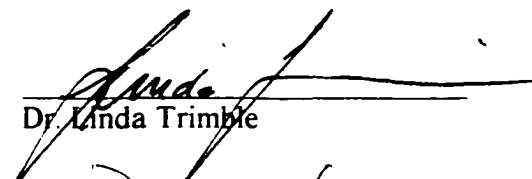
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*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of  
Barthes (Bart), Boas, and Simone.*

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores two patterns of representations of nuclear family, one appearing in the American western literary canon, and one appearing in the Canadian western literary canon. It explores in detail the representations of the nuclear family in four early and mid-twentieth century English “classic” novels dealing with the settlement of the Canadian or American west: Willa Cather’s My Ántonia (1918), Wallace Stegner’s Angle of Repose (1971), Martha Ostenso’s Wild Geese (1925), and Sinclair Ross’s As For Me and My House (1941). Bringing together the works of a number of critics and theorists, it aims to show, first, that all four novels deconstruct the nuclear family, but the two western American novels reconstruct it while the two western Canadian novels leave it fragmented. (Representations of illness in the novels are particularly pointed in their commentary upon the nuclear family and in their application of pressure to its foundations.) Additionally, it points to other novels in each western canon, unexplored in this thesis, that offer up similar representations of the nuclear family. Second, this dissertation shows that each of these novels interacts with and is influenced by the conventions of the formula Western novel (particularly the various discourses of the formula Western hero), interactions and influences that trouble easy distinctions between “pulp” and “classic” fiction. These interactions, however, reproduce further the discourses and ideologies that empower the reconstructed nuclear family in the two western American novels, while they undermine further the already fragmented nuclear family in the two western Canadian novels. Third, this thesis complicates the conventional allegorical reading that “family” stands in for “nation” and that these representations of family exist in their respective national western canons in order to



function as metaphors for “nation.” It does so by exploring one aspect of the canonization machinery that contributed to connections between the representations of family in the Canadian novels and the appearance of those novels in the Canadian western canon, offering some possible material reasons for the appearance of a particular pattern of family representation in the Canadian western canon.

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## **Introduction**

### **I. Introduction**

A number of years ago, as I was completing coursework requirements for my Master's degree, a professor remarked to me, over beers in a local pub, that no one had really theorized the family since the Marxist readings of the 1970s. This wasn't quite accurate, of course, for the family has been subjected to examination and theorization since then, particularly in the areas of psychoanalysis and feminist theory. And equally evident is the fact that my professor's comment was not meant to be official or defining (and she would likely be horrified to know that I have used it in such a context); it was simply part of a casual conversation at the end of a long week. Nevertheless, she did point to an interesting lack, one which has come to my attention several times since that afternoon in the crowded basement bar, and I continue to find it curious that, although the family unit has been explored, it has not been explored *more*, in both literary theory and literary criticism. I find it particularly curious since the nuclear family is an important component of a number of discourses and ideologies, and since some form of family is an accepted element of most cultures—indeed, one might go so far as to say that some form of family is nearly universal. One might also expect the family to be examined more since it's perhaps one of the most, if not *the* most, frequently appearing social unit(s) in novels, short stories, plays, and other literary genres.

This absence, one might assume at first glance, signals a cultural unimportance of family. I have no proof to offer, and I am neither a sociologist nor a theoretician equipped to make such claims, but I suspect that the reason the family has been

underrepresented in theory and criticism has nothing to do with unimportance, but rather with the opposite, with the fact that its importance is so widely assumed and so completely pervasive that it has been and continues to be taken for granted. Jacques Donzelot implies as much in the preface to his 1979 work The Policing of Families. Donzelot chooses to address “three forms of discourse whose contents, to say nothing of their implications, leave too many questions hanging [. . .]. I am referring to Marxists, feminists, and psychoanalysts” (xix). To examine these various discourses, Donzelot strategically focusses on the family (and primarily on the nuclear family) as his object of study “since the family is the concrete locus where these discourses implicitly converge” (xix). That is, some kind of assumption of family—an assumption that locates the family centrally in society and/or in gender and/or in the human psyche—is inherent to each of these complex, widely divergent discourses. Kelly Oliver, in Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture (1997), also draws attention to the influence of the nuclear family, saying that “there is no denying that the fantasy of the nuclear family is still a centerpiece of our cultural imaginary. For this reason, we cannot merely dismiss the importance of the cultural ideal of the nuclear family” (xvii).

## **II. Terms and Assumptions**

In this dissertation, I make certain assumptions about what Oliver calls “the cultural ideal of the family” and I rest on certain premises about and definitions of family. I start from the premise that family is a vehicle through which ideologies and technologies and discourses are generated and perpetuated, that family is a means by

which society maintains its economic and political status quo. Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, in The Anti-Social Family (1982), argue convincingly that “ideal” family conventions, structures, partnerships, and roles, shaped by the ideological, perpetuate the norms that generated them, marginalizing people outside those conventions, structures, partnerships, and roles. (Barrett coins the term “ideology of familialism” to describe that very process [Oppression 206].) I mention this premise here because, although it was once worded as a question in my mind (is family a means by which society maintains its status quo?), it has become an assumption that fuels my research and my belief that more studies of family are important: if family is such an influential socialization mechanism, it deserves the closest and most thorough scrutiny. It’s especially important to scrutinize its role in canonized novels such as the ones studied in this thesis. Canonized work is often widely assumed to be culturally important. Constructions of family in canonized novels, then, may be in a position where they carry extra cultural weight and themselves add to the influence of family in the sociopolitical apparatus; that is, they may be in a position where they “perpetuate the norms that generated them.”

I also start from a premise (previously implied by Donzelot) which applies not only to family but to a host of other discourses and technologies. The premise: that family, like so many other structures and discourses, cannot be an isolated discourse or an autonomous structure. It must be part of the entire social network of relations, discourses, technologies, and assumptions; it reacts with and is acted upon by countless other relations, discourses, technologies, and assumptions. Representations of family, particularly literary representations of family, I assume, are part of this entire network of discourses and technologies, and, though they interact and intersect with actual families,

are not to be confused with them; like Teresa de Lauretis in Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (1987), I make a distinction between “the space of a representation” and “the space outside the representation [. . .] which would then be thought of as ‘real’” (25).

“Representation”—specifically “representation of family”—deserves explanation for it is, as W.J.T. Mitchell notes, “an extremely elastic notion” (13). In this dissertation, I use the term “representation of family” in two ways, depending on the context. First, I use it to refer to symbolic representation of the family—the narration or description of fictional families in the novels. Discussions of these symbolic representations of family come up particularly in Chapters One and Two, since these chapters concern themselves with analyses of fictional families and fictional events in the novels. But, as Mitchell points out, “representation, even purely ‘aesthetic’ representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions; one might argue, in fact, that representation is precisely the point where these questions are most likely to enter the literary work” (15). This leads me to the second way I use “representation of family” in this thesis. While in a good deal of scholarship, political “representation” refers to parties who act for or speak for other parties, or to the representing in a particular context of particular social groups, when I speak of the political aspect of “representation of family” I mean it to refer to an activity on the part of writers, an activity which is on some level motivated by political, ideological, and material factors. That is, in addition to using “representation of family” to refer to the fictions generated by the writers, I also use “representation of family” to refer to the ways in which writers construct and present the family—to the *acts* of construction and



presentation—to us in these novels. Discussions of these acts come up or are alluded to not only in reference to the authors of the novels, but also, in the analyses of Angle of Repose and As For Me and My House, to the narrators; these two novels describe the intentional manipulation of information on the parts of the narrators (who are themselves writers) for the purpose of presenting very specific (if limited) images and representations of family.

I define the nuclear family as that social unit comprising two parents, a man and a woman, and their biological children living in one household. This is a rather strict definition of nuclear family, I know, but I think it's necessary to make some clear distinctions between nuclear family proper and extensions of it (such as grandparents and aunts and uncles, for instance) or alternative forms of it (such as families with same-sex or single parents), and between biological members of the family and adopted members. I don't make this distinction because I believe that grandparents and cousins are unimportant, or that same-sex parents are less valid, or that adopted children are less a part of a family or less important to a family than biological children. Nothing could be further from the truth. This thesis, however, explores fictional families rather than actual families, and, in the novels I discuss, extended families (who play important roles in the two American novels) and adopted children (who play central roles in three out of the four novels) function differently and are represented differently than biological children and nuclear families, and so this distinction must be made in order to explore the representations more carefully. (While alternative forms of family—same-sex couples and single parents, for instance—appear in some of the novels, they are never represented

as nuclear families, and are always represented as somehow deviant, an issue addressed in Chapter One.)

This dissertation explores representations of the nuclear family in early and mid-twentieth century<sup>1</sup> English novels dealing with the settlement of the Canadian or American wests that have been canonized as “classic” novels of the Canadian and American wests. Several terms in this statement require definition. By “classic,” I mean novels that are, as Webster’s NewWorld Dictionary (1984) puts it, literary works “generally recognized as excellent, authoritative” (263).<sup>2</sup> Others might use the term “literature” instead of “classic.” Both terms, “literature” and “classic,” I assume, are inextricably linked with the term “canon,” for a novel becomes a “classic” through a canonization process and receives a position in a literary canon. I assume that a novel cannot be a “classic” if it is not part of a literary canon.<sup>3</sup> A literary canon (to borrow Paul Lauter’s definition, modifying it slightly) is the set of authors and works generally included in basic university and college courses and textbooks, those ordinarily discussed in standard volumes of literary history, bibliography, or criticism, and those generally discussed and understood as being representative of particular genres and categories (for instance, modernism might be such a category, or, in this case, Canadian western literature or American western literature) at academic conferences and events specializing in that literary canon.

Literary canons, as Terry Eagleton notes, in Literary Theory: An Introduction (1983), are by no means static entities, even though the works included in them are “generally recognized” as “excellent,” or superior to other works:

The fact that [a literary canon] is usually regarded as fairly fixed, even at times as eternal and immutable, is in a sense ironic, because since literary critical discourse has no definite signified it can, if it wants to, turn its attention to more or less any kind of writing. Some of those hottest in their defence of the canon have from time to time demonstrated how the discourse can be made to operate on 'non-literary' writing. This, indeed, is the embarrassment of literary criticism, that it defines for itself a special object, literature, while existing as a set of discursive techniques which have no reason to stop short at that object at all. (201-02)

Indeed, Eagleton begins his book by complicating the very idea of "literature" thereby throwing into question any notion of literary "superiority":

[W]e can drop once and for all the illusion that the category 'literature' is 'objective,' in the sense of being eternally given and immutable. Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature – Shakespeare, for example – can cease to be literature. (10)

Eagleton, however, continues to use the terms "literary" and "literature" (as I do in this thesis), "plac[ing] them under an invisible crossing-out mark, to indicate that these terms will not really do but that we have no better ones at the moment" (11).

My emphasis in this dissertation, however, is not on whether or not certain novels *are* "excellent" or "authoritative," to refer again to the dictionary definition of "classic." Indeed, I make no conscious attempt at judging the aesthetic "value" of the texts

discussed here. Rather, my emphasis centres upon the fact that they are recognized as “classics” and (in the case of the Canadian novels) on the process whereby they came to be recognized as such. Every time I use the word “classic,” I enclose it in quotation marks because I want to be very clear that I don’t assume “classic” novels are necessarily superior to other novels which have not had the “classic” label bestowed upon them. Nor do I mean to imply the opposite, that “classic” novels are somehow unworthy of canonization, or that all “literary standards” should be done away with. I mean only to make clear my assumption that canon formation cannot be objective. A canon, then, excludes a great many writers, and many of these are writers whose works have been marginalized for any number of reasons—to name a few, writers of literature deemed inappropriate at the time, writers of particular political leanings, writers of popular literature, and, in the early and mid-twentieth century North American canons such as the canons I examine, writers of colour. I study four particular American and Canadian “classic” western novels not because I want to reify their unshakeable positions in the American or Canadian western canons, although focussing my attention on them undoubtedly and unfortunately has that effect, but because they are canonized and I want to explore some of the reasons behind the stability of their positions in their literary canons.

I say “*their* literary canons” instead of “*the* literary canon” because I assume that there exists more than one literary canon, and that novels recognized as “classics” of one canon often are not recognized as “classics” of another canon. On one level, this seems obvious. A novel by a contemporary British writer about the English landscape would have little place in, for instance, a canon concerned with nineteenth-century Caribbean

poetry. But I mean to take the statement further: what one canon-making body might deem “serious literature,” another canon-making body might reject as “serious literature,” a discrepancy which is a natural consequence of the lack of objectivity in canon formation and which has important implications for a dissertation discussing canons of American and Canadian western literature. As Terry Eagleton suggests, certain writers (he mentions Shakespeare) come up again and again as being writers of what is commonly known as Great Literature, or, to use his words, their works are “unalterably and unquestionably literature” (10). To the best of my knowledge, none of the works I study here have at any point received the kind of international recognition, attention, and deference received by writers such as William Shakespeare or Ernest Hemingway or Joseph Conrad, to name a few. None of them, then, could be considered to be “classics” of world literature like Shakespeare, Hemingway, and Conrad might be. Indeed, I do not even claim that all of these novels are “classics” of American literature or of Canadian literature. I do, however, claim that they are “classics” of American western literature or of Canadian western literature.

It’s important to note here that even the very western canons in which I claim these works are positioned have been widely ignored or questioned at some point as being canons of “serious” literature. The third chapter of this thesis points to some of the struggles faced by publishers, professors, and literary critics who tried to get Canadian (western and non-western) writing to be taken seriously even by Canadians themselves, let alone by the larger international community of readers. John Metcalf discusses more of these struggles (not entirely sympathetically) in What is a Canadian Literature? (1988), as do a number of writers in Robert Lecker’s collection Canadian Canons: Essays in

Literary Value (1991). In a similar fashion, American western literature has a history of struggling against notions that the works it includes are not “serious” literature. One of the first to identify this problem was Norman Foerster in The Reinterpretation of American Literature: Some Contributions Toward the Understanding of Its Historical Development (1928). Since then, Blake Allmendinger (Ten Most 2-4), William T. Pilkington (ix), and Richard Etulain (“American Literary” 144 ff) have all commented on the continued struggle of writers on the western side of the United States to receive the attention their work merits, an attention the eastern writers receive more easily. And a telling illustration of this struggle appears in Paul Lauter’s Reconstructing American Literature: Courses, Syllabi, Issues (1983). The purpose of Lauter’s book is to encourage the study of lesser-known American writers alongside the study of canonized American writers; or to quote Lauter, “so that/ the work of/ Frederick Douglass, Mary Wilkins Freeman./ Agnes Smedley, Zora Neale Hurston/ and others/ is read with the work of/ Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James,/ William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway/ and others” (cover). But Lauter’s book pays little attention to American western literature. In the 67 syllabi listed in Lauter’s book, surprisingly few western authors are mentioned. Twain, Cather, and Dreiser receive regular mention, but other western authors either are mentioned once, perhaps twice, usually under the heading of “regional” literature<sup>4</sup> or, more frequently, ignored altogether. In fact, one syllabus on regional literature, by Ellen O’Brien, states that “[i]t is generally conceded that while the South has produced a number of literary masterworks that are distinctly regional, the West has yet to produce such a work.” After noting that the “West [is] an influence on American thought,” the

syllabus asks students to analyze critics' examinations of what O'Brien calls "the *failure of Western literature*" (199) (my italics).

And yet, I discuss in this thesis "classics" of Canadian and American western literatures. The fact that I do so implies that, regardless of those who have questioned the existence of "serious" Canadian literature or "serious" American western literature, I assume there exists a canon of Canadian western writing and there exists a canon of American western writing. My reason for this assumption has to do with the definition of canon. That is, I assume (in a rather circular argument) that because these western literary works are regularly included in basic university and college courses and textbooks, because they are ordinarily discussed in standard volumes of literary history, bibliography, or criticism, and because they are generally discussed and understood as being representative of the western genre at academic conferences and events, then there exists a western literary canon.

When I speak of canons of American western writing and of Canadian western writing, and when I mention (as I did earlier) that this thesis discusses novels dealing with the settlement of the Canadian or American wests, I use the terms "western" and "west(s)" in particular ways. I use "western" literature, with a lower case w, to mean literature that has been written about (and usually in) the geographical west of United States or Canada, literature in which a sense of place (but not necessarily a sense of mythic tradition) is characteristic. ("Western" with an upper case W refers to the formula Western, a genre discussed especially in Chapter Two.) The "geographical west" of United States or Canada, however, is not an easily defined term, and in criticism surrounding western literature, the definition slips around frequently.<sup>5</sup> Usually, it

includes both the far west and the midwest of United States, and Canadian provinces west of and including Manitoba. But exceptions exist, and often without explanation. At times, western writing excludes coastal writing (such as writing about California or British Columbia) and limits itself to writing of the plains, at times it excludes the writing of the midwest altogether, and at times the included American midwest stretches as far east as to include Indiana and Kentucky. Since I rely upon critics who discuss “western” writing without always defining what they mean by “west,” my own definition must be somewhat elastic, but, for the most part, I take the “geographical west” to start at the west coast of the continent and move eastward to include Manitoba, Canada, and the American states of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. Even though they sit directly south or north (or northwest) of and encompass the same longitudes as the provinces and states included in my definition of “geographical west,” I do not take the term to include Alaska or the Canadian territories, nor to include Louisiana or Mexico.

### **III. Cather, Stegner, Ostenso, and Ross**

To determine whether novels concerning the settlement of the Canadian or American west were canonized “classics,” I consider a number of factors and (rather unscientific) observations, by asking the following questions: Do articles about the novels appear with some regularity in relevant journals (such as Western American Literature<sup>6</sup> or Studies in Canadian Literature)? Alternately, (or additionally), do they appear with some regularity in critical volumes specializing in western literature (such as Barbara Meldrum’s Old West—New West: Centennial Essays [1993] or Arnold



Davidson's Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West [1994])? Do they appear fairly regularly on relevant university course syllabi? When I (or someone else) speak(s) of them to western specialists, (or even to non-western Canadian or American specialists), are these novels instantly recognized? Do western specialists currently refer to them regularly in conference papers and discussions? Taking all of these factors into account, and selecting those writers fairly consistently mentioned, I come up with two lists of writers, one Canadian and one American. The American western list includes, but is not limited to, such writers as James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Hamlin Garland, Owen Wister, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Wright Morris, Frank Waters, A.B. Guthrie, Wallace Stegner, Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, and Marilynne Robinson, among others. The Canadian western list includes, but is not limited to, such writers as Frederick Philip Grove, Sinclair Ross, Martha Ostenso, W.O. Mitchell, Sheila Watson, Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, and Aritha Van Herk, among others. When I further confine the list to include only works written in the sixty-year limit, the lists grow shorter: Americans Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Wright Morris, Frank Waters, A.B. Guthrie, and Wallace Stegner, among others, and Canadians Sinclair Ross, Martha Ostenso, W.O. Mitchell, Frederick Philip Grove, Sheila Watson, Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch, and Margaret Laurence, among others. When I speak, then, of canons of Canadian or American western literatures, I refer to these writers and their works. While I do on numerous occasions quote others who make claims about the entire American or Canadian canon, I do not intend to make claims about the whole of American literature,

or the whole of Canadian literature, and I do not intend my claims to apply to literature written outside of this sixty-year timespan.

From these lists, then, I selected as wide a variety of writers as possible, given the obvious constraints of a dissertation. Trying to focus especially on writers whose works explore the role of family in the settlement of the wests, and whose works address both male and female concerns in the settlement of the west, and whose works to some extent address straight and queer concerns,<sup>7</sup> I chose from each list a male writer and a female writer, a straight writer and a queer writer,<sup>8</sup> ending up with a four-novel list which has become the focus of this dissertation: Willa Cather's My Ántonia (1918), Wallace Stegner's Angle of Repose (1971), Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese (1925), and Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House (1941),<sup>9</sup> a list to which I now turn.

Keeping in mind the previously mentioned definitions of "canon" and "classic," Willa Cather's My Ántonia and Wallace Stegner's Angle of Repose have long been regarded as "classics" of the American wests. Cather's novel, although often criticized for its Old World nostalgia by critics like Granville Hicks and Lionel Trilling, was soon hailed as an important American novel in literary circles, partly because of its representations of the immigrant tide which had been ignored in previous mainstream literary works. Throughout the remainder of the century,<sup>10</sup> it continued to capture the interest of critics of western American literature so that an impressive volume of criticism written about Cather and the novel spans library shelves. Indeed, Cather is easily one of the most frequently discussed writers in recent decades of Western American Literature and in western conferences and conference proceedings,<sup>11</sup> as well as in conferences

dedicated exclusively to the study of Cather. Further, western critics label My Ántonia as “serious” western literature (or some other such term) with some regularity. John G. Cawelti considers it to belong in a category of “serious novels with a Western setting” (93) and Allmendinger considers it to be “‘canonical’ western literature” [Ten Most 3]). All these factors combine to suggest that My Ántonia has maintained a stable position in the American canon since the 1920s.

Stegner’s novel achieved the “classic” status almost immediately upon being recognized with the Pulitzer prize in 1971. I do not mean to suggest that the novel became a “classic” because it was awarded a Pulitzer prize or that all Pulitzer prize novels are “classics,”<sup>12</sup> but that the novel received widespread acclaim immediately upon publication, and that the receipt of this award was only the beginning of the critical attention directed at the novel. Although it is the most recent of the four novels discussed here, Angle of Repose has been the subject of an impressive amount of critical attention. The novel regularly receives discussion and analysis in collections of western essays, such as those edited by Barbara Meldrum or William T. Pilkington, and Stegner’s writing even inspires collections of essays dedicated exclusively to it. Critics like the western bibliographer Richard Etulain name Angle of Repose an “important western novel” and Stegner “a superb mind” (“Frontier and Region” 90). Conferences such as those sponsored by the Western Literature Association call repeated attention to Stegner’s writing (as does the previously mentioned “Crossing Frontiers” conference proceedings). Indeed, when Blake Allmendinger complains that westernists have “put writers such as Wallace Stegner on a critical pedestal” (4), Robert Thacker, using Western American Literature as his venue, rushes to the defense of putting Stegner on such a pedestal,

saying that “critics are drawn to those aspects in Stegner’s writing that most resonate for them” (“Tragically Hip” 457).

Sinclair Ross’s As For Me and My House received little attention from critics or the general public upon initial publication in 1941, but was republished in 1957, by McClelland and Stewart. And since then, Ross’s novel and its central character have become, as Robert Kroetsch says, “a central fascination in the larger story of the Canadian imagination” (“Afterword” 217). Indeed, Marilyn Rose, in the Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature (1997), declares Ross’s novel to be “the most critically appraised of Canadian novels” (61). And the regularity with which it receives discussion in critical journals ranging from Canadian Literature to Western American Literature (See, for instance, David Stouck’s recent article in the Winter 2000 issue of WLA) and at conferences on Canadian writing or western writing confirms Rose’s assessment. Although some critics (such as Morton Ross in “The Canonization of *As For Me and My House*: A Case Study” and Robert Lecker in Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature [1995]) question the means by which the title achieved such acclaim, one would be hard-pressed to find a reason to argue its “classic” status.

Similarly, Martha Ostenso’s novel has been assumed by Canadian critics to deserve a place in the Canadian western canon. While fewer journal articles exist on this novel than the other three, Wild Geese receives regular discussion in volumes of criticism discussing Canadian literature, volumes such as Arnold Davidson’s Coyote Country, Dick Harrison’s Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (1977), John Moss’s Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel: The Ancestral Present (1977) and

Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction (1974), and Laurence Ricou's Vertical Man/Horizontal World (1973). The novel, suggested by Carlyle King to be a landmark novel in North American prairie realism (v-vii), has been a staple on university Canadian literature courses for decades. Some controversy might surround my choice of Ostenso's novel since Ostenso herself was not a Canadian writer (she was born in Norway, emigrated to the United States, and lived in Canada only a short time). Generally, however (as the aforementioned list of the volumes of criticism discussing her work implies), Ostenso's novel has been accepted among critics as a Canadian "classic," perhaps because the novel has at least one Canadian author,<sup>13</sup> or perhaps because of the novel's "Canadian" subject matter.<sup>14</sup> Desmond Pacey's response to this controversy is to suggest that Ostenso is "an American novelist, but [. . .] her first novel, *Wild Geese*, set in Manitoba and the product of her Manitoba experience, is a Canadian novel" (678). The 1961 publication of the novel in McClelland and Stewart's "New Canadian Library" series only acknowledged and emphasized this acceptance of Ostenso's novel in the Canadian canon, and put the novel in a position where its "classic" status might be reified for years to come. What these four novels concerning the settlement of the west have in common, among other things, is that they pay a great deal of attention to family, and that they have all been canonized as "classics" of the American or Canadian western canons.

#### **IV. Synopsis**

When I began this project, with the observation that very different patterns of nuclear family appeared frequently in the canons of "classic" novels of the Canadian and

American wests, I expected to end up in a particular place. I expected to land in a place where I would talk about nation, about family as poster-child for nation, about specific aspects of American western history and Canadian western history, about the different settlement patterns in the two countries, about great prairie facts and small prairie towns, about fledgling countries and mother/fatherlands, about national growing pains and literary resistance, about national imaginations and about how all of these different factors influenced the writers of these novels and their attitudes towards the nuclear family.

I speculated that the different representations of family in the canons had to do with Canadian and American settlement and literary history. I considered the fact that the American west was settled in seventy years and the Canadian west was settled in twenty, and that the United States had a Wild Wild West but Canada had a calm and ordered settlement (ideas explored by Dick Harrison in Unnamed Country). I considered the influence on western American literature of the eastern American transcendentalist movements—such as Bronson Alcott’s Brook Farm experiment which initially intended to propose new ways of conceiving of “family” and “home,” but which failed in the end, thereby affirming traditional constructs of family. Further, I considered the influence of the Canadian and American Social Gospel movements on the two canons. In both countries, the Social Gospel preached a synthesis of Christian ethics and social justice and humanitarian concern, taking up issues of temperance and women’s suffrage. It spawned family-positive novels (Charles Sheldon’s In His Steps [c.1897] and Louisa May Alcott’s Rose in Bloom [1876] south of the border, and Nellie McClung’s Purple Springs [1921] and Ralph Connor’s Man from Glengarry [c.1900] north of the border, to

name a few) and, in the United States, a good deal of advice literature as well. I wondered if perhaps the variations in the American and Canadian versions of the Social Gospel (for instance, the fact that it became the unofficial religious expression of a corporation, the Grain Growers, in the Canadian west) might account for some variations in representations of family in western novels, particularly since the movement in both countries took as its primary symbol the nuclear family. Further, I speculated that, while the easts of both countries were shaped by their relationships with Britain, the wests may have been shaped according to a distilled Canadian or American system of values, after many British influences had been boiled off. I considered if all of these historical events, movements, and influences might be ways of forging or birthing nation, and that the nuclear family claimed different places and functions in the two national literary families.

The more I read, the more I realized that other critics—Dick Harrison, Julia Stern, Elizabeth Barnes, Jane Tompkins, to name just a few—had noticed similar patterns of nuclear family in Canadian or American canons, and had read metaphorically the family, assuming it functioned as a metaphor for nation. I became increasingly dissatisfied with these readings because they often neglected to address the family itself. Further, I found it difficult to assume that individual writers were thinking “nation” when they wrote “family.” Of course, the writer’s intent is not always relevant, but I bring it up here to point out that it seemed to me that the “nation” explanation for the families in these novels was missing something.

And so this project (or, to be more specific, the third chapter of this project) took a different turn. I began to look through archival materials surrounding the western novels discussed here for documents that might shed some light on why certain patterns

crept up in the canons. Beginning in the Roy Daniells Fonds at the University of British Columbia and going to the McClelland and Stewart Fonds at McMaster University, I looked for anything I could find that might address nuclear family in the Canadian novels and the place of particular representations of it in the canon, and for anything that might suggest why these two western Canadian novels were chosen to appear in the New Canadian Library, an influential series (or what would become an influential series) dedicated to the publication of Canadian “classics.” While I found that the above mentioned historical events and movements were in fact very important to creating a context in which certain representations of family might be included in novels of the time, I found that the early publication history of the two western Canadian novels showed some important and hitherto neglected aspects that deserved consideration. Budgetary and time constraints prevented me from doing similar archival work surrounding the two western American novels, though a truly balanced study would include an archival examination of all four of the novels.

This dissertation, as previously noted, explores representations of the nuclear family in four early and mid-twentieth century English novels dealing with the settlement of the Canadian or American wests that have been canonized as “classic” novels of the Canadian and American wests: Willa Cather’s My Ántonia, Wallace Stegner’s Angle of Repose, Martha Ostenso’s Wild Geese, and Sinclair Ross’s As For Me and My House. Bringing together the works of a number of critics and theorists, it aims to show, first, that all four novels deconstruct the nuclear family. Cather’s and Stegner’s novels, however, soon reconstruct the nuclear family whereas Ostenso’s and Ross’s novels leave it in a fragmented state. Although the confines of this dissertation prevent extended



discussion of this, the thesis aims to suggest that the nuclear family in a number of other “classic” western American novels follows a deconstruction-followed-by-reconstruction pattern similar to the one discussed in Cather’s and Stegner’s novels. And it aims to suggest that the nuclear family in a number of other “classic” western Canadian novels follows a similar deconstruction pattern to the one discussed in Ostenso’s and Ross’s novels. (It does not aim to suggest that all American “classic” western novels nor all Canadian “classic” western novels follow these patterns.) It aims to show, second, that, each of these novels interacts with and is influenced by the conventions of the formula Western novel (particularly with various discourses of the formula Western hero). These interactions, however, reproduce further the discourses and ideologies that empower the reconstructed nuclear family in the two western American novels while the two western Canadian novels use them to undermine further the already fragmented nuclear family. Finally, this dissertation aims to complicate the conventional explanation that “family” stands in for “nation” and that these representations of family exist in their respective national western canons in order to function as metaphors for “nation” by exploring some possible material reasons for why the Canadian western canon might include these novels that have such remarkably different representations of family than the novels in the American western canon discussed here.

Rather than forcing upon the very different chapters one overriding theory, I have tried to let the individual topics of each chapter guide my selection of theorists. Chapter One begins the investigation of family by exploring the representations of family in the four novels upon which this thesis focusses. Using Jacques Donzelot’s theory that family functions as a central cog in the sociopolitical apparatus, Chapter One shows that both the

two western American “classic” novels and the two western Canadian “classic” novels scrutinize and deconstruct the nuclear family, exposing and interrogating unexamined assumptions surrounding the nuclear family. The two western American novels, however, follow this deconstruction with a re-construction of the nuclear family, thereby reifying its power and influence and moral status. The nuclear family, in these two novels, becomes not a negative element of resistance in the social, but the re-organizing principle of the society that pressured and questioned it in the first place. However, as if to suggest that the conventional nuclear family is not worth reconstructing, or that it has no place in the west, the two western Canadian novels leave it in a deconstructed and dismantled state, making no attempt to reify its influence. (Using theories of illness and representation put forth by writers such as Susan Sontag and Sander Gilman, this chapter also shows that some of the deconstruction and reconstruction of the nuclear family take place in these novels through the representations of illness or cure.)

Chapter Two examines ways in which the representations of nuclear family in the four novels interact with representations of family in another discursive field, that of a particular genre, the formula Western. This chapter relies on the work of a number of Western theorists such as John G. Cawelti, who examines the basic structural elements of Westerns, Jane Tompkins, who argues that Westerns react against nineteenth century sentimental novels, and Blake Allmendinger, who examines the working culture of cowboys, and who calls attention to many hitherto ignored Western works. I examine these four novels in light of the formula Western, the tradition which informs such Western films as Shane (1953) and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969), because this formula has very specific, fairly rigid ideals of family and its place in the “civilized”

society on the western frontier. Complementing these ideals, formula Westerns subscribe to limited notions of heroism that involve the Western hero protecting and yet remaining outside the nuclear family. This chapter explores the Western's notions of heroism and ideals of family because the ways in which the "classic" novels interact with these Western conventions ultimately furthers the particular representation favoured by the particular examples from the American or Canadian canons discussed in Chapter One. That is, the two western American "classic" novels embrace the notions of Western hero and incorporate them into the sociopolitical apparatus that place the nuclear family in revered and central positions, while the two western Canadian "classic" novels use the conventions of Western hero and Western family to mark a clear opposition between hero and family, showing that the nuclear family prevents rather than enables heroism and individual fulfillment. Examining the "classic" novels in light of the Western serves another function as well: scholars of Canadian and American literature generally take "classic" novels, which are grounded in the same geography and experience as formula Westerns, to be examples of realism, and yet the romantic genre of the Western clearly influences them. Hence, it seems that the distinctions and similarities between the realist "classic" novels and the romantic "pulp" novels beg investigation, particularly since the formula Western, a genre Christine Bold shows to have dominated the literary market at various times in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been repeatedly devalued in academic circles as part of "pop culture" and "pulp fiction," while the "classic" novels have been considered part of the "serious literary establishment." In showing significant overlap and sophisticated, complex interaction between the formula

novels and the “classic” novels, this chapter troubles such “pop culture versus serious literature” distinctions, setting up the central argument in Chapter Three.

If Chapters One and Two explore questions of *what* happens in the representations of family in English “classic” novels of the Canadian and American wests, Chapter Three explores the question *why*. Drawing on the work of a number of canon theorists, such as Robert Lecker, Donna Bennett, Leon Surette, (all of whose works focus on canonicity in Canadian literature) and John Guillory, (whose work complicates highly politicized readings of canonicity and is based on that of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu). Chapter Three examines ways in which the representations of nuclear family in the novels interact with a space outside the field of representation, with the field of the concrete market economy, to determine why these remarkably different representations appear in the two western literary canons. The differences don’t suggest that all writers south of the border subscribe to particular “family” or “patriotic” values that all writers north of the border oppose or avoid. And they don’t suggest that all Canadian western writers are in revolt against an American ideal of family. This chapter aims to show that McClelland and Stewart (a publishing house that functioned as one of a number of canonizing forces in the early days of the Canadian literary canon) was engaged in the creation of a series—the New Canadian Library Series. The purpose of this series was to publish “classic” Canadian work, and to influence—insofar as it was possible for a single publishing house to do this—the creation of a Canadian canon that was clearly distinctive from the American canon. This distinctiveness relied to some extent upon ill-defined “Canadian themes,” particularly themes that contrasted themes already existing in the more established American canon. One of these themes appears to

be the deconstructed, dismantled, or diseased family, a theme which, this thesis suggests, influenced McClelland and Stewart to choose Canadian texts like Ostenso's and Ross's novels for their series over other Canadian texts that might have represented the nuclear family differently. The publication of these two novels in the New Canadian Library, then, set in motion the larger machinery that led to the eventual canonization of the novels. I don't mean to imply that someone with a great deal of power sat down and decided to canonize only one kind of representation of the nuclear family. The process, I believe, was much less direct, for canonization, as Guillory and others show, involves an enormously complex set of factors. Rather, I mean to suggest that the early publication history of novels such as these provides a productive way of thinking about this pattern of representation of the nuclear family in the western Canadian canon.

## **V. Family Background**

A number of relevant studies and theories of family in American and Canadian writing merit summary here. Elizabeth Barnes, in States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel (1997), highlights an important pattern in American literature. She suggests that the glorification of family is central to American literature, and even to the American imagination. "American culture's preoccupation with familial feeling as the foundation for sympathy," she argues, has significant implications, for "sympathy [is] the basis of a democratic republic" (xi). She outlines a number of analogies and metaphors generated by this glorification of family, ones in which the family "stands as the model for social and political affiliations" (2) and ones which raise

questions “as to how America can both glorify family and reject the ‘parent’ [Britain] that has so profoundly influenced its culture. For how does a nation repudiate that which has brought it into being without repudiating an essential part of itself?” (x). And she examines reasons behind casting family as a central metaphor in the American cultural imaginary. (Julia Stern’s 1997 work, The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel, also examines family and the importance of familial feeling in a number of American sentimental works, as well as the roles played by hopes and dreams of grounding social and political bonds in familial sympathy.)

Leslie Fiedler’s 1960 work (revised in 1966), Love and Death in the American Novel, in trying “to demonstrate that the American novel has a character and fate different from the novel [in other countries]” (11), sees a very different pattern in American literature. Fiedler focuses on what he calls “the failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love and his consequent obsession with death, incest and innocent homosexuality” (12), and suggests, among other things, that “great [American] novelists” (most, if not all, of whom, according to Fiedler’s list of great American novels, are white men) hesitate to write about white women and focus on masculine worlds and concerns. They “shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality” (24), monsters and symbols from which the hero figures retreat. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the hero figures, according to Fiedler, run, flat out, away from “civilization,” from women, and, implicitly, from family responsibilities.<sup>15</sup>

While similarly suggesting that male heroes call into question the values of safety and order represented by white women and by family, Richard Slotkin, in Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860 (1973), highlights some important aspects of American writing of which Fiedler takes little note, thereby significantly complicating Fiedler's assertions. Although not citing Fiedler, and exploring different works than Fiedler, Slotkin deals with similar concerns of the mythic nature of the west and the role of the male hero in it. He notes repeatedly the tendency of the hero to rescue family, the frequency with which the captivity narrative ends with a reunion of family, the frequency with which the hero functions (as Daniel Boone does) as "protector of the family and rescuer of captives" (456), implying that whatever the desire of heroes in American novels to flee the family, that desire is ultimately trumped by the compulsion to defend it, a compulsion which advertises the cultural importance of family.<sup>16</sup> Other critics approach the question of family—particularly in western literature—from different vantage points and highlight various aspects of it, but similarly show that, on many levels, male and female frontiers and wests (literary and otherwise) overlapped. See, for instance, Annette Kolodny's The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860 (1984), Betsy Downey's "Battered Pioneers: The Problem of Male Violence against Women as Seen through Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* [1935]," Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson's The Women's West (1987), and Glenda Riley's The Female Frontier (1988).

The accumulated work of Jane Tompkins brings together some of these disparate readings of the place of family in American literature. In Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860 (1985), Tompkins, like Barnes,

emphasizes the glorification of family in American literature, showing that the sanctity of family is one of “the most cherished social beliefs” of the United States (134). Seeing literary texts as “attempts to redefine social order” (xi), she examines ways in which sentimental literature in particular shaped American culture. Tompkins’s next book, West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns (1992), however, suggests that one particular genre of American writing, the American formula Western, presents a very different attitude toward family. She suggests that formula Westerns, reacting against and rejecting the world of Christianity as espoused by sentimental novels and the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, also reject the family. Her argument involves setting up binaries between formula Western heroes and family that are reminiscent of those Fiedler sets up between male and female worlds, and between male heroes and the domestic sphere (which includes family). While she fails to take into account what Slotkin points out—the frequent function of the Western hero as defender and protector of family—both her works are compelling and extremely useful and receive frequent mention in this thesis.

The western American novels I examine in this thesis ultimately tend to glorify the nuclear family, though (as I will show in Chapters One and Two) not unquestioningly; before reconstructing it, they do deconstruct the nuclear family to some extent as well. Because of time and space constraints, my discussions in the chapters must be limited to two western American novels, but other “classic” western American novels demonstrate similar patterns of interrogating and deconstructing, but finally reconstructing, the structures of the nuclear family. Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street (1920), for instance, tells the story of Carol Kennicott who wants to be an emancipated woman



but finds it difficult to achieve what she considers to be satisfactory levels of emancipation in the midwestern small town in which she lives with her husband, the local doctor. She pursues an assortment of hobbies and public endeavours in an attempt to transform her small town into something more to her liking, resisting as much as she can the smalltown way of life. Eventually, she leaves the town and her husband, taking her son with her, to pursue happiness in the larger city. But in the end, she learns that her true contentment is in family; she chooses to return home to raise her children with her husband in the small prairie town, and she voices repeatedly her happiness and her satisfaction with her final decision in the last few pages of the novel.

A.B. Guthrie's The Way West (1949) (incidentally, also a Pulitzer winner) describes the slow and often agonizing trip west of a wagon train, piloted by Dick Summers, a Western hero figure upon whose exceptional wilderness survival skills the members of the train rely, and captained by Lije Evans, the protagonist of the novel. The structures of the nuclear family undergo questioning to some extent by the fact that Dick Summers feels a small (and guilty) amount of relief when his wife dies, freeing him to go west with the train, and by various familial hardships that take place enroute: one family loses a son to a rattlesnake bite, one woman gives birth to a premature, stillborn child, and a young couple marries in haste to prevent people knowing that she is pregnant by a married man. But in the end, the novel celebrates both the nuclear family itself and the responsibility to it. Becky (Lije's wife) voices this sentiment repeatedly: "A happy family was all a person could ask for" (76), or "Don't ever think that what you feel ain't felt by all at one time or another. I get down in my mind, and then I think I got a good boy and a good man, and I ought to be praisin' the Lord" (171). The woman whose son

died from a rattlesnake bite is pregnant with another child who will take his place. The woman who lost her infant in childbirth has nine other children to treasure. And the hastily married couple finds a “new-won closeness” (337). At the end of the trip, Lije decides that “[g]rief bowed the heart but made it richer” (340), and turns his thoughts to the richness his family provides him. In the words of John D. Nesbitt, “one is impressed with [Guthrie’s] conclusion that man [sic] has a responsibility to the land he has settled and developed, just as he has a responsibility to the people he is linked to through community or family. Man’s reward is the fulfillment he gains through his relationships with the land and with others” (369).

Frank Waters’s The Man Who Killed the Deer (1942) echoes similar sentiments about responsibility to and fulfillment through community and family, though in a very different context. Martiniano, a Pueblo Indian, comes under the influence of white culture when studying in white schools as a child, and gradually turns his back on the ways of his family and tribe, seeking out various elements of white culture (such as clothing and footwear). When he kills a deer out of hunting season and without offering the proper Pueblo rituals, he finds himself in trouble with both white and Pueblo justice systems and cultures, and, additionally, finds himself haunted by the ghost of the deer. Gradually, Martiniano returns to Pueblo ways and the ways of his family, knocking the heels off his boots (197), wearing the clothes of his tribe, though his journey back to his tribe is a long one, and for most of the book Martiniano is represented as a man caught between the two cultures. In the end, however, he learns that his life has meaning only in relation to his family and his pueblo. As if to symbolize this, when Martiniano embraces

the Pueblo culture fully, his wife gives birth to their first child. Watching his newborn child and wife, Martiniano decides that “[i]t would all be as before, but better” (204).

Critics examining representations of nuclear family in western Canadian literature have taken note of some remarkably different patterns in Canadian novels. A number of them comment on the many ways in which nuclear families are represented as fractured or ruptured or incomplete. John Moss, in Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction (1974), explores one aspect of this in his chapter “The Ubiquitous Bastard.” Moss discusses the recurring character motif—as well as several variations of—“bastard offspring and bastard origins” (190). He suggests that this character motif presents a “threat to familial and communal unity,” a threat which fosters independence, self-sustenance, and, eventually, isolation (192). Dick Harrison in Unnamed Country, focuses on another aspect of the dismantled family. He comments on the frequency with which fathers in Canadian prairie novels vanish: “The disappearing father is far more universal than the prairie patriarch ever was, and his range of significance is correspondingly broader” (188). And the prairie patriarch who comes before the disappearing father (such as the patriarch appearing in several Frederick Philip Grove novels) makes the continuation of a nuclear family particularly difficult because of his overbearing, though well-intentioned, moralism. Di Brandt, in Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature (1993), calls attention to two aspects of the broken family in Canadian novels. First, the absent mother—and she notes this pattern in multiple works by Margaret Laurence and Daphne Marlatt—and second, the failed mother which she notes in works by Sandra Birdsell, Margaret Laurence, and Sylvia Fraser. “These

works,” according to Brandt, tell “stories of those mothers who go crazy or have too many children or are otherwise disabled and/or unable to defend their daughters against violence” (162).

As the points raised by these critics might suggest, where the American “classic” western novels I discuss in this thesis reconstruct the nuclear family, the Canadian “classic” western novels, after similarly deconstructing the nuclear family, leave the family in its fragmented state. Again, I discuss only two “classic” Canadian western works in the body of the dissertation, but a number of other “classic” western novels apply similar unrelenting pressures to the structures of the nuclear family.

Abe Spalding, in Frederick Philip Grove’s Fruits of the Earth (1933), is a financially successful and well-meaning prairie patriarch who quickly earns a position of respect in the local community. His family, however, provides him one disappointment after another, from the death of his favourite son to his now-frumpy (but privately wealthy) wife to his surviving children who neither apply themselves nor show him the respect he wants. Although he sees them as betraying him on some level, it’s evident that Abe’s self-pitying, overbearing, and controlling demeanour is a main source of the family discontent. In the end, he realizes this, but the damage is permanent and the family shattered.

Similarly, Grove’s Settlers of the Marsh (1925) shows a prairie farmer, Niels Linstedt, whose family life provides little satisfaction. Marrying a woman who “looked like sin” (54) and trying to bring her under the grip of his morals, his home becomes an increasingly hostile place, and he believes his marriage has “killed him” (168). When Niels learns that his wife is in fact the district prostitute, his family situation becomes too

much for him, and he kills her. The final pages of the novel ostensibly offer a smidgen of hope for the nuclear family and for the post-prison-sentence Niels in a new romance, but that hope rings hollow in light of two facts. First, that Niels's new fiancée, remembering the sexual violence inflicted by her father upon her mother, has chosen to live a celibate life, swearing to her mother on her deathbed never to allow a man to touch her. In the words of John Moss, "Love between Niels and Ellen approaches grim parody of the generative relationship" and, in the end, they "[allow] for sex as an untoward necessity" (Sex and Violence 14). And, second, that Niels is a man who thought it appropriate to murder his wife because he disapproved of her morals.

Perhaps slightly more ambiguous on the topic of family is Sheila Watson's The Double Hook (1959). The novel begins with James pushing his mother down the stairs and killing her. Soon after, he blinds a nosy young man, Kip, with his whip, whips his sister and pregnant girlfriend as well, and leaves town. Shortly after James's departure, his sister Greta lights the house on fire and burns herself in it. The explanation James later gives for her actions points to an abusive family—that "Ma was hard on her" (113) and that she, along with James, "had reason to wish the place gone and everything in it" (132). After his two-day journey of self-discovery, James decides to return to his community, build a house to replace the burnt one, and raise a family with Lenchen, his girlfriend. And this return is represented as a rebirth of sorts. Arnold Davidson notes that "this conclusion does tempt us to see the novel as finally affirmative. It is a conclusion easily acceded to" (72). But Davidson continues, warning readers against reading regeneration or renewal or redemption in James's return

for he did kill his mother, blind Kip, and abandon Lenchen.

We can remember what he has previously done and have also seen how much his return is premised on his continued misreading of who and what he is. [ . . . ] James let himself be carried away and he let himself be carried back. Any proclaimed final regeneration of this character is therefore doubly suspect in that it is both unprecedented and untested.

If anything the conclusion of the novel attests to how little James has changed. (72)

Davidson continues, pointing out a number of reasons to doubt the supposed changes in James. And if James hasn't changed, then we have at the end of the novel a nuclear family that really hasn't much of a chance. For the mother (Lenchen) has already been whipped by her husband once, and then abandoned by him, and the father has already committed matricide once—what's to stop him from killing the mother of his children?—and he has shown an ominous affinity for feel of a whip in his hand... In the words of Davidson, "[a]t the end of the disastrous process he dreams origins again" fantasizing about "some green Eden in which [ . . . ] there would be no trace of what he has already done. But there would be, of course, every possibility of him doing it all over again" (73).

Robert Kroetsch's Badlands (1975) tells the story of a family fractured at the outset by an almost always "*absent*" father (2) (his italics). The protagonist, Anna Dawe, searches for whatever she can learn about her deceased father. Her method of searching is to go through his field notes from an expedition on which he searched for dinosaur bones in the Alberta badlands, to locate the woman who was his lover on that expedition

(after whom Anna is named), and to return with the other Anna (Anna Yellowbird) to the river that ferried the expedition. After an emotional and revealing journey with Anna Yellowbird, a journey in which she identifies Anna Yellowbird as “*mother*” (262) (his italics), Anna Dawe throws into the lake her father’s field notes, hooks her arm through that of the other Anna, and leaves that site, “*not once look[ing] back, not once, ever*” (270) (his italics). In that departure, Anna immerses herself in a new connection with Anna Yellowbird, but turns her back on her father and what he represented to her.

And there are variations of this pattern as well. For instance, in Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners (1974) an alternative form of family replaces and becomes preferable to the biological nuclear family. Morag Gunn comes to value and claim for her own the heritage that Christie and Prin, the people who raised her, have given her. She particularly comes to appreciate the sense of personal history and mythology she gained from the stories Christie made up to tell her. She realizes in the end that her true home is not the heritage of her biological nuclear family (her parents died when she was young) but in her adopted family, that her land is not “the land of my ancestors,” but “Christie’s real country. Where I was born” (391).

Finally, let me make clear that I make no claims about the entire western American literary canon or about the entire western Canadian literary canon. As Marlene Goldman reminds us, in Paths of Desire: Images of Exploration and Mapping in Canadian Women’s Writing (1997), Margaret Atwood’s Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972) has come under criticism by writers such as Frank Davey (in “Atwood Walking Backwards”), among others, for viewing “the whole of Canadian

culture as a unified entity,” an error I would repeat if I made claims about the entire western Canadian or western American canons (Goldman 8). Hence, I make no attempt to binarize all novels canonized as classics north and south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel into a pro-versus anti-nuclear family binary. There are western Canadian “classic” novels that tend to celebrate the family—I’m thinking, for instance, of W.O. Mitchell’s Who Has Seen the Wind (1947), a novel whose central characters consistently draw strength from the nuclear family. And there are western American “classic” novels that deconstruct the family without reconstructing it, novels such as Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping (1981), to name one, in which a woman drifter returns to structured town life in order to raise her sister’s orphaned children, succeeding only in fragmenting her family further. I am simply noting here that the patterns I discuss occur with some frequency in both the novels discussed and also in other novels that have been canonized as classics in their respective literary canons. Nor do I suggest that these strains are good or bad, merely that they exist and manifest themselves with some frequency.



## Notes

1. Specifically, I focus on novels written in the (roughly) sixty-year period of 1915 to 1975. My reason for choosing 1915 as a starting point instead of 1900 or 1905 is that I want to be certain that the novels I discuss will be unquestionably considered twentieth-century novels, and works written around the turn of the century sometimes come under questioning when they are lumped in with works of either century. My reason for choosing 1975 as a cut-off point is that I want to be certain all the novels considered have had sufficient time (or at least have had a good chance) to be recognized as “classics” by the literary community. Since, for instance, Sinclair Ross’s work was initially largely ignored and didn’t come to the attention of the wider literary community for nearly twenty years after original publication, I thought it important to give as much time as possible for novels to attain this recognition. It’s likely, however, that 25 years (or rather 27 years) isn’t quite sufficient, that a number of novels written within this sixty-year time period are currently not considered to be “classics” but will one day be recognized as such.
2. Paul Lauter, in Canons and Contexts (1991) calls attention to the market-centred aspect of the term “classic,” noting that “Many [canonized] books are [ . . . ] available in widely marketed paperback series of “classics” (23).
3. To quote John Guillory, in Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (1993), on the topic, “The word ‘canon’ displaces the expressly honorific term ‘classic’ precisely in order to isolate the ‘classics’ as the object of critique. The concept of the canon names the traditional curriculum of literary texts by analogy to that body of writing historically characterized by an inherent logic of *closure*—the scriptural canon” (6).
4. Herb Wyile, in an interesting and provocative article, “Ransom Revisited: The Aesthetic of Regionalism in a Globalized Age,” notes that “regionalism, in comparison with other marks of difference, has received much less attention and theoretical consideration, because over time it has accumulated substantial negative connotations, and as much as critics are inclined to view region and regionalism with more sympathy these days, substantial reservations remain about the terms” (100).
5. See John R. Milton’s essay, “The Novel in the American West,” for a more extended discussion of the difficulty of defining the term “western.”
6. Western American Literature is the quarterly journal of the Western Literature Association, and so it necessarily reflects the aims and preferences of that association. Despite the biases that might arise out of this, I mention it here because many prominent critics of western American literature are members of the association and publish in the journal. Thus, the material published in the journal (biases and all) does, to a significant extent, reflect western critical trends and indicate which western writing is canonized. Indeed, I believe the journal itself is, to some

- extent, a canonizing force in the field of western literature. Western American Literature publishes a great deal of criticism and bibliographic information about western literature—mostly American, but also Canadian.
7. Even though I thought it important to study works that don't limit themselves to heterosexist notions of family and relationships, this thesis doesn't explore in great length the homoeroticism and/or queer concerns that arise in each novel.
  8. Keath Fraser's As For Me and My Body: A Memoir of Sinclair Ross [1997] suggests that Ross is a queer writer and Sharon O'Brien's "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" suggests that Cather is a queer writer. To the best of my knowledge, Ostenson and Stegner have never been understood or represented as anything other than heterosexual.
  9. Indeed, this list has been confirmed by my own experience. By the time I started my doctoral degree, before taking any courses at the PhD level, I had studied each of these four novels at least once (one of them three times) in university classrooms. I had encountered each novel repeatedly in relevant critical journals and/or volumes, and I had attended numerous conference sessions and panels in which these novels and their writers were mentioned and discussed.
  10. Susan Rosowski notes that recent decades have been particularly fruitful in generating Cather criticism (Cather Studies: Volume 1 xi).
  11. Note, for instance, the ubiquity of Cather references in the proceedings of the 1978 conference Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature (1979), edited by Dick Harrison.
  12. Indeed, the entire Pulitzer selection process and history is one riddled with controversy. W.J. Stuckey's The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look (1981) outlines some of the central controversies surrounding the Pulitzer, such as the inability of the officials and jurors to determine consistent criteria, the inability to agree on what defined "superior" writing, the questions surrounding the motives of officials and the qualifications of jurors, and the place of morals and moralism in selection criteria.
  13. As David Amason notes in his 1980 thesis, "The Development of Prairie Realism: Robert J.C. Stead, Douglas Durkin, Martha Ostenson and Frederick Philip Grove," Ostenson signed a legal document thirty years after writing the novel, stating that the name "Martha Ostenson" had in fact been a pseudonym that referred to the collaborative efforts of two writers, Ostenson herself and Douglas Durkin, a Canadian professor who taught at the University of Manitoba.
  14. R.G. Lawrence's article, "The Geography of Martha Ostenson's Wild Geese," which details the meticulous care with which Ostenson adhered to local Manitoba geography when writing the novel, suggests that the novel itself is very much grounded in the Canadian soil and in Canadian experience.

15. Fiedler's notions, in Love and Death and elsewhere, elicit vigorous responses from critics, to say the least. To name one, Jack Brenner, while professing admiration for Fiedler's work, finds his "claim that men in retreat from women are brothers under the national skin [. . .] a strange idea indeed" (101) and states that, however provocative, sometimes Fiedler's work is compromised by "feats of aggressive showmanship" (103). Brenner's response echoes Pilkington's and Etulain's criticisms of other Fiedler works (most notably, The Return of the Vanishing American [1968]): Pilkington finds Return "bizarre" and "so eccentric as to border on the useless" (xiii) and Etulain, while admiring certain aspects of Fiedler's body of work (and recognizing that others find it more valuable than he), criticizes it for its tendency to ignore themes Etulain finds important and to succumb to a "narrowness of [. . .] approach" ("American Literary" 159).
16. Slotkin, like Fiedler, comes under the criticism of Richard Etulain for certain omissions (such as the failure to discuss the Lewis and Clark accounts), though in the end Etulain seems more to favour Slotkin's work, concluding that Slotkin's work is thoroughly researched, a major work in the field, and ought to be "read and reread by all students interested in the literary West" ("American Literary" 158).

## **Chapter One - Homes and Native Lands**

### **I. Introduction**

It seems that nearly everywhere I turn, someone has something to say about family values. Last March, for instance, I received an email from a student in my English 101 class informing me that he “[stood] for family values,” and wanted to state his disappointment respectfully about the fact that so little of the course curriculum reflected the values dear to him. And in the last twelve months, family values have served as a platform for right-wing politicians in both the recent Canadian and American elections. Kelly Oliver, in Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture, discusses the rhetoric of family values, noting the frequency with which it is used to oppress and exploit women, an opinion shared by many liberal, radical, and socialist feminists alike (xvii). Oliver shows how conservative politicians “are attempting to contain” women’s resistance and increased domestic and public power (xvii), blaming feminists for “destroying family values and the moral fiber of the country” (xvi).<sup>1</sup> She notes how the logic that places blame for violence, crime, and drug abuse upon the breakdown of the nuclear family sets up an opposition between family and state, and how that rhetoric perpetuates the breakdown of the community since the politicians “who run for office on platforms of family values want to cut aid to dependent children, welfare services, government daycare services, education, summer work programs, and medical services” (xiv). The rhetoric of family values, Oliver shows, is an ubiquitous, complex, writhing, and intensely politicized entity that perpetuates and turns back on itself.

And that's as good a place to start as any. This chapter discusses the rhetoric of family values, the relationship between family and the sociopolitical apparatus, and representations of the nuclear family in the Canadian and American western novels central to this thesis. Jacques Donzelot's theory of the sociofamilial apparatus, described in The Policing of Families, receives special attention since it concerns the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of families, notions important to the novels discussed in this thesis. Following the discussion of pertinent theory, this chapter discusses the four novels themselves. It begins the discussion of each novel by summarizing some of the critical work that surrounds these novels, paying particular attention to that criticism which explores family, in order to present the material to which this thesis responds and with which it interacts. Discussing representations of family first in the two American western novels, Willa Cather's My Ántonia and Wallace Stegner's Angle of Repose, it shows that even as the novels tell of the extreme difficulties of settling the west, they suggest that the nuclear family, and even just the ideal of family, somehow tempers those difficulties. This is not to say that there are no damaged families in the novels. Indeed the opposite is true; both American western novels are saturated with broken and struggling families, families often represented as diseased. And through these representations of fracture, struggle, and disease, the novels apply pressure to the structures of the nuclear family, deconstructing them, and testing their foundations. But this brokenness, in the American western novels, presents as a symptom of something temporarily wrong, of something to be remedied. The reconstruction of the nuclear family (sometimes in a new order) is not only a primary aim of the narratives, but the willful act of reconstructing is also the cure for whatever malaise afflicted the original

incarnation of the nuclear family. In the end, these American western novels represent the nuclear family primarily as an institution whose organic components work together in a way that reifies the power, influence, and moral status of itself, of the nuclear family.

Additionally, this chapter discusses representations of family in the two Canadian novels, Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese and Sinclair Ross's As for Me and My House, showing a remarkably different pattern. The nuclear family, in these novels, is not placed on a pedestal to be admired or celebrated. The family *is* scrutinized, to be sure, but rather than representing it as a normative institution whose power, influence, and moral status should be reinforced and reified, these novels interrogate the politics of family in a way that suggests that the power structures and the primacy of the normative nuclear family itself are problematic. As is the case in the American novels, again something is diseased, something is wrong, but where the representation of disease points to a cure in the American novels (a cure or remedy which involves the reconstruction of the nuclear family), the nuclear family in the Canadian novels is the source of contamination; the representations of the diseased nuclear family function primarily to call for the disintegration of the nuclear family. Nowhere do the Canadian novels reveal an aim to reconstruct the broken family. Rather, they leave it fragmented, deconstructing it and allowing it to exist only in a fragmented state.

In parts of this chapter, in order to point out ways in which the novels deconstruct and sometimes reconstruct the nuclear family, I discuss family in terms of disease and health metaphors, hence implicitly comparing it to a biological organism. However, I do not intend to imply that the family is the same as (or can always be compared to or discussed in terms of) a corporeal body. Body theorist Drew Leder notes, in The Absent

Body (1990), that the concept of embodiment is “[f]ar from being an unproblematic notion” (5) and certainly I have no wish to enter into debate with complex notions of Cartesian dualism or of the body as *Leib* or any other such theory of body. I do wish to suggest, however, that the family in these novels, without becoming corporeal *per se*, is represented as a site upon which things are inflicted or which is itself afflicted, an inherently dynamic site where things happen and changes take place. These representations are a means by which the writers apply pressure to and examine the foundations of the nuclear family and by which they show the families to be damaged, ruptured, or incomplete. This isn’t a new approach. Theorists like Susan Sontag, Clive Bloom, and Sander Gilman have all discussed the ways in which metaphors of illness comment upon stability and chaos in social conditions and constructs. I simply apply their theories here to the metaphors of illness describing the microcosm of the nuclear family. Representations of illness levy considerable cultural and social weight: Susan Sontag, in Illness as Metaphor (1977),<sup>2</sup> notes that disease is often used as a label to “suggest a profound disequilibrium between individual and society, with society conceived as the individual’s adversary” (73). Sander Gilman shows that illness is a social construct which invokes fear because of its “life-threatening, stability-threatening or chronic nature” (Health and Illness 12). These metaphors, then, are not just important because of what they represent—chaos—but because of what they do, because they are themselves disruptive forces on a number of levels. Since representations of illness are levelled at the family unit in each of these novels, they constitute a discourse that deserves special consideration in this dissertation.

## **II. Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing the Sociofamilial Apparatus**

Jacques Donzelot's book, The Policing of Families, translated from French by Robert Hurley, uses an analysis of aspects of French history to describe the rise of a sector of culture he calls "the social."<sup>3</sup> You will note, however, that the title of Donzelot's book is not "The Rise of the Social"; it doesn't even mention "the social," although it implies the presence and influence of it in the word "policing." It speaks instead of families. This is because the social, being a "hybrid domain, particularly in regard to relations between the public and the private spheres," is inherently connected to the family, so much so that the milieu on which it acts is the family (Deleuze x). Or, to use once again the words of Gilles Deleuze (who wrote the "Foreword" to Donzelot's book), *"the rise of the social and the crisis of the family are the twofold political effect of these same elementary causes"* (xi) (his italics).

There is little point in rehearsing here Donzelot's descriptions of the factors contributing to the rise of the social and the crisis of the family in France since the texts I examine in this dissertation have little to do with France or French history. (I should mention here that, although Donzelot's book looks at French history, the existence of the social is not a phenomenon confined to France, and I continue to assume, throughout the chapter, that it is a domain affecting family in the novels.) I raise it, then, because I want to point out a rather obvious implication of the connections between the family and the social, and that implication is this: the family unit is pervasive, and by virtue of its pervasiveness, the family enters into a particularly complicated relationship with the social and with social values. The family influences social values (an active state)



forcing them not only to acknowledge it but to revolve around it. At the same time, however, it reflects and is influenced and even shaped by social values (a passive state). In relation to the social and to social values, the family appears to be, to use the words of Jacques Donzelot, “both queen and prisoner” (xxii). It seems, then, that any discussion of the family must necessarily take into account the social and the relationship the family has with it.

I turn to Donzelot’s work because he puts forth a number of theories regarding the family and its intersections with the social that prove useful for understanding and theorizing the texts discussed here as well as some of the politics surrounding them. I would like to note here, quickly, that I do not claim that the relationships between family, social, and government sectors are the same in North America (where these novels are written) as they are in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France that Donzelot describes. I claim only that some of Donzelot’s theories are relevant to understanding representations of family in these novels.

Specifically, I’d like to explore Donzelot’s theories regarding the socio-familial apparatus and its effects. In describing the *ancien regime*, Donzelot shows that, in much the same way that the family is both queen and prisoner of the social, it was “both a subject and an object of government:”

[I]t was the smallest political organization possible. Set directly within social relations of dependence, it was integrally affected by the system of obligations, honors, favors, and disfavours that actuated social relations in general. But if the family was caught up in this way, it was also an active

participant in the give-and-take of social ties, goods, and actions through the strategies of matrimonial alliances and clientelist allegiances [ . . . ] (48).

In the tradition of Michel Foucault's examinations of sexuality and of punishment,<sup>4</sup> Donzelot goes on to show that since the family became an integral part of the political sphere, since it became an apparatus of the state, it was subject to a constant ever-present governance, a governance which had at least some degree of regulatory power. An individual outside that governance and regulatory sphere of influence, then, presented a certain threat:

[T]he fact of not belonging to a family, and hence the lack of a sociopolitical guarantor, posed a problem for public order.

This was the category of people without ties, without hearth or home, of beggars and vagabonds who, being in no way connected to the social machinery, acted as disturbers in this system of protections and obligations. There was no one to supply their needs, but neither was there anyone to hold them within the bounds of order. They were [ . . . a ] floating population. (49)

The threat this floating population presented,<sup>5</sup> Donzelot shows, did not diminish under widespread influence of the sociofamilial apparatus, nor was it destroyed by the disciplinary powers and mechanisms of government. Rather, it gradually increased, infecting the apparatus itself, and produced a two-fold consequence:

First, the family was finding it harder to contain its members by ensuring their upkeep. The barriers that held individuals

within organic groupings were slowly crumbling. [...] Secondly, family authority [...] was] vigorously called into question by the victims [that is, the members of the floating population] themselves. (50-51)

This two-fold consequence, Donzelot argues, constituted a “deconstruction of the old government of families” (51) which in turn eventually led to a certain disentanglement of state and family powers.

Donzelot is quick to point out, however, that this disentanglement and deconstruction raises as many questions as it answers. Such a deconstruction of family,<sup>6</sup> one might expect, would lead to a certain widespread interrogation of both the family itself and the political mechanisms that place such high value upon family. But in fact, the opposite occurred and the family came to be held in high regard even by those who seemed to earn no benefit from such regard of the family. The disentanglement from the state and the deconstruction of the family, Donzelot argues, does not explain the value so many people came to place on the family unit itself. He states that

this schema [...] does not offer much of a hold for grasping either the present configuration of the family or the nature of the attachment that individuals of liberal societies have conceived for it. It does not explain why this fondness for the family is associated with a feeling for liberty, or how the defense of the family can be effectively undertaken in the name of safeguarding people’s sphere of autonomy. If today’s family were simply an agent for transmitting bourgeois power,

and consequently entirely under the control of the 'bourgeois' state, why would individuals, and particularly those who are not members of the ruling classes, invest so much in family life? (52)

To explain the investment and protection of the family even by those who did not benefit from such values, Donzelot shows that the relationship between the family and government had to undergo a certain transformation, a distancing between the public and private spheres followed by a re-valuing of the family apart from its former connections with the state, and that this transformation occurred through the political strategy of philanthropy. "Philanthropy," Donzelot explains, "in this case is not to be (sic) understood as a naïvely apolitical term signifying a private intervention in the sphere of so-called social problems, but must be considered as a deliberately depoliticizing strategy for establishing public services and facilities at a sensitive point midway between private initiative and the state" (55). Donzelot distinguishes this strategy of philanthropy from the straightforward patronizing charity it succeeded—which promoted a direct financial dependence of the poor upon the rich—and explains that philanthropists of the time sought two things. First, they sought to establish a "legitimate moral influence" by offering an education in self-sustenance instead of handouts, arguing that advice

evinces the most equality since it follows at the same time from the desire to influence in the one who gives it and from the perfect freedom of the one who receives it. Wherever the exercise of political rights is lacking, it is difficult to get the poor man to understand that the advantages of the rich man

give the latter no material power, but rather a legitimate moral influence' (Dupin qtd. in Donzelot 65).

Second, they sought to normalize (and thereby regulate) the members of the floating population further through decreeing norms that would regulate adult-child relationships, hence "protecting" the children, health, and education. This was accomplished through such things as compulsory and state-subsidized education, through implementation of laws concerning child labour and unsanitary housing, et cetera (78). Despite the efforts to pursue "equality" and "preserve" dignity, both of these sub-strategies of philanthropy clearly still patronized the poor, as did the direct charity that preceded them.

Nevertheless, replacing direct handouts with such propagandization effectively diminished the floating population and reduced the power of "drifting social species" by bringing the behaviours of those outside the mainstream population in line with those inside the mainstream population (81).

Through the focus on the welfare of the child, the family, though no longer an express mechanism of the state, was nevertheless valued and valorized more than ever. It was made into "the reorganizing principle of society," argues Donzelot, and in the end, the family became "a positive form of solution to the problems posed by a liberal definition of the state rather than [ . . . ] a negative element of resistance to social change" (53). Where the family was formerly deconstructed, it was now reconstructed to become both "the point where criticism of the established order stopped and the point of support for demands for more social equality" (53).

In the scenario Donzelot describes, the original family structures were deconstructed, and then reconstructed. The novels I discuss also offer representations of

families in various stages of deconstruction or reconstruction. And indeed, one might argue (as I intend to) that the nuclear family in the two American western novels undergoes a process similar to the one Donzelot describes, a process of deconstruction and then of reconstruction. But the two Canadian western novels don't complete the process. They deconstruct the family, challenging its assumptions, exposing its unexamined foundations, and applying pressure to its borders, but they make no attempt to reconstruct it. Donzelot notes that the family is often the dividing line between defenders and contestors of the established order (5). If that is the case here, it becomes clear that, in the reconstruction of the nuclear family, the American novels defend the established order by showing it worthy not just of reconstruction itself but also of the formidable effort required for reconstruction. Conversely, the Canadian novels refuse to defend that same order, perhaps even resisting it by refusing to reconstruct it, implying that it does not merit such reconstruction.

### **III. The American Novels**

#### **III.i. My Ántonia**

As all four of the novels discussed here have been canonized as "classics," there exists a fair amount of criticism surrounding each one of them. But since Cather's novel was the first to be published, critics have been discussing it for the longest time; the many different analyses and readings of Cather's work would undoubtedly fill many library shelves.<sup>7</sup>

A number of these studies discuss indirectly the representations of the nuclear family in the novel. For instance, an ongoing discussion amongst several critics regarding Jim's relationship to sexuality sheds indirect light upon Cather's representations of nuclear family by examining the ways in which Jim repeatedly desexualizes his world. John H. Randall suggests that Jim represents life in his grandparents' house as desexualized, and that the affection existing there is not sexual, but the "affection such as the members of a large closely knit family feel for each other. The ways of feeling are clearly laid down, they are socially acceptable, and they have none of the dangerous destructive aspects of passion—or of the creative ones either" (279). One could argue, I believe, that Jim's orphanhood contributes to this desexualization, that the persons whose sexual act led to his existence are no longer alive and have been replaced by two elderly people who provide little in the way of sexual energy or passion, but much in the way of a benign familial affection. David Stouck, Blanche Gelfant, and Ann Fisher-Wirth have similarly noted the desexualization in this novel.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Fisher-Wirth comments on Jim's "infantile and morbid fear of sexuality" and brings to the reader's attention that Jim repeatedly "backs away from any real chance to become involved with a woman" ("Out of the Mother" 45). Taking Christine Wiesenthal's essay about O Pioneers! into account, one might argue that the desexualization here is Cather's intentional subversion of traditional sexual constructs in order to promote alternate sexual constructs, that Jim desexualizes women in an attempt to make room for his attraction to men, an attraction manifested in his relationship with Gaston Cleric, for example. Gelfant takes a slightly different approach, though, and suggests that Jim's fear represents Cather's own fear of sexuality and of the possibility of

losing her own autonomy. Whatever the reason, the desexualization is prominent and ubiquitous. It explains Jim's attraction to Lena, a woman who has told him a number of times that she will never marry. It explains his frequent and prolonged absences from his own wife. It explains his revulsion at Ántonia's first pregnancy and the personal offense he takes that she has "thrown herself away on such a cheap sort of fellow" (195). I believe it also explains the title of the last section, "Cuzak's Boys." The title might otherwise be puzzling, for it negates both Ántonia herself and her many daughters by excluding them, even though the section is very much *about* Ántonia. But if this section title is one of Jim's eschewals and evasions of sexuality, titling the section only after the men in Ántonia's family desexualizes Ántonia herself, erasing the image of a young, willful, passionate woman indulging in sexual frolic with roving train conductors, thereby making Jim's former attraction to Ántonia less threatening.

Other indirect or implicit commentary on the nuclear family can be found in a number of books and articles, but considering the magnitude of accumulated research on Cather's work, the family has received surprisingly little attention. Perhaps implicit comment about the family resides in Granville Hicks's essay about Cather's "political conservatism" (140) or in Lionel Trilling's examination of Cather's belief in "the tonic moral quality of the pioneer's life" (150) but certainly no clear discussion of family appears in either essay. And likely implicit commentary on the family exists in Alfred Kazin's study of Cather's "candid and philosophical nostalgia, a conviction and a standard possible only to a writer whose remembrance of the world of her childhood and the people in it was so overwhelming that everything after it seemed drab and more than a little cheap" (164), or in the many feminist studies of the novel,<sup>9</sup> or in Robert



Kroetsch's witty but problematic essay, "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space."<sup>10</sup> However, with a handful of exceptions, such as studies by Randall and Fisher-Wirth, the family topic itself gets only indirect, implicit, and minimal attention.

Two things become immediately evident when one pays attention to families in My Ántonia. One is that there are broken, diseased, and incomplete families everywhere. One of the first things we learn, on the very first page, is that the narrator, Jim, will grow up to marry a woman who "*seems unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm*" (1) (Cather's italics). And, not altogether unrelated, we are also told that Jim spends a great deal of time away from home. Later, we learn his marriage is childless. Following that two-page introduction, we learn in the second sentence of the novel proper that this novel happens because both of Jim's parents died within a year. Their deaths result in Jim moving to Nebraska to be raised by his grandparents, and Jim's life in Nebraska is the subject of the novel. In a nutshell, the part of the novel concerned with Jim's own story tells us about how "those early accidents of fortune" left Jim with one incomplete nuclear family and how he grew up to create another one (238).

The critical response (limited as it is) to Jim's lack of parents and the surrogate family created for him reveals a certain confusion regarding the form of the surrogate family that is worth noting, for it betrays an urgency on the part of critics to impose upon Jim a nuclear family of some sort. John H. Randall makes an argument that Cather relies on a three-generational model in which "[t]here is a regular ladder of rank starting with the children and proceeding up through the parents to the grandparents, who in My Ántonia are regarded as the ultimate repositories of wisdom" (280). He argues that the

farmhands, Jake and Otto, take the place of Jim's parents so that the "three-generation pattern is maintained" (280). But the problems in this reading are soon evident, for Otto and Jake are not presented to us as parent figures, but as men who are more boys themselves than anything resembling parents. Indeed, we are told that when they sit down at their first meal together Otto and Jim keep "stealing covert glances at each other" like children (11). And later, when Jake and Otto leave the farm to find their fortunes further West, Jim and his grandparents feel protective of Jake the way they would of a child and "did [their] best to dissuade Jake. He was so handicapped by illiteracy and by his trusting disposition that he would be an easy prey to sharpers" (93). Further, Jim tells us that Jake and Otto, instead of being like parents to him, "had been like older brothers" (94). Randall's three-generational model is not as sound as he would have us believe.

Ann Fisher-Wirth's interpretation of Jim's family situation in "Out of the Mother: Loss in My Ántonia," makes no attempt to impose a three-generational model on the Burdens. Instead, she states that Jim "resumes sonship in his biological family" as his grandparents take on parental roles of caring for him, but eventually "the figures who become his true surrogate family are not his grandparents but his wistfully imagined mother-sister-sweetheart-wife, Ántonia, and the elegant exhausted man who gazes into his eyes" (50). This reading, too, has its problems. First, Jim's grandparents, though they feed and clothe him, are so much older than him that they can never really be parent figures. And we are frequently reminded of this. The very first time his grandmother looks upon Jim, he tells us that, from the look on her face, he knows she is reminded of her own son who died, a reminder that points as much to the fact that Jim is *not* her son

but her son's son as it does to any kind of kinship between her and her grandson. Further, young Jim's awe of his grandfather's white beard, lengthy prayers, and generally pious demeanour is an awe which speaks to the age difference between them. But perhaps the generational gap is most clear when Jim tells us about his frustration and boredom in the town of Black Hawk, spending evenings in his grandparents' house, "wondering what book I should read as I sat down" not with parents or even family members but "with the two old people" (113). As for Ántonia and Cuzak, while Jim clearly adores their happy and enormous family, he just as clearly regards the two of them as his equals, and not as parent figures. He tells their children nothing that suggests a parent-child relationship with Ántonia, but something that suggests a relationship that once beckoned romance, that he was "very much in love with your mother once" (222). Similarly, he looks forward to spending time not with someone who will nurture him and replace his father, but with that "most companionable fellow," Cuzak himself (234). While the final pages do reveal a certain boyishness in Jim, they reveal the same boyishness in Cuzak and a similar girlishness about Ántonia. This youthfulness may point to any number of things, all of which suggest a camaraderie between the three and an ability in each of them to embrace their own youth despite their age and substantial accumulated experiences, but I see no indication that Jim's youthfulness and playfulness suggest that Ántonia and Cuzak somehow become his surrogate parents.

The essential problem at the heart of both of these readings is that they try to force upon Jim a nuclear family of some sort. The fact is that, regardless of how one looks at it, Jim has no parents; he has no nuclear family, and no surrogate family will ever do the job. Despite the warm and cozy life Jim describes for us in the first part of the novel (a

part that Fisher-Wirth calls “the book of the mother” [“Out of the Mother” 58]), he is still an orphan, a motherless, fatherless, parentless orphan. And as the narrator, he is the primary representative, in this novel, of incomplete families, reminding us, with his constant presence and his constant attention to other people’s families, of his own situation and of the pervasiveness of broken and incomplete families.

And then there’s the hateful marriage of Wick and Mrs. Cutter, who openly and publicly loathe each other and live “in a state of perpetual warfare” (135). Their mutual hatred finally culminates in Wick’s spiteful murder of his wife, which he then follows with his own suicide, boasting on his deathbed that, by outliving her for less than an hour, he has rendered null and void any will she might have made. Given the misery the two of them generate, both intentionally and effortlessly, it comes as something of a relief that they have no children who might learn their unhappiness from them and visit it upon another generation.

When it comes to representing the immigrant households, the representations seem even more extreme, for some form of illness seems to be their primary characteristic. Not long after we meet Jim’s grandparents, we meet Pavel and Peter, two gentle men (presumably partners) who contrast the understated and quiet fragmentation of Jim’s family, representing instead the most violent smashing of families in the novel. They have no children of their own, and they have been exiled from their homes, families, village, and country because of the events of one wedding night long ago. Their instinctive actions, when surrounded by a pack of wolves bent on eating them, were to throw the bride and groom to the wolves on their honeymoon night, destroying the beginnings of a nuclear family, in order to lighten the load in their sledge and save their

own lives. But now, in America, Pavel is dying, of wounds incurred while barnbuilding, in a remarkably vivid way:

[h]is emaciated chest, covered with yellow bristle, rose and fell  
horribly. He began to cough.

[ . . . ]

He pulled a cloth from under his pillow and held it to his mouth.  
Quickly it was covered with bright red spots—I thought I had  
never seen any blood so bright. [ . . . ] He lay patiently fighting  
for breath, like a child with croup. [ . . . ] His spine and shoulder-  
blades stood out like the bones under the hide of a dead steer  
left in the fields. That sharp backbone must have hurt him  
when he lay on it. (36-37)

Pavel's fatal injuries are the last in a long series of misfortunes to befall the two men:  
"Misfortune seemed to settle like an evil bird on the roof of the log house, and to flap its  
wings there, warning human beings away" (35). So extensive has been their unwilling  
flirtation with misfortune that they are feared like contagions: "The Russians had such  
bad luck that people were afraid of them and liked to put them out of mind" (35). Sontag  
notes that "every form of social deviation can be considered an illness" and these two  
men are doubly deviant, first as (presumably) homosexual men, and second, as men who  
threw families to wolves. That Pavel would be dying, and in such a vivid way, is simply  
the final fulfillment of the metaphor that characterizes the men as deviants by  
characterizing them as diseased.

And then, there is *Ántonia's* first family, the Shimerdas, the focus of the first section of the novel. Instead of a single illness or wound festering in the Shimerda family, more kinds of pain drip from *Ántonia's* first family than one would think possible. And because pioneering demands dependence and co-operation, the illnesses of the Shimerda individuals disrupt the larger Shimerda family to such an extent that they become illnesses of the family. Most obvious is the depression and suicide of Mr. Shimerda. John H. Randall, III comments that *Ántonia's* family is "wracked by internal dissensions, and her father is so unhappy that he commits suicide, largely because her mother is not a homemaker" (275). Perhaps more probable reasons for Mr. Shimerda's depression are the unbearable poverty that clenches his family, and the densely packed homesickness that drags down every action and every word of this lonely, lonely man who never wanted to leave his homeland in the first place. His homesickness is both a psychological and a physical state; *Ántonia* tells Jim that "My papa sick all the time" (28) and Jim notices that when Mr. Shimerda visits the Burden farm, falling asleep in the rocking chair, "[h]is face had a look of weariness and pleasure, like that of sick people when they feel relief from pain" (57). Indeed, Jim tells us that homesickness is what kills Mr. Shimerda (66), and that "he had only been so unhappy he could not live any longer" (67).

Her father's suicide leaves *Ántonia* without a complete nuclear family and her remaining family, already immobilized by poverty, becomes quite desperate. Like the sourdough yeastbread and the mouldy potatoes and fungus (mushrooms) they eat, the Shimerdas are represented as being afflicted with rot and fermentation. Mrs. Burden, who cannot contain her disgust at their fare, believes that *Ántonia* will "spoil" under the

influence of her mother and brother, an assessment with which Jim agrees (81).

Ántonia's mother and brother, who are already bossy and conceited, add cruelty and selfishness to their list of irritating personality traits after the death of Mr. Shimerda (to the point that later Ambrosch requests that Ántonia's first child be drowned in the rain barrel). Their misery eventually reaches the point where Mrs. Burden puts them in the category of those to put out of mind: "Now read me a chapter in *The Prince of the House of David*. Let's forget the Bohemians" (60).

Even the younger brother Marek manifests symptoms of things growing where they shouldn't. Jim describes Marek as having deformed hands, webbed between the fingers "like a duck's foot" (18). Additionally, Marek suffers from delayed mental development which eventually becomes a form of mental illness, conditions only aggravated by the neglect that befalls him being born into a family so wracked with misery that he cannot receive the attention he needs, and he goes about in the exceptionally cold winter without winter clothing because "he liked to be thought insensible [to the cold]. He was always coveting distinction" (67). No direct causal link is made in the novel between the unhappiness of Marek's family and the fact that he later "had got violent and been sent away to an institution," but I'm inclined to think that such a link is implied (202). His final violence demonstrates the instability in the Shimerda family and proves untrue Mrs. Shimerda's confident assurance that "he won't hurt nobody" (18).

One might be tempted to suggest that Cather presents so many broken and sickly families because she wishes to subvert traditional heterosexist nuclear family constructs. This suggestion could be further supported by the fact that the most financially successful

people in the novel are unmarried women. Tiny Soderball, we are told, “was to lead the most adventurous life and to achieve the most solid worldly success” of “all the boys and girls who grew up together in Black Hawk” (192). Lena Lingard, in spite of her air of carelessness and in spite of the neighbourhood gossip decrying her morals, sets up her own highly successful dressmaking business first in Lincoln (using some of her earnings to build and furnish a house for her mother) and then later in San Francisco, turning herself out in “her silks and her satins” (201).

Undoubtedly, Cather supports and lauds the single working woman. She does what the writers discussed by Marlene Goldman do: she “posit[s] a link between a subversive engagement with established discourses and attempts to disrupt the configuration of gender within society at large” (4). And undoubtedly, she calls into question the values represented by nuclear families in having so many characters (and such financially successful characters) turn their backs on “family life” in favour of the less certain and more adventurous, in favour of joining (to use Donzelot’s term) the “floating population.” Through them, Cather shows that the nuclear family undergoes a re-valuing in the west, one which displaces the previous authority of the nuclear family and proves untrue previous assumptions about the inevitability of and need for creating one’s own nuclear family. Cather further displaces the authority of the nuclear family through the fragmentation represented in the young *Ántonia* and Jim and all the others with broken families. Through them, Cather raises questions and reveals hitherto unchallenged assumptions regarding that institution and others. She raises questions about whether it’s worth the life of the father that the son have land to farm, about whether the hired girls aren’t better off never bearing children, about whether there is, as



Randall suggests, a formula for “what a family should be” (285), about whether the nuclear family is really worth all that effort. Undoubtedly, the nuclear family undergoes a transformation and re-valuing in Cather’s west, and perhaps a reader or two might want to extend that re-valuing to suggest that Cather casts a quiet shadow on the normative conventional constructions of nuclear family.

But such reasoning would be faulty, since it is contradicted by the second immediately evident thing one notices when paying attention to families in the novel: any misery caused by broken families or by desperate conditions is completely overshadowed by the enormous success of *Ántonia* in building an extraordinary nuclear family. After 200 and some pages of story after story, anecdote after anecdote, describing countless hardships and adventures, disappointments and triumphs of settling Nebraska, a corner of “one of the loneliest countries in the world,” (235), we are given a glimpse of Arcadia. Jim Burden goes to visit his old friend *Ántonia*, expecting to find her “aged and broken,” a continuation of the disease that characterized her family earlier (211). Instead he finds her thriving amidst orchards of near-mythical fecundity, “in the full vigour of her personality” (214), with no less than *twelve* children, a “veritable explosion of life” (218). There is no happier place in the entire novel (and perhaps in American literature) than in the final enclosure of *Ántonia*’s large family. It’s so happy, in fact, that Jim, who has become something of a travelling loner, not unlike the wandering cowboys he used to admire as a child, becomes very attached to *Ántonia*’s family, and makes plans to be a regular visitor. (Indeed, Jim’s admiration of *Ántonia*’s reproductive accomplishment reflects the patriarchal values referred to by feminist critics mentioned earlier.) The re-

valuing of the nuclear family, in Jim's narrative of Cather's west, finds it to be more valuable, more important than ever.

Ántonia's nuclear family similarly overshadows completely any financial or worldly success attained by Jim or Tiny or anyone else in the novel. There is no question as to whose life, of all the characters in the novel, is the most successful: "[i]t was no wonder that [Ántonia's] sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (227). When Tiny Soderball states that she believes Ántonia has "not 'done very well'" (211), we are left with the impression that Tiny just doesn't get it (and perhaps we even pity her for that). We can see that Ántonia's *joie de vivre*, grown out of and because of her gargantuan family, is far more enviable and impressive than Tiny's considerable wealth and her world-weariness evidenced in the fact that "[s]he was like someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out" (194). Further, Ántonia's family clearly overshadows Jim's many accomplishments, his advanced education, his widely travelled life, and his impressive career as legal counsel to a large national railway, not only in Jim the narrator's opinion, but, as John H. Randall, III states, in Cather's opinion as well:

Although [Jim's and Ántonia's] lives run parallel and are given almost equally extensive treatment, no doubt is left in the reader's mind that Ántonia is the one who has achieved the real success. Willa Cather loads the story in Ántonia's favor, not only by emphasizing Jim's obvious admiration for her, but by making all the significant action take place in Nebraska; Jim Burden's marriage and Eastern career are

mentioned merely in passing. (275-76)

Indeed, *Antonia's* family is so remarkable that critics repeatedly notice her accomplishment. James K. Folsom, for instance, notes the worshipful care with which Cather treats *Antonia's* enormous family in the final paragraphs of the novel. Carl Van Doren, in his essay "Willa Cather," states that "so deep and strong is the current of motherhood which runs in her that it extricates her from the level of mediocrity as passion itself might fail to do" (18). T.K. Whipple gives motherhood a similarly reverential (though uncomplicated) treatment when he states that although Cather "knows that passion is rooted in physical vigor, she sees the man or woman as one piece, alive in both body and spirit, with therefore a strong vein of sensuality which may find its proper outlet, as *Antonia's* does in motherhood, but which may prove calamitous as it does to Mrs. Forrester" (a character in another Cather novel, *A Lost Lady* [1923]) (49). And when one takes into account the emphasis Cather places on that last section of the novel by contrasting it so distinctly with the difficulties *Antonia* has endured up until this point,<sup>11</sup> it's not surprising that critics repeatedly take note of the section.

In the face of *Antonia's* familial success—a success which follows a life of hardship and considerable sacrifice, a failed attempt at creating a nuclear family with another man, and a good deal of shame on account of her father's suicide and her child born out of wedlock—the many accounts of familial misery in the novel point only to a lack of effort, or to misdirected energies, on the parts of those involved. Those who tried to create such familial happiness and failed didn't try hard enough or long enough or often enough. And those who didn't try to create familial happiness and aimed instead for other kinds of wealth and accomplishments, well, America needs them too, the

narrator seems to say, but it's too bad for them that they can never know the kind of happiness that surrounds *Ántonia*. Randall notes that the family unit is "vitaly important to Willa Cather" (278), that the family home becomes "a kind of sanctuary" (282). Further, he shows that it is "represented as being the source of all civilized values; it is the only social unit which she conceives of with any degree of intensity" (279). Certainly, it is all that, but through *Ántonia*, the family unit is even more than that. *Ántonia*'s family comes to represent not just "civilized values" but everything good about the country itself. As Jim and his travelling companion decide, "[m]ore than any other person we remembered, [*Ántonia*] seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (2). What all this points to is the fact that, through Jim's story, Cather puts forth a complete and happy nuclear family—*Ántonia*'s choice—as *The Best Choice*, the most important thing for which to strive. In this novel, it's clearly more important than accomplishments like Jim's, more admirable than financial success like Tiny's, or more worthwhile than independence like Lena's. That *Ántonia*'s line is the one that will continue into the next generation, rather than the lines of Jim or Lena or Tiny, seems only appropriate.

The enthusiasm the novel exudes for *Ántonia*'s choice points to another fact as well. The complete nuclear family in Cather's novel is not only the best choice; it's also a remedy for pains and ailments and difficulties that accompany the settlement of the west. More specifically (and perhaps a bit tautologically), reconstructing the nuclear family proves to be a cure for the pains, ailments, and difficulties that accompany its previous fragmentation. *Ántonia*'s first family endures significant fracturing and trauma in the move to America. But that fragmentation, the narrator makes clear, is not the final

step. Instead, it is a temporary state, a necessary step without which *Ántonia* and others like her could not cultivate their final enormous success. In Europe, *Ántonia* could not create the kind of pastoral paradise that she does eventually create, and without the hardships she endures, she could not come “to mean [. . .] the country,” as she does to Jim and his friend (2). The fragmentation of the nuclear family that accompanied the *Shimerdas*’ move to the United States is soon overtaken by the cure, another new, healthy, and so much bigger nuclear family of the next generation.

In the *Arcadia* *Ántonia* finally creates through her offspring, we see this reconstruction take place and we witness the damage from the previous traumas healed. Her first daughter born out of wedlock (and declared by *Ambrosch* to be worthy only of drowning) has been accepted so completely that her closest sister in age doesn’t learn until adulthood that the oldest in the family has a different father than do the other eleven children (228). And the spirit of *Ántonia*’s beloved father thrives again in the figure of her husband, a “city man,” like her father, who loves entertainment the way her father did, a man who (like her father) would not have stayed on the farm had it not been for his wife (235), a man through whom *Ántonia* can heal the wounds and cure the diseases of the past by doing things differently than her mother did, so that this man does not want to leave. This man doesn’t even come close to considering suicide, but stays with her instead, happy, fulfilled, and amused with his large family. And as for *Ántonia* herself, her previous difficulties are not erased, but are remembered; and yet they are crowded out of any positions of substantial influence by all the fond memories she has created with her large family. An ancient Latin phrase, which has influenced countless paintings, states, “*et in Arcadia ego*;” Death says “Even in *Arcadia*, I am there.” Death is in this

Arcadia too, evinced in the corpse of a small dog. But that event is noticed and contemplated only in passing, for here, one does not dwell on such things. Here one dwells on all the fruit that fills the fruit cellar (217-18), on the trees and arbors in the orchards (219-20), on the Pan-god characteristics of *Ántonia's* “faun-like” son (born, ironically, on Easter) (224). This is, after all, Arcadia. The old wounds have been healed, there is plenty of fresh food to eat, and the nuclear family is stronger than ever. And the reconstruction of the nuclear family repairs any damage left by the earlier fragmentation and makes it even better than it was before, like a mended bone that is stronger than it was before the break.

And yet, the illness question, the question of why Jim, in the first section, associates the immigrant families with disease, must be addressed. Sander Gilman, in *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (1988) and *Health and Illness: Images of Difference* (1995), demonstrates the kinship between “representations of illness and cultural fantasies about illness” (*Health* 18). Undoubtedly, the representations of the immigrant households—and the Shimerda family in particular—call attention to the ethnocentrism and racism of the narrator and his household. We hear Jake voice out loud the cultural fantasy of contamination: “you were likely to get diseases from foreigners” (6). Describing Pavel and the Shimerdas as diseased allows the Burden household to keep a comfortable distance from their foreign neighbours. It provides a means of transferring the cultural difference onto the body politic in order to contain it, to highlight difference, and to create a sense of Other. And while rendering their difference in an unforgettable way, the (now contained) diseased

representations allow the Burdens conveniently to minimize the difficulties of their neighbour by distancing them, and putting them out of mind.

In the end, however, the primary purpose of representing the Shimerda family as diseased is not to reify the racist fantasies of particular characters, nor to interrogate family structures themselves, but to support a different cultural fantasy: that the disease can be cured, that any difficulty, with enough time and effort and loyalty, can be overcome. Sontag states that “every illness can be considered psychologically [. . .] and people are encouraged to believe that they get sick because they (unconsciously) want to, and that they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will; that they can choose not to die of the disease” (57). *Ántonia* wills herself not only to live and overcome the diseases of her family, but to create life and become the paragon of all things healthy. The disease of the family exists, in this novel, to point to the cure.

In the figure of *Ántonia* and in her accomplishments and in Jim’s admiration of those accomplishments, Cather affirms and celebrates the traditional nuclear family constructs, declaring them to be the remedy for the damages incurred by years of pioneering, and declaring them worth every sacrifice made on their behalf. And, much as it did in Donzelot’s France, the nuclear family becomes the reorganizing principle for a society trying to make sense of a new order of things.

### III.ii. *Angle of Repose*

Although Wallace Stegner was writing in the 1940s, not long after Cather finished her last novel (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* [1940]), he didn’t publish *Angle of Repose*

until 1971. Anthony Arthur's introduction to his 1982 book, Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, discusses one of the main categories into which the bulk of literary criticism of Stegner's novel falls—narrative voice—and in doing so makes a distinct connection between Stegner and Cather. He states that Stegner studied the narrative techniques of other writers in order to search for “the best means to convey his views” on an assortment of subjects (7). Arthur brings to our notice the attention Stegner paid Cather's novel, My Ántonia, in particular. Rather than “report[ing] the action” through an omniscient narrator, Stegner notes, Cather uses a “narrative mask” in the character of Jim Burden, a mask which permits her

to exercise her sensibility without obvious self-indulgence.

[Jim] Burden becomes an instrument of the selectivity that she has worked for. He also permits the easy condensation and syncopation of time [ . . . ]. Finally, Jim Burden is used constantly as a suggestive parallel to Ántonia: he is himself an orphan and has been himself transplanted and is himself groping for an identity and an affiliation. In the process of understanding and commemorating Ántonia, he locates himself; we see the essential theme from two points, and the space between these points serves as a base line for triangulation. (qtd in Arthur 7)

Arthur shows how Stegner's narrative technique in Angle of Repose builds on Cather's idea, but distances the audience further than Cather does. Whereas Cather places Jim and Ántonia in the same time frame where they directly parallel and reflect each other, Stegner places Lyman Ward, the narrator, two generations after Susan Burling Ward.



This extra distancing is an important factor, for it emphasizes the multiplicitous relationship between perspective and narrative voice and the story itself. And this multiplicitous relationship is central to much of the criticism surrounding Stegner's novel. It is also central to my discussion of constructions of family in the novel precisely because Lyman's distant perspective profoundly affects the story he tells, and it shapes—almost entirely—the families he constructs.

Joseph M. Flora, in his entry in James Vinson's reference book, Twentieth Century Western Writers (1982), writes that Stegner's protagonists seek "to define themselves, usually very consciously" (732). Lyman Ward consciously defines and constructs not only himself but also the families and the people whose stories he tells, so convincingly that many critics neglect to take into account Lyman's role as interpreter and shaper of story. For instance, Sid Jenson, in his 1974 essay, "The Compassionate Seer: Wallace Stegner's Literary Artist," states that "Lyman Ward is trying to write a history of his grandparents in order to understand them. He hopes that if he understands them, he will understand himself" (166). Jenson goes on to argue that Lyman learns that "'cumulative grudges'" destroyed his grandparents' marriage and tries to learn from their experience (170). Jenson, however, does not question Lyman's version of the "cumulative grudges," just as Richard W. Etulain, in "Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration," doesn't question Lyman's claim that Susan is always a stranger to the west (153) in his reading of the novel as a "first-rate fictional interpretation of the historical development of the West" (148). And Barnett Singer continues the unquestioning belief of Lyman's version of his grandparents' story in his 1977 article, "The Historical Ideal in Wallace Stegner's Fiction," to the astonishing point that he

criticizes Stegner for including “long excerpts from Susan’s letters,” thinking that Stegner included them merely for “historical atmosphere,” and completely missing the point that Stegner included them to provide a perspective outside of Lyman’s rigid and narrow one, and thereby cast long and pointed shadows on Lyman’s versions of the story (134).

But a number of critics recognize Lyman’s considerable influence and limited perspective. Kerry Ahearn, for instance, points out that the novel contains at least as much mystery as it does history (118), since Lyman decides ahead of time to take a stance against Susan and side with her husband, since he “resorts to fictional techniques” (119) with some frequency, and since he pays no attention to the ten years Susan spent apart from her husband. These silences and many others, Ahearn points out, encourage suspicion of the narrator, and show that irony is key to understanding Lyman’s stories. Similarly, Audrey Peterson points out that Lyman’s narrative voice “presides over” (176), “creates and controls all the levels of fiction in the novel,” and is never entirely absent (182).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Lyman’s narrative voice is so convincing that James Hepworth notes, in “The Quiet Revolutionary,” that readers frequently confuse Stegner with Lyman and his other narrators (13-14), and a number of critics (such as Richard Etulain, Audrey Peterson, and Robert Canzoneri, to name three) caution readers against such confusion.<sup>13</sup>

However convincing Lyman’s narrative voice may be, his vision of family is somewhat cloudy. He shares with us his concerns, in the early stages of his project, that his son’s generation does not appreciate family adequately, thereby presenting himself to us immediately as a person for whom the preservation of the nuclear family is important. His son Rodman (and others like him), Lyman claims, puts considerable effort into being a “culture hero,” into rescuing the world from its “corrupt [. . .] inheritance” and making

way for “a life of true freedom” (18). Lyman fears, however, that in these efforts, family will be destroyed: “Marriage and the family as we have known them,” he worries, “are becoming extinct” (18). He leads us to believe that he values family history like he values “the solidity and weight of these relics” that are his grandfather’s ore samples, relics which do double duty by acting as paperweights, keeping his life and research project about family history organized and under control (31). He even suggests that his belief in the importance of the nuclear family compels this project.

But Lyman’s unreliability as a narrator, discussed previously by Ahearn and Peterson, significantly warps the families he presents to us. Indeed, it’s difficult to take Lyman’s concerns for the nuclear family seriously, since, ostensibly, his greatest efforts go into casting aspersions upon both his extended family (the nuclear family represented in his project) and his own (broken) nuclear family. Lyman’s relentless examinations of his grandmother, for instance, lead to representations of her as an inadequate mother and wife and are eventually echoed in Lyman’s representations of his own wife. He reconstructs his grandmother’s story partly through the letters and papers she left behind and partly through his imaginings and constructions of what happened between the minutes and hours and days described in the letters. Being an historian (or rather an “historical pseudo-Fate [. . . holding] the abhorred shears”), he sees it as his duty to look “beyond the raw happenings” to make “choral comment on a woman who was a perfect lady” (534). His choice of when to interpret her letters and fill in the gaps with his own imaginings and when to quote her letters is not accidental, however, and his careful representations of her are always telling and often condemning. Certainly, he pays a sort of lipservice to respecting her memory, telling us, for instance, that “I am on my

grandparents' side" (18). And he tells us how much he loves his grandmother's studio (19), how he does not find her life uninteresting and would like to see it as she saw it (25), how he admires her for being a "Quaker lady of high principles" (23), and how proud he is that she rubbed shoulders with the likes of Henry Longfellow and Mark Twain, among others (20). Indeed, he boasts to us a number of times in the first section alone of her considerable accomplishments, and even seems to idealize her at times.<sup>14</sup>

But within pages of introducing her to us, he reveals his considerable bias against her. He tells us that he finds her to be a "complicated" girl, and yet he repeatedly reduces her to the lowest, most simplistic, denominator he can find (55). He tries to persuade us, for instance, that she was, all her life, "a cultural snob" (24). And he goes to great lengths in the rest of the novel to convince us of her cultural snobbishness, to convince us that her attitude to others and to the western life was not only superior, but downright demeaning towards anyone with sensibilities different from hers.<sup>15</sup> He claims she found western mining folk "coarse and cow-faced and strangely pale" (85) and that she "came West not to join a new society but to endure it," implying that she was predisposed against it from the outset, and predisposing readers to interpret her letters in a biased, ungenerous way (81). Lyman insists that

Her version of the 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. [ . . . ] Of course it would take a little time. (70)

But since these statements (and many, many others like them) are not supported with quotations from her letters, we have no way of verifying Lyman's interpretations, here and elsewhere, of Susan's attitudes and must consider that they may be significantly exaggerated and misrepresentative.

And Lyman's interpretations and conclusions *must* be interrogated, not only because he has no firsthand observations to offer of Susan's early life in the west, and because his inclusions and exclusions are selective and often unexplained,<sup>16</sup> but because his interpretations and conclusions are frequently hasty at best, illogical at worst. For instance, we must question whether someone as myopically eastern as Lyman describes Susan to be, someone determined only to endure (and not enjoy) the west, someone simply waiting to return east, would actually make the dangerous and lengthy trip west, not just once but many times, eventually retiring in the west. We must question whether she might not do it for reasons Lyman doesn't consider, reasons to which Susan alludes when she discusses a long-term goal, "our effort to reclaim and civilize the west" (491). Lyman never once considers the alternate possibilities—and there are nearly always other possibilities—that Susan looked forward to a western life, or that she was as much an adventurer as Oliver, or that she was a savvy businesswoman who recognized from the outset that she would gain unprecedented notoriety from being a western artist, and a western *woman* artist who gladly went down into the mines in order to see them for herself and approximate verisimilitude in her drawings. Certainly, there is a brief mention in one of Susan's letters that "*this* is not our real home, that we do not belong here except as circumstances keep us" (102) (her italics), a mention that seems to refer to their temporary home in a mining camp and not to the entire west of the United States

(though Lyman gives us only a truncated excerpt of this note and its actual context is difficult to discern). And there is another equally cryptic and ambiguous reference to not wanting “this country to see me old” (119). But brief references like these are few, and are far outweighed by Susan’s frequent and lengthy appreciations of the west, her declarations of contentedness,<sup>17</sup> her numerous enthralled descriptions of vistas and habitats,<sup>18</sup> her euphoria at new experiences,<sup>19</sup> her dread at leaving any one of her western homes behind,<sup>20</sup> her disgust at the “lingering sentiment for the old home, a pathetic sense of being aliens in the new” (119) which she notes in some women from the east, her personal investment in the western projects,<sup>21</sup> and so many other expressions that suggest anything *but* a woman enduring a temporary hardship. But these expressions and alternate possibilities Lyman is loathe to consider; his conclusions about Susan’s motives for moving west, then, are somewhat premature.

Instead, Lyman fixates upon and conjures Susan’s snobbery into monstrous proportions. He repeatedly presents his grandfather, Oliver, as a victim of her snobbery, telling us, for instance, that he thinks “her love for my grandfather, however real, was always somewhat unwilling. She must unconsciously have agreed with his judgment that she was higher and finer than he.” He continues, asking a particularly damning rhetorical question: “I wonder if there was some moment when she fully comprehended and appreciated him” implying in his own wondering that he does not believe such a moment existed (25). Indeed, Lyman not only accuses her of snobbery, but he also questions her faithfulness to Oliver, and regularly implies that she did not love Oliver as much as she loved her other friends. In particular, he conjures up a picture in which she loved a New York editor, Thomas Hudson (“an impossible ideal” [54]), and was jilted by him when he

married her friend Augusta.<sup>22</sup> Characteristically, Lyman doesn't take into account the many signs of Susan's affection for Oliver, signs such as the fact that she not only keeps but displays prominently on the wall, right "where she would see them every time she looked up," Oliver's belt, revolver, bowie knife, and spurs, even though "they were not her style" (19). Considering no alternate possibilities—such as the possibility that she likes the trophies, or that she loves and feels pride for the man to whom they belong, Lyman concludes the worst: that she would display them only as a constant moral lesson to herself, to remind herself "of something that had happened to her" (20).<sup>23</sup>

And Lyman's limiting constructions of Susan continue. He steadfastly allows her only the worst possible motive for marrying Oliver: that "He kept writing and she didn't have the heart to shut him off. And he was a reserve possibility," presumably, in Lyman's mind, in case things with Thomas didn't work out (53). He holds that it was a source of family shame that Susan supported them with her income in times when Oliver's income was unreliable, not allowing that both Susan and Oliver may have taken pride in Susan's independence and accomplishments, and in the fact that she supported the family at times. At his least generous point, Lyman even pins on Susan the responsibility for the death of her child, speculating that the girl drowned because Susan was distracted by and absorbed in a supposed lover<sup>24</sup> instead of watching her daughter more closely, as a better mother would have done.<sup>25</sup> At his most generous point, Lyman relents slightly, saying that she may originally have been "stirred by Oliver Ward's masculine strength" and that she fell "physically in love with" him (65), grateful for the "very hand of the protective male" (62). But even in this "generous" moment, Lyman simply exchanges the "moral" weakness of his previous accusations of infidelity for a

“feminine” weakness consistent with his other constructions of women as helpless, though sometimes helpful, creatures to be protected by, or to act as assistants to, men (65).<sup>26</sup> Perhaps Kerry Ahearn says it best: “Lyman Ward [. . .] misleads us, but no more, perhaps, than he does himself” (119).

Despite his guise of respect and reverence for Susan, the only pictures of her that make sense to Lyman, it seems, are either pictures in which she requires the protection of a man such as Oliver, or pictures in which Oliver is made to seem inferior to his uppity wife, who occasionally craves the “protection” he offers, but who simply doesn’t pay him enough attention to be able to appreciate his merits and who always looks for other distractions. Lyman’s determination to construct a particular version of Susan allows him to gloss conveniently over Oliver’s contributions to marital difficulties and over the fact that “his family must come second to his job” (477). Any material that doesn’t match his sinister and insulting pictures of Susan, Lyman resolutely ignores: “To teach me how one evening’s acquaintance ripened into a tacit engagement through five years of absence, I have only the reminiscences, written in Grandmother’s old age, and I don’t believe in them” (51). And when Susan implies that, through correspondence, an understanding developed between her and Oliver, Lyman responds, “I doubt the understanding and I doubt Grandfather’s confidence” (53). Essentially, he does with Susan’s letters what he does when he visits towns: “I go through them deliberately not noticing anything, like a machine set on automatic pilot” (74).

Of course, we learn in the end that Lyman’s representations of Susan have a great deal to do with the fact that Lyman is coming to grips with his broken marriage; conjuring up his grandfather as a similar victim offers him an ally in this world. The story



is less about his grandparents' marriage than it is about his own marriage regardless of Lyman's initial conviction that "this isn't that personal" (17). As Forrest G. Robinson notes, in "The New Historicism and the Old West," Lyman "learns only belatedly, and to his dismay, that his reconstruction of the family past is a distorted fabrication, driven by unacknowledged personal agendas, and most especially by an unwillingness to confront painful lapses from high ideals" (89). Through the careful selections and omissions from Susan's letters, and through the narrative glue he concocts to hold those selections and omissions together, Lyman conjures up a type of confession on Susan's behalf. By confession, I mean a discourse (as Foucault says) in which "the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement [. . .] a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it [. . .]" (History 61). Of course the confessor here—the authority who requires, prescribes, appreciates, and in this case, invents—is Lyman himself, who undergoes this exercise, not to take "pleasure [in] knowing that truth, [in] discovering and exposing it," (71) but to avoid confessing about his own afflicted family. This information, while it excuses none of Lyman's misogynistic inclinations, does explain why he so frequently wants to "take [Susan] by the ear and lead her aside and tell her a few things" (Angle 67), why it comforts him to patronize her, why he creates silences through his selected inclusions and exclusions of her writings, and then translates many of those silences into Susan's infidelities. In these statements and silences, Lyman voices his own frustrations about Ellen and his own broken nuclear family, and silences aspects

of his relationship with Ellen he'd rather not have discussed, thereby gaining a type of power over those aspects.

Lest we think that Lyman's suspicions center exclusively upon the women in his family, we must consider the fact that Lyman constructs not only the stories of his grandmother Susan and his wife Ellen (whose infidelity he works hard not to forgive), but also of his son, Rodman. William Abrahams's sympathies lie entirely with Lyman, and, in "The Real Thing," he points out that Lyman is "patronized by his son" (31). Certainly Lyman believes this to be the case, and presents Rodman to us as someone who is, as Abrahams suggests, rather insensitive and patronizing. Lyman's frustration with his son's well-meaning watchfulness is sometimes comic, and is usually understandable. But it's also often quite harsh, harsh enough to raise questions once again about Lyman's objectivity and about whether the situation might not be more complicated than Abrahams suggests. Lyman is cynical about Rodman's motives, demeaning about Rodman's work, critical of Rodman's personal philosophies:

Like other Berkeley radicals, he is convinced that the post-industrial post-Christian world is worn out, corrupt in its inheritance, helpless to create by evolution the social and political institutions, the forms of personal relations, the conventions, moralities, and systems of ethics (insofar as these are indeed necessary) appropriate to the future. [ . . . ]

He, Rodman Ward, culture hero born fully armed from this history-haunted skull, will be happy to provide blueprints, or perhaps ultimatums and manifestoes, that will save us

and bring on a life of true freedom. (18)

As he did with Susan, Lyman builds for us a particularly limited picture of Rodman. He tells us that Rodman sees Lyman's project as nothing more than a "present aberration" and doesn't consider the possibility that his son's interest in his project is genuine, that he "tak[es] the trouble to read some of Grandmother's stories and look at some magazines containing her drawings" because he too is interested (23). Instead, he invents his own monstrous fantasies of Rodman like he invents monstrous pictures of Susan: "Probably [Rodman] thinks the blood vessels of my brain are as hardened as my cervical spine. They probably discuss me in bed. *Out of his mind, going up there by himself . . . How can we, unless . . . helpless . . .*" (16) (his italics). Perhaps Lyman's demonization of Rodman reaches its peak when Lyman introduces his description of Rodman's visit by saying wryly, "He might as well have put a gun to my head" (207).

Even Lyman's construction of his father seems skewed and begs interrogation. He mentions that his father was a silent and difficult man to whom his grandmother "deferred [. . .], seemed almost to fear" (313), and, as if to fatten his grandmother's silence, Lyman tells us very little about life with his father, saying simply that he "grew up [his] grandparents' child" (313). He runs quickly over his father's "queer unhappy life," and then brushes off with considerable ease the fact that he enlisted the "support of the law" to "take Father" away because he "got so addled" (22). This ease must be questioned in light of the fact that he fears Rodman may have to repeat the event with him eventually, but, characteristically once more, Lyman pays attention only to the details he wishes to see.

One might wonder if Lyman's criticisms of these family members, their opinions, their marriages, and their responses to difficult situations are Stegner's way of troubling the boundaries of the nuclear family. Lyman muses,

As a modern man and a one-legged man, I can tell you that the conditions are similar. We have been cut off, the past has been ended and the family has broken up and the present is adrift in its wheelchair. I had a wife who after twenty-five years of marriage took on the coloration of the 1960s. I have a son who, though we are affectionate with each other, is no more my true son than if he breathed through gills. That is no gap between the generations, that is a gulf. The elements have changed, there are whole new orders of magnitude and kind. [ . . . ] My wife turns out after a quarter of a century to be someone I never knew, my son starts all fresh from his own premises. (17-18).

As a result of Lyman's critique of nearly every member of his family, one might ask certain questions: Is something that causes so much pain as a nuclear family really worthwhile? Are the constructs of the nuclear family that made sense in the east sensible in the west? In a land yet unfamiliar with institutions, does the institution of the nuclear family make sense since the context in which it was conceived is inaccessible? What is the point of the nuclear family when certain members persist in ignoring its structures and expectations? On a more concrete level, might Oliver be better off without Susan, and

she without him? For that matter, might Lyman be better off without the attentions of his son Rodman?

But these questions, it turns out, are hollow. The real questions must be levelled not at Susan or Rodman or Ellen and their failings, but at Lyman himself, at his conjectures, constructions, and at his rigid ideals of family. This is, I believe, where the real deconstruction takes place. And here I must turn again to the representation of disease. Sontag states, "Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust" (72). Notably, it's neither the society nor the other characters nor even the broken family most often represented as diseased in this novel, but Lyman himself, as if to say that his interpretations and ideals, however well-meaning, are corrupt and unjust. And even more important is the nature of his illness: a painful bone disease, it has left him one leg and has fused his spine to the extent that his body has become stiff and rigid, and he can literally look in only one direction. Like his diseased body, his painfully conservative ideas of marriage and of roles and duties of family members are rigid and look in only one direction. He agrees with his Augusta creation that "after all marriage *was* the woman's highest role" (63) (his italics) and he affirms traditional marital constructs when tells us that he has "no faith in free-form marriage" (518). Since the Susan and Ellen and Rodman he has created refuse some of the stereotypes to which he reverently clings, in his judgment, they do not take their commitments to nuclear family seriously enough. In the end, these moralisms and "family values," analyses and constructions, and his insistence on "not noticing anything" he doesn't want to notice, "like a machine on automatic pilot," shows him, and not his grandmother, to be the one with limited vision (74). The representation of that limited

vision as a disease of literal rigidity, a physical inability to look in any direction but one, invites further examination and interrogation not only of the rigidity and judgmentalisms, but also of Lyman's versions of the stories he tells, and of the constructions of family to which Lyman so obstinately clings. Where Cather's novel used representations of illness to expose and foreground the prejudices of those represented as healthy, Stegner's novel uses them to expose and foreground the prejudices of the one represented as diseased. Lyman's narrative, in the end, is like a dramatic monologue five hundred and some pages in length,<sup>27</sup> revealing much more about its narrator than about the stories the narrator tells. Despite Lyman's efforts to avoid confessing, it seems he has given us a confession after all.

The representation of illness performs another function as well. Lyman's bone disease is incurable, his amputated leg unrecoverable. But, as the ending of the novel shows, Lyman's nuclear family need not subject itself to the same dismemberment, for a cure exists, just around the corner, in the act of rebuilding relationships and reconstructing his family. If Lyman agrees to abandon his judgmentalisms and his resolve to anger and to reconcile with his wife, he will take a significant step towards implementing that cure. This reconciliation, it turns out, has been the point of the novel, and as such, it is very important and must not be dismissed as secondary. Whether or not Lyman takes the opportunity, we cannot know. The novel leaves him seriously considering it. But this much is certain: the remedy to heal the nuclear family is there, within reach. He simply has to swallow the pill.

Certainly, the nuclear family has undergone a transformation: the members of Lyman's family, along with the much of the western world, have rejected the patriarchal

ideals to which Lyman clings and which have now been collapsed. His wife, who left him, wants back in, even though Lyman “can’t feel about her as [he] once did” (443). And Lyman, once the protective, caretaking, authoritative father is now the taken-care-of, under the authority and protection of his son who can at any moment call the authorities to have him institutionalized, a son whose visits provide a frequent reminder of this reversal of power. This wounded family, if Lyman chooses, will undergo the process of gathering up its fragments, revaluing them, and piecing them back together in a different configuration, apart from former ideals, but no less willing to bow to the notion that such reconstruction will ultimately repair the wounds and provide a cure for the damage incurred to the family hitherto as well as a cure for the malaise of bitterness that compels Lyman’s rigid judgmentalisms in the first place. Agreeing to take those first steps of reconciliation, it turns out, is exactly what will make Lyman “man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather” (569). Significantly less rigid than it was in Lyman’s ideals, the institution of the nuclear family has nevertheless been recuperated, its ties as supple and as binding as ever.

The reconstruction of the nuclear family also takes place through the outcome of Lyman’s grandparents’ narrative, an outcome offering rose-coloured lenses which tint the entire novel. This project doesn’t take place during the vulnerable times of Susan’s life in the wild west of history but in the safety of Lyman’s present, a present that knows how nicely it all turned out in the end. And from the very first page of the novel, the nuclear family is implicitly affirmed, for Lyman tells us at the outset that his grandparents’ family not only survived the difficulties which he is about to describe for the reader, but

came to thrive and retire happily in the west, leaving behind a remarkably rich heritage in which Lyman takes great pride. He says:

I am cumulative too. I am everything I ever was [. . .]. I am much of what my parents and especially my grandparents were—inherited stature, coloring, brains, bones [. . .], plus transmitted prejudices, culture, scruples, likings, moralities, and moral errors that I defend as if they were personal and not familial. [. . .] My antecedents support me here as the old wistaria (sic) at the corner supports the house (15).

As previous discussion has shown, Lyman makes no attempt to idyllicize the westering experience his grandparents faced, but since we know, from the very first page, that the family will survive, that Oliver and Susan will become contented, and that Lyman will value more than anything this heritage of family, the trials and tribulations diminish in comparison. We know it will be all right in the end. We know that, even though there may be no Arcadia, there will be apple blossoms (45) and wisteria (15). There will be significant financial success for both grandparents, and Lyman will grow up surrounded by enough wealth for him to be “the town’s rich kid” (75). There will be a beautiful, sun-filled home, saturated with fond memories of his grandparents and the tenderesses they showed him, memories so powerful that Lyman immerses himself in them when he seeks comfort from the difficulties in his own life. There will be a marriage so solid that it survives frontier living conditions, that it works determinedly through countless hardships (financial and otherwise), that it deals even with the death of a child, a marriage so strong that Lyman studies it when working through his own marital



difficulties, a marriage so permanent that when the husband dies, the wife waits only “two months [until] she lay down and died too” (568). And we find, in the end, an impressive, expansive, and meaningful prize rose garden to boot, a garden grown as a kind of family project, a way for Oliver to honour his children and to spend time with his grandchildren (537). And Lyman’s project, for all its questioning of family, serves up to him reminder after reifying reminder of the value he places in those family structures. Again, successes happen because of the family and the persistence of its members to *Make It Work*, and we are left with the impression that, somehow, it is all worthwhile.

#### **IV. The Canadian Novels**

Two Canadian western classic novels, Martha Ostenso’s Wild Geese and Sinclair Ross’s As For Me and My House, are not nearly so generous to the nuclear family. These novels tell stories similar to those in the American western novels discussed above, stories of settling the west, of the considerable difficulties encountered when farming the hostile prairies or when building communities out of dislocated people who have neither common language nor common culture. But when one pays attention to the families in these novels, some noteworthy aspects distinguish them from the families in the two American western novels. Comparatively speaking, there is little sense of past or of long-term continuity in these two Canadian novels. The question of heritage, of where the settlers come from, is so very important in the American novels. *Antonia*, we are constantly reminded, hails from Bohemia, and that fact affects everything she does and nearly everything that happens to her, from the suicide of her homesick father to her

marriage to a Bohemian man. And according to Lyman Ward, his grandmother's eastern upbringing similarly affects all her choices, decisions, actions, and thoughts, and ultimately, he claims, her easternness affects his choices and thoughts and decisions as well. But the "east," whether that be Europe or eastern/central Canada, has considerably less visible influence in these Canadian novels than it did in the American novels; it's seldom (if ever) mentioned. Likewise, the extended family has considerably less influence in these novels than in the American ones. We know a few things here and there, that Amelia in Wild Geese has a middle-class urban heritage, and that Philip Bentley's father in As For Me and My House was a student preacher who died young and his mother a waitress. But when compared to the two American western novels, there is little sense of familial continuity in these two novels, little indication of leaving behind extended families in order to settle the west, little (if any) ongoing communication with extended family, little sense of extended family of any kind. The consequence of this is that the families in these Canadian western novels are more nuclear, if I might use the term "nuclear" in such a fashion. What I mean by this is that they are more isolated, more unto themselves, more introspective, more focussed on their own nuclei, less dependent on eastern or European heritages or on extended families. Our attention, then, focusses much more completely on the activities and constructions of single, isolated nuclear families in these novels.

And here we can see a pattern of family again, but a remarkably different pattern than in the American western novels. The nuclear family, in these novels, is not placed on a pedestal to be admired or celebrated. The family *is* scrutinized, to be sure, but rather than deconstructing and then reconstructing it, ultimately representing it as a normative

institution whose power, influence, and moral status should be reinforced and reified, these novels deconstruct the nuclear family and, without relenting or reconstructing, interrogate the politics of the nuclear family in a way that suggests that the primacy and perhaps even the existence of the normative nuclear family itself is problematic. Again, representations of illness are important means by which the foundations and assumptions governing representations of nuclear family are dismantled and exposed. The two American novels use representations of illness to spotlight and criticize prejudices of particular characters and to show that reconstructing and re-ordering the nuclear family offer a remedy for the damage incurred by the previous incarnation of the nuclear family. The two Canadian novels similarly represent the nuclear family as a diseased and damaged organism whose symptoms dissect and interrogate the politics of the nuclear family; the structures of the nuclear family that define it as such, that are meant to hold the individual components in place and regulate function, instead inflict some kind of trauma on the individual members and impair them from normative “healthy” function. But where the American novels call for a re-ordering and reconstruction of the nuclear family, the Canadian novels use representations of illness to call for its fragmentation, or even its disintegration. And there they leave the nuclear family, in its disintegrated state.

Susan Sontag, in Illness as Metaphor, notes that “modern disease metaphors specify an ideal of society’s well-being, analogized to physical health, that is as frequently anti-political as it is a call for a new political order” (76). When disease metaphors are applied to family, then, they imply first that the diseased, chaotic condition of the family is not the norm, and thus point to the healthy tenor that would otherwise be the norm; and second, the “healthy” tenor to which they point might call for a re-ordering

of existing family politics and structures, or it might in fact suggest that the primacy and perhaps even the existence of the normative nuclear family itself is problematic. By refusing to point to healthy families, and by refusing to reconstruct nuclear families into political orders that are mutually beneficial for the individual members, these two novels are on some level what Sontag calls “anti-political” in their representations of family. That is, they don’t just oppose specific orders of the nuclear family. They oppose the nuclear family itself.

#### IV.i. *Wild Geese*

Of the four novels discussed here, *Wild Geese* has received the least amount of literary criticism published in journals. Recent critics in particular haven’t paid a great deal of attention to the novel.<sup>34</sup> Having said that, however, I should also say that by virtue of its popularity on university Canadian literature courses, and the frequency with which it receives critical discussion in thematic studies of Canadian literature such as those by Harrison, Moss, and Ricou, it has never really left the critical limelight.

From the very first page of Ostenso’s novel, it’s obvious that we’ve left the idyllic prairie and happy family on the south side of the border. In their place, *Wild Geese* presents to us an example of a novel centred upon the figure Dick Harrison calls “the prairie patriarch” (188). The elimination of the tyranny generated by this patriarch, and, as a matter of course, the elimination of the patriarch himself and the “spectacle of his tyranny” turns out to be the point of the novel (*Wild Geese* 135). Consequently, a significant chunk of Ostenso criticism—particularly the criticism found in a number of

graduate theses and dissertations—centres upon the thematic exploration of tyranny, a topic which has a good deal to do with the constructions of family in the novel. Stanley Stanko, for instance, in “Image, Theme, and Pattern in the Works of Martha Ostenso,” surveys all of Ostenso’s many novels and groups them into three thematic categories: novels which explore tyranny and guilt, novels which explore decline, fall, and regeneration, and novels which explore the vital man and the creative woman. Alexander Jones and Becky-Jean Hjartarson each take Stanko’s work on tyranny further in their writing, Jones exploring the means by which tyranny (along with isolation) generates family tension in the novels, and Hjartarson studying tyranny in terms of conflict between man and woman, parent and child, or a woman about to become independent and society at large.<sup>35</sup>

The representation of the tyrannical father has led to an extended critical discussion debating whether the novel is an example of romance, as the tyrannical villain might suggest, or an example of realism, or a combination of the two. (The realism/romance question is an issue that comes up in criticism surrounding all four of the novels—probably since all four of the novels read as realism but have indisputable elements of romance in them—but the question has been taken up most vigorously in the criticism surrounding Ostenso’s novel.) Rosaleen McFadden, arguing that the novel is built around mythopoeic patterns found in Norse myths, and W.J. Keith, examining the *deus ex machina* ending in the light of novels like Sir Walter Scott’s Bride of Lammermoor (1819) and R.D. Blackmore’s Lorna Doone (1869), suggest that the novel belongs in the romantic genre.<sup>36</sup> But Desmond Pacey, in The Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English (1965), thinks the novel the “single most consistent piece

of western realism to appear before the novels of Frederick Philip Grove” (678-79), an assessment with which Stanley Atherton and Carlyle King seem to agree. The most convincing arguments, however, are those that acknowledge and explore the ways in which the novel demonstrates marked characteristics of both realistic and romantic genres. Dick Harrison, for instance, first comments (rather wryly) that although Ostenson is one of three authors “assumed to have brought realism to prairie fiction, [. . .] as usual, the meaning of the term ‘realism’ is uncertain” (101). Harrison continues, showing that the exploration of prairie life in Ostenson’s novel is characteristic of other novels categorized as prairie realism, but that Caleb Gare himself, by virtue of his superlative “larger-than-life dimensions,” is a “creature of romance,” more specifically, a “romantic villain” (108). David Arnason’s thesis on Canadian prairie realism notes that Ostenson explores elements of the traditional sentimental romance (such as themes of isolation, social interaction, freedom, and bondage) but argues that ultimately the novel is an example of realism because of its recognizable world, its meticulous attention to detail, and the specific freedoms—such as freedom from the tyranny of the land and of Caleb—which the characters seek (as opposed to the vague freedoms Arnason argues is sought by characters in novels of the romance genre).

You have to wonder about the politics of family in a novel where the best thing that happens—the *miracle*, in fact—is the accidental death of one of its members. Undoubtedly, the nuclear family in Ostenson’s novel intensifies the already substantial difficulties of settling the west. In fact, it’s represented to us as the primary source of suffering and persecution in the novel. For the Gare family, the formidable task of farming hostile prairies amidst uncooperative elements, blinding heat, and choking dust,

and the substantial physical pain inflicted by the demands of manual labour are taxing, to say the least. And yet they seem slight in comparison to the tyranny inflicted upon each family member by Caleb, the father, a tyranny (as others have noted before me) both manipulative and physically abusive, not to mention relentlessly constant.

The family member whose misery we are invited most often to witness is Jude, Caleb and Amelia's seventeen-year-old daughter, and of her feelings toward family there can be no mistake. When Judith warns Lind, the schoolteacher, to expect Caleb's bullying, she advertises in her face "the naked image of hate," and this hatred only intensifies during the course of the novel (13). At the apex of her hatred, Jude throws an axe at her father when he attempts to beat her for meeting her lover. In response, Caleb ties her into the most demeaning position he can imagine, face down in manure on the barn floor. For most of the novel, Jude is, quite literally, his prisoner and slave, and we are reminded of this with some frequency as she covertly plans her escape.

The prison in which Jude, her mother, and her siblings are captive, however, is not so much a dungeon as a prairie become a literal version of Foucault's panopticon. In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Foucault describes an architectural unit which might be a prison, an asylum, a hospital, a school, or any other such building in which residents are policed for any number of purposes. Brightly lit cages or cells with walls between them surround a central tower in which stands a supervisor who can see into each of the cells without himself being seen. "In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap"

(200). The effect of such a building is that the invisibility of the supervisor coupled with the knowledge that they are always being watched induces in the residents a guarantee of order. If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen there is no risk of their committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents. (200-01).

In this kind of panopticon, Judith, her siblings, and her mother find themselves. Caleb's power is one of watching and punishing them with the knowledge he collects until they behave as they would if he were there watching them at all times. He spies on Jude and her lover (Ostenson 165), and on Lind and her lover (185), surprising them later with his awareness of their intimate encounters. He enters Amelia's kitchen when she has an unexpected (but unapproved) guest "only to torment her with his knowledge that Mrs. Sandbo was there" (117). And when his own vision doesn't gaze far enough, he relies on the gaze of other prairie dwellers to give him information with which to discipline his family until everyone in the Gare household knows, along with Lind, that "the prairies have seen [them]" (118) and have passed that information along to Caleb. Indeed, at one point, Caleb leaves the farm for several days, but he has induced in Jude "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of



power” (Foucault, Discipline 201). Consequently, Judith polices herself and doesn’t use the opportunity to seek out her lover: “Judith was free to go where she liked without discovery for four days. But she did not try to find Sven Sandbo” (Ostenso 102).

Jude’s resistance to family, however, doesn’t stop with her hatred of Caleb, his gaze, and his abusive power. It extends to loathing her sister, Ellen, as well. Ellen responds to Caleb’s terrorizing by internalizing it until “she was driven farther and farther within herself” (133) and turns her back on a suitor who proffered her the only chance she has to escape the farm. Further, Ellen takes a martyristic pride in the extensive physical suffering she endures on the farm, occasionally even defending the abusive actions of her father. She has a “contorted sense of loyalty” which has “overrun every other instinct like a choking tangle of weeds” (72), until she becomes an extension of Caleb’s vision and reproduces his anger as she “vented her disapproval upon Amelia” on the single occasion in the novel when he doesn’t learn about (and hence cannot punish anyone for) an outing of Jude’s (96). Instead of sympathy for the extent of Ellen’s psychological damage, Ellen earns only Jude’s disgust:

Judith saw that Ellen’s face was white, her eyelids red and swollen. But the feeling she had toward her was only one of contempt. There was nothing admirable in Ellen’s suffering. Before the return of Malcolm Judith had pitied Ellen and would have done much to spare her from duties that were too heavy for her. Now she felt that anything that befell Ellen was her just due. (163).

Amelia, a more pronounced extension of Caleb's control, inflicts a lesser tyranny upon her children in order to deflect some of the persecution Caleb levels at her. Where *Ántonia* became the perfect loving mother who created the perfect loving family, Amelia, for most of the novel, hasn't even affection let alone love for her children. She's entirely willing to mistreat her children in the ways Caleb demands, and to sacrifice the happiness of the children she had by Caleb for the happiness of a son she had out of wedlock by another man:

Caleb's children could wither and fall like rotten plants after frost—everything could fall into dissolution. He was his father's son, Mark Jordan, the son of the only man she had ever loved. Ellen, Martin, Judith and Charlie, they were only the offspring of Caleb Gare, they could be the sacrifice. She would bend and inure them to the land like implements, just as Caleb wished her to do. She would not intercede in (sic) their behalf hereafter. She would see them dry and fade into fruitlessness and grow old long before their time, but her heart would keep within itself and there would be no pity in her for the destruction of their youth. (88)

This almost completely uncompromising representation of family bonds as tyrannical in nature is only one of the ways in which *Ostenso* applies pressure to the nuclear family. Perhaps she applies the most pressure by representing the nuclear family as a diseased organism. The Gare family, in this novel, suffers a disease of excess, of a malignance that originates in Caleb. Caleb fails to function as a contributing member of

the organic family, and instead functions as a tumorous organ that impairs the health both of the organic family and of the individual members. His body, we are told, looks imbalanced, topheavy, misshapen. “[H]e was, if anything, below medium height, but [ . . . ] his tremendous shoulders and massive head, which loomed forward from the rest of his body like a rough projection of rock from the edge of a cliff, gave him a towering appearance. [ . . . while] the lower half of his body [ . . . ] seemed visibly to dwindle” (13).

But, as already mentioned, his deformed appearance is slight in comparison with the misery he visits upon his family members, evident already in the very first sentence of the novel, where we are told that “[i]t was not openly spoken of, but the family was waiting for Caleb Gare” (11). The eye of the narrator then sweeps around the room and describes for us how this “waiting for Caleb” afflicts the demeanor and physical posture of each family member. The narrator emphasizes the “unnatural” quirks, attitudes, and the unspoken suppression of each one. Martin, for instance, is “slow and clumsy of feeling,” as if he is stupefied, while Ellen, the organist, has inexplicably “forgotten even the more familiar parts of her repertoire.” And Charlie and Jude move about unnaturally, coming “in and out of the house repeatedly for no reason whatever” (11).

The demands made upon them by Caleb impair the mobility of the other family members and their movements are severely restricted. Under the guise of protecting the interests of the farm, Caleb forbids Amelia or his adult children to leave the farmyard even for a few hours unless on a closely regulated errand for him. Their social interaction is so limited by his demands as to render it virtually nonexistent. And when Amelia offers lunch to a sickly neighbour, “a little kindness [to] mak[e] up for all the meanness of the past years” (151), Caleb lashes out at her, forbidding her even such

common decency. He polices every motion of those in his family, even while they are at home, and at certain points, goes so far as to suppress communication and interaction between the family members themselves.

And then there are the physical symptoms. The manual labour Caleb demands from his children extracts more and more from their bodies.

It was deadening work, so that after a while the spirit forgot to follow the body [. . .]. The nostrils began to ache from the sweet, hot, dusty smell of the hay. The hands grew dry and swollen from the reins, the sun lay like a hot iron on the shoulders, no matter which way one turned. But presently it was only the body that was there, enduring; the spirit seemed to have gone somewhere else [. . .]. (142)

Ellen's weak allergy-tortured eyes become red and swollen and go nearly blind from haydust irritation. Consequently, Martin, in an attempt to keep the near-blind Ellen from falling off a haystack, dislocates his shoulder and is bedridden for weeks. And there are too many descriptions of blisters and welts and other assorted wounds spotting the overused bodies to count. Indeed, even while overworking them physically, Caleb forces his children into positions of metaphorical atrophy such that even he recognizes them as physically "twisted and gnarled and stunted [. . .] and barren" (59). And when he compares them to the strapping, handsome son his wife had by another man, he recognizes that the original contamination now afflicting his family comes from within himself, "a furious jealousy [. . .] like a ravaging disease long checked and now broken out more violently than ever" (59). He is like a primary tumour, gradually consuming the

entire organism of family. Perhaps Amelia, Caleb's wife, describes his cancerous nature most succinctly when she compares him to the fool mentioned in the Book of Ecclesiastes who "'eateth his own flesh.' That was what he was doing. [. . .] Eating his own flesh, here on the land" (42).

The malignant excess Caleb represents reveals itself further in the fact that, for all that he consumes from the family, he contributes nothing positive to it. He is, to be precise, useless excess. Although he owns the farm legally, and uses it to demand physical exertion from his family, he does none of the physical labour himself. As Judith explains, "He loves to ride around in the cart to show the Icelanders how much spare time he has during the busy season, while the rest of us slave around in the muck all day" (13).

Susan Sontag notes that cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease of the pathology of space, both metaphorically and literally. Its principal metaphors refer to topography—cancerous tumours "spread" or "proliferate" and are surgically "excised"—and the malignance itself literally travels through the body and invades and colonizes spaces other than the primary tumour. Caleb's self-proclaimed ambition is to consume physical space, to get rid of the "foul" muskeg with its "sickly vapours," a swamp with which he is frequently compared and identified, and replace it with more and more and more prime farmland and timber in the region (19). And, in fact, he makes some progress towards this goal and negotiates a trade of the sickly muskeg for some fine timber. But cancer is not contagious; his power to consume does not extend outside the body of his own family. His family members are contaminated, to be sure, but the sickly muskeg, which he believes excised from himself and his possession, reaches out and consumes him quite literally, and buries him alive in its quicksand.

What motivates this novel, then, is the process Sontag calls “a practic[e] of decontamination” (6), in this case, an effective surgical excising of the diseased organ, namely, the death of Caleb. From the end of the first subsection of the first chapter, a mere seven pages into the novel, through more than two hundred pages, to the third last page of the novel, the reader anticipates the relief of his removal. But to sever the diseased organ—a severance necessary for the physical survival of the family—is to compromise the integrity of the nuclear family, to create a loss. After Caleb’s death, most of the remaining members of the Gare family are noticeably happier, but the cohesiveness that a shared resistance to Caleb’s power previously afforded is gone. Judith has moved away with her lover; Amelia still lives on the farm with Martin and Ellen, but any potential for harmony between the three of them is compromised because Ellen has begun to show symptoms of Caleb’s disease. In The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (1988), Jessica Benjamin notes that at the end of a period of domination, those who were oppressed often attempt to reproduce the authority of their oppressors. And certainly Ellen responds to liberation from Caleb’s domination by making feeble, emaciated efforts to reproduce his authority: she tries to convince her brother to insult a neighbour and reject a kind invitation because “[h]e didn’t invite father” (238).

One might argue that some of the other families in the novel offer last-ditch hopeful representations of the nuclear family: Jude and Sven’s final escape to the city, for instance, where they will raise their child. Certainly, a side of Judith appreciates fine things, things like Lind’s amber beads (18) and finely textured lingerie (182), things unavailable to her on the farm but easily available to her in the city. And certainly, the

life she has under Caleb's roof is one characterized by misery and she longs to escape it, believing herself "singled [. . .] out from the rest of the Gares. She was no longer one of them" (53). But I tend to agree with Dick Harrison, who notes that Judith's final predicament in the novel is more imprisoning than it is liberating or inspiring: "It is hard to imagine this passionate young amazon being happy in the urban domestic environment to which they consign her" (114). This is a woman who takes pleasure in wrestling with horses (Wild Geese 39), who instinctively challenges stallions (164), who's attracted to the violence of young bulls (54). Indeed, when Jude is inserted for more than a few hours into the domestic sphere in the novel, her response is anything but contentment; instead, it's much closer to depression:

Judith had become only a pair of hands that did what they were told. She spoke to no one, looked at no one.

To Lind, her apathy was heart-breaking. For days, the Teacher did not approach her, knowing that it would do no good. When she came in from school she would hear her, perhaps, moving heavily about upstairs, scrubbing the pine floors, or would see her sitting stolidly absorbed over a pailful of vegetables that she was cleaning. (170)

It seems unlikely that a person who reacts in this fashion to domesticity, whose most passionate and living moments involve being thrown by farm animals (39) and rubbing her naked body into uncultivated earth (53-54), would be content confined to a house in a city. It simply doesn't follow that she would find joy in wearing housedresses instead of overalls, changing diapers instead of breaking stallions, having little access to farm

animals or naked earth. Let me turn briefly to one of the more erotic passages in the novel: once, during a passionate and highly sexual wrestling match, Jude and Sven wrestle almost as equals, “two stark elements, striving for mastery over each other,” until Sven finally “crushed [Judith’s] limbs between his own, bruised her throat, pulled her arms relentlessly together behind her until the skin over the curve of her shoulders was white and taut, her clothing torn away” (86). This wrestling match, while it has its erotic appeal, represents something more than stoking the sexual furnaces of two lovers. Rather than freeing her, it seems to me that Judith’s marriage to Sven, complete with child and urban home, will be one of continued power struggles where (despite her vigour) they are not quite equals, where she will continue to be metaphorically crushed and bruised, increasingly dominated by familial expectations and domesticity, increasingly unhappy. The residual effect of her first family and its secrets overshadow any positive implications her second family might suggest and Jude simply moves from Caleb’s panopticon into a metaphoric dungeon, chained by obligations and housework.

Even the neighbours are unable to offer positive representations of the nuclear family. The Sandbos have already been relieved of their patriarch and are clearly better off for it. Mrs. Sandbo, though nostalgic for her deceased husband, and happily keeping him alive in her memory, insists she is “heppy he iss gone. [. . .] I vass a dog under him. Now I live good, not much money, but no dirt from him, t’ank God!” (sic) (29). Mrs. Sandbo’s daughter, Dora, we learn, also lives in a “disastrous marriage” (176), though its disasters, we are to infer, have more to do with Dora’s apathy than with any kind of patriarchy on the part of her husband; Lind finds “deep relief” in exiting her house (106).



Misery holds the sceptre at Thorvald Thorvaldson's farm, as it does elsewhere in the novel. We are led to believe that the farm, "a fragment of neglect," is nothing but a "ragged piece of land" because Thorvaldson has "nine girls, and no boys" (47). This reading raises immediate suspicions, however, since Jude is clearly the best and most valuable farm hand at the Gares; sex, Ostenso seems to insist, has nothing to do with farming capability. But we are granted a few glimpses into the Thorvaldson family and have reason to fear that the situation there is at least as bad as the one at Gares, and that Thorvaldson is also a cruel patriarch. Mrs. Sandbo, ever the bearer of news, declares Thorvaldson to be "a mean von" (116). Her accusations are confirmed when Thorvaldson visits the Gares and the narrator tells us that he admires the control Caleb wields over the people in his house while justifying to himself the implicitly violent approach he prefers: "He grinned flatteringly at Caleb. Here indeed was control that was at once subtle and sure! The trouble was that Thorvaldson's women folk had not the intelligence to understand and properly respect such ruling. More obvious tactics had to be used with them . . ." (80). Thorvaldson's "piggish little eyes surveying [Judith's] limbs and the backs of her thighs as she bent over, the overalls she wore tightening across her body" only sharpen the image of Thorvaldson as an abuser of women (79-80).

In the end, then, we are left with a surviving but fragmented Gare family, but since we are offered no alternatives, we are left to surmise that the fragmented state is the only state in which it can be allowed to survive. Ostenso has not made even a single attempt to reconstruct the nuclear family.

#### IV.ii. *As For Me and My House*

When I first studied this novel in high school, my teacher remarked that since the novel was a diary written entirely in the first-person voice of Mrs. Bentley, since “Philip” was the first word of the diary, and since the diary ended with Mrs. Bentley contemplating not one but two Philips, the novel was about Mrs. Bentley’s obsession with and need to control Philip Bentley. While I have come to believe that the Mrs. Bentley character is a complex and ambiguous one (and I don’t agree with much of what my highschool teacher taught), he aptly pointed out the central field of controversy in the criticism surrounding this novel, a field very similar to one surrounding Angle of Repose, the question of narrative voice and narrative reliability.

Roy Daniells ignited the controversy surrounding Mrs. Bentley in 1957 in his now-famous introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of Ross’s novel. Daniells, completely persuaded by Mrs. Bentley, deems her full of “pristine Puritan beauty,” a woman who sees the situations surrounding her “with exquisite and painful clarity” (vii). Speculating that dispute will surround the character of Philip in future criticism, Daniells even goes so far as to say that Mrs. Bentley is “pure gold and wholly credible” and, hence, will not attract much in the way of controversy (vii). Certainly there have been readers who agree with much of Daniells’s most generous reading of Mrs. Bentley. Robert Chambers, for instance, in Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler (1975), suggests that Mrs. Bentley is responsible for bringing about Philip’s rebirth and saves the marriage through her sacrifice and devotion to him. And D.J. Dooley argues, simply, that if Mrs.

Bentley is not credible, then we have no novel; there must be some level, according to Dooley, at which her word can be accepted if the novel is to exist.<sup>37</sup>

The critics who combat this point of view are just as adamant. John H. Ferres, in Twentieth Century Western Writers, notes that Mrs. Bentley sees herself as “victim of the town’s and [Philip]’s failings,” but a careful reader will recognize that her “elitist pride and belittling frigidity” ultimately defeat the Bentleys and estrange them from the people around them (661). Similarly, Ken Mitchell, in Sinclair Ross: A Reader’s Guide (1981), considers Mrs. Bentley an unreliable narrator since she suppresses information, and evades evidence and questions about herself. Wilfred Cude and David Stouck have each come up with some of the harshest criticisms of Mrs. Bentley, Cude pointing to her “unblushing acceptance of her own hypocrisy” (82) and the fact that she unintentionally but methodically sabotages her marriage, and Stouck stating that her admirable qualities are “tautly balanced by the ironic view of her as manipulator and petty deceiver” (102), that she’s a woman with a “power to castrate” (98) who controls and bestows and takes away Philip’s manhood.<sup>38</sup>

The most convincing analyses are those that take into account the fact that we are completely at Mrs. Bentley’s mercy. As Lyman Ward does, Mrs. Bentley controls one hundred percent of the material we are given in the novel, the one difference being that she interprets for us her husband’s actions and silences and paintings, claiming to know the thoughts behind them, whereas Lyman interprets his grandmother’s letters. Again, however, we are without means to verify the narrator’s versions of anything. Lorraine McMullen, in Sinclair Ross (1979), assumes that although Mrs. Bentley is not a reliable narrator, she nevertheless speaks un-self-consciously and as honestly as she can in a

“confessional mode” (59), and in this mode reveals both her manipulation and her vulnerabilities, her guilt and self-deception. Certainly, Mrs. Bentley gives us a confession of sorts, as Lyman did; Evelyn Hinz and John Teunissen argue that the novel is a dramatic monologue, much as I suggested that Angle of Repose is a dramatic monologue,<sup>39</sup> and that Mrs. Bentley strategically and intentionally deceives her readers. However, despite the fact that this controversy<sup>40</sup> is relevant to the questions of family I explore in this thesis, I won’t spend a great deal of time discussing it or the ways in which questions of narrative voice and narrative reliability shape constructions of family since the essence of that argument would be a simple rehearsal of the arguments already given in the discussion of Angle of Repose. One thing I will mention quickly, however, is that the narrative strategies in As for Me and My House serve a final purpose opposite those in Angle of Repose: where Lyman ultimately recuperates the family and abandons his rigid ideals, Mrs. Bentley’s narrative of family, we will see, is not nearly so hopeful or generous.

As it was in Wild Geese, the nuclear family is once again represented to us as a diseased organism, a representation which calls for its fragmentation. In this novel, however, the disease is not a disease of excess, but a disease of deficiency. Mrs. Bentley gives us a self-diagnosis of sorts. She describes in detail the symptoms appearing in her family: her feelings of profound alienation and paranoia, her anaemic coexistence with her preacher husband, their “lifeless” communication (21), what she perceives as his rejection of her, and what she believes to be his extramarital affair. All of these symptoms she attributes to the Bentleys’ lack of children, to the fact that her nuclear family is incomplete, and she seems to believe that this lack can lead only to further

marital breakdown. She writes, "And huddling there I wished for a son again, a son that I might give back a little of what I've taken from him, that I might at least believe I haven't altogether wasted him, only postponed to another generation his fulfillment" (7).

This fear of collapse, of what Sander Gilman calls "the sense of dissolution" central to images of disease, is perhaps *the* defining characteristic of Mrs. Bentley's narrative as she unwittingly lays naked her fear that her marriage dissolves a bit more each day.<sup>41</sup> Time after time she tells us about her fear of losing Philip, in her many hollow attempts to convince herself that she "know[s] him" (Ross 157), and then in her contradictory musings that he is "unknowable" (14), that she has "lost Philip anyway" (98). She obsesses in her too keen, too constant observations of him, a policing that would be unnecessary if she felt secure in her marriage. Her description of him as a "strong, virile man, right in his prime" coupled with her descriptions of the women who "flock faithfully to church [. . .] to say how stimulating they find his sermons" (14) seem to be a subtext of pride braided together with jealousy of the flocking women, and with the paranoia that they find more than his sermons stimulating. Especially revealing is her belief that "[h]e likes boys" (9), that an unspoken attraction compels him to linger his gaze upon "an *ominously* good-looking boy" like Steve (54) (my italics), and that "[w]omen aren't necessary or important to him" (22).<sup>42</sup> She fears men, she fears women, she fears boys, or rather, she fears the threats they all represent to her marriage. But switching between the fears with such frequency shows her real fear not to be any specific person or threat but rather her own inability to prevent the dissolution of her marriage. That her depictions of Philip are not necessarily accurate is less important than the fact that her narrative is punctuated both with expressions of fear that Philip is

slipping gradually away from her and with confessions of passive aggressive schemes to keep him close to her.

Unable to bear children herself, she seeks to treat the illness, to restore the “right” balance by adopting an orphan, Steve, who can function as a surrogate or prosthetic child, who can fill the lack. Her decision, however, more than pointing to her desire for a child, points to the deficiency in her relationship with Philip: “At the time I wasn’t thinking about Steve at all, just Philip. He was sitting there in front of me with such a white, hopeless look on his face; somehow I knew that what I was doing was the right thing to do” (*As For Me* 66). David Wills, in *Prosthesis* (1995), notes that “however much ‘prosthesis’ refers to an apparatus alone, it cannot fail to imply the idea of the amputation—or of a lack or deficiency—that would have preceded it. [. . .] There is nothing that is simply or singularly prosthetic; it has no ordinary integrality” (133). As Wills says, “prosthesis [is] about nothing if not placement, displacement, replacement, standing, dislodging, substituting, setting, amputating, supplementing” (9).

And so Steve is taken into the Bentley house. But no sooner has the Bentley prosthesis been put in place than the process of rejection begins. Torn between wanting to correct the deficiency by being a loving and responsible mother, and ravaged by jealousy over the fact that Philip shows the child attentions he never showed her, “grudg[ing] every minute he and Philip are alone together” (69), Mrs. Bentley can’t control her narrative, and it becomes more and more fragmented. She repeatedly tries to convince herself that Steve completes the family, that the three of them united face the prairie world, that the nuclear family is now healthy and strong, “[e]specially now that there are the three of us” (89). But despite her efforts, she must confess, out of

frustration, that the prosthesis has not led to a recuperation of any kind but rather to an increase in the severity of the symptoms, that the marital tensions have only increased, that her own feelings of inadequacy surrounding her marriage escalate daily, and that Steve is, after all, only a prosthesis—that he is not the real thing, but is instead a mere substitute generated to perform a specific function, something which is, at the same time, an extension of the organism, something which completes and enhances it, but something which is not integral to it. In the end, this prosthetic child only emphasizes the fact that Mrs. Bentley's now-complete nuclear family is a constructed—instead of a biological—one. As Wills notes, “[t]he obvious needs to be stated: the prosthesis is an artifice, a contrivance, a fabrication” (165).

Clive Bloom, in The ‘Occult’ Experience and the New Criticism: Daemonism, Sexuality, and the Hidden in Literature (1986), notes that illness, because of the chaos in its wake and because of its indiscriminate nature, threatens social order. In this case, the illness doesn't threaten social order, as Bloom would say, but the intended cure for it. At first Steve (the intended cure) makes Mrs. Bentley feel just “vaguely threatened” (56), but soon she betrays the extent of the insecurities this young boy raises in her. When Philip pursues people who owe them money in order to pay expenses “on account of Steve,” Mrs. Bentley lashes out at him:

I was bitter. He had never asked for money for me. He had let me skimp and deny myself, and wear shabby, humiliating old clothes. I thought of the way I had borne it, pitying him, admiring him. It was because he was sensitive, fine-grained, I always said, because the hypocrisy hurt him, because beneath

it all he was a genuine man. And I threw it all at him. I told him that when I married him I didn't know it was to be a four-roomed shack in Horizon. I called him a hypocrite again, and a poor contemptible coward. (113)

Of course, if the intended cure threatens social order (or here, the order of the family), the implication follows that the illness itself is integral to that social order. In this case, the implication that the deficiency characterizing her relationship with Philip is necessary to that relationship casts doubt on whether this nuclear family can ever be complete.

But perhaps the military metaphors most clearly reveal the sense of dissolution characterizing their marriage. Both Sander Gilman and Susan Sontag note the frequency with which diseased bodies are referred to as battlegrounds, as sites of conflict where wars are waged on alien viruses and bacteria or disruptive cells: "With the patient's body considered to be under attack ('invasion'), the only treatment is counterattack. [. . . E]very physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology" (Sontag 64). As one might expect of a diseased body, the Bentley family takes on the characteristics of a battlesite, and Steve becomes, simultaneously, the reason for the battle, a weapon, and a trophy. Mrs. Bentley strategizes carefully about her plans of attack. She plays piano "brilliantly, vindictively, determined to let Philip see how easily if I wanted to I could take the boy away from him. I succeeded too. [. . .] It hurt Philip" (63). And when Philip becomes similarly oppositional and speaks more aggressively to her than usual, Mrs. Bentley blames Steve for Philip's actions: "It must be Steve that's responsible [. . .] taking sides with him against a world of matrons and respectability" (64). She finds "allies" in the boyish habits of Steve, habits she believes



will wear down Philip's interest in him (71). She even confesses that her marriage has been a battleground for some time: "I thought I'd won. More and more years went by, and still I thought I'd won. [. . .] Not till today, when I saw him driving off with Steve, did I know the worth of what I've always called a victory" (85).

Subsequent symptoms of rejection of the prosthetic child manifest as jealousy, mushrooming and crowding out her affection for Steve, until finally separation becomes the only option. When Philip continues to collect arrears to pay for Steve's future education, Steve's bedroom, Steve's this and Steve's that, Mrs. Bentley experiences a "queer, numb feeling in my stomach as if I had been hit there with a cold lead ball" (145). Soon her feelings towards Steve are only "half love;" the other half, she tells us, is "[b]itterness because he's taken Philip from me" (146). Gradually, her narrative focusses on the fact that Steve proves "a hard boy to bring up" (146) and gets into neighbourhood fights, and soon the inevitable happens and Steve is taken away, reclaimed by the Catholic church. The eventual removal of the child from the Bentley family comes as something of a relief and Mrs. Bentley immediately feels "good to have [Philip] to myself again" (155). And although Mrs. Bentley herself is rather vague about who is responsible for the return of Steve to the orphanage, Hinz and Teunissen make a convincing case that Mrs. Bentley herself arranges it.

And so, the prosthesis is removed. But that very removal once again creates a lack; again the integrity of the nuclear family is compromised. And Mrs. Bentley, as if driven by instinct, feels compelled to compensate for the lack. She arranges for the adoption of an infant she believes to be the biological child of her husband, although the evidence for this assumption is scanty at best. We are given no reason to believe,

however, that this prosthesis will prove more effective, that the process of rejection will not begin again, that the symptoms have not merely abated into a temporary remission, latent until the new prosthesis to reject comes along. Wilfred Cude comments on the disintegration of the Bentley marriage:

The significance of the novel's ending is that the Bentleys' marriage is finished. The shadow might linger on for years, but the substance is dead. [. . .] The baby is another tainted member of the Bentley house, a house that now must accept the fact that it will not serve the Lord. (93)

Where Jim offered us *Antonia's Arcadia*, and Lyman offered us a glimpse into Susan and Oliver's future, we are offered here no such glimpse to suggest that all will be well and happy in the end, or that retirement and rose gardens heal old wounds.

I'd like to return for a moment to Clive Bloom's comment that illness threatens social order, and my subsequent statement that in this novel the intended treatment—the prosthesis—rather than the illness threatens social order. If we take Steve out of the imaginative, metaphorical order and speak about him on a more concrete level, it's soon apparent that he is a member of what Jacques Donzelot called the “floating population,” a population that inherently threatens social order by virtue of the fact that it remains outside of the regulatory unit of family. Steve (like the floating population in Donzelot's France) is subjected to regulation and attempts at normalization as Mrs. Bentley tries to impose upon him what she considers to be appropriate social behaviour. She teaches him table manners, for instance, and returns to their original owners the coins Steve earned from renting out rides on his pony. When Steve finally moves to an orphanage, suddenly

stripped of the nuclear family, he reclaims membership in the floating population. Cather presents to us a number of characters who choose the floating population rather than nuclear families, but as I suggested earlier, Cather implies that their lives are less rich, their accomplishments less remarkable, than *Antonia's* life and her large family. In this novel, however, no such suggestion appears. Steve's exit from the Bentley home is a happy one. He's excited to go on a train, and swaggers and boasts about "the fine big school where he would be living" (154). While Mrs. Bentley claims to be sad and describes Philip as having a "still, bled look" (152), Steve evidently does not share their grief. Donzelot speaks of how the focus on the welfare of the child brought an increase in the value of the family, and ultimately led to the reconstruction of the nuclear family and the placing of it in the position of cornerstone in society. No such reconstruction happens here, and Steve's exit from the house of Bentley and his jubilant return to the floating population suggests that he's the lucky one.

Other characters in the novel without a nuclear family similarly seem no worse for wear. Laura the formidable ranch woman and Paul the etymologist, both eccentric in their own way, lead fulfilled lives, no lonelier in their single lives than Mrs. Bentley is in her married life. But the other families in the novel, like the neighbourhood families in *Wild Geese*, offer up only discontent and fragmentation. Mrs. Finley, we're told, is a "small-town Philistine" who lashes out verbally and physically at anyone who gets in her way, whether it's the preacher or his adopted son, violently striking both of them at times. One expects that her own special brand of violence finds release on her family as well, for

[h]er husband, for instance, is an appropriately meek little man,

but you can't help feeling what an achievement is his meekness. It's like a tight wire cage drawn over him, and words and gestures indicative of a more expansive past, keep squeezing through it the same way that parts of the portly Mrs. Wenderby this afternoon kept squeezing through the back and sides of Philip's study armchair. (9)

The Birds, like the Bentleys, are not a complete nuclear family, for they have no children, and the Lawsons, a country family, lose their child halfway through the novel. Once again then, we have a novel which offers no affirming representations or reconstructions of the nuclear family, and suggests that the nuclear family can survive only if it's fragmented, incomplete, in short, if it's not a nuclear family.

## **V. Conclusion**

In the end, then, we come back to the place of the nuclear family in the social. In the American western novels, the authority of the nuclear family is questioned, its structures are put under pressure, the problematic nature of its discourses exposed. But then, after undergoing reconstruction, the nuclear family is re-valued, and re-presented as an institution whose organic components work together in a way that reifies the power, influence, and moral status of the family. Like the nuclear family in Donzelot's France, the nuclear family becomes part of the solution, and not a negative element of resistance. It becomes the re-organizing principle of the society that pressured and questioned it in the first place. But while these Canadian western novels also question the authority of the nuclear family and apply pressure to its structures to the point of fragmenting it, they

refuse to reconstruct it, refuse to allow its structures to replicate in any cohesive form, refuse to reproduce its discourses and ideologies, as if to say that the conventional nuclear family is either on some level a social or cultural failure, or that it simply has no place in the west.

These four novels, Canadian and American, have all been canonized by the literary establishment. The next chapter examines their interaction with a genre largely excluded from the “serious literary establishment” but a genre which nevertheless has a great deal to say about family and its place in the social, the formula Western.

## Notes

1. This rhetoric of family values, even though it demonizes women, and even though it seems to be ubiquitous, doesn't mean that women's power and authority are about to collapse, according to Oliver. Instead, it's a byproduct, a "reactionary stance," Oliver argues, "against the gains that women have made in the last decade" (xvi).
2. For another useful discussion of illness as metaphor, see Sontag's book, AIDS and Its Metaphors (1989).
3. Gilles Deleuze, in the Foreword to Donzelot's book, defines the social as

a *particular sector* in which quite diverse problems and special cases can be grouped together, a sector comprising specific institutions and an entire body of qualified personnel ('social' assistants, 'social' workers). We speak of social scourges, from alcoholism to drugs; of social programs, from repopulation to birth control; of social maladjustments or adjustments, from predelinquency, character disorders, or the problems of the handicapped to the various types of social advancement. [...] As the contours of this domain are nebulous, one has to recognize it first by the way it took form, beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the way it sketches out its own originality in relation to older sectors, so that it is able to react on them and effect a new distribution of their functions. (ix)

Donzelot's own definition clarifies a bit further this nebulous domain:

For "the social" is not society understood as the set of material and moral conditions that characterize a form of consolidation. It would appear to be rather the set of means which allow social life to escape material pressures and politico-moral uncertainties; the entire range of methods which make the members of a society relatively safe from the effects of economic fluctuations by providing a certain security—which give their existence possibilities of relations that are flexible enough, and internal stakes that are convincing enough, to avert the dislocation that divergences of interests and beliefs would entail. (xxvi)

4. See Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction (1976) and Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975).
5. Floating populations and their influence on nuclear families will be discussed further in the second chapter as part of the discussion of Western heroes.

- 6 Donzelot does not offer a definition of deconstruction when he uses the term. I assume that he uses a definition similar to the one put forth by Joseph Adamson in Irena R. Makaryk's Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms (1995). According to Joseph Adamson (who summarizes the writings of Jacques Derrida on the subject), the purpose of deconstruction is "to expose the problematic nature of all 'centred' discourses, those which depend on concepts such as truth, presence, origin, or their equivalents; second, to overturn metaphysics by displacing its conceptual limits. Deconstruction seeks to inhabit the margins of traditional systems of thought in order to put pressure on their borders and to test their unexamined foundations" (25). In this case, the traditional systems of thought being dismantled, challenged, and examined are the nuclear family (and other similar forms of family) and its intimate relationships with the state. Derrida, of course, focusses on literary texts and on the ways in which writing is a supplement to speech. In examining and calling for the decentring of centred systems in literary texts, particularly systems of knowledge and domination, Derrida not only examines the influence, or rather the dominance, of the centred discourses in certain texts, but also the ways in which they test the boundaries within which they must function and from which they cannot escape. Donzelot's reading of the family focusses on something non-literary, the relations of family and state. But the basic purpose of the deconstruction method (to expose the problematic nature of centred discourses, in this case, family-state relations) is the same, as is the revelation that centred discourses dominate in these relations, and that, however much the boundaries are tested, they are inescapable.
7. While many collections of criticism on Cather exist, James Schroeter's overview of the pre-1967 criticism (Willa Cather and Her Critics [1967]) is particularly helpful because it breaks the first five decades of criticism into manageable chunks by noting how the novel interacted with general critical trends through the century. My Antonia, Schroeter's collection shows, answered calls for cultural reform from critics such as H. L. Mencken and Carl Van Doren early in the twentieth century. It spoke to the formal aestheticism that fascinated many literary critics of the twenties (such as Sinclair Lewis and Rebecca West). It came under the criticism of influential left-leaning critics of the thirties such as Granville Hicks and Lionel Trilling, who faulted Cather for her nostalgia and idyllicization of the past. It underwent historical analysis in the forties at the hands of such critics as Alfred Kazin and George Schloss, both of whom explored the influence that American historical events, American moral trends, and Cather's personal life exerted on her work. And it was examined thematically and archetypally in the fifties and sixties by critics such as Leon Edel and John H. Randall, III, whose explorations of Cather's novel were influenced by studies in theme, symbolism, and myth written by literary theorists such as Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950), R.W.B. Lewis's The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (1955) and Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (1957).

8. See John H. Randall, III's "Interpretation of *My Ántonia*," Blanche Gelfant's "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*," David Stouck's Willa Cather's Imagination (1975), and Fisher-Wirth's "Dispossession and Redemption in the Novels of Willa Cather" and "Out of the Mother: Loss in *My Ántonia*."
9. Some of these feminist studies include articles by critics such as Christine Wiesenthal ("Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Era of Scientific Sexology: A Dialogue between Frontiers"), who explores female sexuality and argues that Cather intentionally subverts normative sexual constructs, and Janis P. Stout (Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion [1990]), who argues that Cather uses reticence as a strategy for feminist subversion of accepted injustices. Other feminist critics examine Cather's use of a male narrator. Jim. Sharon O'Brien ("The Thing Not Named: Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer") suggests the male narrator is a mask through which Cather can explore her desire for women in a socially acceptable way, and Elsa Nettels (Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather [1997]) examines the implications of Jim's patriarchal inclinations upon his reliability as a narrator. (Questions concerning narrative reliability, while relevant to this novel, will be taken up in greater length in the discussion of Stegner's novel.) Susan J. Rosowski's two volumes of Cather Studies, published in 1990 and 1993, have in them a number of feminist explorations of Cather's work by writers such as Ann Fisher-Wirth (previously mentioned), and Rosowski herself ("Willa Cather's Subverted Endings and Gendered Time"), among others.
10. Some of the problems with Kroetsch's essay are discussed in Sandra Djwa's response to it in the conference proceedings (edited by Dick Harrison), Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature (1979).
11. Randall suggests that Ántonia's rebellion against her employer, Mr. Harling, and her later rebellion in becoming involved with Larry Donovan, who impregnates her and disappears rather than marrying her, are actually moments of rebellion against her first family, moments in which Ántonia is fiercely determined to "enjoy life's sweets" rather than suffer more of the hardships her first family has come to represent, thereby "asserting her independence from [them]" (299). Randall continues, suggesting that this rebellion is necessary for the nuclear family Ántonia will one day set up: "Ántonia must rebel against a bad family before she can set up a good family" (299). I'm inclined to think Randall's argument a bit weak here. To suggest that Ántonia's love of dancing is a rebellion against authority and more specifically against the authority her first family represents is something of a stretch that seems to be unsupportable. If her love of dancing is anything beyond a love of dancing (and I'm not convinced it is), it would be a continuation of her father's love of music that seemed to be his lifeblood—and would thus be an affirmation of her first family. Further, we must take into account the fact that nowhere in the



novel do we see Antonia speak or do anything against her first family. Nor does she say or do anything that suggests any rebellion against them. She unfailingly supports their decisions, always provides excuses for her mother's whining and selfishness, her father's sadness, her brother's harshness. At the very most, she comments, after she proves herself to be a better farm hand than her brother, that now her mother cannot say that he does all the work (80), a comment which points to the fact that Antonia works as a farm hand to help keep peace in her family. Antonia's fervour for nuclear families—whether the one she was born into, the one she creates, or the one she wishes Jim had created—never wavers.

12. See Ahearn's "*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*: Trial and Culmination" and Peterson's "Narrative Voice in Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*." Both essays can be found in Anthony Arthur's collection.
13. Likely the fact that a number of striking similarities exist between Stegner's own biography and the stories of his narrators, as Forrest Robinson points out in "Wallace Stegner's Family Saga: From *Big Rock Candy Mountain* to *Recapitulation*," contributes to this confusion. In addition to the Etulain and Peterson articles (already mentioned), see Canzoneri's "Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence."
14. One example of Lyman's idealization of Susan Burling is when he fantasizes about the kind of assistant she would be to him in his research project:

Instead of mishearing instructions, mistyping copy, losing things, dropping things, watching the clock, taking coffee breaks down in the kitchen, hitting the bathroom every half hour, and getting ready to leave before she had half arrived, Susan Burling would have been quick, neat, thorough. She would have been fascinated by the drawings instead of handling them like the kitchen silver being sorted into a drawer, the knives with the spoons and the forks among the knives. She would have been intrigued by the clothes of another period instead of finding them comical. She would have noted the humanness of faces lost in time. (44)

Of course, Lyman imagining "what a pleasure it would be to have someone like Susan Burling" to assist him instead of imagining what a pleasure it would be to assist the famous illustrator Susan Burling who was admired and respected by Mark Twain and Henry Longfellow, or instead of imagining the two of them working together as equals, is just one example of many in which he betrays a certain tendency to relegate women to roles of assistants and supporters, a tendency which gives further cause to question his reliability as a narrator of a woman's life story.

15. Curiously, it is Lyman who is the cultural snob. He repeatedly name-drops on his grandparents' behalf, while nothing in Susan's letters suggests that she would do such a thing. Perhaps the contrast between his attitude to name-dropping and his grandmother's attitude to name-dropping is sharpest in their responses to her letters from famous people: in excerpts written by Susan, she never mentions the letters she received from Rudyard Kipling, Grover Cleveland, Mark Twain, and other famous men with whom she worked, but Lyman frames and mounts them, as if through her contact with these figures, he too claims certain connections with American cultural icons.
16. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh in "*Angle of Repose* and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study," discusses (and criticizes Stegner for) the way in which Lyman's representations of Susan's letters do injustice not only to Susan but to Mary Hallock Foote's letters, the actual letters on which the Susan material is based. Although obtaining permission to use the Foote material by promising Foote's descendents that Foote would be unrecognizable in *Angle of Repose*, Stegner didn't live up to his promise, copying Foote's narrative structures, paraphrasing and "borrow[ing] entire passages almost word for word" (Lamont 3). Consequently, Victoria Lamont shows, in "Writing on the Frontier: Western Novels by Women, 1880-1920," readers came to assume that Susan Burling Ward was a biographical recreation of Mary Hallock Foote. Given the fact that Stegner creates some damaging distortions that "go hand in hand with a narrative framework which suggests that Foote's own narration cannot be trusted," and the fact that Stegner's novel got a Pulitzer prize while Foote's autobiography languished in obscurity, Stegner's novel caused considerable damage to Foote's memory and to her family. The works of Lamont and Walsh imply that Stegner perhaps shares some of Lyman's less admirable qualities as well (such as a tendency to selectively revise histories).

Similarly, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn highlights the fact that Stegner has some of the same blindnesses that critics point out in his narrators, but she focusses on different weaknesses than those upon which Lamont and Walsh focus. In her 1996 article "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner," Cook-Lynn argues that Stegner portrays the invasion of North America by Europeans as a "benign movement directed by God," a movement, in fact, of "moral courage and physical endurance" (29). She further criticizes him for claiming to belong to and be a native of the west, for claiming a certain kind of indigenoussness that cannot rightly belong to him, and she takes great issue with Stegner's suggestion that the world of the North American Indian stopped in 1890 at the battle of Wounded Knee. Surprisingly, Patricia Nelson Limerick, in her 1996 article "Precedents to Wisdom," suggests that Stegner resists stereotyping of any people and lauds him for this effort. She identifies Stegner's ideas of race relations and his rejection of "a bipolar relationship between blacks and whites" as being far ahead of his time and also "ahead of *our* time" (112) (her italics).

17. For instance, in Leadville, Susan tells Augusta that she feels “exhilarated” (253), and in Michoacan, she declares she is “as happy as a worm in an apple” (335).

18. For instance,

The mountains of the Great Divide are not, as everyone knows, born treeless, though we always think of them as above timberline with the eternal snows on their heads. They wade up through ancient forests and plunge into canyons tangled up with watercourses and pause in little gem-like valleys and march attended by loud winds across high plateaus, but all such incidents of the lower world they leave behind them when they begin to strip for the skies: like the Holy Ones of old, they go up alone and barren of all circumstance to meet their transfiguration. (234)

19. For example, she tells Augusta that “buil[d]ing a house with your own hands, out of the materials that Nature left lying around” is “the most satisfying experience I know” (390).

20. Note, for instance, the fact that “the prospect of leaving [Santa Cruz] could make me want to weep” (191).

21. For example, when their financial situation becomes bleak and the weather dry enough to threaten the Mesa Ranch, she tells Augusta, in italics for emphasis, “*I do not want it to die!*” (533).

22. Lyman insists that “Thomas *had* to suggest himself to Susan as a potential husband” (55) (italics his) even though “[n]aturally no expression of that shows through the decorous playfulness of her letters to him” (55). His reasons for this conclusion are remarkably unsubstantial: he mentions, first, a brief estrangement between Susan and her best friend (and fiancée of Hudson), Augusta, and second, the fact that some letters between Susan and Oliver were lost but gifts given her by Thomas Hudson were not lost (55). Lyman doesn’t consider that Susan might have rejected the eastern life and Thomas (rather than he jilting her) for Oliver and the western life, nor the more likely possibility that the love between Augusta and Susan was every bit as intimate as Susan implies when she tells Augusta, “I only want you to love me,” that she pulled down the front of her dress exposing as much cleavage as possible “to please my girl” (57), that she loves Augusta “as wives love their husbands,” and that “I believe she loved me almost as girls love their lovers—I *know* I loved her so” (58) (her italics). Instead of exploring how such intimacy might become problematic if the feelings are not mutual, or if jealousy becomes a significant factor, Lyman skips over most of the frank lesbian references, and minimizes other “uncomfortably explicit” references by criticizing those who might think Susan and Augusta’s relationship to be a homoerotic one: “The twentieth century, by taking away the possibility of innocence, has made their sort of friendship unlikely; it gets inhibited or is forced into open sexuality” (34). He insists that Susan was not “an incipient dike” since she “could not have been more feminine” (34), and re-labels her self-confessed attraction to Augusta first as an example of “her

capacity for devotion" (34), and then as an example of a youthful "crush" (56). Lyman brushes away countless examples of his grandmother's intimacies with and loyalty to Augusta (one of which includes persuading Lyman to name his son after Augusta's father [33]), emphasizing instead his own belief in her loyalty to Thomas.

23. This "something" refers presumably to the death of Susan's daughter—an event for which Lyman unreasonably places full blame on his grandmother—even though these trophies reflect not her dead daughter but her husband.
24. Because of Susan's reference to Frank's "incurable disease" (484), a disease Lyman takes to be love for Susan, Lyman convinces himself that Susan had in Frank Sargent a lover with whom she never had sexual intercourse. There is, however, no indication in her letters that she and Frank were on such intimate terms and were lovers of any kind, just as there is no indication that they were not on more intimate terms than Lyman believes and enjoyed intercourse regularly.

Lamont points out that this part of the Susan narration damages not just Susan, but Mary Hallock Foote, the woman on whose letters the Susan material is based. The death of Agnes, Lamont argues, is a conflation of two separate events in Foote's life: "the death of Foote's youngest daughter, Agnes, of appendicitis in 1904, and Foote's friendship with a close friend of her husband," a friendship Stegner reshapes into infidelity (3).

25. And if it isn't enough to blame Susan for the death of her child, Lyman even states that, for Oliver's suffering over the death of his daughter, "she was to blame" (540). Lyman interprets Oliver's act of ripping up the rose garden as a punishment of Susan that was "vindictive and pitiless" (540), instead of considering that it may have been an act of grief and had nothing whatever to do with Susan or with punishment.
26. It's rather ironic, and comical, to note that Lyman simply can't "deal" with "a whole folder of correspondence" about the one thing that would utterly dispute his notion of a "weak" woman needing protection—the lengthy birth of his father, a birth whose "stages, difficulties, damages, and emotional exhaustions" are described in that folder, and it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to realize that the birth would be particularly gruelling given the fact that the baby "weighed a humiliating eleven pounds" (132). Lyman's reasons for his inability to "deal with it" are partly that the handwriting is illegible and partly that the sentiments expressed in it are "anciently, mystically, impenetrably female" (132). The second reason shows that the first cannot be true, for Lyman would be unable to deem the sentiments "impenetrably female" if he could not read the handwriting. Instead, this is clearly just another example of Lyman taking refuge behind his own "ancient" stereotypes, a place from which he can launch judgments of women without examining his own reasons for doing so.
27. A dramatic monologue, according to M.H. Abrams, in A Glossary of Literary Terms: Sixth Edition (1993) is a lyric poem with three main features.

- 1) A single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific

situation at a critical moment. [ . . . ]

2) This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence and what they say and do only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.

3) The main principle controlling the poet's choice and organization of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character. (48) (his italics)

In a nutshell, then, a dramatic monologue is a poem in which the speaker inadvertently tells us more about her or himself than about the subject s/he addresses. In this case, of course, I do not mean to suggest that the novel is a long poem, but do wish to suggest that it brandishes the other characteristics of a dramatic monologue.

34. Two exceptions to this are Arnold Davidson's 1994 book Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West, which offers a brief feminist reading of the novel (99) and Brian Johnson's 1999 essay "Unsettled Landscapes: Uncanny Discourses of Love in Ostenson's Wild Geese."
35. See Jones's "Martha Ostenson's Novels: A Study of Three Dominant Themes" and Hjartarson's "A Study of Conflict in the Major Novels of Martha Ostenson." Additionally, a helpful summary of both works appears in Atherton's 1987 overview, Martha Ostenson and Her Works (11).
36. See McFadden's thesis "Icelandic Edda and Saga in Two Prairie Novels: An Analysis of *The Viking Heart* by Laura Goodman Salverson and *Wild Geese* by Martha Ostenson," and Keith's "*Wild Geese*: The Death of Caleb Gare."
37. See D.J. Dooley's "*As For Me and My House*: The Hypocrite and the Parasite."
38. See Cude's "Beyond Mrs. Bentley: A Study of *As For Me and My House*," and Stouck's "The Mirror and the Lamp in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*."
39. See Hinz and Teunissen's "Who's the Father of Mrs. Bentley's Child?: *As For Me and My House* and the Conventions of Dramatic Monologue."
40. Helen Buss, in her 1990 essay "Who are you, Mrs. Bentley?: Feminist Re-vision and Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," notes that both popular readings of the narrator rely on damaging stereotypes of women—either the castrator/bad woman type or the victim/good woman type (191). Since both types carry patriarchal baggage, Buss urges readers to consider Mrs. Bentley instead as a powerful artist figure (who is nonetheless heavily influenced by patriarchy). Other critics who read the Bentleys as failed or successful artists include Ryszard Dubanski, in "A Look at Philip's 'Journal' in *As for Me and My House*," and Frances Kaye, in "Sinclair Ross's Use of George Sand and Frederic Chopin as Models for the Bentleys," considers Mrs. Bentley's favourite musical

selections (by Chopin and Beethoven) and suggests that the Bentleys themselves are modeled after Frederic Chopin and George Sand. Excerpts from a number of the essays and books mentioned here have been reprinted in David Stouck's most helpful 1991 book, Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*: Five Decades of Criticism.

41. See Gilman's *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*.
42. Frances Kaye suggests briefly in her essay that Philip might be a closeted homosexual. This is an important observation and this queer aspect of Ross's fiction has been explored further by Valerie Raoul in "Straight or Bent: Sexual/Textual T(n)angles in *As For Me and My House*" and by Andrew Lesk in "Something Queer Going On Here: Desire in the Short Fiction of Sinclair Ross." David Stouck, in his most recent article on this novel, "Cross-writing and the Unconcluded Self in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," charges that the readings of Philip as homosexual (or the contrary readings of Philip as heterosexual) are too simplistic for the complex characterizations Ross presents, that they are as "reductive as [the readings] on the lines of geography or gender" (436), and that "binaries like heterosexual/ homosexual are too crude as categories to calibrate the complexity and contingent nature of identity and relationships in this novel!" (440).

## **Chapter Two - Home, Homes on the Range**

### **I. Introduction**

In the introduction to her book, Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960 (1987), Christine Bold argues that the conflict central to formula Westerns spills across the boundaries of the written texts themselves into the field of text production:

[R]epeatedly in the writings of the best-selling [Western] authors [...] is evidence of a tension between formula and individual initiatives. This tension is important because it reaffirms the conflict which is central to the Western theme. In early literature about adventures in the West, it is clear that a conflict between nature and culture is played out both in the plot and in the narrative technique. [...] In the post-1860 Westerns, the plots [...] convey less and less sense of any genuine battle. However, if the characters no longer act out dramatic struggles in these fictions, the authors still do. The ways in which these Westerns are narrated show that their authors are involved in a conflict analogous to that between nature and culture. (xvi)

She continues, showing that the writers resist the encroaching civilization in the ways available to them, namely by presenting “alternative patterns for the development of the West” (xvi), or by reacting (in a decidedly limited fashion) against the conventions of the formula itself (xvii).

Curiously, within the hyper-“civilized” sphere of academia, this very conflict spills still further, beyond the field of text production, into the field of literary criticism where it continues to be played out in discussions surrounding criticism of Western literature. One of the more recent examples is the ongoing conflict between Western (and western) critic Blake Allmendinger and the Western Literature Association. Allmendinger begins his 1998 book, Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature, a book that studies and “resurrect[s] several western works from obscurity” (7), with an introduction that tackles the entire “*ancien regime*” of the Western Literature Association in much the same way that the writers Bold discusses react against the conventions of the formula Western, (though perhaps more effectively) (6). He states that the Association’s journal, Western American Literature, “exists in a time warp and reflects an intellectual state of stagnation” (5). He accuses the journal of largely ignoring changing trends in the field and publishing instead “the same kind of articles on pretty much the same group of authors year after year” (5). He gives a mitigated credit to the “benevolent dictatorship [which] occasionally sees to it that contemporary, minority, and avant-garde writers are spared execution” (5-6), but that credit isn’t much more than a veiled criticism for being a dictatorship in the first place and for not sparing more writers such “execution.” His argument is more extensive than I can outline here, but I do want to point out that Allmendinger—himself a well-credentialed member of the academic establishment writing within the confines of that establishment—sets himself up as an individualist, someone who breaks away from the conventions and the expectations of the Western Literature Association, someone who (like the heroes of so many Westerns) is himself a



native westerner and therefore possesses “western/Western” skills and knowledge,<sup>1</sup> but who also understands the “Eastern” institution and the threat it represents. Having knowledge of both sides, Allmendinger represents himself as someone who can be like a Western hero, who can and will stand up for and pay attention to the neglected writers (among others), and who takes a stand and resists what he represents as a stagnant, stodgy, self-important institution.<sup>2</sup>

The response to Allmendinger’s book in the Winter 2000 issue of Western American Literature is every bit as caricatured as, and considerably more vitriolic than, Allmendinger’s individualistic self-representation. Robert Thacker, representing the institution (and the way things have always been done), fights back in his book review of Allmendinger’s work. While correctly pointing out Allmendinger’s “high-minded” elitism (452), his own glares out from between the lines of the pejorative and patronizing review. Somersaulting in sarcasm, Thacker mocks the “still lonely and certainly anxious” Allmendinger (452), stating that he “bemoan[s] his pathetic plight” in the “terrible situation” of the field of Western (and western) literature (451). The book, according to Thacker, is “idiosyncratic pique” (453), “paltry, paltry stuff” (454), a “self-serving paean” (453) that “would be funny if it weren’t so sad” (454). Hauling out the canonization card, Thacker takes issue with Allmendinger’s choice of discussing certain works and suggests that those works are not ““literature,”” but mere “silliness,” implying that the discussions of them can easily be dismissed (456). And in a surprisingly juvenile mine-is-bigger-than-yours section, Thacker even goes so far as to compare the number of pages of bibliographical notes in Allmendinger’s work with the number of pages of notes in his own book, The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination (1989), suggesting that

since his own book has more pages of notes, it is somehow more intellectual. (Thacker takes neither font size nor page size nor the merits of conciseness into account in his simplistic calculation.) His conclusion pats the institution of the Western Literature Association on the proverbial back, assuring members that the WLA produces the “best intellectuals” in the field, and that “[t]his Ten Most Wanted isn’t the work of such a person, nor is it much wanted” (458).

Evidently, the conflict between nature and culture (to use Bold’s terms), or between the individual and the institutional (to use Max Westbrook’s terms), or between “savage” and “civilization” (to use John G. Cawelti’s terms), continues, at least in form, even in the most unlikely sphere of academia, although the institutional affiliations and the word-drenched arguments make it hard to know who’s the “savage” and whether anyone is “civilized.” Generally, the credit for explaining most fully the conflict and the formula designed to highlight the conflict goes to John G. Cawelti. In his 1971 long essay published in book format, The Six-Gun Mystique, Cawelti suggests that a western novel must have certain elements for it to be a formula Western. Referring to Northrop Frye’s discussion of myth in Anatomy of Criticism (1957), Cawelti argues that, despite their heritage of “the archetypal pattern of the hero’s quest [ . . . in] the mythos of romance” (30), Westerns follow a formula instead of a myth.<sup>3</sup> And the formula, in a nutshell, is this:

Westerns must have a certain kind of setting, a particular cast of characters, and follow a limited number of lines of action. A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontier, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension,

and that does not involve some form of pursuit, is simply not a Western. (31)

And so, this chapter is about conflict and formula Westerns and family and My Ántonia, Angle of Repose, Wild Geese, and As For Me and My House. An unlikely combination? Perhaps, but perhaps not. The novels central to this thesis are canonized western novels, and are generally accepted as examples of realism.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, I agree with the scores of critics who think they are examples of realism, for they are “written so as to give the effect that [they represent] life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that [their] characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen,” to use the definition provided by M.H. Abrams (174). But, like so many other aspects of North American culture, these novels have come under the influence of the formula Western, even though few formula Westerns (if any) could claim to be canonized in the same way as the four novels I examine here and even though these four novels are not formula Westerns themselves.<sup>5</sup> Because the formula Western has so much to say about the nuclear family, that influence deserves exploration. This chapter, arguing that the four novels are informed by the formula Western, examines conventional oppositions between Western heroes and the nuclear family. It suggests that those oppositions are hastily conceived and do not hold true in many American formula Westerns, nor in the American novels I examine here. It also argues that the hero/family binary is much more completely realized in the two Canadian novels, but ultimately cannot be achieved entirely because the nuclear family and domestic life frustrate attempts of the protagonists to be Western heroes. In a nutshell, this chapter continues the discussion of the previous chapter—that representations of family values in these

novels comment upon the place and value of the nuclear family in the social—and shows that the representations of family interact with representations of nuclear family in another literary genre, ultimately using that interaction to further the agendas described in the previous chapter. That is, the two western American novels use the formula Western family conventions to reproduce further the discourses and ideologies that empower the nuclear family while the two western Canadian novels use them to undermine further the already fragmented nuclear family.

## **II. Exploding Frontiers**

Formula Westerns have had an enormous impact on American culture. The back cover of Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson's essay collection, Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western (1998), makes the claim that the film version of the formula Western "is the most important genre in American cinema."<sup>6</sup> As the thirteen essays collected in Buscombe and Pearson's book illustrate, however, the influence of the Western goes beyond film and shapes various aspects of American culture generally, from fashion to photography to music to national identity to race relations.<sup>7</sup> It's had a similar influence on various genres of literature as well: to name a single example, children's literature. James Macguire explores the impact of the Western on American children's novels such as the The Wizard of Oz (1900) by Frank Baum, Little House on the Prairie (1935), as well as the other books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Additionally, Susan Naramore Maher examines Frances Hodgson Burnett's work (A Fair Barbarian [1880] and Little Lord Fauntleroy [1886]) in light of the Western.<sup>8</sup> And recent

studies of German literature show that its influence crosses the ocean and that the Western has taken up residence of a sort in Germany.<sup>9</sup> Of particular relevance to this thesis, though, is the fact that the influence of the Western bleeds north of the forty-ninth parallel where it affects novels that are not of the American west at all but of the Canadian west,<sup>10</sup> a notable fact given that the frontier (according to Frederick Jackson Turner, among others) is supposed to represent most clearly a sense of *American* individualism and *American* spirit. And of equal significance to this thesis is the fact that the formula Western, a genre Allmendinger argues is not taken seriously in literary circles (Wanted 2-4),<sup>11</sup> has played a significant role in shaping a good deal of non-formulaic, canonized western literature (such as the novels central to this thesis). As Arnold Davidson notes, “The Western formula is so established that it can substantially shape even fictions intended to transcend it” (11), and names Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s The Oxbow Incident (1940) and Frank Waters’s The Man Who Killed the Deer as two of these fictions. And on a purely material level, it would be difficult for writers to escape the influence of a genre so ubiquitous: Christine Bold, in her discussion of Western writers’ resistance to the demand for standardized texts, examines the commercial publishing machine and shows that “in every phase of [American] mass publishing, the Western has figured as the best-selling genre for a time” (xiii).

The origins of this influence have been explored by a number of critics. Probably the most well-known of these is Frederick Jackson Turner.<sup>12</sup> His 1893 essay on the western region, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” both announces the closing of the American frontier and argues that the frontier itself exerted considerable influence over American life by fostering a sense of dominant

individualism, confidence, and a scorn of established society that became quintessential American cultural characteristics. Turner's thesis, that the western frontier "explain[ed] American development" (26), has become a western critical Scripture of sorts and has led to extensive mythologizing of the west.<sup>13</sup> The west, Wallace Stegner comments, in "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," "has been mythicized almost out of recognizability" (199). Gerald Nash notes that "between 1893 and 1993 the Turner thesis continued to have a large cadre of adherents" (18), and Patricia Nelson Limerick goes so far as to say that Turner is the generally accepted "father of western American history" ("Chandler" 28). Both Limerick and Nash are among those who challenge and complicate Turner's thesis. Limerick celebrates "the end of the Turnerian patriarchy . . . [ . . . ] that empire of white male dominance" (28), and Nash examines oversights in Turner's paper and encourages western critics to begin taking into account the many populations excluded from or ignored by Turner's thesis: women, Aboriginal people, Hispanic people, African-American people, etcetera. Nevertheless, variations of Turner's arguments still appear frequently in discussions of formula Westerns. For instance, Garry Wills's study, John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity (1997), concludes that the American "basic myth is that of the frontier. Our hero is the frontiersman" (302).<sup>14</sup> Barbara Meldrum discusses briefly the efforts of a number of contemporary writers to escape or ignore these old myths and try to write "outside the tunnel vision of frontierism" (Old West 2), but ultimately, Turner's myth of the frontier continues to wield a good deal of cultural power. And the frontier, as noted in the Cawelti passage quoted earlier, is central to the formula Western.

For Turner, the frontier was a socio-economic factor that shaped American history. For writers of formula Westerns, however, it takes on much more concrete dimensions. Cawelti defines the frontier in formula Westerns as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (35). While the frontier doesn’t necessarily *have* to be a geographical meeting point, in most formula Westerns, the frontier *is* a geographical element with clear demarcations separating settlements from wilderness. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the formula Western is a genre that grew out of the geography of the west and the particular cultural problems posed by settling the west. Similarly, the themes and subject matters in the four canonized novels central to this thesis ground themselves firmly in the North American west, their narratives relying upon a specific western geography and upon specific points in the history of that geography, points around or shortly after the settlement of the west.

The role of the geography in western literature must not be underestimated. The idea, presented by Yi-Fu Tuan in his books Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values (1974) and Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience (1977), that affective bonds exist between people and the environments in which they live, takes on a particular importance in the novels of the west. (Indeed, critics have argued that each of the four novels I discuss in this thesis has been shaped to some extent by its setting.<sup>15</sup>) Henry Kreisel’s now-familiar statement, in “The Prairie: A State of Mind,” insists that “all discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape on the mind” (173). Other literary critics argue along similar lines. Thacker’s tome (to whose references he proudly draws attention in the previously discussed review) builds on Willa Cather’s statement

about the prairies, that “the great fact is the land itself” (Prairie Fact 2). Thacker examines western texts for evidence of the ways in which Europeans came to understand the prairie, and to turn it from virgin land into fertile prairie farmland, arguing that literary conventions, representations, and symbols of prairie writing were derived from the “great prairie fact,” the land itself. Annette Kolodny, in The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers 1630-1860 (1984), reads the western landscape not only as an informing element in women’s western writing, but also as a symbolic text itself, something which became a medium in which woman writers could “convert culturally shared dreams into palpable realities” (xii). Moving the discussion into the confined realm of a particular western genre, John Cawelti (in Six-Gun Mystique) and Jane Tompkins (in West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns [1992]) each speak specifically about formula Westerns, and argue along lines similar to those in Kolodny’s argument. In the works they discuss, the landscape functions not only as an informing force, but also as a medium through which particular elements of the central narratives are expressed. For Cawelti and Tompkins, each of whom devotes considerable discussion to its role in formula Westerns, the landscape takes on a symbolic significance, presenting both the untamed wilderness and the inevitable civilization, representing both the “savage”<sup>16</sup> and the “cultured,” as well as the inevitable conversion (and coercion) of the former into the latter. “[I]n every respect,” Cawelti notes, “Western topography helps dramatize more intensely the clash of characters and the thematic conflicts of the story” (40).



### **III. Frontier versus Family**

I discuss the four novels in light of the Western because I believe they cannot escape its influence or the influence of the myths informing it and because of shared geographical and thematic elements. But even more importantly, I think the formula Western is of particular importance to this thesis because of what it says about the nuclear family.

The American formula Western, a number of critics argue, assumes certain conventions of family and domesticity. Jane Tompkins, for instance, argues that the Western is at least partly about the rejection of the nuclear family. In West of Everything Tompkins places the formula Western in the larger context of nineteenth-century American literature, arguing that the Western genre reacts to the sentimental novel of the early nineteenth century (indeed, that the former presents a “point-for-point contrast” to the latter [39]), that it provides the “antithesis of the cult of domesticity,” and that it “take[s the] manhood back from the Christian women who have been holding it in thrall,” claiming independence for American men from the evangelical zeal of a feminized Christianity (33). In her characteristically engaging style, she contends that the primary impetus of the Western either relegates women to subservient roles where they simply fulfill the needs and desires of men, or excludes them altogether, and with them the family and all domestic life. Theorizing the relationship between men and women in Westerns in light of works by Peter Schwenger and Shere Hite, she states:

Women, like language, remind men of their own interiority;  
women’s talk evokes a whole network of familial and social

relationships and their corollaries in the emotional circuitry.

What men are fleeing in Westerns is not only the cluttered Victorian interior but also the domestic dramas that go on in that setting [. . .]. (66)

This hero/family binary is not the only binary in Westerns, Tompkins asserts. She calls attention to several

classic oppositions from which all Westerns derive their meaning: parlor versus mesa, East versus West, woman versus man, illusion versus truth, words versus things[. . .]  
independence versus connection, anarchy versus law, town versus desert. (48)

Tompkins immediately qualifies her statement, erecting a warning, “What is most characteristic of these oppositions is that as soon as you put pressure on them they break down” (48), but this warning rapidly loses potency since Tompkins spends the remainder of the chapter, as well as large sections of other chapters, exploring and reasserting these oppositions in her examinations of numerous Westerns.

I can see why Tompkins insists on the hero/family binary. The archetypal departure of the hero at the end of the Western into the sunset, leaving the family behind for a life free of “civilization” and its expectations, certainly upholds this assertion. (Think of the film, Shane (1953), for instance.) As does the independence of so many Western heroes, who in one form or another insist that they don’t need anybody and prefer solitary life to cluttered and noisy town (and family) life. (Think of Wyatt Earp in

the film Gunfight at the O.K. Corral [1956] stating that he's "never needed anybody in [his] life.") "The town offers love, domesticity, and order, as well as the opportunity for personal achievement and the creation of a family," says Cawelti, "but it requires the repression of spontaneous passion and the curtailment of the masculine honor and camaraderie of the older wilderness life" (49). Cawelti points out that this opposition, in the end, becomes one of the reasons the Western hero *is* the Western hero: he has skills that the townspeople don't have, skills he has garnered in his life in the wilderness, skills that "identify [him] with the savages" (46). His relationship with the townspeople is defined from the very beginning. He is, from the outset, not one of them. From the outset, then, he is in opposition to family and domestic life, even if he is not actually opposed to it. It's all another version, it seems, of the hero/institution conflict discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

But it seems a bit forced to me. Tompkins's polarized reading, while accurately describing some formula Westerns, is excessively reductive, I think. Useful and important as I find her book to be, I tend to agree with Buscombe and Pearson that many Westerns are "a good deal more subtle than that" (3). It seems to me that regardless of how often the Western hero leaves the family behind, and regardless of how often he rides off into the wilderness, one cannot ignore the fact that often the American formula Western itself and the role of its hero are at least as much (if not more) about the *protection* of the family as they are about the rejection of it. Although the hero is not one of the townspeople, he nevertheless is "fundamentally committed to the townspeople" (Cawelti 46); he achieves the title of "hero" precisely because he rescues them, again and again and again and again. If the hero and family were truly oppositional, as Tompkins

suggests they are, then the hero would not rescue families, but would participate in their destruction and elimination. He would not do as Tom Donophon does in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)—sacrifice himself and his way of life to support and rescue the leader who will bring more power to the pioneers and who will undermine the lawless wilderness life that bred Donophon in the first place. He would not do as Shane does in Shane—protect the pioneers from the tyrant Fletcher and do away with Fletcher’s power over them—nor would he take such a focussed interest in one family in particular, the Starrett family. And he would not do as the Virginian does in The Virginian (1929)—forsake his solitary life and hang up his gun for a settled and married life.

Nina Baym, in “The Women of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales,” (a discussion she continues twenty years later in “Putting Women in Their Place: *The Last of the Mohicans* and Other Indian Stories”), comments on the complexities of the hero/family relationship. In her discussion of the complicated relationships between the heroes and “Indians” and women in James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking tales,<sup>17</sup> she shows that, while the families provide a foil for the solitude intrinsic to the hero’s quest, they also provide fodder for rescue since they are so often captured (or exploited or transformed into “Indians”) by the “Indians.” (And because the family requires rescue repeatedly in the American wild west, the hero can maintain hero status even if he marries). Richard Slotkin, in Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860, goes so far as to say that capture and rescue are central to American mythology. While the hero-rescues-family motif betrays a rigid and established patriarchy, and shows that the hero and family roles are clearly defined, it also shows that both the family and the hero must necessarily be intertwined for the hero

role to have power in the first place. Even though the hero is not one of the townsfolk, he can be a hero only because of their presence and the presence of their families who, time and time again, must be saved from the “savages,” whoever the “savages” are. The two (hero and family) are, in fact, tightly bound. Norris Yates’s book further complicates Tompkins’s claim, though along very different lines. In Gender and Genre: An Introduction to Women Writers of Formula Westerns, 1900-1950 (1995), Yates doesn’t set out to disprove Tompkins’s opposition exactly, but he nevertheless muddies the clean and precise binaries Tompkins sets up. Yates explores similarities between the formula Western and the domestic novel, discussing something mentioned in the previous paragraph, that the Western—like the domestic novel—often includes a romantic plot leading to the hero’s marriage, something that would be inconsistent with a hero/family opposition.<sup>18</sup> Cawelti also discusses a number of versions of the Western formula in which the hero marries.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of Tompkins’s binaries, then, a more complex formula Western structure must be considered, one loaded with a number of weighty implications. In Tompkins’s construction of the hero/family binary, the Western hero is remarkably similar to members of Jacques Donzelot’s “floating population” (49). “The fact of not belonging to a family, and hence the lack of a sociopolitical guarantor,” Donzelot states,

posed a problem for public order. This was the category of people without ties, without hearth or home . . . who, being in no way connected to the social machinery, acted as disturbers in this system of protections and obligations. There was no one to supply their needs, but neither was there anyone to hold

them within the bounds of order. (49)

While Tompkins's Western hero is not one of the beggars or vagabonds of which Donzelot speaks, he is nevertheless in a position where he has no family, hence no sociopolitical guarantor, and hence, no obligations to the system (except for those imposed upon him by his own personal beliefs). In Tompkins's binaries, the "West functions as a symbol of freedom [. . .]. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice" (West 4). In this kind of West, the Western hero, who has successfully escaped social entanglements and personal relations, is one of "those whom the socio-familial apparatus could not keep in check" (Donzelot 51). Hence, he presents a certain threat to the sociofamilial apparatus and the family-centred population it protects.

I argue, however, that although there are exceptions, the American Western hero is often non-threatening to these apparati and populations and instead is an integral part of the sociopolitical mechanisms and of the sociofamilial apparatus. As already noted, even though he has the skills and knowledge of the "savages" who thrive in the wilderness—the people who are much like the vagabonds of Donzelot's France and would also fall under the auspices of "floating population"—the hero often rejects that role (sometimes reluctantly) in favour of one where he can be the protector of families. By virtue of the fact that he so often protects and defends them, he ultimately polices those outside the socio-familial apparatus as well. Those "whom the socio-familial apparatus [cannot] keep in check" the Western hero can and often does keep in check (Donzelot 51). His job, in the end, is to make sure that the sociofamilial apparatus keeps

functioning. In the France of which Donzelot speaks, the floating population was eventually brought under control of the apparatus through philanthropy, incorporating a system of obligations, and other various mechanisms. John G. Cawelti keeps on returning to the fact that “In the Western formula savagery is implicitly understood to be on the way out. [. . . T]here was never really a question that savagery might prevail” (36).

Thanks to the Western hero’s volunteerism, the “savage” floating population in American Westerns will soon be brought under the control of the sociopolitical mechanisms as it was in Donzelot’s situation; it’s really just a matter of time. The formula Western hero, then, while not necessarily one of the benefactors of the sociofamilial apparatus, and while not officially appointed by the apparatus, and while often unsympathetic to its government, is undoubtedly one of its agents.

#### **IV. Cather and Stegner Meet the Western**

And what has any of this to do with the four novels I discuss here? The American western novels by Cather and Stegner, while not formula Westerns themselves, are both very much influenced by the formula Western and by the life and ideas it represents. A central narrative in each novel grows out of the fact that a central character in each novel is modelled upon a particular configuration or discourse of Western heroism. (While each configuration subscribes to the same overarching discourse of Western heroism in which the hero is the person in the middle who has internalized the conflict between the opposing sides, minor variations in the configurations make it necessary to theorize the four protagonists and the ways they represent the Western ‘hero’ separately.) Each

protagonist shows signs of wanting to live the life of a Western hero and this desire, it seems at first, is in tension with desires for and obligations to a nuclear family. While the protagonists in both novels originally seem to seek out the legendary independent and individualistic life of the Western hero who is seen as being in conflict with family, both men finally choose the life of the Western hero who endorses the sociopolitical mechanisms and apparatus that favour families. That is, both Jim Burden (in My Ántonia) and Oliver Ward (in Angle of Repose) end up becoming agents of the sociofamilial apparatus, and we are left with the impression that while this agency comes with considerable sacrifice it is very much a worthwhile endeavour. In the final analysis, then, these two novels intersect with the formula Western in a way that further valorizes the nuclear family, extending the argument made in the previous chapter that these two American western novels reify the power, influence, and moral status of the nuclear family.

#### IV.i. My Ántonia

Even as a young boy, Jim Burden wants the life of a Western hero. The first page of his narrative tells us a bit about his tastes, that the Life of Jesse James is “one of the most satisfactory books I have ever read” (Ántonia 5). And his description of his own surroundings at that moment hint at his desire to see events in his life in terms of Western heroes like Jesse James. The train which takes him west, for instance, becomes an iron horse whose “engine was panting heavily” (6). Both Tompkins and Cawelti discuss at some length the importance of horses in Westerns. According to Cawelti, “The hero is a



man with a horse and the horse is his direct tie to the freedom of the wilderness, for it embodies his ability to move freely across it and to dominate and control its spirit” (57). Tompkins extends the analysis to say that “Horses are there to galvanize us. More than any other single element in the genre, they symbolize the desire to recuperate some lost connection to life” (West 94). Upon his arrival at his grandparents’ farm, Jim is given a pony to ride (named Dude, no less). Otto Fuchs, the hired hand, introduces the pony to him, simultaneously capturing Jim’s imagination. Jim’s description of Otto betrays his taste for all things Western:

I looked up with interest at the new face in the lantern-light.  
He might have stepped out of the pages of *Jesse James*. He wore a sombrero hat, with a wide leather band and a bright buckle, and the ends of his moustache were twisted up stiffly, like little horns. He looked lively and ferocious, I thought, and as if he had a history. A long scar ran across one cheek and drew the corner of his mouth up in a sinister curl. The top of his left ear was gone, and his skin was brown as an Indian’s.

Surely this was the face of a desperado. (7)

And Otto does not disappoint. He ropes steers for Jim, fearlessly separates angry bulls, and shows Jim his boots, chaps, spurs, pistols, and other cowboy paraphernalia. Otto is the first to be told about Jim’s inadvertent initiation into heroism when he saves a girl (Ántonia) from the dangers of the wilderness and kills an enormous rattler.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the first section, true to the spirit of “drifting, case-hardened labourers” (55), Otto has

moved off into the "wild West" (93) to work at the Yankee Girl silver mine, never to be heard from again, having left an indelible mark on Jim's psyche.

Despite his taste for the life of the horse-riding Western hero, and despite the fact that he considers Otto to be like an older brother, Jim is a generation younger than Otto, and horse-riding and steer-roping are rather anachronistic for Jim. Indeed, after just three years on his grandfather's farm, Jim moves with his grandparents into town, a sign that western life is becoming more urban. Nevertheless, like Otto Fuchs and the heroes described by Cawelti, Jim unquestionably resists town life and finds it shallow:

On starlight nights I used to pace up and down those long, cold streets, scowling at the little, sleeping houses on either side, with their stormwindows and covered back porches. They were flimsy shelters, most of them poorly built of light wood, with spindle porch-posts horribly mutilated by the turning-lathe. Yet for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip. This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to live like the mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the

surface of things in the dark. (140)

Jim finds relief from the oppressiveness of town life in the successor to the four-legged horse, the iron horse that brought him west in the first place, and he often goes down to the train station to watch the trains come into town when the restrictiveness becomes too much for him (140). Eventually, of course, the train takes him away from the town that stifles him, but not before he rescues *Ántonia* a second time, this time from the unwanted sexual advances of her corrupt employer, the town loanshark. Given the fact that the west is no longer wild, the adult Jim pursues an education and manufactures for himself a career as close as possible in the current climate to the one of the horse-riding hero. He becomes “*legal counsel for one of the great Western railways*” (1), a job which allows him frequent and “*long trips across the country*” (2) (Cather’s italics), away from the cities with their pretensions. This working aspect of his life is what gives it meaning: we are told that he demonstrates little love for the woman he married, but “*he loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development*” (2) (her italics).

Blake Allmendinger’s discussion of the “orphan myth,” a system of thought informing cowboy culture,<sup>21</sup> sheds considerable light on Jim Burden:

Cowboys suggested that they had metaphorically orphaned themselves by physically moving away from the geographical sites of reproductive civilization, or from cities and towns in which their parents and families had lived. [. . .] Literate reproductive societies perpetuated themselves by procreating and

by creating [ . . . ] knowledge in book form, hence preserving knowledge, tradition, and culture for the sake of posterity. Orphans, however, had no biological heirs and no book culture to connect them to men and women outside their circle. They maintained their social autonomy by literally separating themselves from the wellsprings of civilization. (Cowboy 9)

Allmendinger shows that this system of thought led to an oral literary tradition that functioned as an “invisible” discourse,” handed down from one orphan cowboy to another, mouth to mouth, in order to preserve a cultural purity and to preserve knowledge, tradition, and culture for the sake of posterity (9). Jim, being of the post-cowboy generation, is an educated man with access to many more visible kinds of discourse. He writes his narrative down and passes it on to another, in a very tangible and visible fat legal portfolio; his method and form include the oral tradition (the conversations on the train described in the frame of the novel are the precursors to the written version), but aren’t limited to that tradition. But the end result is the same: like the orphan cowboys for whom sharing stories is so important, Jim makes certain that the stories are told to another person, an old friend of similar background (they grew up “*in the same Nebraska town*”), who can share most of his insights (1) (Cather’s italics). Like those of the cowboys, Jim’s insights are exclusive to those who have shared similar experiences: “*We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it*” (1) (her italics). And like the orphan cowboys, Jim’s narrative describes significant knowledge and tradition about his own experiences in the west (Jim’s narrative is so authentically western, T.K Whipple notes, that “many reviewers

assumed that [Cather] was producing a sort of combined guide book and history of Nebraska”[37]). Much of the narrative, however, describes things other than the cowboy life. (I will later return to this fact).

Even though the orphan myth is very much about cowboy work and cowboy work culture, Allmendinger shows that it’s actually one of the effects of the cowboy work culture not operating, for it demonstrates a way in which cowboys, having “cut themselves loose from noncowboy society,” deal with “the alternative problem of returning to noncowboy society” (11). Since much of the cowboy work is seasonal, and since even cowboys eventually retire, Allmendinger argues, there are times during which the cowboys must return to noncowboy society and must make enough money to survive. During these times, says Allmendinger, some might access the literary marketplace, writing and selling the stories and poems that were once part of an exclusively oral tradition. This writing, while providing a means of income, also “fill[s] the void left by the absence of real working cowboys and satisf[ies] society’s nostalgic craving for what is absent by manufacturing artistic renditions of cowboy life and by aiming those renditions at a noncowboy audience in the mainstream American marketplace” (10). Jim Burden has no need to earn money from the literary marketplace (and nothing in the frame of the novel suggests that Jim benefits financially from writing this story). But he does have to cope with the cowboy work culture not operating, because it is largely a culture of the previous generation, and regardless of how much he wanted as a child to mimic his cowboy heroes, that life is not really an option in the settled west. Like the cowboys out of work, then, Jim too writes his story as a way of coping with the absence of that culture. Further, the fact that Jim tells the story at all, and at such length, suggests

that he “fills the void” left by the experiences of his childhood which can only be relived in the imagination.

The most important aspect of the orphan myth—its orphanhood—is particularly relevant to Jim for his narrative shows him repeatedly moving away from the geographical sites of reproductive civilization, being orphaned and orphaning himself again and again. As a child, he moves West, leaving not only his deceased parents behind, but also any connection to their spirits: “I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from [the complete dome of heaven]; they would still be looking for me at the sheepfold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind me” (*Ántonia* 8). And as if to maintain the independence that orphanhood affords, he marries someone for whom he has little affection and with whom he shares little in common, creating a situation where celibacy and solitude can be achieved with minimal effort. Even though he lives in New York, he avoids the socialite life of his wife, and indulges instead his own “*quiet tastes*” (1) (Cather’s italics), refusing any of her social connections, choosing a career where he can, on a regular basis, move away from the sites of reproductive civilization, separating himself from the “wellsprings of civilization” repeatedly.

And yet, there’s the *Ántonia* factor. Any discussion of Jim’s orphanhood and his choices must take into account the fact that *Ántonia* is the inspiration for and focus of Jim’s narrative, and that the larger part of Jim’s narrative has nothing to do with cowboy life. This complicates everything. It becomes difficult to think of Jim in terms of the cowboy hero isolated from reproductive society if his narrative tells more about the life of the neighbourhood immigrant girl, his first love, than it does about cowboys and

cowboy life, and if the narrative is, as the previous chapter shows, about the valorization of the nuclear family. Indeed, the cowboy stories in this novel take up considerably less space than even the final section of the novel which lionizes *Ántonia* and her large family and locates them in an Arcadia of sorts.

Nevertheless, the unabashed endorsing of family in light of the orphan myth which values the independence of orphanhood *does* have its place, and carries with it some important implications. Jim's focus upon *Ántonia* and her formidable creation of a happy family contrasts with and therefore highlights both the orphanhood thrust upon him through the death of his parents as well as the fact that he has voluntarily distanced himself from the reproductive life for which *Ántonia* becomes known. In the same way that the cowboy's orphanhood is most pronounced when surrounded by reproductive society, the orphan myth in *My Ántonia*, though less obvious than the family myth, is more noticeable than it might otherwise be because it's surrounded by the family myth, and vice versa: the contrast between Jim's chosen life and *Ántonia*'s chosen life makes each choice that much more noticeable since each throws the other into stark relief. Further, like the nostalgia of the cowboys' poems and stories, Jim's lengthy description of *Ántonia*'s isolated family farm far away from the pretensions of cities functions as a nostalgic nod to the way things used to be before the west was settled, a nod to the rural life away from cities. (Indeed, a great number of critics—Granville Hicks and Alfred Kazin to name just two—have commented on Cather's tendency to indulge in nostalgia.) Capitalizing on that nostalgia in the orphan myth, Allmendinger shows, is what makes the cowboy narratives saleable in the first place.

But more than anything, Jim's adoration of nuclear family and the representation of *Ántonia's* successes as more admirable than his own produce a statement of sorts that, whatever the nostalgia, a settled place for families like *Ántonia's* is what the American west is really all about. The days of the lone cowboys are gone, and certainly Jim misses them and pays homage to their memory, but they have been replaced with something Jim considers to be better. In the end, of course, Jim becomes an agent of large and sophisticated institutions as he develops the railways which bring west more families like *Ántonia's*, showing in his actions what he values most. Even Jim's narrative itself is an agent of the sociofamilial apparatus which gradually displaced the life of the cowboy heroes, for it supports wholeheartedly the idea that, for a family like *Ántonia's*, any amount of hardship, any sacrifice of cultures like the cowboy one, is a worthwhile price to pay.

#### IV.ii. *Angle of Repose*

Similarly, *Angle of Repose* intersects with the formula Western and with Western notions of hero in ways that extend the reach of and reify the sociofamilial apparatus. The narrator, Lyman Ward, has a debilitating bone disease which has left him crippled, and because of which he describes himself as a "maimed" and "grotesque doll" with a "rigid Gorgon head" (*Angle* 28) instead of a man. At times, he even speaks of himself in the third person as a sexless "it" (29). The fact that his wife left him for the surgeon who amputated his leg only further contributes to Lyman's perceptions of his own failed masculinity. The project on which he spends his days then—going through his



grandmother's papers, writing her story, often with a good deal of misogyny—is a way for him to project his fantasies of masculinity and Western heroism (a heroism very much like the one Tompkins describes) upon a man he loved a great deal, his grandfather, Oliver Ward, “the kindest, most trusting, easiest-to-get-on-with man [he] ever knew” (563).

Angle of Repose shows the wildness of the west more than the other three novels, and the wildness seems to surround Oliver in particular. To set the tone, a few pages into the novel, we learn that Oliver owns and has had occasion to use “a broad leather belt, a wooden-handled cavalry revolver of the Civil War period, a bowie knife, and a pair of Mexican spurs with 4-inch rowels” (19), items the narrator calls “Western objects” (20) and “primitive and masculine trophies” (19). Like the Western heroes of whom Cawelti speaks (“The Western hero is [...] a man with a gun” [Cawelti 57]), Oliver makes his wooden-handled revolver so much a part of him that he even takes it to his courting, a sign that “[his] character and his role were already Western” (Angle 60). And, in deference to the previously noted importance of horses for Western heroes, I should point out that Oliver is a competent horse-rider: “He often rode a horse a hundred miles a day, four hundred miles in a week, accepting the testing that such journeys implied” (29).

While the entire novel is filled with both adventures and stillnesses the likes of which one would expect to find in a Western, the “Leadville” section of the novel is particularly generous with the formulaic elements. In addition to crooked managers and hotel clerks, it has corrupt sheriffs, dangerous mountain passes, claim jumpers, gunfights in mines and in dusty town offices, stagecoach holdups, canyons and corrals, lynchings and hangings and showdowns. As an added bonus, some Western notables are name-

dropped—Wild Bill Hickock and Buffalo Bill Cody, among others—and the scene set so that even the theatrical entertainment is filmically violent (210). Note the following conversation between Lyman and Rodman as Lyman describes the west into which he places Oliver:

“Ever try living in a tent through a Dakota winter? That’s excitement enough to last anybody a while. Ever see Buffalo Bill Cody and Captain Jack Crawford ride their horses onto the stage of the Bella Union Theatre to re-create Buffalo Bill’s single-handed killing and scalping of the Oglala chief Yellow Hand?”

[ . . . ]

Unfortunately Captain Jack’s horse got cutting up, scared of Captain Jack’s warbonnet, and he shot himself through the leg and brought down the curtain.”

“You mean they were putting on an act with live ammunition?”

[ . . . ] “The West was not built with blank cartridges.” (210)

But Oliver’s masculine trophies, his horse-riding stamina, and his surroundings, however Western they all might be, are not the reason I suggest that Lyman models Oliver upon Western heroes. Unlike Jim Burden, Oliver Ward does not write an extensive narrative nor does he spend a great deal of time with cowboys and I find no indication that he wants to become one. Further, where Jim is an orphan like the cowboys he admires, Oliver has a family; in fact, the story is told by Oliver’s grandson, evidence aplenty that Oliver doesn’t shun reproductive society but participates in and

perpetuates it. Instead of being like a cowboy hero, however, Oliver is like a frontier scout hero. Cawelti notes that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the cowboy emerged as “the key heroic figure” along with “the shift of Western settlement to the Great Plains and the Far West” (93), and before that “the frontier scout,” was “the archetypal Western hero” (34). The Oliver presented to us, a mining engineer of a generation before Jim Burden’s time, constantly makes maps, surveys, and searches for rich ore and silver veins. He is very much a frontier scout mapping the frontier, a man whose work gives him access to the unexplored mountainous and mine-pocked west rather than the prairie. Frontier scout heroes, like cowboy heroes, usually drift from place to place; they’re most comfortable in the wilderness and not dependent upon towns. A look at the “Table of Contents” in the novel is all one needs to see that Oliver is a drifter. Lyman, the narrator of Angle of Repose, divides the story up primarily according to where Oliver and Susan live. And they live in many different places: New Almaden, Santa Cruz, Leadville, Mexico, Idaho, Grass Valley, and there are some others in between that get mentioned only in passing or that Oliver goes to without Susan. Their whereabouts are largely determined by where Oliver finds work. And even when posted in out-of-the-way places, his work takes him still further into the wilderness away from Susan and any vestiges of civilization on a regular basis, often for long stretches of time.

Lyman takes great pains to be certain that his readers admire and respect Oliver. Always industrious, Oliver works twenty-hour days when necessary (29). Further, we are told that he is a skilled marksman and that this quality makes others both fear and admire him. Frank Sargent, Oliver’s hired man, notes that

“He’s the one [the thieves] are scared of. The boss is a very

good shot, did you know? Under all that trusting good nature is a very tough hombre. Every day or so we hold target practice outside the shaft house at noon, so Oliver can knock off a few cans at fifty yards. The word gets around.” (289)

Even more important than his work ethic or his marksmanship, however, is Oliver’s character. His honesty is exceptional, gruelling even, to the point that he repeatedly loses or walks away from lucrative work if it means compromising his integrity. This happens in New Almaden (154), Blacktail Gulch (210), and in Mexico (345). And just to make sure that we fully comprehend the extent of Oliver’s heroic code of honour and tremendous accomplishments, Lyman shows us the admiration others have for Oliver and his chosen life. John Grant, Oliver’s brother-in-law, whose growing discontent leaks through his censoriousness, “envies Oliver so. He’s almost the only person he still speaks well of” (281). Frank Sargent doesn’t just envy Oliver, he wants to *be* Oliver; in Lyman’s version of the story, he makes himself over to resemble Oliver so convincingly that Susan, Oliver’s wife, mistakes one for the other and kisses Frank: “And she realized why she had made her mistake. Frank had modeled himself so completely on Oliver in dress, mannerisms, walk, mustache, everything, that they might have been brothers, a lighter and a darker” (285). Even Clarence King, the man who “had impressed Presidents and made himself an intimate of the great,” the man whose “reputation had gone around the world” (260), values Oliver to the extent that he “would trust [him] with [his] life” (260).

Indeed, one might think that Lyman Ward has read and studied Jane Tompkins’s essay “Women and the Language of Men” in West of Everything, so similar is Oliver to

the heroes Tompkins describes. Of course, Angle of Repose antedates Tompkins' work, so this is impossible, but Oliver Ward embodies in many ways the quintessential Tompkinsian Western hero. In the configuration that Tompkins puts forth, reticence, or rather "antilanguage," defines the Western hero:

For the Western is at heart antilanguage. Doing, not talking, is what it values. [ . . . ]

For the really strong man, language is a snare; it blunts his purpose and diminishes his strength. [ . . . ]

The pattern of talk canceled by action always delivers the same message: language is false or at best ineffectual; only actions are real. (50-51)

More often than I can count, Lyman comments on Oliver's silence, his stubborn "wordlessness" (407, 471, 481). And Susan, the writer who loves good conversation, wonders almost as frequently "how she had happened to marry a man for whom words were so difficult" (278). Note the following conversation Lyman conjures up between Oliver and Susan:

"You ought to speak up more in company"

"That's what you're always telling me."

"It's true. If you don't, people will think you haven't anything to say."

"I don't."

"Oh, Oliver, you do too! But you just sit back."

"Like a bump on a log," Oliver said. (263)

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Oliver's actions effectively cancel out words and any purpose they might serve. When Susan expresses her fear that Oliver's reluctance to speak will mean that potential employers "'won't have any idea how good you are at things, and how much you can *do*,'" he insists, quietly, "'They know what I can do'" and proceeds to inform her that he has just been offered a position on a Survey, evidence that his actions speak loudly enough (but, characteristically, he hasn't gotten around to telling his wife) (264) (his italics). Susan's response is one of chagrin and acceptance of her own folly, as she agrees with his implicit evaluations about talk and action:

"Will thee forgive me?"

"Sure. What for?"

"For wanting to make thee over. I'm a foolish woman, I'm too much in love with talk and talkers. Talk isn't that important." (264)

Implicitly, this dichotomy leads to a natural antagonism; as Tompkins notes, "'Westerns are full of contrasts between people who spout words and people who act'" (51). In this novel, as in most of the Westerns Tompkins mentions, the word-spouters are women. "The message [. . .] in the case of women in Westerns generally, is that there's nothing *to* them. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble. [. . .] When the crunch comes, women shatter into words" (61-62). Of course, Lyman does configure Oliver and Susan's marriage as a power struggle between the silent and heroic Oliver and the word-spouting Susan who "never appreciate[s] him enough until it [is] too late" and who

foolishly values things like art and education and books and conversation (Angle 563). He even has Susan repenting in the end, a “‘lady who made a terrible mistake.’ ‘And recognized it [. . .]. Admitted it, repented it, accepted the consequences, did her best to live it down’” (563). This representation matches the generally hostile representation of Susan discussed in the previous chapter. But the particularly interesting part about the word/action dichotomy surrounds the irony it lends to Lyman himself. As the writer who tells his grandparents’ story, he too is a spouter of words, and all the criticisms of language—that it “is gratuitous at best; at worst it is deceptive”—apply as much to him as they do to Susan (Tompkins 52). Lyman says as much in his final dream when he “was strangling on [his] words,” his tongue “three times too big for [his] mouth,” while trying to describe the nature of the affection he saw in his grandparents’ relationship (Angle 563). Lyman’s position as writer, rather than being an example of failed masculinity, is an extension of the paradox Tompkins describes: “[T]he entire [Western] enterprise is based on a paradox. In order to exist, the Western has to use words or visual images, but these images are precisely what it fears. As a medium, the Western has to pretend that it doesn’t exist at all, its words and pictures, just a window on the truth, not really there” (51).

In the end, though, the dichotomies and paradoxes come back to the role of family in the formula Western and in this novel. Previously, I argued that whatever the ostensible dichotomies, the formula Western is often more about the protection of family than about the rejection of it. Certainly, this applies to Oliver and Angle of Repose as well. Like Jim Burden, Oliver is of the west, but whatever his current profession—whether building an irrigation ditch or supervising mine operations or participating in

surveys—his jobs prepare the west and make it a safe place for burgeoning populations and nuclear families. His creations, like the Big Ditch or Susan Canal, are to be “the beacon of hope to settlers and their families” (486). Throughout his successes and failures, his wordlessnesses and actions, ultimately Oliver builds up and exists in the west for families, preparing it for the inevitable takeover of wilderness by civilization and its apparatus.

Furthermore, much as Oliver traipses around the American west, moving from job to job, from wilderness to wilderness, much as his reticence opposes his wife’s conversation and wordsmithing, he keeps coming back to and trying to provide for his family. Susan follows him whenever and wherever she can, often into places that see few women. Their combined efforts to be together whenever possible show that Oliver doesn’t subscribe to Tompkins’s hero/family opposition, regardless of how far and wide the job of the frontier scout mining engineer takes him. Even though Susan sometimes thinks that “his family must come second to his job” (477), in the final analysis, Oliver’s wife and his children are the most important aspects of his life. He spends as much time as he can with them, and when that’s no longer possible he spends as much time as he can remembering them—he dedicates years to breeding the perfect rose to commemorate his daughter, Agnes, who died as a child. On some level, Lyman knows this to be true for, despite his constructions of Oliver as Western hero, the reason he values Oliver so is not because he was skilled with a pistol or because of any other Western hero quality, but because of his loving parental and nurturing qualities, for making Lyman “feel *safe*” when his own father “always made [him] uneasy” (563) (his italics). Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapter, Lyman studies and then tells the story of his grandparents’



marriage in order to find a way to cope with and perhaps repair his own failed marriage. Ultimately, the nuclear family—his own nuclear family—is the point of Lyman’s story.

## **V. Ostenso and Ross Meet the Western**

In the introduction to Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West, Arnold Davidson makes a number of important points. First, he states that “Canadian Western writers have resisted the mythic American West with a more realistically portrayed Canadian one” (6). Second, he states that this Canadian response to the American Western is

as if the gunfight at the OK Corral were restaged with the Matt Dillonish U.S. marshal facing not some outlaw or renegade, but Coyote himself. The question of who will be the winner in such a shootout is hardly the issue; the point is that the whole *form* of the encounter is altered from shoot-out to melee. (8) (his italics)

Certainly, the “form of the encounter” in these two Canadian novels differs both from the formula Western and from the forms of the “savage/civilization” encounter in the two American novels discussed earlier. Davidson’s claim that such differences constitute alterations whose function is to resist the American mythic West is something I don’t address directly in this chapter, but I discuss Canadian resistance to American influence in the next chapter. Here, however, I want to point out that the Canadian novels come under the influence of the formula Western as much as do the previously discussed American novels, and that, as Davidson suggests, the “form of the encounter” in them undergoes alterations and becomes a melee. But two other alterations also deserve

particular attention, for they have a great deal to do with family. Firstly, the domestic sphere—that which is customarily protected by the hero in the American novels—undergoes transformation in both of these Canadian novels, and in this transformed state it enters the melee. In fact, it becomes the site of the melee. Secondly, and consequently, the domestic sphere either provides inadequate protection for the people in it, or it becomes the originary locus of villainy. Either way, the effect is the same—the domestic sphere and the family included in it increase the power of the hero's antagonists and simultaneously forbid the hero his or her heroism. Consequently, the hero's attempts at heroism fail except in those times when she or he can step outside the domestic sphere.

As previously noted, the hero in many American formula Westerns and in the two western American novels discussed here generally protects the domestic sphere and the nuclear family. Jane Tompkins's hero/family binary, then, doesn't really hold up in those American works. But when the domestic sphere and the nuclear family deflate and disempower the hero, as they do in these Canadian novels, a hero/family binary is much more completely realized (though the binary still doesn't resemble the one Tompkins describes). Nevertheless, binary or not, the heroes in these Canadian novels cannot escape the domestic sphere, and thus still function (unwillingly, for the most part) as agents of the sociofamilial apparatus.

V.i. *Wild Geese*

Elements of the formula Western mark their territory throughout *Wild Geese*. Most of the action takes place on an isolated farm, where there's plenty of livestock,

hectares and hectares of open land, and where there are horses, lots and lots of horses. Much of the daily routine is taken up with riding the horses, working the fields with the horses, using the horses to get the cattle, breaking the horses, currying the horses, feeding the horses, and in the end, trying to fight a prairie fire with horses. A romantic figure (Goat-eyes, or Malcolm), a “lone horseman” from the wilderness, rides into town in order to try to sweep Ellen Gare off her feet and rescue her from the savage grip of her father (140). He doesn’t succeed and rides off, alone on his horse, into the “golden lustre” of the sunset (140). Images of death confront the reader with remarkable frequency in this novel. Jane Tompkins writes at length about the prevalence of death and images of death in Westerns and states that “To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in this genre” (West 24). (Tompkins links the preoccupation with death in Westerns to her claim that Westerns write against and in response to the heaven-focussed sentimental novels and to the cult of domesticity.) Many of the deaths in Wild Geese are unnatural, as they usually are in Westerns as well. Two quarrelling members of the Bjarnasson family lie drowned on the bottom of the family lake (46), a horse “drop[s] dead in the pasture” (101), and a healthy sow dies unexpectedly on the Gare farm (138). What should be birth narratives become death narratives: there’s a girl who tries to kill her baby (174), and a deformed baby said to be born with the head of a calf (116). Additionally, we’re given three different reminders that Amelia’s first love, Del Jordan, was gored to death by a bull (20, 59, 87). And, of course, as the previous chapter notes, the point of the novel is the death of Caleb Gare.

In fact, of the four novels discussed here, Wild Geese sets up the good versus evil dichotomy of formula Westerns most starkly, and has the most villainous villains and the

most victimized victims; the demarcations between the “savage” and the “civilized,” are clearer in this novel than in any of the others. On the “civilized side,” there’s Amelia, now a “poor down-trodden woman of the land,” (223) who longs for the citified life of her youth, and who clings to the precious linen napkins that remind her of those times (141). (Lind hearkens from the city as well. A gentle woman who indulges in lingerie and amber beads and fine soap, she’s in the area for a year to further the cause of “civilization” by teaching at the local school. But she herself is usually simply an observer of Caleb’s abuse and seldom a victim of it.) On the “savage” side, of course, is Caleb Gare (and his friend Thorvald Thorvaldson), the greedy, vicious, violent, sinister, manipulative man, who has absolute control of the Gare family farm and household, and who also exerts considerable control over the town and church. While Caleb abuses and controls all the members of his family, he’s particularly compelled by his “insanity for power over [Amelia], at any cost” (160) to the point that he tries to whip her literally into submission, and Amelia justifiably prays “that something unforeseen” will happen to him (207).

Physical and emotional pain and abuse are nothing new to Westerns. Tompkins writes about their place and function, saying that “The Western schools people to scorn the expression of sympathy for pain because it needs an interdiction against such expressions to keep itself in business. [. . . T]he interdiction against sentimentality [. . . is] needed to support the image of manhood the genre underwrites” (West 121). What’s different here, though, is that much of the pain is directed not at an animal or at a male hero, but at women in the domestic sphere. Because Amelia (“civilized” and “victim”) and Caleb (“savage” and “villain”) are married, the point of encounter between

“civilized” and “savage” in this novel locates itself firmly inside the domestic sphere, and indeed, inside the nuclear family. The domestic sphere, then, which in other Westerns receives fierce guarding and repeated rescue, loses its protection and becomes the site of the most intense conflict and violence (both physical and emotional) in the entire novel. This in itself seems highly unusual since the action in formula Westerns usually takes place in what Arnold Davidson calls “characteristically male spaces” (97). But Betsy Downey, in “Battered Pioneers: The Problem of Male Violence against Women as Seen through Mari Sandoz’s *Old Jules*” theorizes domestic violence in frontier literature, showing that it was “part of the pattern of family life in frontier settlements” (98).

Downey states:

Although there is much work yet to be done, it is clear from the evidence now available that physical violence was a part of women’s frontier experience. Probably less frequent, and certainly more private, than the violence of the male frontier, the violence of the female frontier was just as devastating. Perhaps it was more so, for it struck in the place where women were supposed to be most safe and within relationships that were supposed to be most supportive and most sacred (109).

In addition to losing protection, the domestic sphere also loses definition in the face of such violence and overlaps with other, more public, often male, spheres. Drawing on works such as Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson’s *The Women’s West* (1987), and Glenda Riley’s *The Female Frontier* (1988), Downey notes,

Until recently the frontier has been primarily male landscape

presented by males. During the past two decades, however, an increasing number of historians, many of them women, have started to examine American frontierswomen more closely. They find the numbers and significance of the frontierswomen are great enough to constitute [ . . . ] “a ‘female frontier’ . . . shaped . . . by gender considerations.” Many aspects of the male and the female frontiers overlapped, of course; one area of overlap was violence. [ . . . T]his violence was not simply the public violence so often associated with the male frontier, but was part of the domestic life of the frontier wife, a private violence [ . . . ].” (97-98)

The overlapping of frontiers and subsequent loss of definition of the domestic sphere melts the victims’ roles into something less defined. Certainly, they remain victims of Caleb and gain no power over him, but as if they absorb some of his villainy, they begin to turn on each other, increasing exponentially the amount of abuse in the domestic sphere. This absorption results in something discussed in the previous chapter, Amelia passing on some of Caleb’s abuse to her children, and Ellen reproducing Caleb’s authority in his absence.

In the middle of this unprotected, frontier-overlapping, domestic-sphere-turned-site-of-conflict, having internalized the struggle between the “civilized” and the “savage,” as Cawelti says any hero figure must do, is Jude Gare. That the hero figure is a woman seems fitting since the domestic sphere is the site of conflict. Given the violent and diseased nature of *this* domestic sphere, it comes as no surprise that the protagonist’s

heroism is characterized not by the influence of cowboy or frontier scout myths, but by an unrelenting battery of violence. Jude is no ordinary domestic-centred woman. Like her mother, she craves a life more “civilized.” As previously mentioned, she admires Lind’s fine things, lingers over the textures and colours of amber beads and silk underthings, and longs for luxuries like a silk bed (21). And yet, her “savage” skills and violent side are unmistakable and especially noticeable in her relationships with animals. Taking pleasure in being thrown, she breaks young stallions with a skill and dexterity that amaze onlookers (39), she’s enthralled by the violence of young animals at play (54), and often inflicts violence upon the horses, a characteristic Tompkins identifies as common in Westerns: “The desire to curb the horse and make it submit to human requirements is as important to Westerns as the desires for merger or mutuality. Horses do not start out as pals; they have to be forced into it” (West 97). She continues, “The cruelty meted out to horses is an extension of the cruelty meted out to men’s bodies and emotions; the pain horses endure is an analogue of the pain the hero inflicts on himself” (107). While she recognizes and despises the pain Caleb inflicts on her and her siblings, Jude inflicts pain on herself as well, from physical pain incurred by the reins wrapped tightly around her hands until they cut through the skin to the emotional pain she experiences by denying herself the small pleasures (such as amber beads) that Lind offers her. (Tompkins connects explicitly the emotional pain a Western hero suffers to his—Tompkins’s essay refers to male heroes—silence, saying that he would “rather die than talk because talking might bring up [his] own unprocessed pain” [67].) Jude’s tendency to violence isn’t restricted to horses and herself, though. She strikes a “terrific blow” to Ellen (188) for spying on her, for instance. And yet, this willingness to violence, her considerable

strength and skill, combined with her desire to protect her mother from the power Caleb holds over her makes Jude the perfect hero, the person who can take down the evil Caleb Gare.

Immediately upon meeting Lind, Jude sets herself in opposition to Caleb. Not only does she offer Lind food under the reproachful glare of her sister, knowing full well that Caleb would disapprove of her hospitable action in the most punitive way possible, but she warns Lind about the antagonistic atmosphere that afflicts the Gare household:

“You might as well know that he’ll try to bully you,” she said matter-of-factly. “He’s starting by keeping supper waiting. He always does the same thing when a new teacher comes. He expects you to be a man. All the teachers have been men. He’s in for a jolt. But you stick up for yourself, Miss Archer. Don’t you let him bully you.”

Amelia spoke from the doorway.

“Judith!”

“Never mind, Ma. I’m only tellin’ her the truth.” (12)

Caleb clearly recognizes that Jude is the one who most opposes him, and he aggravates the opposition in as many ways as he can think of. He mocks her need for new shoes, for instance, by pretending not to notice her toes sticking out of her boots (17). He directs his rage most often at her, and he seeks out as many opportunities as he can to unleash it upon her. For instance, when he believes Jude has done something that bothers him, he prepares to vent abuse upon her. When he learns that blame for the situation belongs to someone other than Jude, his anger immediately diffuses and the incident goes



unpunished. If one of her siblings did it, then it's not a problem; if Jude did it, she deserves the harshest discipline (52). As Caleb's most direct antagonist, Jude protects Amelia and the domestic sphere whenever she can, trying to shield Amelia (or, as the above example shows, Lind) from Caleb whenever possible. For instance, she forgoes a number of clandestine meetings with her boyfriend because she knows that if she goes, "It's no use—he'll take it out on Ma" (27). And she tells Amelia that she will leave the farm to marry Sven "[a]s soon's I know *he* won't kill everybody if I do" (98) (Ostenso's italics). Certainly, she wants to protect herself too, for she is a victim of Caleb even more than are the others. She comments on a number of occasions that Caleb treats her and her siblings like slaves or animals (13, 27) and advertises her resentment of that treatment in floods of "dark wave[s] across her face" (16). But her concern is first for her mother; if it wasn't, Jude would have left the Gare farm long ago.

Paradoxically, protecting Amelia and her domestic sphere often requires that Jude refrain from the kinds of action that would put a stop to Caleb's abuse. Like the action-centred solutions proffered in so many Westerns, the most effective way of protecting Amelia would likely involve violence to Caleb, and would perhaps even involve killing him. But on more than one occasion, Jude does nothing: "She would have struck Caleb today had it not been for Amelia. Always pity stood in the way of the tide of violence she felt could break from her. Pity for Amelia, who would get what Caleb did not dare mete out to her, Judith" (53). What this necessary restraint suggests is that the domestic sphere, while requiring the protection of the hero, also forbids the hero her heroism and denies its own protection since it doesn't allow her to neutralize the villain. And this paradox retains its grip throughout the entire novel. Even though Jude is "both

intellectually and emotionally justified in destroying [the villain],” to use Cawelti’s phrase, and even though she’s physically capable of doing so, the domestic sphere prevents any such action (14).

Even at her heroic peak—when she takes action despite the influence of the domestic sphere—Jude can’t successfully neutralize Caleb. The only thing she manages to accomplish is a symbolic action. While throwing an axe at Caleb (and missing him) provides him with evidence to blackmail her (as long as it remains lodged in the wall, Caleb can at any time have her incarcerated), her action marks the beginning of Caleb’s end. When it falls to the ground, taking the rotten wood with it, it marks the end of his reign of terror and within hours of that fall, he dies. But despite the symbolic weight of Jude’s action, she never successfully takes action against him and never successfully defends anyone. In the end, all she can do is run away from him.

Arnold Davidson comments that “In place of the adult male hero, [Canadian women western writers] put a woman or even a girl, and then show her establishing a new and different order and subsuming men into it” (99). He suggests that Jude succeeds in establishing such an order because she “decisively stages her own rebellion” (99) in order to “embrace whom she pleases” (100). But embracing whom she pleases doesn’t free her from the bondage of the domestic sphere she loathes, and hardly constitutes establishing a new order. *Wild Geese* ends with the disintegration of the old order, certainly, a fitting end on the night of the carnivalesque masquerade, and the changes turn out to be permanent. Unfortunately, these changes don’t place Jude, formerly the hero figure, in any kind of a heroic or powerful role. Caleb is dead, but Jude still can’t be free. As the previous chapter shows, Jude’s escape from Caleb involves her further

disempowerment. She leaves the Gare farm only to become more entrenched in a domestic sphere for which she has little affection, to perpetuate it through reproduction, leaving behind any possibility of future heroic action and entering instead the realm of what is, in most Westerns, the protected space reserved for those who cannot defend themselves.

And this brings us back to theories of the social. Downey scours sociological studies alongside Sandoz's work for clues as to what might have inspired or allowed the ubiquity of such violence in frontier homes and concludes that a number of factors were involved, from the "patriarchal organization of the family" to "psychological makeup, poverty, stress, status, and isolation," to "social attitudes that accept or even condone violence" (98). Indeed, Teresa de Lauretis (drawing on Breines and Gordon) states that "violence between intimates must be seen in the wider context of social power relations" and that "institutions such as the medical and other 'helping professions' (e.g., the police and the judiciary) are complicit, or at least congruent with 'the social construction of battering'" (33). While fewer institutions exist in Wild Geese than in the more recent time of de Lauretis's work, there can be no doubt as to the condoning and even complicity of the society and social structures outside the Gare household; the Gare family violence is a fact of prairie life. Caleb threatens Jude with calling the authorities to have her incarcerated knowing the law would support his authority, neighbours turn a blind eye to his cruelty except to capitalize on its sensationalism for the purposes of gossip (think of Mrs. Sandbo), and storekeepers and local farmers alike participate in it by informing Caleb of anything that might precipitate more of it (think of Johanneson reporting to Caleb Jude's sale of wool, or Thorvaldson betraying her escape from the

Gare farm). Family affairs are clearly community affairs and the social mechanisms that do exist do so for the purpose of supporting the nuclear family structures, and in this case, the villainy of Caleb Gare.

To detour to a short tangent for a moment, it's interesting to note that, from the ways in which Jules Sandoz made all decisions in the family without discussion or warning, to the prices he exacted for disobedience, to his restraint from violence in public places, to his avoidance of physical labour, to the fact that patterns and routines in the domestic sphere organized around him, to the ways he discouraged his wife from visiting with others, Sandoz bears a striking resemblance to Caleb Gare. (Indeed, at times Sandoz seems to be quoting Caleb.) On a highly simplified level, since Mari Sandoz's account is autobiographical, this implies that, for all the romantic elements in Wild Geese, it presents a "realistically portrayed" Canadian west, as Davidson says (6). And indeed, Glenda Riley examines newspapers, diaries, and memoirs and concludes that "the incidence of wife abuse" (Riley 97) was itself a great (and by "great," I mean "large" and not "good") prairie fact.

#### V.ii. As For Me and My House

Like the other three novels, As For Me and My House is rife with Western references and intersections. The most obvious of these take place when the Bentleys go to the ranch and temporarily insert themselves into the lives of cowboys and ranch women, people who fit "into a background of range and broncos, and at the same time a kind of glamour, to confirm all you've ever imagined about an older, more colorful

West” (122). But less obvious intersections with the discourses of Westerns also crop up with decisive regularity. The transient orphanhood of cowboys (discussed previously in this chapter), for instance, shows itself when Mrs. Bentley slaps the belly of a cowboy’s horse and immediately receives admonishment from her friend, Paul: “After a long celibate week on the range just what did I think brought the cowboys to town on Saturday night? It was especially bad being asked to go and see a horse” (129). And yes, the ever-important horses roam here too. One expects to find them out at the ranch, along with the cowboys and their chaps and saddles, but horses frequent the town as well (and this in a time of the automobile, a time when one might expect few horses in town): Paul often shows up riding Harlequin, Philip and Mrs. Bentley purchase a horse named Minnie, Philip paints horses often, and his name, we’re told, means lover of horses.

Even more fundamental to the Western than roving cowboys or saddled horses is the town/wilderness or “civilized/savage” distinction. And Ross’s novel—whether consciously modelling itself after the Western or not—sets up this distinction clearly. In *Horizon*—the “civilized” place—people are especially concerned with pleasing “the exacting small-town gods Propriety and Parity” (9), host all the appropriate dinners, wear all the appropriate hats and gloves, say all the appropriate things, and “outdo one another in Christian enterprise” (14). Meanwhile, the women of the rural farming area Partridge Hill, aware of the social gulf between them and the townsfolk, “[fidget] with their ungloved hands” while the men have tablemanners not at all like those of “[t]own folks [. . . who] don’t pitch in themselves and eat” (27). In *Horizon*, people rely on economic and social networks for sustenance, but the Partridge Hill people concern themselves with trying to survive while the land and climate stubbornly resist cultivation efforts as if

reluctant to begrudge the last bits of wilderness left in the west: “Five years in succession now they’ve been blown out, dried out, hailed out; and it was as if in the face of so blind and uncaring a universe they were trying to assert themselves, to insist upon their own meaning and importance” (26). Like other Western wilderness denizens, they have a near uncanny ability to survive on the harsh prairie demonstrated in the remarkable fact that after five years without crops they’re still there. But even with uncanny survival skills, the way of life at Partridge Hill—like the way of life of the savage Cawelti speaks of—is on its way out. The actual physical death of the young farmboy, Peter Lawson, who would ordinarily grow up to be a member of the next generation of prairie farmers, symbolizes the gradual decay of the farming community. (Notably, both Judith West and El Greco, characters who originate in the country, also die during the course of the novel, Judith leaving behind a child who will be raised in an urban environment.) Of course, farming itself will not die out completely, but the way of life of the farming community is being replaced in the novel by a town-centred way of life. The fact that the Bentleys eventually move to an even more urban location, the city, shows that they too are caught up in the urbanization momentum that contributes to the decline of farming communities.<sup>22</sup>

Into this dichotomized setting, the narrator places the would-be Western hero, Philip Bentley.<sup>23</sup> In the civilization/wilderness dichotomy Ross sets up, Philip often identifies with the latter. Certainly not a gun-toting tamer of wilderness like Oliver, Philip nevertheless shows considerable attachment to the prairies. He “fancies a campfire and the open night” (119) and identifies with the poverty-stricken country-dwellers at Partridge Hill more than he does with the Horizon townsfolk, to the point that he forms

sympathetic bonds with them so that “their poverty hurt[s] him” (173). His alleged affair further suggests an affinity for wilderness since his alleged lover Judith West, a girl of the land with a surname nearly synonymous with “prairie,” identifies so completely with the prairie that her voice responds to, rides up with, and scales the prairie wind much like a hawk might respond to, ride up with, and scale it, a wind that is like the voice of the prairie itself and oppresses others into “febleness and isolation” (51). Even Philip’s appearance contributes to his country-boy identity: he looks like one of the Partridge Hill farmers, Joe Lawson (110).

As a corollary of identifying with country and wilderness, Philip “hates Horizon, all the Horizons” (88) and it isn’t hard to see why. Townsfolk epitomize villainy and hypocrisy to him. They exploit his labour and, town after town, they regularly neglect to pay him (if neglect can be a regular thing). They police his every move, to the point that he unwillingly shoots a dog he meant to adopt because of their disapproval (108), to the point that he and his wife fear keeping a light burning late or “Horizon will be reminding us of our extravagance” (17). On a smaller scale, Philip avoids the corner of his house most representative of town-style propriety, the parlour, and retreats to a place of solitude, his study.

Yet, like the heroes Cawelti describes who identify with the town enough to defend it against lawless villains, Philip also identifies to some extent with the small towns like Horizon and its inhabitants. The evidence of this inscribes itself in his paintings, for he draws Main Street false fronts again and again, often with considerable sympathy for and appreciation of them:

there was a little Main Street sketched. It’s like all the rest,

a single row of smug, false-fronted stores, a loiterer or two, in the distance the prairie again. And like all the rest there's something about it that hurts. False fronts ought to be laughed at, never understood or pitied. They're such outlandish things, the front of a store built up to look like a second storey. They ought always to be seen that way, pretentious, ridiculous, never as Philip sees them, stricken with a look of self-awareness and futility. (7)

Dick Harrison comments on the ambivalence of Philip's feelings towards small towns and notes, "however he may deny it, [Philip] is viscerally connected with these towns" and carries a "feeling of implication in the sins of the small town" (Harrison 150). Indeed, at one point, Philip identifies with the town so completely that he becomes its defender, a full-blown hero, defending it not against lawless villains but against an element of nature gone awry, a raging fire that consumes one frail prairie building and threatens a number of others.

Specifically, Philip's Western heroism appears to be much like the heroism described in Max Westbrook's revolt-search motif in "The Themes of Western Fiction." Typically, according to Westbrook, "the hero rebels against institutional evil and searches for a code or setting that will enable him to express abstract belief" (34). Westbrook continues,

The essential idea behind the revolt-search motif is that truth cannot be embodied in an institution or written down in a list of rules. An ultimate truth, however, does exist; and the hero—through his superior insight—has enough intuitive or



symbolic understanding of this truth to distinguish him from  
common men. (34)

In Mrs. Bentley's descriptions, Philip tries to resist the church institution in particular: "he feels he doesn't belong in the Church" (13); "He's cold and skeptical towards religion" (24); "emphatically he does not believe" (25). He clearly resents the church's unspoken and unwritten rules and constant policing—all of which eventually compel him to give up pipe-smoking, to "profess what he couldn't believe" (25), and to kill a dog he meant to adopt—thrust upon him by such an institution. He does, nevertheless, believe in an "ultimate truth," according to his wife, and thereby makes a distinction between the institution of the church and the belief in a deity:

He tries to measure life with intellect and reason, insists to himself that he is satisfied with what they prove for him; yet here there persists this conviction of a supreme being interested in him, opposed to him, arranging with tireless concern the details of his life to make certain it will be spent in a wind-swept, sun-burned little Horizon. (24)

Mrs. Bentley reports that this search for truth is what motivates Philip's painting. In her narrative, Philip states that art is a way "'of taking a man out of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture,'" something to which religion also aspires (148). "They're both a rejection of the material, common-sense world for one that's illusory, yet somehow more important'" (148). Even in his position as a preacher, he recognizes and acknowledges the inability of the church to offer truth. For instance, when a Partridge Hill woman in desperate poverty confronts him on the lack of the

Lord's compassion in her life, he makes no attempt to argue, defend a Christian God, offer false hope, suggest that he personally believes in God's compassion, or answer in any way (149). He simply listens to her, validating her concerns and misery, acknowledging the overwhelming unfairness of life, implying that he agrees with her morbid rendering of the situation, silently identifying with her even though he can't actually share her desperate experience.

Westbrook describes further the implications of the revolt-search motif:

At least six important themes result from this one idea. First, nature is a better source of truth than manmade—therefore corrupted—institutions. Second, man is evaluated more accurately by his performance in a fist fight than by his performance in a drawing room. Third, intuitive knowledge and empirical knowledge are superior to book-learning. Fourth, language—especially institutional language—cannot denote what is truly important. Fifth, the best men are frequently cast out of society because they are the best men. Sixth, symbolic action (usually defense of an underdog victimized by institutions) is the most valid expression of value. (34-35)

As much as they possibly can, given Philip's domestic ties, these themes inform his life and choices. His disdain for the church institution and his conviction that it offers no truth compel much of Mrs. Bentley's narrative. He avoids (and seems to loathe) drawing or livingrooms and heads for the solitude of his study as often as possible, he supports

Steve's fist fights provided they are fair, and he even gets a bit beat up himself. He does own an impressive library that advertises his love of book-learning, but he also demonstrates his intuitive knowledge and advanced observational skills in the paintings which so accurately depict prairie life. The only time he actually uses language is when he's in the pulpit, and considering the fact that he doesn't believe the things he professes from the pulpit, it follows that the things he finds "truly important" remain unsaid. Indeed, Philip (like Oliver Ward and the many heroes of which Tompkins speaks) is remarkably tight-, or rather, white-lipped, often remaining silent where anyone *but* a Western hero would burst out in self-defense. According to Mrs. Bentley, Philip idolizes his father, a man he considers to be an outcast. And he defends underdogs like Steve the orphan boy whenever he can (though not always successfully), showing how much he values such symbolic action.

Of course, this reading of Philip becomes ferociously complicated by the fact that he is a preacher, a public representative of the very institution he resists. As Mrs. Bentley says, "hypocrisy wears hard on a man who at heart really isn't that way" (21). And it's even more complicated by two important family-centred facts. First, Philip never extricates himself from the nuclear family and the domestic sphere. If we are to believe Mrs. Bentley's version, his family is the reason Philip got into the Church in the first place (he "made a hero of his father" who had been a student preacher, and followed in his footsteps [40]) and the family is the reason he still finds himself in the Church: "For these last twelve years, I've kept him in the Church—no one else" (141). While Philip is a capable man who can make his own informed decisions and who has considerably more agency than she gives him credit for, and while Mrs. Bentley so often "could not be more

wrong” (Cude 78), one cannot ignore the fact that from the second page of the novel (where she chooses an appropriate hymn when Philip refuses to do so) on, she repeatedly calms troubled church waters so that Philip can and will continue in this profession, suggesting that perhaps her claim is indeed accurate. In other words, the hypocritical aspect of his life, that which prevents him from being the kind of Western hero he aspires to be, exists because of the nuclear family and his inability to escape it.

Second, Philip’s greatest antagonists—the “villains” who threaten underdogs and victimize people less powerful than themselves—are located not in the wilderness but in the domestic sphere, and they are women. That is, they speak from the location of those who are usually victims and who traditionally require repeated rescue. This re-location of the antagonists confuses many things and rapidly deflates any power that Philip (or any other hero figure) might have. Cawelti notes that in Westerns, “the ‘code of the West’ is in every respect a male ethic and its values and prescriptions relate primarily to the relationships of men. [...] The presence of women invariably threatens the primacy of the masculine group” (63). Mrs. Finley and Mrs. Bentley consistently threaten this primacy not only through their presence but through their considerable power, and they thereby metaphorically emasculate those who might otherwise be heroes. We never hear, for instance, about Mr. Finley, other than to learn (as mentioned in the previous chapter) that he is “an appropriately meek little man, but you can’t help feeling what an achievement is his meekness” (9). (And Philip, it seems, isn’t too far off from achieving Mr. Finley’s meekness.)

Consequently, with the exception of the one act of heroism that takes place outside the domestic sphere (the battle against the fire), Philip’s acts of heroism fail, and

instead of defending underdogs successfully, he actually aggravates their physical distress. For instance, Philip twice tries to defend Steve from Mrs. Finley, the mother of twins with whom Steve regularly fights. (Perhaps Sandra Djwa says it best, in "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," when she suggests Mrs. Finley is a Legion figure because her malice is uncontrollable.) Both confrontations end, however, with Mrs. Finley committing some sort of a physically violent act and being the undisputed winner. The first time, she strikes Steve across the mouth for fighting with one of her sons. When Philip tries to intercede, she laughs at him and, lips set "thin and vicious," strikes Steve a second time. The second time he tries to intercede in a similar situation, she turns her anger on Philip (*after* the situation has been diffused) and swipes him three times in the face with her purse (151). Both times, Philip's efforts at defending the underdog are unsuccessful, and her violence is aggravated, her anarchy unrestrained. And nothing resembling justice, or even an awareness of transgression on the part of the antagonist is ever achieved.

Similarly, Philip fails to achieve justice in confrontation with his wife. Their final confrontation in the novel, Mrs. Bentley claims, comes about because of a look of "gray bitterness in his face," a look that compels her to accuse him of adultery and of fathering Judith's child, the boy they adopt at the end of the novel. Not wanting a confrontation, he attempts to leave the scene and she grabs his wrists and restrains him, forbidding him exit, and pummels him further with accusations (213-14). Even though her narrative betrays her to be an aggressor who actively imprisons her opponent and harshly accuses him of things for which she has no proof, she presents herself to us as a wounded victim of his look and his rare words which "stung" her (214). Not surprisingly, she never tells

us Philip's side of the story and we never learn the identity of the child's father. Nearly everything Mrs. Bentley says is in the context of her own domestic sphere; as the title of the novel suggests, she writes about herself and her house in the minutest detail. What we do hear from Philip (through Mrs. Bentley) is this: "You were with her then—and she told you—" (214). Philip neither confirms nor denies the accusation, but brings to our attention his temporary suspicion that, regardless of whether or not he is guilty of adultery, another woman from the domestic sphere has unfairly assaulted him, that Judith, like Mrs. Finley and Mrs. Bentley (and even Philip's mother), is not to be trusted.<sup>24</sup> Cawelti notes that "one of the major organizing principles of the Western is to so characterize [sic] the villains so that the hero is both intellectually and emotionally justified in destroying them" (14). The location of these antagonists in the domestic sphere where they commit violent acts under the pretenses of protecting family, however, prevents any such justification; the very location constantly reminds readers that these antagonists belong to a group of people which inherently requires rescue or protection.

In effect, Sinclair Ross places Philip, a man who might have been a Western hero and who has many markings of a Western hero, in a place where he cannot be one. He must either leave his family—something that might be admirable for Shane (and might be possible for Oliver whose wife is financially self-sustaining and whose trips into the wilderness generate money), but would be completely irresponsible for a man such as Philip whose family relies on him to provide for their basic needs and who has no wilderness-based source of income—or live with, eat with, and lie down at night with his antagonist. In the end, being a family man and being a Western hero are incompatible states of being in this novel. Subsequently, this novel is much closer than are most

formula Westerns to achieving Tompkins's family: hero opposition for it shows a clear antagonism to the cult of domesticity, and indeed, to the entire domestic sphere.

Here we are, then, in a place where heroism isn't even possible when family or the domestic sphere is involved. Evidently, the conventions of formula Western function in these novels largely to affirm the family/hero opposition. They do this not by separating hero from family, however, (as Tompkins suggests many Westerns do) but by inserting the hero figure into the domestic sphere and frustrating any attempts at heroism.

Before leaving these Canadian novels behind, two more things must be considered. Why do these novels indulge in this rhetoric of physical, emotional, and metaphoric violence? And why does that violence so often have to do with women? The answer to the second question is fairly straightforward. Locating the frontier—the site of conflict—inside the domestic sphere, necessarily involves (rather than protects) women. And in these two novels, women's violence is closely linked with women resisting "their place" as subservient to and/or protected by men. Jude takes violence and dishes it out until she is finally "put in her place" and she leaves, ready to begin life as a housewife. Following a very different arc, Amelia metes it out to her children as well until she finally resists Caleb, only to be beaten within an inch of her life for that resistance. Since Caleb's death follows the beating, the novel ends with Amelia's freedom. Mrs. Bentley refuses to be "put in her place" and resorts to manipulation and passive aggression to gain the upper hand until readers sympathize with Philip. And Mrs. Finley refuses to know "her place"—she is simply a tilt-a-whirl of rage, flinging out violence under the guise of protecting her family. The women's violence in these texts, then, has to do with resisting the sociofamilial structures that insist women have "places" into which to be put. The

initial act of resistance, I would agree with Arnold Davidson, is a “feminist twist,” but both novels finally forbid that resistance a satisfying completion and refuse to allow the establishment of new orders associated with successful resistance (99).

As to the first question (why the violence rhetoric?), Teresa de Lauretis notes that traditionally critics have suggested that the violence represents a disintegration of social order (34) but in these novels, it seems the violence *is* the order. What, then, is the point of the domestic sphere as site of violence? Drawing on Breines and Gordon, de Lauretis notes that rather than a breakdown in social order, domestic violence is a “sign of a ‘power struggle for the *maintenance* of a certain kind of social order.’” But which kind of social order is in question, to be maintained or to be dismantled, is just what is at stake in the discourse on family violence” (34) (her italics). These two novels use the rhetoric of violence to call attention both to the power struggle taking place and to the nature of the order being maintained and resisted, hence, formulating a cry for the dismantling of this social order (the nuclear family) with its excruciating, tenacious grip. The violence in these domestic spheres then functions as yet another attack on the citadel of the family, another attempt to disrupt its mechanism, deflate its power, displace—rather, push aside violently—its authority.

The point of the interaction with the formula Western in the two western American novels is at least partly to reify the sociopolitical discourses and ideological underpinnings that hold the nuclear family in place, and in the two western Canadian novels, to disempower further those same sociopolitical discourses and ideological underpinnings. But the interactions with the Western also raise the question why. Why



are these particular works canonized as classics in their respective countries? Critics like Dick Harrison suggest it has to do with their realism, but this chapter implies that the realism and romance categories are less quarantined from one another than Harrison believes. And this question of why these different representations of family appear in the western American and western Canadian canons is what the following chapter takes up.

## Notes

1. Indeed, Allmendinger's earlier book, The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture (1992), is grounded in Allmendinger's personal experiences of ranch life, experiences which complicate and undermine a number of commonly assumed characteristics of cowboys and cowboy culture. Implicitly, in this "native westerner" self-representation, Allmendinger offers to his readers what the formula Western hero offers to the pioneers—skills and knowledge they (as relative newcomers to the west) don't possess.
2. While the conflict between institutions and individuals is central to most Westerns, there is no single pattern declaring either side always good or always evil. The only constants are the conflict itself between two sides and the fact that the heroes are good guys who, by virtue of their understanding both sides, are "men in the middle" (Cawelti 46) who have "internalized the conflict between savagery and civilization" (55). For more on this, see John G. Cawelti's Six-Gun Mystique (1971).
3. For particularly useful discussions of the mythic history of the formula, see Barbara Meldrum's collection of essays Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature (1985) and Richard Slotkin's Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860. And for an interesting exploration of the impact of myths of heroism, solitude, and masculinity (myths which inform Westerns) on contemporary cinema see Joakim Nilsson's 2000 essay, "Take Me Back to the Ball Game: Nostalgia and Hegemonic Masculinity in *Field of Dreams*."
4. No sooner do I say that these novels are generally accepted as examples of realism than I must add the caveat mentioned in Chapter One that each of these novels has also been scrutinized for its romantic elements. See, for instance, Susan J. Rosowski's 1986 book, The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism, as well as Russell Burrows's essay on Angle of Repose, Paul Denham's essay on As For Me and My House, and W.J. Keith's essay on Wild Geese. My examination of the novels in light of romantic genres like the Western, then, is not an entirely new approach.
5. To refer once again to Cawelti's definition of Western, these novels are set in the west, near the frontier, at a time when the west is being settled, a time when social order and anarchy—or "civilization" and "savagery"—are in tension. But since their narratives don't center upon some form of pursuit and center instead upon relationships, families, personal journeys, and life stories, they don't really qualify as Westerns, regardless of how many Western elements and aspects they boast.

6. Because there are so many structural and thematic similarities between formula Western films and formula Western books, and because the film Westerns have influenced the written Westerns and vice versa, I refer to both in my discussions of formula Westerns.
7. See "Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-war 'Pro-Indian' Westerns" by Steve Neale, "Photographing the Indian" by Edward Buscombe, "'Our Country'/Whose Country? The 'Americanisation' Project of Early Westerns" by Richard Abel, "Dixie Cowboys and Blue Yodels: The Strange History of the Singing Cowboy" by Peter Stanfield, and "The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume" by Jean Marie Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog, all collected in Buscombe and Pearson's book.
8. See James Macguire's essay, "Beginnings of Genres in the West," and Susan Naramore Maher's paper, "A Bridging of Two Cultures: Frances Hodgson Burnett and the Wild West."
9. See Tassilo Schneider's "Finding a New *Heimat* in the Wild West: Karl May and the German Western of the 1960s," for instance.
10. Arnold Davidson, in Coyote Country, writes of the "tall, lanky shadow" cast by the popular American Western "over the Canadian West," and how that shadow has shaped Canadian western literature (8).
11. Indeed, Allmendinger has a point. Even John G. Cawelti, the man whose 1971 enunciation of the formulaic structure is in some ways still the defining text on the topic, separates formula Westerns from "serious novels with a Western setting" (93).
12. Another study worth mentioning here is Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth, also an oft-quoted exploration of the mythic power of the west. Smith examines the formula Western in the light of a number of other cultural myths.
13. For two interesting and useful collections exploring this mythologizing, I recommend Barbara Meldrum's collections, Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature (mentioned in a previous footnote) and Old West—New West: Centennial Essays.
14. While Cathy Davidson makes no direct link to Western, she does explore an aspect of this idea in her book, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (1986), when she implies that the ideology of independence and individuality even motivated the book trade (especially the novel trade) in the United States. See, for example, Chapter Three, "Ideology and Genre."
15. See, for instance, essays on Cather's work by Maxwell Geismar and T.K. Whipple, essays on Stegner's work by Susan Tyburski, Brett Olsen, Charles Rankin, and Russell Burrows, essays on Ostenso's work by Daniel S. Lenoski and R.G. Laurence, and criticism on Ross's work by William H. New, D.G. Jones, and Laurence Ricou.

16. Let me just state here quickly that "savage" here refers to no racial or cultural group in particular, even though "Indians" are synonymous with "savages" in some Westerns (For instance, some characters in John Ford's 1955 film The Searchers equate "Indian" with "savage".) Instead, it refers to anyone who opposes the "advancing wave of law and order," to use Cawelti's terms (38), and might refer to amiable outlaws (see George Roy Hill's 1969 film Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) or Mormon preachers (See Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage [1912]), cattle rustlers (see Gunfight at the OK Corral), or corrupt townsmen.
17. A number of critics, Christine Bold and John G. Cawelti among them, argue that Cooper's Leatherstocking tales (the most commonly cited one is The Last of the Mohicans [1826]) are the earliest formula Westerns and set the stage and perhaps even establish the formula for upcoming Westerns.
18. In addition to complicating Tompkins's hero/family binary, Yates also complicates Tompkins's assertions that the women in Westerns subscribe to the cult of true womanhood, a discourse which promotes "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity," discussed most comprehensively by Barbara Welter in Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1976) (21). Yates shows that the women in many Westerns subscribe instead to a counter-discourse described first and most completely by Francis Cogan in All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (1989). Cogan's Real Women don't set their sights on piety or subservience, but are physically fit, rational, often educated, highly capable women who are companions to their husbands rather than dominated by them. Gene Gressley, in the prologue to Old West/New West (1997), argues along similar lines when he presents an overview of western theory. Exploring the "linchpin in the multiculturalist argument: the victim as hero" (8), Gressley shows that multiculturalists often configure "the noble savage and the pioneer woman [as] exploited and downtrodden—THE VICTIMS" (8) (sic), a representation very much like the one Tompkins presents. Gressley points out that later critics have problematized this construction in light of the history of western settlement. "The West of victimization, say these critics, was just as unreal as the romanticized West of Turner's heroic conquest" (13).
19. See pages 46-66 of Six-Gun Mystique.
20. Incidentally, behaving like the Western heroes Tompkins describes, Jim instinctively separates actions from words and criticizes Antonia's chatter after this incident: "'What you jabber Bohunk for?'" (32).
21. In his introduction to The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture, Allmendinger posits that his own book, which examines cowboy art and cowboy writing, "voices a correction" to the ideas put forth by critics like Tompkins who suggest that cowboy heroes don't participate in institutions, art, writing, or culture (14). To be fair to Tompkins, though, Allmendinger does note that his examinations of cowboy work culture are based on cowboy self-representations whereas critics such as Jane Tompkins and Henry Nash Smith explore "fictions"

(novels and films) written by noncowboys (13). Allmendinger states that these critics "use the cowboys only as symbolic springboards for diving off into discussions of wide-ranging issues, most of which have little or nothing to do with real working cowboys" (12). While he clearly shows concern for the representations of cowboy put forth by such critics, as well as their effects on real cowboys, he refrains from commenting on the conclusions about fictional cowboys reached by the critics, a silence which is in itself somewhat telling.

22. D.G. Jones reads the novel's ending differently and sees in it a type of return to wilderness. He buys into Mrs. Bentley's interpretation that Philip has an affair with Judith, and argues that Philip in the end embraces the wilderness within himself when he embraces Judith, since she is a representative of the wilderness. While I agree that Judith is a representative of the wilderness, and I agree that Philip searches for wilderness both within and outside of himself, I find Jones's "happy ending" reading somewhat unconvincing since the Bentleys' move to the city is necessarily a move further away from instead of closer to the wilderness. If Philip has embraced the wilderness in his alleged affair, he has done so only temporarily.
23. While one might be able to make a case for Mrs. Bentley or Paul being the Western heroes, the cases would necessarily be weak. As John H. Ferres notes, Mrs. Bentley presents herself as victim of both the town's and Philip's many failings (Ferres 661), and this is in keeping with Cawelti's description of the hero as the person caught between two opposing sides because he (in this case, she) has "internalized the conflict" between them (55). Further, she presents herself to us as Philip's much-needed defender to the villainous and shallow townsfolk, the one who makes up for his inadequacies (such as his inability to wield a hammer successfully), who compensates for his social gracelessness, who rearticulates into something appropriate his hastily muttered thoughtless comments. But by doing so, she demonstrates that she is completely fluent, and regularly participates, in the shallow, often brutal discourses of the townspeople. Her ubiquitous, gossipy evaluations of the townsfolk, her quiet manipulation of Philip, and what Wilfred Cude describes as her "hypocrisy" and her "unblushing acceptance" of it are qualities too insidious, too sneaky for a Western hero (82). What most disqualifies her from hero, however, is the way she describes herself to us: she champions her own efforts, she describes at length her continual self-sacrifice ("Submitting to him that way, yielding my identity—it seemed what life was intended for" [22]), her thoughtfulness towards others ("our first social duty will be to return their dinner" [10]), her ability to comprehend and anticipate the machinations of the townspeople ("they expect a genteel kind of piety"[5]), and especially her knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of Philip ("he resents his need of me. Somehow it makes him feel weak, a little unmanly" [31]). This kind of self-congratulatory, unquestioning confidence in her own ability to understand the feelings and motivations of another person so completely, despite the fact that that person seldom actually speaks to her, betrays an arrogance and solipsism a Western hero simply would not have.

Granted, she also confesses to us times when her behaviour and intentions are less than benevolent and speaks about her conviction that she is a "hindrance" to him (44), confessions that might make her seem less arrogant. But these are unconvincing in light of the significant amount of time and space she spends trying to persuade us of her reluctant magnificence.

Similarly, one might make a weak case for Paul. He rides a horse, considers himself a "[c]ountry boy" (11), dresses like a cowboy (53), and finds himself caught between two opposing sides in more ways than one. He prefers wilderness life but is the schoolteacher with loyalties to the townspeople as well, and he's caught in the middle of the Bentleys' marital tensions, a friend who appreciates Philip's art and intellect, and a companion (or possibly lover) to Mrs. Bentley. But again, this heroism doesn't ring true since, under the guise of instructing others, he takes every opportunity to advertise his knowledge of etymology and philology, to an extent far greater than would be necessary if he were simply sharing necessary information or being conversational, and to an extent that is difficult to read as anything but boastful, and hence incongruent with Western heroism.

24. The only woman character in the novel that doesn't get bound up in similar hostilities about women and what they represent is Laura Kirby. Laura is the only woman in the novel who doesn't somehow victimize Philip. She has "a mannish verve about her" (122) and she receives the respect of the cowboys as a true companion would but she does this without being adjunct to any of them and without emasculating any of them. Indeed, she implies that she can restore to Philip some of his masculinity when she wishes she "'had the handling of him for a day or two'" (134). It's important to notice, though, that Laura is not part of the domestic sphere and indeed sets herself in opposition to it much like the cowboys do, as if announcing that identifying with the domestic sphere is identifying in opposition to what she stands for: "Laura is a thorough ranch woman, with a disdainful shrug for all such domestic ties" (122).

**Chapter Three - “The Stinking Wreckage of the West”: The Fractured Family,  
“Canadian Themes,” and the New Canadian Library**

**I. Introduction**

The title of this chapter, “The Stinking Wreckage of the West,”<sup>1</sup> is taken from a lengthy, volatile, and argumentative correspondence between Jack McClelland, the owner and editor-in-chief of the Canadian publishing house, McClelland and Stewart, and Malcolm Ross, the general editor of the New Canadian Library series published by McClelland and Stewart. Much of the correspondence is unpublished and can be found in Series A (President’s Correspondence) of the McClelland and Stewart fonds at the McMaster University Archives in Hamilton, Ontario. The subject of debate is Leonard Cohen’s novel, Beautiful Losers (1966), and the year is 1968. Malcolm Ross, having originally agreed to include Cohen’s novel in the New Canadian Library series, re-reads it and changes his mind, deciding that the novel should not be published in his series because it is, in a nutshell, a “very, very sick book” (McClelland and Stewart Archives, Series A, Box 47, File 3, Sept. 2/68). In some of the liveliest and most entertaining writing I have ever read, the argument between the two men escalates as McClelland tries to convince Malcolm Ross to stick with his original instincts and include the book in the NCL series, while Ross, reading and re-reading the novel several times, becomes increasingly offended and increasingly incensed, using increasingly colourful expletives and modifiers to explain his position. Beautiful Losers, he says, is “an adult-sick extravaganza on the persistence of infantile sexuality—the polymorphously perverse” (Sept. 2/68), and its writer, he accuses, “wallows in the stinking wreckage of the West”

(Series A, Box 47, File 5, Sept. 18/68). To make a long story (which wanders through several archival boxes and files) shorter, Malcolm Ross wins the short-term battle since he does have power of veto as general editor of the series (Series Ca, Box 10, File 17, Oct. 16/68), and the rights to the novel continue to be held by McClelland and Stewart while the novel is once again published by Bantam, an American firm which purchases from McClelland and Stewart a temporary license to publish the novel (Series Ca, Box 10, File 17, Oct. 16/68; Series A, Box 47, File 5, Aug. 27/68). Twenty-three years later, in 1991, the opposing side has the last word and Beautiful Losers is published as Number 153 in the New Canadian Library series.

I choose this phrase, “the stinking wreckage of the West,” as a title for this chapter for a number of reasons. First, the larger situation out of which the phrase grows is important to the content of this chapter. The tensions between McClelland and Malcolm Ross—tensions based on the fact that McClelland thinks the novel a “serious piece of work” which will “enhanc[e] the reputation of the New Canadian Library” while Ross thinks it the product of moral decay and therefore unable to enhance anything—point to the debates surrounding canonization of novels (Series A, Box 47, File 5, Aug. 27/68). These debates, in turn, show that while there may appear to be consensus regarding the “literary superiority” of a particular novel which renders it “suitable” for canonization as a “classic,” the narrative surrounding that canonization often suggests otherwise. The narrative in this case suggests that the events and machinations leading up to the canonization of a novel are far from straightforward, and are instead convoluted and complex. It suggests that “literary superiority” is not an objective Given understood equally by everyone who specializes in literary subjects, but is instead a highly subjective



process reliant on many things, one of them being the tastes and judgments of those in positions of power. Further, the situation out of which the phrase was born shows Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland as key figures in the canonization of many Canadian novels. Their roles and involvements in the creation of the New Canadian Library, a series dedicated to the publication of “classic” Canadian literature, are crucial to any discussion of the representations of the nuclear family in these novels and are consequently discussed in this chapter.

Finally, the title points to the irony surrounding the “stinking wreckage” itself and the speaker who names it as such, an irony which raises questions of taste and value central to the issues of canonization raised in this chapter. In his protests against Cohen’s novel, protests of which the “stinking wreckage” quotation is one, Malcolm Ross identifies with values that some might describe as “wholesome, clean, family values,” lamenting the passing of such values and spitting out his distaste at finding himself in a time “contaminated by disgust,” a period of “anti-morality and anti-art” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Sept. 2/68). In this exchange (and indeed in all of the McClelland and Stewart archival records I was able to read), Ross resists examining these values upon which he places so much weight as adamantly as he resists accepting the values and judgments of those who might disagree with him. Nevertheless, he sets out to complete a particular job—the creation of a distinctive national capital-L Literature—that throws his “values” into new, ironic light. By virtue of the fact that he sets out to complete this job in Canada—a country neighbored by a more established country with its own influential national capital-L Literature to which “family values” are central—Ross struggles with an anxiety of influence, and thereby promotes values which have a non-American bent to

them and which subsequently undermine on some level the popular “family values” to which he appears to subscribe personally. The values he inadvertently promotes highlight the fragmented nuclear families which contribute to and form part of what he deems the “stinking wreckage of the West.”

This chapter investigates some material explanations for and aspects of the differing representations of nuclear family in the “classic” American and Canadian western texts. It uses primarily a New Historicist methodology, a structuralist anthropological method which, to use the words of Bruce R. Smith, “read[s] fictional texts against other kinds of texts [ . . . ] to come up with data, facts, objective knowledge” (320).<sup>2</sup> After discussing briefly some pertinent canonical theory and contextual information, this chapter locates the final reconstruction and reaffirmation of the nuclear family demonstrated in the two American western novels (by Willa Cather and Wallace Stegner) and the final deconstruction of and resistance to the nuclear family demonstrated in the two Canadian western novels (by Sinclair Ross and Martha Ostenso) in long established histories of similar representations of family in the respective national canons. It discusses the critical tendency to read these trends allegorically as metaphors for nation, and points out some problematic aspects of that tendency, suggesting that an examination of the publication situations surrounding these texts might be a more productive way of thinking about the representations of family in them. It follows that discussion with an examination of the publication and canonization history of Ross’s and Ostenso’s novels, focussing particularly on their publication in the New Canadian Library, an important one of many aspects contributing to their canonizations. It makes no attempt to defend the “Canadian literary canon,” its inclusions and exclusions, and it

does not examine connections between the political motives of the writers and the representations of family in their novels; instead, it suggests that the inclusion of these novels (and other novels with similar representations of family) in the New Canadian Library series is part of a larger attempt by McClelland and Stewart, the self-defined “Canadian publishers,”<sup>3</sup> to create a Canadian canon that was clearly distinctive from the American canon, a distinctiveness which relied upon ill-defined “Canadian themes,” one of which appears to be the broken, dismantled, or diseased family. The “Canadian canon” agenda, this chapter suggests, influenced McClelland and Stewart to choose these two western Canadian texts over other Canadian texts that might have a different family rhetoric altogether.

In following this line of argument, this chapter necessarily departs from the central topic of family to complicate claims made by Dermot McCarthy and Lawrence Matthews. While McCarthy and Matthews each claim that universities are the primary institutions responsible for the creation of literary canons, I will show that, in the case of the Canadian western canon, a publishing house, reacting against the American more established canon, had a great deal of influence in the creation of the Canadian western canon (and, indeed, in the creation of the larger Canadian canon). By controlling the texts available, it both manipulated the university curricula and promoted the creation of a canon directing its efforts at the university population as a marketing strategy. While I assume that a great number of other factors and elements—such as various cultural authorities, audiences, cultural producers, social positions, political events, economic conditions, advertisers, reviewers, booksellers, to name just a few—played important

roles in the canonization of these western Canadian texts, I do not address these other factors at great length here.

Carole Gerson notes, in “The Canon between the Wars: Field-notes of a Feminist Literary Archaeologist,” that “Deeper insight into some of the ideas and activities of Canada’s canonical ‘gatekeepers’ can be acquired in serendipitous forays into this country’s scattered archival collections, where, despite the vagaries of preservation and indexing, the researcher occasionally makes significant, unexpected discoveries” (48). The scattered nature of the archival collections in Canada makes this chapter necessarily narrow. My archival journey began in the Roy Daniells Fonds at the University of British Columbia. Readings in this Fonds led me to wonder about the importance of the New Canadian Library in the canonization of the two Canadian western novels central to this thesis, and eventually, to explore the McClelland and Stewart Fonds (in which the NCL archives are included). This chapter focusses on material concerning the New Canadian Library series found in the McClelland and Stewart archives in Hamilton, Ontario. Other “canonical gatekeepers” and archival collections are, unfortunately, not examined here.

## **II. Culture Games and Canon Battles**

Before I begin discussing the Canadian and American literary canons and what they have to do with family in the western texts I study, I must define what I mean by those terms. This is especially important since “canon” is such an intangible noun; as Donna Bennett shows in “Conflicted Vision: A Consideration of Canon and Genre in

English-Canadian Literature,” a canon can exist only as “a mental construct, a collective abstraction” (132). For the term “American literary canon,” I borrow Paul Lauter’s definition from his 1991 work, Canons and Contexts. Lauter defines the American literary canon as “that set of authors and works generally included in basic American literature college courses and text books, and those ordinarily discussed in standard volumes of literary history, bibliography, or criticism” (23). To this definition, I add an oral aspect; I use the term American literary canon to include those books and authors generally discussed and understood as being representative of particular genres and categories (an example of such a category might be Canadian western literature) at academic conferences and events specializing in American literature.<sup>4</sup> I modify this definition slightly to define the Canadian literary canon as “that set of authors and works generally included in basic Canadian literature college and university courses and textbooks, and those ordinarily discussed in standard volumes of literary history, bibliography, or criticism,” as well as those texts and authors generally discussed and understood as being representative of particular genres at conferences and events specializing in Canadian literature.

Much canon theory examines questions of privilege—it asks why certain works are capital-L Literature while others are not. Robert Lecker, in his introduction to Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value (1991), notes that such canon “interrogations are inevitably contentious. [...] They testify to some wide-ranging differences in the perception of literary merit. And they question the structures that invest certain texts and authors with canonical authority” (3). Lecker goes so far as to suggest that, by virtue of its analyses of the institutions responsible for the existing canons, “canonical enquiry is

deliberately aimed at destabilizing authority” (3). A good deal of canonical enquiry throws relentless shadows of doubt upon the unquestioned. Are the Masterpieces really masterfully crafted? Are they actually aesthetically superior? Does a hierarchy of aesthetics even exist? Can there be a universal standard against which works of literature can be measured for their aesthetic achievement? If so, who created this hierarchy? And for what reason? Whose opinions count? Who gets to say that this book is Capital-L Literature and that book is small-p pulp? Do the canonized works gain the descriptors “masterpiece” or “classic” through privilege and nepotism instead of through some intangible aesthetic achievement? Or, do the books gain those adjectives through the accidents of market opportunities, of writing in the right place at the right time in the right discourse, accidents which automatically exclude from canonization at least as many writers and works as they include?

By troubling canonical authority through questions such as these, much canonical theory lifts the veil of “aesthetic superiority” and exposes for examination the assumptions behind the “standards” by which the texts are measured. To use Lecker’s words, it “focus[es] on how literature is the product of ideological forces that remain largely unexamined, even though these forces have created the values aligned with works called good or pronounced to be worthy of study” (4). What is of particular note here is that these unexamined ideological forces and assumptions are neither benign nor isolated; instead, they are highly influential and widespread. Paul Lauter states that

no conclave of cultural cardinals<sup>5</sup> establishes a literary canon, but for all that it exercises substantial influence. For it encodes a set of social norms and values; and these, by virtue of its cultural standing,

it helps endow with force and continuity. [...] The literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power. (Canons 23)

This social power can be seen particularly in the self-perpetuation of the canon, the reproduction of certain ideals over and over again. Dermot McCarthy, in his essay “Early Canadian Literary Histories and the Function of a Canon,” states,

Any canon is [...] self-perpetuating; or, as [Barbara] Herrnstein Smith puts it, both teleological and tautological. This is Eliot’s sense of the tradition as ‘an ideal order’ which is ‘complete before the new work arrives’ and which is only ‘altered’ by the new work in a way that results in a ‘conformity between the old and the new.’

[...] The canon is always ‘complete,’ if never finished. (McCarthy 41)

It is always complete, once it has been created, according to this line of thinking, because its primary function is the reproduction of the social values that brought it into being in the first place.

A number of the above cited discussions appear in Robert Lecker’s volume, Canadian Canons, and I discuss them here not only because their arguments are relevant to understanding canon debate, but because their discussions focus on exploration of Canadian canons. However, John Guillory, in Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation, complicates several of these ideas of canonicity and canon formation, cautioning against reading canonization as overly political. Guillory’s work relies on the previous work of Pierre Bourdieu who suggests, in “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” that artistic recognition, or, to use his term, “symbolic capital,” is a type of power for which cultural producers *compete* in the enormously

complex field of cultural production (“field” for Bourdieu is a structure or system in which individuals and institutions occupy and struggle for positions of domination, subordination, or equivalence); and second, that “cultural capital,” or legitimate knowledge of some kind (also a form of power), cannot be divorced from class.<sup>6</sup> Guillory seeks to take Bourdieu’s argument further and to foreground class in the discussion of canonicity in an effort to correct the “relative absence of class as a working category of analysis in the canon debate” (viii). “The fact of class,” Guillory continues, is important because it “determines whether and how individuals gain access to the means of literary production, and the system regulating such access is a much more efficient mechanism of social exclusion than acts of judgment” (ix). In foregrounding class in this manner, Guillory takes issue with certain liberal-pluralist conventions which have “had the unfortunate effect of allowing the participants in the ‘symbolic struggle’ over representation in the canon to overestimate the political effects of this struggle” (viii). He resists the idea that “the history of canon formation [is] a conspiracy of judgment, a secret and exclusive ballot by which literary works are chosen for canonization because their authors belong to the same social group as the judges themselves, or because these works express the values of the dominant group” (28). “The scene in which a group of readers,” Guillory continues, “defined by a common social identity and common values, confronts a group of texts with the intention of making a judgment as to canonicity, is an *imaginary* scene” (28) (his italics). Instead, Guillory, insisting on the complexity of the field of cultural production and its struggles between parties (individual and institutional) and position-takers, suggests that “the problem of what is called canon formation is best understood as a problem in the constitution and



distribution of cultural capital, or more specifically, a problem of access to the means of literary production and consumption” (ix).

H. Aram Veesser points out, in the introduction to The New Historicism (1989), as he identifies assumptions underpinning New Historicist practice, that “a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe” (xi). What this means is that even while analyzing the institutional forces which canonized these novels, my writing here (like the writing of the canon theorists mentioned above) participates in the same institutional forces that I place under examination in this chapter. I cannot and do not claim to be above them; the best I can do is claim to be aware of them. Perhaps Pierre Bourdieu says it most succinctly in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste: “There is no way out of the game of culture” (12).

### **III. Family Traditions**

My focussing so completely on parts of Canadian and American canon narratives, on specific patterns in them, and on certain aspects of their histories, should not suggest that there were no other important and highly influential contextual factors influencing the cultural climate of the time and, subsequently, the canonization of individual novels. At the time these canon narratives were being written, Canada was not yet a century old, and had already been involved in two world wars, both fought on European soil. In 1917, Canadian soil itself became scarred by the European wars when a French munitions ship exploded in the Halifax harbour, killing over 1500 people and injuring thousands more.

Canada's involvement in these wars attested—in blood and corpses—to the close bond it still had with England; in each war, Canada fought alongside and in support of England. (I have often wondered if the drafting of so many men—many of them fathers—into military service in two wars within the same generation has anything to do with the “disappearing father” motif Dick Harrison points out in Unnamed Country). Not until the late 1950s, when it participated actively in United Nations peacekeeping efforts, and when it criticized instead of supported the British and French seizure of the Suez canal, did Canada assert significant military independence from Britain.

And Great Britain not only reshaped Canadian families by drafting young men for military service (and often not returning them), but it shaped Canada's arts culture as well. I was fortunate enough to spend two summers as researcher for the Edmonton Theatre Project, and one of my duties was to scour newspapers from the 40s, 50s, and 60s for information regarding particular theatre activities. What I found there was that easily the most popular acts, judging from the reviews and descriptions of audience response, were the acts from Britain—the regular tours of John Martin-Harvey, for instance. Indeed, the creation of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in 1953 is evidence enough of the penchant to establish in Canada the kinds of theatrical experiences for which Britain was famous.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, the theatre culture is only one aspect of the arts culture of the mid-twentieth century. That the British Council served as a model for the creation of the Canada Council in 1957 shows that the Stratford example is not an exception, and that British culture still wielded a great deal of influence over the Canadian arts scene (and, more specifically to this thesis, over the literary scene) in the middle of the twentieth century.

And there were other important contextual factors and events as well. The public outrage over the cancelled production of the Avro Arrow (a warplane designed to shoot down Soviet bombers) suggested that Canadians in the 1950s were very much affected by the Cold War taking place between United States and the Soviet Union. The fight for women's rights in the twenties, thirties, and forties by such women as Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby, troubled constitutional definitions of "person," an achievement that surely affected many levels of Canadian culture (even though the widespread mistreatment and sanctioned discrimination against Japanese and Chinese Canadians during those decades revealed the quiet acceptance of racism in a country "progressive" enough to give votes to women). And in all of this, the effects on Canadian self-definition and understanding of the late (1948) joining of Newfoundland to Canada as well as the rising tensions between Quebec and the rest of Canada must factor in as well. These events and factors, along with many others, would have exerted considerable influence over the economic conditions which would affect the sales of novels. My discussion here is not meant to exclude such contextual factors or to suggest them unimportant, but simply to focus on one corner of one aspect of cultural production, the early publication contexts of particular western novels.

### III.i. *Family in The American Canon*

A number of theorists and critics have noted the tendency in the American literary canon to glorify the family. Sentimental literature, a genre Jane Tompkins shows to be foundational to American culture because of "the enormous popularity" in the nineteenth

century of sentimental novels, has as a cornerstone a pro-nuclear family bias (124). In Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860, Tompkins discusses the religion of domesticity in sentimental novels, arguing that the novels represent “a tradition of evangelical piety and moral commitment” (123). In her discussion of the novels, she shows that the “most cherished social beliefs” of the United States are and have been “the sanctity of motherhood and the family” (134).<sup>8</sup> And indeed, one need look no further than the advice manuals of the nineteenth-century United States, manuals such as those written by Lydia Maria Child (The Mother’s Book [1831]) or William Alcott (The Young Wife [1837] or The Young Husband [1841]), to see the celebration and influence of the pro-nuclear family discourses in the nineteenth-century United States. These advice manuals give detailed instructions for creating that most important ideal, a happy home, and set forth discourses that are reproduced in the sentimental novels.

The influence generated by stereotypical characters (and by the advice novels) that trademark much sentimental fiction is substantial, argues Tompkins, and carries over into life outside the novel. She writes that in her own research, she “began to see the power of the copy as opposed to the original [and] searched not for the individual but for the type. I saw that the presence of stereotyped characters, rather than constituting a defect in these novels, was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition” (Designs xvi). Tompkins notes, in her introduction to Sensational Designs, that her study reads literary texts as

attempts to redefine the social order. In this view, novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations

of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment. (xi)

Tompkins goes still further to show that the sentimental works she studies not only operate as instruments of cultural self-definition, but are intended as instruments of cultural construction, shaping, and reproduction as well, that they “were written not so that they could be enshrined in any literary hall of fame, but in order to win the belief and influence the behaviour of the widest possible audience” (xi). Indeed, Tompkins even suggests that the religion of domesticity promoted by sentimental novels and household advice manuals had a colonial agenda dedicated to “colonizing the world in the name of the ‘family state’” (144). As such, it follows that the “widest possible audience” to which these novels aspire would include future readers and writers who would sit under the tutelage of such works; it follows that certain characteristics and expectations of reading and of literature—and of family in literature—would be passed on to the next generation of writers, even if the sentimental novels themselves slipped from the canon for a while.<sup>9</sup>

Sentimental fiction, however, has in recent decades attracted a good deal of attention. One might argue, then, that since much of the critical attention given to sentimental writing is relatively recent, the ubiquity of the pro-nuclear family rhetoric in sentimental literature is inadequate support for my claim that there exists a pattern in the American literary canon of glorifying family. Elizabeth Barnes, however, extends this tendency beyond sentimental literature into other American literature and even into the public American political and cultural spheres. In States of Sympathy: Seduction and

Democracy in the American Novel (1997), she discusses nineteenth-century American novels, and asserts a continuing “preoccupation with the power of familial love characteristic of American literature and politics” (19). “For American authors,” she argues, “a democratic state is a sympathetic state, and a sympathetic state is one that resembles a family” (2). Pointing to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, among other novels, Barnes shows that “to be truly American [in these novels] one must be able to conceive of others as if they were part of one’s family” (xi).

Barnes extends her discussion of family in American culture and literature to an examination of the incest and seduction narratives which appear with some frequency in American literature. She argues that the American valorization of and preoccupation with family and family-bonding produce a “confound[ing of] the difference between familial and social bonds,” a confusion which is partly responsible for

why so many American stories center on the distinction between licit and illicit love and why incest and seduction become recurrent themes. [. . . ] Incest and seduction represent the ‘natural’ consequence of American culture’s most deeply held values. Both can be read as metaphors for a culture obsessed with loving familiar objects. (xi)

Indeed, Barnes suggests that the especially intense filial bonds of incest and seduction play central roles in (and even “epitomize”) the construction of American identity. The frequency with which they appear, she argues, “is not a rejection of incest and seduction, but a perfecting of these concepts”; it is an affirmation and idealization of “loving what is familiar” (74).<sup>10</sup>

That this valorization of and obsession with family might extend to a more specialized canon—the canon of American western literature central to this thesis—is another notion that some critics might dispute. They might especially challenge the idea I discuss in the previous chapter, that many American formula Westerns (which I claim inform the texts discussed in this thesis) are part of the long established American literary history that glorifies and celebrates family. The Western hero often leaves the family behind for life outside of “civilization,” but he also spends a great deal of his time protecting from harm and rescuing from danger the nuclear family; nothing is more worthy of rescue and protection in the Western than the nuclear family. Indeed, the stereotype of the lone, individualist hero protecting the family occurs with such frequency in Westerns that it too gains the power of “cultural self-definition” Tompkins attributes to the stereotypical characters in sentimental novels. In a nutshell, when it comes to family, the Western and the sentimental novel are not so very different as they may seem to be.

Elizabeth Barnes makes note of another interesting connection between the sentimental novel and the American west. While she does not specifically address the formula Western, her argument that American literature has a tendency to glorify the nuclear family does extend specifically to texts having to do with the western part of the continent. She discusses Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian vision of small independent landowners, along with the valorization of the ideal of the nuclear family on which such a vision relies. She notes that in communicating this vision, Jefferson actually creates an American personal and political identity rather than merely articulating it, and that his vision “did not die out in the nineteenth century, but rather moved westward,” to where

the western frontier offers a new and spacious home for the American imagination, an imagination which Barnes shows still reproduces, relies, and preys upon the intimate power of familial bonds (77). This, then, is part of the heritage into which Cather's and Stegner's novels are born.

### III.ii. *Family in the Canadian Canon*

The Canadian canon has a much different history than the American canon. For one thing, the history is shorter. There was no Canada until two thirds of the way through the nineteenth century (and, as earlier noted, provinces continued to be added until half way through the twentieth century), and Canadian literature didn't appear regularly on university curricula until the 1970s. Further, the nineteenth-century sentimental novels that Tompkins argues were instruments of American cultural self-definition never acquired the power and influence in Canada that they acquired in the United States. Carole Gerson, in *A Purer Taste: The Writing and Reading of Fiction in English in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (1989), shows that romance novels in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott garnered significant attention in nineteenth-century Canada, but that "early critics drew a clear distinction between unacceptable sentimental romance and acceptable Scott-inspired fiction" (72).

Nonetheless, the constructions of family that appear in the Canadian canon also follow certain distinctive patterns. Early widely-received Canadian fiction<sup>11</sup> written before the time of a Canadian canon routinely presents fairly conventional and cohesive nuclear families. When I say this, I think of works such as *Man From Glengarry*, by



Ralph Connor (pseudonym) which presents the domestic sphere as something to cherish and protect and the complete and healthy nuclear family as something after which to strive.<sup>12</sup> Connor's novels, and this one in particular, have a certain zeal consistent with what you might expect to find in a missionizing sentimental novel, though rather than using the novel form to colonize the world as a kind of "family state," as Tompkins suggests many American sentimental novels do, a primary *raison d'être* of Connor's novels, it seems, is to offer political comment on Canada's nation-status.

But as Canadian writing begins to be taken more seriously in university curricula, the broken or diseased representation of the nuclear family becomes prevalent, particularly in the Canadian western novels that gain critical acclaim in the last half of the twentieth century, and in the commentary of the critics. For instance, John Moss implicitly notes this in Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction when he includes an entire chapter on the exploration of a single character type that represents the broken family (one in both As For Me and My House and Wild Geese) and that appears repeatedly in Canadian fiction: "The Ubiquitous Bastard" (189-192). Moss discusses the recurring character motif, and a number of variations, of "bastard offspring and bastard origins" (190), suggesting that the motif shows a "threat to familial and communal unity," a threat which fosters independence, self-sustenance, and subsequent isolation (192). (The bastard child, according to this reading, is much like the members of what Jacques Donzelot calls "the floating population," persons not easily regulated by the sociofamilial apparatus.) Dick Harrison, in Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction, focuses on another aspect of the dismantled family. He comments on the frequency with which fathers in Canadian prairie novels vanish: "The

disappearing father,” Harrison states, “is far more universal than the prairie patriarch ever was, and his range of significance is correspondingly broader” (188). And the prairie patriarch who precedes the disappearing father, a patriarch who shows up in novels like Grove’s Fruits of the Earth (1933) and Settlers of the Marsh (1925), is so relentlessly overbearing and moralistic despite his good intentions that he makes the continuation of a nuclear family impossible. Di Brandt, in Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature (1993), turns Canadian critical attention to the women in the family only to explore (and give a largely psychoanalytic reading of) yet another aspect of the broken family in Canadian novels, specifically in multiple works by Margaret Laurence and Daphne Marlatt: the absent mother. And at the end of her work, she points briefly to an unexplored aspect of the broken family in works by Sandra Birdsell, Margaret Laurence, and Sylvia Fraser—the failed mother. These works, writes Brandt, tell “stories of those mothers who go crazy or have too many children or are otherwise disabled and/or unable to defend their daughters against violence” (162). While the history of the incomplete, failed, broken, or diseased family in the Canadian canon is not as long as the history of the glorified and happy family in the American canon, given the relative size of the canons, the former is no less prominent.

### III.iii. Family as Metaphor

Curiously, the critical tendency seems to be to read metaphorically these patterns of glorifying or dismantling the nuclear family. Barnes, for instance, in her study of such novels as Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Hannah Foster’s The Coquette (1797), Herman

Melville's Billy Budd (1924) among others, states that "[s]ympathy was to be the building block of a democratic nation, and democracy, so the story goes, was a defining element of the United States." She continues:

In American literature sympathetic identification relies particularly on familial models. Readers are taught to identify with characters in such a way that they come to think of others—even fictional 'others'—as somehow related to themselves. At the same time, the family analogy generates a myriad of problems for an emerging national audience. For example, the long-standing metaphor of England as America's 'parent' country raises questions as to how America can both glorify family and reject the "parent" that has so profoundly influenced its culture. For how does a nation repudiate that which has brought it into being without repudiating an essential part of itself? (x)

Jane Tompkins, studying works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and James Fenimore Cooper, among others, offers a similar allegorical and nationalistic reading of the family in which she states that the family "becomes the type and cornerstone of national unity, and an earthly semblance of the communion of the saints" (Designs 14).

Similarly, critics read the dismantling of families in Canadian novels metaphorically. Dick Harrison, for example, allows that the disappearing father may suggest "particular themes in individual novels," but goes on to read the novels with this absent character as a single unit, reading the family metaphorically, arguing that the

missing fathers have to do with a lost continuity with the past, with “dead, lost, or obscured antecedents.” Specifically, Harrison refers to absent fathers in works by western writers W.O. Mitchell, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, and Sinclair Ross, and argues that this discontinuity has to do with “emphatically declar[ing] the end of the patriarchal prairie,” (189) but in the context of his larger argument that Canadian prairie novelists are re-naming the past (212), this discontinuity also has to do with a Canadian rejection of European heritage, a type of national maturation. More recently, Frank Davey, in Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967 (1993), also implies such a nationalistic reading of family when he states that

in general male representations of Canada as the ‘growing lad’ (Ranald Macdonald of The Man from Glengarry, Neil Macrae of Barometer Rising, Brian O’Connell of Who Has Seen the Wind, Johnnie Backstrom of The Words of My Roaring) have tended to be more common [than the representation of Canada as a woman threatened or wooed by international men]” (193).

I’m not sure which is more interesting—the familial patterns themselves, as they appear in these novels, or the tendency of these critics and others to allegorize the nuclear family, and, more specifically, to allegorize it in a nationalistic way. Why must these families be read allegorically? Or, rather, must they be? Karen Sanchez-Eppler, in Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body (1993), claims that sentimental fiction relies on the body as “the privileged structure for communicating meaning,” and that the body consequently can be read symbolically (25). Barnes takes this to the next logical step and states that sentimental narratives convert “all bodies into

representations, subjecting them to interpretive [ . . . ] mediation.” “In order to be read at all,” she suggests, “the material body *must* be read symbolically” (95) (her italics). Does the same thing happen in these novels with the family? Must it too be mediated and read symbolically in order to be read at all?

Elizabeth Barnes points to a long heritage in English literature of reading the family as nation. She reminds her readers of kings represented as fathers of their people (10), or of John Locke’s affirmation of filial bonds as political metaphor when he includes an analogy of childrearing in Two Treatises of Civil Government (1694) (Barnes 23). She also notes that in philosophical, literary, and political texts, “sociopolitical issues are cast as family dramas, a maneuver that ultimately renders public policy an essentially private matter. [ . . . ] *F*/amily stands as the model for social and political affiliations” (2) (her italics). Anne McClintock, in Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest (1995), thinks along similar lines when she discusses the function of the metaphor, pointing out that the “family trope is important for nationalism” because it “offers a ‘natural’ figure for sanctioning national *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interests” (357) (her italics).

Perhaps the critical tendency to invoke nation on these fictional families has something to do with sanctioning national hierarchy, but I suspect it has more to do with something Elizabeth Barnes points to—the fact that the cultural imaginary “can be as powerful a political tool as material facts and events,” (ix) and that its power extends here to the way we read family in these novels. That is, with a long and complex European philosophical, political, and cultural heritage of reading family as nation, perhaps both

Canadian and American critics read family as nation almost by default, simply because so many before them have done the same thing.

Reading the family allegorically, while it allows one to trace the development of particular themes and ideas throughout a large body of literature, is problematic on a number of levels. First, it implies that all the authors write family in the same way, as nation. This is not impossible, of course, but it is a bit of a stretch, I think, even to imply such a universal. I do hate to get into the smudgy, slippery, generally unstable area of authorial intent, but I have a hard time believing that Cather, as she was writing My Ántonia or O Pioneers! and all her other novels that valorize family, was thinking about the family metaphorically, and specifically, nationally. And that Stegner and Guthrie and Lewis and Ross and Ostenso and Mitchell and Kroetsch and all the other canonized western writers, Canadian or American, are thinking “nation” when they write “family.” While I disagree with much of what John Metcalf says in his book What Is A Canadian Literature?, he does have a point when he argues that “Writers in English are influenced by other writers in English,” and not exclusively by simple lines of tradition, be they lines of genre, nation, style, or ideology (89).

Even more difficult to believe is the further implication of the family-as-nation metaphor that the American authors think and write family-as-nation one way and the Canadian authors think and write family-as-nation another way. As Robert Thacker points out in his essay, “Erasing the Forty-Ninth Parallel: Nationalism, Prairie Criticism, and the Case of Wallace Stegner,” such universals can be dangerous. Nationalist assumptions in prairie criticism are not benign, Thacker shows. Instead, they “accentuate difference while ignoring or minimizing similarity. More insidiously, they undergrid

exceptionalist arguments. American *and* Canadian” (181) (his italics). In reading family exclusively as metaphor—both in prairie novels and other western novels—we limit ourselves, miss part of the point, and read the novels categorically rather than individually.

Further, I believe that when we read family in the novels exclusively as metaphor, we miss part of the narrative. One thing becomes abundantly clear when reading the files and papers in the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library archives: writers frequently (but not surprisingly) have a greater loyalty to writing, and to being paid well for writing, than to abstract nationalistic ideals. In a letter to Malcolm Ross dated December 5, 1957, Jack McClelland informs him that a foreign publishing house (Knopf) has beaten McClelland and Stewart in the race to procure rights for a particular novel, and anticipates that foreign publishers will be able to contact authors and snatch the rights to potential NCL works with increasing frequency: “This is going to be one of our problems in that, as more paper-back publishing is done in England and in the United States, more titles [ . . . ] are going to be issued in other series and it is going to make it difficult for us to complete our aim of offering a Canadian ‘classic’ series” (McClelland and Stewart Archives, Series A, Box 47, File 3, Dec. 5/57). A more specific example of an author’s lapsed nationalistic loyalty in the face of financial reality comes up in the case of Gwethalyn Graham. According to Malcolm Ross, her book, Earth and High Heaven (1944), is “an indispensable element” in his blossoming New Canadian Library (Series A, Box 47, File 8, Sept. 14/64). Nonetheless, after her initial three-year contract with McClelland and Stewart, Graham withdraws from the contract because of “the old,

old Canadian story—I can't afford not to." After laying out for Malcolm Ross the actual figures that prompt her decision, Graham laments the fact that she finds herself

in the disgusting position of not being able to have principles.

For this sort of thing *is* against my principles and it is particularly ironical because [... I once] was Chairman of the Book Contracts Committee of the Canadian Authors Association which involved, among other things, a stubborn fight not to have Canada regarded as an American or British colony, depending on which publisher got there first. (her emphases)

Graham concludes her letter by highlighting what must have been a painful reality for McClelland and Ross—that the New Canadian Library series could not possibly offer comparable remuneration to the competing Paperback Library series: she states that the NCL edition of her novel “is going to earn the amount of the Paperback Library advance alone, in exactly fifty years!” (Series A, Box 47, File 8, Sept. 16/64). Nationalistic ideals, and the representations of family that grow out of them, are all well and good in the end, but being paid for a day's work and making a living are even better.

These kinds of financial and publication realities also play important roles in the narratives surrounding the canonization of the Sinclair Ross and Martha Ostenso novels, in the stories that explore some of the reasons why they became Canadian “classics” in the first place. The fact is that the Ross and Ostenso novels were not written for a Canadian market nor were they written to perpetuate ideals of Canadian nation; instead, they were both written for an American market and were published by American publishers. Ostenso, herself a Norwegian-turned-American (and not a Canadian), wrote



Wild Geese for the Dodd Mead “best first novel” competition, knowing that the selection of the winning novel would be based largely on how well the novel could be transformed into a motion picture that would be filmed by an American company (Atherton 9). Since it won the competition, it was published by Dodd Mead, which was and is an American company. Indeed, when one takes into account the fact that the novel was in fact written not by Ostenso herself, but by Ostenso *and* her partner and co-collaborator, Douglas Durkin (Arnason 132), a fact which would have given Ostenso an unfair advantage in the Dodd Mead contest, one must agree with Stanley S. Atherton that this is “a story of commercial shrewdness [more] than anything else” and might wonder if it could possibly be a story of “deliberate fraud” (14).

Similarly, Sinclair Ross’s As For Me and My House seems aimed at an American market. It was published by a small American firm, Reynal and Hitchcock, in 1941. Dallas Harrison’s essay, “Where Is (the) Horizon?: Placing As For Me and My House,” argues convincingly that Sinclair Ross keeps ambiguous the exact location of the small town, Horizon, specifically because he keeps “one eye on the American market” (145), (a suspicion at least one early reviewer shared with Dallas Harrison)<sup>13</sup> and locating Horizon squarely in Canada would alienate his American audience. In the end, Sinclair Ross’s novel did not sell well in the States and, Harrison argues, Sinclair Ross “wanted American readers more than they wanted him” (148). These two Canadian novels, then, were not written for a primarily Canadian audience, so it is likely that they were not written with the family-as-Canadian-nation metaphor in mind (or even as explorations of Canadian national ideals or themes).

This is not to say that the reading of family as metaphor for nation is not useful. The works and writers that do read family as nation have made valuable contributions to our understanding of Canadian and American culture and literature, particularly in the reading the development of literary history. Indeed, this chapter relies heavily on the works by (Dick) Harrison and Tompkins and Barnes, all critics who use the family-as-nation metaphor. I mean only to say that this metaphor is merely part of the story; it is something placed on these novels retroactively and, as such, does not examine some important and relevant aspects of the constructions of family in these novels. In particular, it does not examine the ways in which the representations of family might be symbolic products of influential but unexamined ideological forces, and it does not examine the questions of privilege inherent to the making of any canon.

#### **IV. Anxieties of Influence**

That the Ostenson and Sinclair Ross novels were intended for American markets but eventually became mainstays of the Canadian canon raises some important questions: how did they come to be canonized as Canadian “classics”? If they were to be canonized as “classics,” a privilege granted to relatively few novels, why were they not canonized as American “classics” instead? And what has this to do with the different family rhetorics appearing in the canons?

I believe that one important factor is an anxiety of influence. “Anxiety of Influence” is a term coined by Harold Bloom in the early 1970s to describe the pressure on those writers who must write against, or out from under, the influence and cultural

tradition created by respected writers who have preceded them. In his book, Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (1973), Bloom complicates the assumption that the influence and literary traditions inherited by writers from canonized writers who precede them are positive inheritances. He argues that canonical writings, expectations, and traditions are at least as much a burden to the writer as they are a blessing, a burden which affects the poetic imagination by urging writers, consciously or subconsciously, to create or name something first, a difficult task given the fact that nearly everything has already been named or described by previous writers.

In discussing representations of family in the Canadian literary canon, however, I focus not on the anxiety of influence that affects Canadian writers but on the anxiety of influence that affects Canadian publishers, those who are partly responsible for determining which novels will and will not be canonized as “classics,” and who are partly responsible for the creation and distribution of the book product. Canadian publishers McClelland and Stewart show in their archives that the entire Canadian literary scene was working itself out from under the influence of the more established American canon.<sup>14</sup> These next pages examine the early public receptions of all four novels, showing that the two American western novels were canonized as American “classics” relatively soon after initial publication. The two Canadian western novels, however, likely would have slipped into oblivion were they not subjected to “cultural retrieval” through the efforts of McClelland and Stewart. This section of the chapter argues that McClelland and Stewart, a Canadian publishing firm, attempted to create a Canadian literary canon as a marketing strategy to increase sales and to create a niche for itself in the North American literary

market. Since the creation of a niche required that McClelland and Stewart market literature clearly distinctive from the already established American canon (of which the valorized family was and is an accepted characteristic), they sought out novels with “Canadian themes,” ill-defined themes that were somehow distinctive from themes characterizing American literature. One of these “themes,” I suggest, is the undermined, dismantled, diseased nuclear family. The damaged nuclear family that appears repeatedly in the western Canadian canon, then, is at least partly a product of material circumstances. These circumstances do imply the importance and reproduction of certain ideals, but these are less ideals about family itself than they are ideals about certain genres of literature, about “quality” in literature, and about the representation of geographic, national borders in literature.

#### IV.i. *Literary Receptions*

Both Cather’s My Ántonia and Stegner’s Angle of Repose were recognized as “American classics” relatively soon after publication. James Schroeter shows that not all readers and critics were enthusiastic about Cather’s work: her novel was dismissed by critics who valued “heavy attempts at refinement, uncritical loyalty to the prevailing business ethic, a narrowly Protestant, Anglo-Saxon viewpoint,” and never caught the attention of those critics who took a “naïve delight in stories with a ‘well-made’ plot” (1). Between 1910 and 1920, representatives of this “genteel” school of thought, Schroeter argues, either ignored Cather’s work or trivialized it by giving it “the sort of meaningless praise [ . . . ] doled out to any other book of the day that crossed [the reviewer’s] desk” (3).

But while her work was being trivialized or misunderstood by the established literary order, it was simultaneously embraced by a second school of thought growing in influence and momentum. The literary establishment was undergoing a delegitimation crisis, a crisis that signalled a change in cultural values. As Paul Lauter notes, “The literary canon does not, after all, spring from the brow of the master critic; rather, it is a social construct. As our understanding of what is trivial or important alters in response to developments in the society, so our conception of the canon will change” (*Canons* 36). High profile critics like H.L. Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks were calling for change; they were dissatisfied with distinctions between high and low brow art, and were disgusted with various other kinds of elitism.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, they were “attacking the puerilities of American culture at the time of World War I, and calling for ‘America’s Coming-of-Age’” (Schroeter 2). To quote a 1921 review of Cather’s work, they were enlisting “in the crusade against dulness (sic) which ha[d] recently succeeded the hereditary crusade of American literature against wickedness” and credited artists who did the same (van Doren 16).

To these sensibilities, Cather provided much. For instance, her complex representations of immigrants, taking seriously a large and varied population that had been previously ignored in the American literary canon, were welcomed by these critics. Further, her western regional writing won favour with these American literati by bringing the western 2/3 of the country to their attention. Schroeter states that Cather “helped shift the geographical center of the literature toward the heart of the continent, where Mencken and Brooks thought it belonged” (3). All the while, Cather demonstrated a literary craft that could be appreciated by those readers with a literary education who were on some

level rebelling against that education.<sup>16</sup> Even though she had to continue to fight the sexism characterizing much critical opinion (Mencken declared My Ántonia “the best piece of fiction ever done by a woman in America,” suggesting that writing by women should be evaluated under different criteria than should writing by men [qtd. in Schroeter 4]), and even though the serious and detailed evaluations of her work didn’t come for a few years yet, Cather was immediately taken seriously by people who had the power to canonize her work. And her novel—while it variously came under criticism or praise depending on the penchant of the reader—never really lost its place in the American canon after that, even after Mencken and his colleagues became the old guard against whose staid ideas younger critics rebelled.

Wallace Stegner’s novel was canonized as a classic nearly immediately after publication since it won the prestigious and widely publicized Pulitzer Prize in 1972, becoming a subject of instant critical attention. Since that time, Angle of Repose has continued to be a staple in courses and books discussing western American literature, and Stegner’s work is a frequent topic of discussion at western literature conferences. Angle of Repose has been lauded by critics and theorists as widely varied as New Historicist theorists like Forrest Robinson, environmentalist critics such as Brett Olsen and Nancy Owen Nelson, and western literature specialists like Kerry Ahearn, among others. Of the four books I focus on in this dissertation, this novel is the one that received the most instant recognition at the university level. Indeed, as mentioned previously, western critic Blake Allmendinger considers the attention Stegner’s work has received to be disproportionate. That it is an American “classic” isn’t really a question.

Martha Ostenso and Sinclair Ross, however, could have no such reception in Canada. There are a number of reasons for this. First, you will recall that the potential market for “best sellers” in Canada was abysmally small, that a sale of two thousand five hundred copies would make a book a “best seller” by Canadian standards, a sale that was a mere fraction of what a “best seller” would generate in the United States or in Britain (McClelland and Stewart Archives, Series A, Box 47, File 3, Feb. 27/58). Stated simply, in the decades surrounding the initial releases of these novels, the Canadian reading public could not support the kind of market necessary to warrant labelling a novel a classic; enough sales couldn’t be generated. Second, as already mentioned, both novels were published by American publishing houses. Since Wild Geese won the Dodd Mead contest, it was published by Dodd Mead. As For Me and My House was published by a small independent American publisher, Reynal and Hitchcock; the United States, it seems, was the target market both for Ostenso and for Sinclair Ross. It follows that the Canadian attention—both critical and popular—Ostenso and Ross received would be minimal at first. And third, the Canadian readership had its own tastes already, as Carole Gerson shows. And those tastes favoured foreign writing. Drawing on studies by Allan Smith and Mary Vipond, Gerson shows that the British and American products dominated the Canadian markets, that the vast majority of books read were written by British writers and by American writers (“Purer Taste” 7-8). Further, as already mentioned, those tastes—especially the popular tastes—favoured “romance” writing, particularly romance writing after the fashion of Sir Walter Scott. And though both of these novels clearly have romantic elements in them, they would hardly qualify as writing after the fashion of Sir Walter Scott.<sup>17</sup>

It is understandable, then, given the size and tastes of Canadian readership, that the initial attention the two novels received in Canada was not entirely enthusiastic. Despite the fact that Ostenso's novel beat out 1388 other entries for the Dodd Mead prize, and despite the fact that "Wild Geese quickly became the source of a financial bonanza" (Atherton 3), the early reviews of the novel were mixed. Canadian reviewer W.E. MacLellan called it "the most striking and by far the best literary work that any one of [Canada's] children has yet done," but F.P. Grove spat out that "only trash wins a prize" (25-26). It didn't take long for the novel to be relegated to critical obscurity; Atherton notes that it was "mainly ignored by both Canadian and American critics for the next thirty years" (10). Even now, surprisingly little criticism has been written about Wild Geese<sup>18</sup> despite the fact that it shows up regularly on Canadian Literature curricula.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Sinclair Ross's novel received mixed reviews. A young Robertson Davies, in his oft-quoted review, recognized Sinclair Ross as "an author of first-rate importance" and was enthused by the possibilities such a Canadian novel represented (Davies 18), and others, such as William Arthur Deacon and Roy Daniells, agreed. But there were also reviews like the one by E.K. Brown, a review which criticizes Sinclair Ross for repetition, "injured" unity of tone, and "failures in design" (20). Like Ostenso's novel, then, Sinclair Ross's novel "soon dropped from sight" (Stouck, Five Decades 6). Unlike Ostenso's book, though, As For Me and My House failed to capture the popular imagination—particularly the American imagination—and thus could not be the source of a financial bonanza. Indeed, McMullen states that "A few copies of the novel were imported for the Canadian market by McClelland and Stewart, but in all, only a few hundred copies were sold (19). Consequently, by 1957, Sinclair Ross himself considered



the novel to be a failure. In a letter to Hugh Kane (a representative of McClelland and Stewart), Sinclair Ross states:

For my part, As For Me and My House is something that happened a long time xxxx (sic) in which I am now not very interested. I feel there are a few good things in it—and considerable promise, which unfortunately has not been fulfilled—but none the less *I have written it off as a failure.*

It may be, however, that I see it with a somewhat jaundiced eye as a result of its neglect [ . . . ] (McClelland and Stewart Archives, Series A, Box 47, File 3, Apr. 16/57) (my emphasis)

Lest anyone think Sinclair Ross is falsely modest here, and secretly admires his own work, a letter of June 5, 1957, quickly dispels that possibility by showing that Sinclair Ross didn't even think the novel worth keeping on his own bookshelf. When asked by the editor to check some sentences and phrases before the novel went to print, Sinclair Ross confessed, "I leave this one entirely to you. I haven't a copy of the book and don't know exactly how the sentence reads" (Series Ca, Box 15, File 7, June 5/57).

These novels, then, were in the process of vanishing and likely would have disappeared entirely into microfiche obscurity had they not undergone what Dallas Harrison calls "*cultural retrieval*—to import the export, to place the novel and its setting more solidly in Canada [ . . . ], and to construct [the novel] as a classic of English Canadian literature "(145) (his italics). It was the publishing house McClelland and Stewart that was responsible for their cultural retrieval; insisting that the plots of both novels were located on the Canadian prairies (even though the locations of both are

ambiguous in the texts themselves), McClelland and Stewart republished them in the New Canadian Library series, a series which published only works its editors considered to be “classic” Canadian works. As For Me and My House was republished as a Canadian “classic” novel in 1957, 16 years after first release in United States, and Wild Geese was republished as a Canadian “classic” novel in 1961, 36 years after its first release, also in United States. This event was the turning point for both novels since the New Canadian Library series, as John Metcalf disparagingly asserts, is responsible for a great deal of what we call “the Canadian tradition” (35). Upon their appearance in this series, these novels, it seems, were immediately taken seriously as “Canadian classics” by both the Canadian public sector (in this case, universities) and by the Canadian private sector. They have maintained their position since then, and have each been reprinted a number of times by McClelland and Stewart. Only long after original publication did these novels become “Canadian classics,” and largely because of the efforts of one publishing firm that set in motion the process of their canonization.

#### IV.ii. New Canadian Library-- the Beginnings

The remaining questions, then, are, first, why would McClelland and Stewart choose these novels, one having received little critical attention and the other having hardly sold its first run, to become Canadian “classics”? It seems that of all the novels available, these would be among the least likely to be canonized as “classics” of any sort. And when one takes into account the fact that they were written for an American market,

their canonization as Canadian “classics” seems non-sensical at best, absurd at worst.

The second question is, of course, what has this to do with family?

Answering these questions calls for some elementary exploration of the New Canadian Library series. The initial idea for the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library series was proposed by Malcolm Ross sometime in 1953 (McClelland and Stewart Archives, Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 6/54),<sup>20</sup> and was discussed by Ross and Jack McClelland, among others, soon after that. Ross, a university instructor himself, emphasized the university community, the university needs, and the university market. For him, the New Canadian Library was about the university. A memo to Jack McClelland describing Malcolm Ross’s idea of the target market argues that the series would be “Primarily for courses in Canadian and American literature. These courses are taught in Canadian universities” (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 14/54). This emphasis continues in Ross’s correspondence throughout his time as general editor of the series. In early letters which still bear the formality of unfamiliarity (eventually, correspondence would become more casual and those involved in the New Canadian Library series would address each other by given names), Ross argues that university literature courses require “an inexpensive series of paper-backed Canadian works,” and that a ready market is growing in the university community which will expand when books become available, “given time” (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 14/54). In a nutshell, his winning argument was that “This kind of thing is coming—someone must get in and at it—first!” (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 6/54) (his emphasis).

Jack McClelland’s vision was not as narrowly focused as was Malcolm Ross’s, or so it seems. Ostensibly, the purpose of the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian

Library series for McClelland was mostly altruistic. “On the whole,” he states in a memo to Steve Rankin dated November 25, 1957, “I think the publication of this series is performing a service to the people of Canada” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Nov. 25/57, 3). McClelland states repeatedly in his correspondence that “there doesn’t seem to be a hell of a lot of money in it for anybody” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Jan. 27/55), that the series is pretty damn uncommercial. Book publishers’ motives are always suspect and ours might well be here except that in this case the facts speak for themselves. Even if this series is a tremendous success we can do little more than break even. On the other hand, we do stand to lose a good deal of money on the experiment if it doesn’t work. (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Nov. 25/57, 2)

Indeed, the advance sales of the first few selections was disheartening, and this fact is mentioned repeatedly in the 1957 correspondence in the archives; despite the fact that McClelland anticipates my suspicion of his motives, on some level the numbers do speak for themselves. McClelland tells Ross, in a letter written on January 31, 1957, that “the [advance sales] returns were very, very distressing. The booksellers didn’t like the titles we had chosen and weren’t optimistic about the prospect.” He worries about the future of the series and states that “We cannot afford to have this project flop” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Jan. 31/57). It does seem, initially, that McClelland was interested in this project for largely altruistic reasons and that he believed “the reason inexpensive editions of Canadian classics or semi-classics are not available is that there is not a sufficient market for them” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Nov. 25/57).

Nevertheless, the archives indicate that McClelland was not simply providing the average reading public with Canadian literature, that he was highly aware of and focused upon the university market, though perhaps for different reasons than Malcolm Ross. In fact, it seems he was thinking in a Bourdieuan manner, about a kind of distinction, about a building up of cultural capital. He clearly knew that the university market was a potentially lucrative one, even though it would require some shaping before its benefits could be reaped. Again and again, his main criterion for inclusion of a novel was that it be usable in a university classroom.<sup>21</sup> (It seems that McClelland agrees with Bourdieu that art and literary appreciation are learned—and for McClelland, they are learned especially in university classrooms.) He consistently insisted that the introductions to the novels be useful for “the University undergraduate market” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Jan. 22/58), even though they would be “above the head of the average reader” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Jan. 9/58), suggesting that it was important to McClelland to attract and cultivate the readership of what Bourdieu calls “*connoisseurs*” (“Field” 330). Indeed, he states in a February 10, 1960, letter to Ross that the series is “based on the belief that Canadian literature is going to become increasingly important subject [sic]” (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Feb. 10/60, 5). (In the end, the outcome of the series also fitted the Bourdieuan concept of the way investment in cultural capital works over the long term, that an opposition exists between “the short cycle of products which sell rapidly and the long cycle of products which sell belatedly or slowly” (330). McClelland’s investment in products which sell slowly brought about a good return, perhaps even better than the one he might have made had he marketed bestsellers. I shall return to the subject of the university market later in the chapter.) And yet, although the financial urgency—an

understandable concern—is apparent in his insistence that the project must not flop, and although his continued awareness of and aim at the university market is evident, in his public communiqués McClelland downplays the financial aspect of the project by emphasizing the public service aspect of the series as primary motive for its inception:

Firstly, we are doing it because for years we have listened to the complaints of teachers and readers generally that there are no good Canadian books available in inexpensive editions. [ . . . ]

Another reason we are publishing them is that we feel they should be available for students and for people interested in Canadian writers. This is, after all, our business. We are supposed to be promoters of Canadian reading and of Canadian culture and so we do this sort of thing. (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Nov. 25/57, 2)

I believe that a key to the choice of novels included in this series, and specifically to the inclusion of the Sinclair Ross and Martha Ostenso novels, is in the final words of McClelland's quotation above: McClelland and Stewart saw its mandate as being the promotion of Canadian reading and culture. The New Canadian Library series, with its focus on "classic" Canadian novels, was a vehicle of this promotion. The New Canadian Library archives show the focus and effort put into this promotion of Canadian culture. The editors searched constantly, for example, for books with "Canadian themes," or for books that bore the mark of being "important Canadian literature." A work by Emily Montague, for instance, was considered for the series because it was "an important early work, quite original" (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Jan. 12/60). Gwethalyn Graham's Earth and High Heaven. McClelland insists in a note to Malcolm Ross, has a "strong and

important Canadian theme” (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Dec. 7/59). Later, Ross concurs, saying that the novel “is concerned with a theme of genuine significance” (Series A, Box 47, File 8, Sept. 14/64.) In addition to “important” Canadian writing, the editors looked also for books that were somehow representative of Canadian writing and culture. A November 14, 1960, release to the press states that “The aim of Dr. Ross as editor-in-chief of the New Canadian Library is to secure a representative cross section of the best Canadian writing in its different forms from the colonial period to the present” (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Nov. 14/60, 2). Two years later, the aim had not changed. A November 7, 1962, letter to Brandt & Brandt states that “The purpose of this series is to bring back and maintain in print representative works of what is considered to be the best of Canadian fiction” (Series A, Box 47, File 2, Nov. 7/62.) As might be expected when a series attempts to be representative, the New Canadian Library had a few books that even the editors considered to be less than stellar. Jack McClelland admits, in a September 9, 1968, letter to Malcolm Ross, that “We have published some pretty bad novels in The New Canadian Library because of their historical significance” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Sept. 9/68, 4). But for the most part, the impetus of the New Canadian Library seemed to be towards the spotlighting of “important” and “representative” Canadian work: “The NEW CANADIAN LIBRARY SERIES (sic),” states the report of a January 1961 meeting, “will include only two groups of books: (1) Great Canadian writing [. . .] (2) Criticism and anthologies” (Series A, Box 47, File 7, Jan. 30/61, 7).

The problem, for a graduate student like myself, is to determine just *what* these men think “Great Canadian writing” is. I looked in vain through boxes and boxes, files and files of McClelland and Stewart archives, hoping to locate such a definition. My

hopes peaked briefly when I found the following in a memo (the memo concerns publicity for the New Canadian Library series) from Jack McClelland to Steve Rankin:

An angle is the question as to why we selected these four titles to launch the series. This subject is an interesting one, I think, for panel discussion. What are Canadian classics? Are these four books Canadian classics? Can the selection be defended? I think it can. I think each one of the four books is outstanding. I think we have provided a reasonably varied fare at the outset. (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Nov. 25/57, 2).

Unfortunately (and even painfully), Mr. McClelland does not elaborate. He tells his reader that he *can* defend his selection, but never actually *does* so. Nor does he offer an explanation for how two novels long ago forgotten, novels previously unable to “stand the test of time” (a cliché often used to describe and/or determine “classic” literature), might suddenly be “classics.”<sup>22</sup> Again and again, Malcolm Ross and McClelland toss around such terms as “good writing” or “poorly written” or “hardly adequate” without ever articulating their criteria for such value judgments.<sup>23</sup> There are a few hints here and there as to what the editors may be looking for. For instance, after reading a manuscript by a writer named Curry, Malcolm Ross states that “He is not a graceful writer” (Series A, Box 47, File 4, Mar. 10/59), suggesting that Ross appreciates writing he considers to be graceful. But I was unable to find anything in the archives which defined “Great Canadian writing.” Instead, as the description that opens this chapter suggests, I found disagreements between the editors that suggest they themselves didn’t necessarily agree on what constituted Great Canadian writing. Consequently, I must agree with Leon



Surette when he states that “the Arnoldian and New Critical claims that the canon consists of the best that has been thought and written are not easily supported” (17).

Indeed, the New Canadian Library files indicate that the editors had difficulty defining even “Canadian writing,” let alone “Great Canadian writing.” In discussing a particular project (A.J.M. Smith’s proposed volume, Essays in Criticism by Canadian Writers), Malcolm Ross and McClelland struggle with an aspect of this by trying to determine what qualifies as Canadian criticism. Ross asks McClelland if a volume on criticism by Canadian writers should have a section devoted to “Canadian critical comments on non-Canadian work,” or if the book should “tie in mainly with Canadian literary studies,” or if it should “attempt to represent the development of criticism as such in Canada” (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Jan 12/60); Ross’s question highlights the central quandary: is Canadian writing about Canada, or is it writing done by Canadians, or is it writing that shares patterns or themes with other already-identified-as-Canadian books? Perhaps an even more pointed example of the struggle to define Canadian writing is the fact that American writer Willa Cather’s work, Shadows on the Rock (1931), was seriously considered for a 1962 inclusion in the New Canadian Library series (Series A, Box 47, File 7, Jan. 30/61, 5). And of course, we run into similar problems with Wild Geese. When it was published in the New Canadian Library series, the fact that it was co-written by American author Ostenso and Canadian author Durkin was not common knowledge; all correspondence regarding the novel in the archives is addressed to “Mrs. Durkin,” the married name of Martha Ostenso, and the publishers clearly assume that she wrote the novel in its entirety. They seem to have little difficulty including the writings of an American citizen in their list of “classic” Canadian novels. Similarly, they have

little difficulty considering the writings of a British author; in 1968, Gilbert Parker's Seats of the Mighty (1896) was considered for inclusion in the series (Series A, Box 45, File 33, Nov. 25/68, 1).

It comes without surprise, then, that we have little in the way of definition for "important Canadian themes," even though Malcolm Ross and McClelland state repeatedly in the archives that these "important Canadian themes" are central to "Great Canadian writing." These "important Canadian themes" are so ill-defined, in fact, that their presence or absence in a particular work was repeatedly cause for controversy and dispute among the editorial staff of the *New Canadian Library*. To give a single example, I refer once more to Gwethalyn Graham's Earth and High Heaven. You will recall from two earlier references that Malcolm Ross attempted to persuade Graham to allow McClelland and Stewart to continue publishing the novel (rather than switching to an American publisher) and that he felt that the novel was "concerned with a theme of genuine significance and that it holds and will continue to hold a unique place in Canadian fiction" (Series A, Box 47, File 8, Sept. 14/64). I do not doubt Ross's conviction here, but it is interesting to note that this point is one of which Ross himself had to be persuaded five years earlier. Malcolm Ross initially rejected Graham's novel for the series and Jack McClelland, in a letter dated December 7, 1959, urged Ross to reconsider because he (McClelland) felt the book had "a strong and important Canadian theme" (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Dec. 7/59), a theme which again goes unidentified and unexplained. It seems, then, that McClelland and Ross were not very clear themselves on just what an "important Canadian theme" is, a dilemma that likely contributed to the intensity of the aforementioned debate surrounding Cohen's novel, Beautiful Losers.

And so what we have here is a publishing house releasing a series the aim of which is to promote Great Canadian writing with important Canadian themes. What we do not have is an understanding of what is Great or what is Canadian for this publishing house (or for this series). This is not entirely surprising. Both John Metcalf (What is A Canadian Literature?) and Margaret Atwood (Survival) have written about the troubles of defining aspects of Canadian culture, Metcalf suggesting that Canadian writing should be less determined by subject or theme than by the Canadian citizenship of the author, and Atwood pointing out that Canadian culture is often defined by Canadians in the negative (i.e. it is *not* British, or *not* American, etc.). And Pierre Bourdieu (Distinction) and other theorists who build on Bourdieu's work speak of the difficulty—the impossibility, even—of defining and identifying “great” art since such value does not exist inherently in art itself; taste, the mechanism through which one would discern such hierarchies, Bourdieu shows, is largely determined by class and other sociological and environmental factors. It follows, then, that the criteria McClelland and Stewart set for determining New Canadian Library texts are particularly difficult to define or identify.

#### IV.iii. *American Hype and Canadian Distinctions*

Keeping in mind that we receive definitions for neither “great” writing nor “Canadian” writing in the New Canadian Library archives, and keeping in mind Harold Bloom's theories discussed earlier, I would like to posit that “Great Canadian writing,” for McClelland and Stewart, was partly North American writing from or about the northern part of the continent that could somehow be shown *not* to be American writing,

or at least could be shown to be distinctive from works already considered American. Subsequently, I suggest that “important Canadian themes” for the New Canadian Library editorial staff were often those themes that identified or discussed something in Canadian literature and/or culture that was unlikely to be characteristic of American literature and/or culture. Stated baldly, I believe that the anxiety of influence produced by the American market and the American canon was a substantial and primary motivating and defining force in the New Canadian Library series.

The key to the New Canadian Library—and perhaps even McClelland and Stewart—surviving in an American-dominated North American market was for McClelland and Stewart to carve out a niche for itself. Judging from the correspondence in the McClelland and Stewart archives, easily the biggest obstacle to the success of a Canadian publishing firm was the very substantial, powerful, and always growing American market. But that same market also provided Canadian publishing firms and Canadian writers with promotional engines much larger than could be generated in Canada. The McClelland and Stewart archives suggest that the American publishing industry essentially ran the North American market (even much of the British literature on the North American market was being printed and distributed by American publishers), and that the Canadian publishers and writers had a love/hate relationship with these forces: they both relied upon (and even desired) American promotions of Canadian writings and were also overwhelmingly dominated by the American market, a situation which provided fertile breeding ground for anxieties of influence.

The extent to which Canadian publishers like McClelland and Stewart relied upon the American promotional engines is revealed in correspondence between Jack

McClelland and Edward A. Weeks (editor of The Atlantic Monthly). Quickly and eagerly, McClelland cooperated with the American editor on the rare occasion that the latter wished to highlight Canadian writing in an upcoming issue of his journal. Instead of just giving Mr. Weeks contact information regarding the Canadian writers he might want to include, as one might expect, McClelland contacted the writers personally (with the exception of Margaret Laurence, whose address he gave to Mr. Weeks) and eagerly offered further help as well “because nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see a really first-rate Canadian issue of The Atlantic” (Series A, Box 2, File 33, June 12/64, 2). Although McClelland doesn’t say it, it’s not difficult to see that an issue of the American magazine dedicated to Canadian writing would provide the kind of advertising that might significantly boost sales of Canadian books.

And when the American promotional machine is temporarily withdrawn, the results are dramatic: an unexpected American political event which diverted media attention was enough to slash expected sales of a Canadian book (that is, a book by a Canadian writer) by more than seven-eighths! Hugh MacLennan tells Malcolm Ross, in a January 19, 1962, letter, about the release of his novel, Each Man’s Son (1951): “The weekend of its American appearance happened to be the weekend of MacArthur’s dismissal, and all the American reviews, I guessed, went unread. Instead of selling 75,000 copies, as Little Brown (sic) expected, they sold no more than 9,000” (Series A, Box 47, File 2, Jan. 19/62). If MacLennan’s speculations are correct, the loss of the American promotional engines, even for a weekend, had near disastrous results for this Canadian writer. Clearly, then, the Canadian market and those involved in it benefitted

from American promotions; American advertising, because of the results it could offer, was clearly something to be desired for those who needed its publicity.

But the strength of the American market presented substantial drawbacks for Canadian writers and publishers as well. I have already discussed, in the case of Gwethalyn Graham, the tremendous southward pull exerted on Canadian writers by the promise of much higher pay. And those writers who were not seduced by the promise of American money to publish exclusively with American houses were still reluctant to turn their backs on the possibility of that same money. For instance, a December 26, 1957, letter to Jack McClelland from Morley Callaghan states

In limiting the publication to Canada naturally I wouldn't object if you did a deal with a United States publisher, who might want to buy sheets or even books from you, but really to give it a United States publication. [. . . S]ooner or later there's some money in it there for me, and I musn't kill it off. (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Dec. 26/57)

The Canadian literary market, then, was regularly in danger of drainage as the artists and writers leaked southward to publish where the remuneration could be more substantial.

The power of the American market extended even to Canadian universities, where curricula on American-Canadian courses were clearly dominated—perhaps even determined—by American literature and the ubiquity of American texts. Hugh MacLennan noted the difficulties of teaching a university class in Canadian prose. In a letter to Malcolm Ross, MacLennan states that before the birth of the New Canadian Library “it was almost impossible to handle [a course in Canadian prose] at all because books were either unavailable or there was only one dog eared copy in the library”

(Series A, Box 47, File 2, Jan. 19/62). Ross clearly agreed, as an earlier (pre-New Canadian Library) internal McClelland and Stewart memo notes, and expressed frustration that “most of the material” used in courses in Canadian and American literature was “concerned with the American portions of the courses—principally [. . .] because of the scarcity of Canadian material” (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 14/54).

Even though it is written nearly 20 years after the early New Canadian Library days I discuss here, perhaps a 1972 memo to Jack McClelland from Peter Taylor explains best the conflicted relationship between the Canadian and American markets. Taylor points out the enormous influence of American media, the fact that Canadian media are not nearly as effective as the American media in reaching the general Canadian populace, and the consequence that the American “hype machine” effectively shapes Canadian (as well as American) culture:

The sheer (sic) weight of American promo is all around us, spilling into our homes with Time, Life, TV, and that whole mess of American movie magazines. The audience is used to that message. It finds them in the media they watch, read and listen to. There are few Canadian equivalents to the American programs, magazines, etc., which this market is tied to. [. . .] The Canadian who reads Robbins, et al, is tied to the American hype machine. He has very little knowledge of the Canadian thing. He’s the first guy to say “Is it published in the States—O it’s just published in Canada” when you tell him you’ve written a book. [. . .] He knows what to expect

from Canadian publishers and he buys it if it's a must like the Berton books, but he buys it for other reasons. [ . . . ] It takes a scattergun to reach him—our Canadian scattergun is not as big and very likely to treat the product with good old Canadian cultural kid gloves. If they do, we're dead.

The fellow who buys Robbins (or Robertson) doesn't read book review (sic). He absorbs what's hot through a thousand advertisements, mentions, plugs, the works. He can tell you more about American movies, books, fads, and fancies than he can tell you about his own city hall. (sic) (Series A, Box 68, File 29, Aug. 14/72)<sup>24</sup>

To return to the Canadian publishing situation in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by virtue of the comparatively miniature size of the Canadian cultural “hype machine,” the Canadian literary market had been and continued to be shaped by American promotions. For McClelland and Stewart to succeed in the shadow of such a “hype machine,” for McClelland and Stewart to fulfill its mandate and promote successfully Canadian reading and culture, it had to work itself out from under the influence of that powerful American market and of its product, the well-established American canon.

Donna Bennett argues that new canons have “difficulty establishing themselves against older, entrenched forms. since, consensus having already been gained, a canon is [ . . . ] resistant to revision or replacement.” Bennett continues, “For a new version of the canon to challenge or displace a well-entrenched one is usually indicative of a major shift in values” (134). To establish itself against the older, more entrenched American canon,



then, the new Canadian canon had to indicate to the Canadian reading public a change in values, a change so substantial that it merited the establishment of a new canon. It had to convince Canadian readers (the intended market) that the American canon was somehow inadequate; it had to offer a distinctive canon, distinctive especially from the already widely accepted American canon. If it could not offer something distinctive, there would be little reason for its existence. The quest of Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland for “important Canadian themes” in the literature the New Canadian Library would publish, I suggest, was partly a quest for themes that were unlikely to appear in “classic” American novels, a quest for themes that wrote against current themes frequenting the American canon.

And herein, finally, lies the family issue. As mentioned earlier, a number of critics suggest that the American canon celebrates the nuclear family and has done so for generations. Elizabeth Barnes and Jane Tompkins repeatedly point out that a glorified and celebrated nuclear family is an obvious and major characteristic of the American canon. They suggest that the glorified nuclear family is not only an American theme but an ideal central to the American culture and psyche. My discussions in the previous two chapters show that this is certainly the case in Cather and Stegner’s novels. By retrieving novels such as those by Sinclair Ross and Ostenso—novels whose central themes do not valorize the nuclear family but instead subject it to constant suspicion and interrogation, ultimately dismantling it—McClelland and Stewart could show that, despite some historical, geographical, and cultural similarities between the United States and Canada, Canada (or should I say McClelland and Stewart?) was well on its way to creating a distinctive body of literature, a body of literature whose distinctiveness relied to some

extent upon ill-defined “Canadian themes” of which the dismantled or broken or diseased nuclear family was one.

This pursuit of “Canadian themes,” such as the broken, diseased, or dismantled nuclear family, in the interest of canon-making offers an explanation for McClelland and Stewart’s choice of the two western Canadian novels by Sinclair Ross and Martha Ostenso, novels which might otherwise have been ignored since they had disappeared from the market and could not be expected to generate substantial income: as the previous chapter shows, both of these novels clearly explore such themes and, hence, could take prominent positions in a canon intended to explore such themes. Pursuing “Canadian themes” was an agenda that might have inspired McClelland and Malcolm Ross to choose these texts for the New Canadian Library series over other novels that had different, more conventional, more favourable representations of the nuclear family, even though those other novels might have enjoyed relative popularity in Canada when they were first published.

Additionally, and similarly, this pursuit offers an explanation for why Canadian sentimental novels were either ignored or disparaged by the New Canadian Library staff. Sentimental novels were unlikely to contain the “Canadian themes” Malcolm Ross and McClelland sought, particularly the “Canadian themes” pertaining to the nuclear family, because (as Tompkins and Barnes demonstrate) sentimental novels by their very definition were restricted to pro-nuclear family themes. The family rhetoric in Canadian sentimental texts such as those by Nellie McClung, to name an example, is in keeping with the valorization of the nuclear family found in the American sentimental novels of which Tompkins and Barnes speak. It may be because of the similarity to the American

sentimental form that McClung's novels were discussed but never seriously considered for the New Canadian Library series. In a report of a New Canadian Library meeting dated January 28, 1961, Nellie McClung's Sowing Seeds in Danny (1908) is listed along with 62 other books "for house discussions at some future time," (Series A, Box 47, File 7, Jan. 28/61, 8). Important to note, however, is the fact that this list is for McClelland and Stewart commercial paperbacks, and that there is repeated emphasis that "commercial paperbacks not be published as a part of the NCL series" (Series A, Box 47, File 7, Jan. 28/61, 6) (their emphasis). Indeed, McClung's novels were not simply swept aside thoughtlessly; they were clearly rejected because they were considered inferior to the New Canadian Library fare. Carlyle King's introduction to the New Canadian Library 1961 publication of Ostenso's Wild Geese, an introduction commissioned and approved by Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland, speaks disparagingly of McClung's novels (among other Canadian sentimental novels) because the writer finds the protagonists to be "priggish" (vi), the plots contrived, the novels "cheerful and dishonest" (v) and "superficial" (vi). King goes on to praise Martha Ostenso's novel because it does not give in to these conventions and sets itself apart from the sentimental form.<sup>25</sup> Given the fact that sentimental novels were a genre important in the history of American writing, it follows that sentimental novels were unlikely to be successfully co-opted as distinctively Canadian, and would be avoided and perhaps even disparaged in the New Canadian Library pursuit for "Canadian themes."

And yet, before we move on, we must consider the fact that occasionally sentimental novels—such as Ralph Connor's Man From Glengarry—were included in the series, and consequently were canonized as Canadian "classics." Carole Gerson does not

speaking specifically of the New Canadian Library's role in the canonization of Connor, but she argues that Connor's novel was canonized while McClung's wasn't because of the accidents of sex and occupation: "Before the 1920s, L.M. Montgomery and Nellie McClung were as popular and wrote as well as their male counterpart, Charles W. Gordon ('Ralph Connor'), but lacked the canonical valorization bestowed by the latter's profession as a man of the cloth" ("Canon" 54). The introduction to the New Canadian Library version of Ralph Connor's Man From Glengarry complicates Gerson's assertion, and introduces the ever-important American factor in the canonization choice. The introduction, written by S. Ross Beharriell, makes clear that the editors do not find American-style sentimental writing suitable for publication in a series of Canadian "classics." Connor's novel, even as it is being published in the series, comes under some harsh criticism. Beharriell criticizes Connor for "crusading moralism" (viii) and superficial, stereotyped characters, elements consistently found in much sentimental literature. Connor's presence in the series is justified, in Beharriell's introduction, because of the ways in which it differs from the American sentimental form, because of moments of "penetrating realism" (xi) in the novel which set Connor apart from American sentimental writers: "there is a deeper realism here, too, and Connor succeeds where many of his American counterparts failed" (xi). While the bias seems to be against the sentimental genre itself more than against American writers, setting Connor's novel apart from the American sentimental novels is clearly important to Beharriell, and central to explaining the novel's place in the New Canadian Library canon.

Ironically, all this canon-making and niche-forming suggests that in making such choices, in choosing texts that were distinctive from the American texts in reaction to the

already-established American canon, McClelland and Stewart allowed for and in fact relied upon the American canon to shape the Canadian market and the Canadian canon. Dermot McCarthy suggests that “the writing of Canadian literary history has been organized around the extra-literary concept of the ‘nation’” (32). To this, I add that the writing of Canadian literary history as it appears in the New Canadian Library series owes as much to the concept of American nation as it does to the concept of Canadian nation, for in the creation of the series, the concept of Canadian nation appears to grow out of reaction against the concept of American nation.

The implication of this pursuit of “Canadian themes” for the purpose of distinctiveness from the American canon is that the frequency with which the dismantled or broken or diseased nuclear family appears in the New Canadian Library (and consequently in the Canadian “classic” canon) is not an intentional agenda of a multitude of individual Canadian writers to write metaphorically about Canada’s nation status and its relationships with other countries. The implication is that the frequent appearance of the damaged family in Canadian literature is partly due to the marketing strategy of a Canadian publishing house struggling to create a niche for itself and for Canadian novels in an American-dominated market. It is partly the result of material circumstances.

Of course, the material circumstances—and consequently the canon—are informed by certain cultural ideals and beliefs. In this case, the cultural ideals and beliefs informing the material circumstances that brought about the creation of the Canadian canon are assumptions about nation and literature. Jack McClelland and Malcolm Ross, in order to bring about the New Canadian Library, had to assume, for instance, that the experience of living in a particular geographical region of the globe compels writers to

embrace and write about particular themes; that is, that something as imaginary as a nation results in national characteristics<sup>26</sup> which can be represented in literary themes that somehow encapsulate the experience of living in that country, and that those themes appear repeatedly in the writings of people who have lived in that country. In addition to assuming that there are such things as “national themes,” the editors had to assume that one country’s national themes can be clearly distinguished from another country’s national themes, that differences in location and geography result in essential and elementary thematic differences. Further, they had to assume that those themes should become the cornerstone to that country’s literature. Robert Lecker comments on this phenomenon in his introduction to Canadian Canons. He draws on the work of Leon Surette to state that “the evolution of canonical value projects a displaced expression of nationalist ideology. [. . .] To find the literature was to find the country, and to find successive works of literature that embodied the nationalist ideal was, in effect, to discover the solidity of the nation’s existence in time” (9). And so, even though the metaphor of family in Canadian literature need not be a metaphor for nation, we nonetheless return to the importance of nation in canons. Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland’s assumptions here, according to the theory put forth by Lecker and Surette, are not just assumptions about literature, but about nation; they seek not only to confirm the existence and solidity of a canon, but the existence and solidity of a country.

Furthermore, the material circumstances surrounding the creation of the New Canadian Library rested on Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland’s assumption of a hierarchy of literature. By that, I mean that they assumed that one genre of literature (realism) is inherently qualitatively superior to another genre of literature

(sentimentalism), that some measurable standard exists by which “good” or “great” writing can be distinguished from “pulp.” This assumption is nearly astonishing in light of the fact that they—highly articulate men with a great deal of cultural power—seemed unable to define “Great Canadian writing” themselves. And yet, it is not so very astonishing when one takes into account that canons are by their very nature hierarchical, a fact so enormous that each one of the contributors to Robert Lecker’s collection of essays (Canadian Canons) discusses it in some version. Assumptions such as these—assumptions which are not necessarily facts—contribute to the inclusion of some texts in a canon and the exclusion of most others. And because of assumptions such as these, Paul Lauter says, of canon creation, that we “need to construct new versions of history—social as well as literary—[and] to reconstruct our standards of excellence, our understanding of form, indeed our ideas about the function of literature” (“History” 95). Terry Eagleton, in Literary Theory: An Introduction, urges academics to recognize that literary canons are, above all, constructs that serve specific functions for specific people at specific times (11). To quote Jane Tompkins, “When classic texts are seen not as the ineffable products of genius but as the bearers of a set of national, social, economic, institutional, and professional interests, then their domination of the critical scene seems less the result of their indisputable excellence than the product of historical contingencies” (Designs xii).

Equally important, however, is the fact that other ideals we might expect to inform the ubiquity of certain “Canadian themes” do not necessarily inform the material circumstances, and consequently, do not necessarily inform the canon. Ideals about family itself, for instance, are much less important to the material circumstances than the

national and literary ideals mentioned above. That is, the frequent appearance of the damaged family in McClelland and Stewart's "Canadian themes" suggests nothing about the family "values" of the editors, or about the family "values" the publishing house wished to promote. We cannot assume that Jack McClelland and Malcolm Ross were intentionally promoting anti-nuclear family values because they held anti-nuclear family beliefs. Indeed, the situation surrounding the inclusion of Cohen's Beautiful Losers that opens this chapter shows that Malcolm Ross, at least, clutched to himself rather conservative values and wanted, on some level, to see those values reproduced in the New Canadian Library. Lawrence Mathews, in "Calgary, Canonization, and Class: Deciphering List B," goes so far as to suggest that a trend exists among canonized Canadian novels—and the canon of which he speaks includes a list of novels most of which were published in the New Canadian Library—towards being "[r]espectable and inoffensive" (165). Furthermore, McClelland and Stewart published books that clearly promoted pro-nuclear family values at the same time as the New Canadian Library was reaching its stride. The editor's notes of Simma Holt's Sex and the Teenage Revolution (1967), for instance, describe a book which discusses and writes against "the shocking declining morality among teen-agers and young people." Many of the "causes of the declining morality" are related to "the breakdown of the family," a breakdown manifested in such things as "the declining influence of the father in the home" (Series A, Box 25, File 20, Feb. 13/67). I do not suggest that the publishing house had a pro-nuclear family agenda, but rather that an intentional anti-nuclear family agenda was unlikely. In the end, the frequency with which the damaged nuclear family appears in the western Canadian literary canon may have had as much to do with distinguishing western



“Canadian” novels about to be labelled “classics” from the American already-identified-as-“classic” novels and their frequent familial idealism as it had to do with the family ideals and values themselves.

Jacques Donzelot, in Policing the Family, writes, “It has become an essential ritual of our societies to scrutinize the countenance of the family at regular intervals in order to decipher our destiny, glimpsing in the death of the family an impending return to barbarism, the letting go of our reasons for living; or indeed to reassure ourselves at the sight of its inexhaustible capacity for survival” (4). Perhaps the scrutiny of the family in these Canadian novels is not to decipher destiny or reassure ourselves of the family’s capacity for survival, but is instead part of a mechanism to assure the survival of a literary canon, a survival that might be dependent on the barbarism of the family, for even that can be a distinction.

## **V. Cultural Cardinals and Canonical Gatekeepers**

And still there remains (at least) one aspect of the canonization process to consider, and for this, I must step away from family issues and return to another institution, the university. Dermot McCarthy and Lawrence Mathews, in their essays in Lecker’s Canadian Canon volume, argue that universities are the institutions primarily responsible for creating canons. McCarthy states that “The contemporary Canadian literary canon as ‘institution’ is a product of the university as a cultural institution” (30). Mathews thinks along the same lines: “in Canada, it is a relatively small group that makes the decision about what books are fit for canonization: university teachers of English who

specialize or dabble in Canadian literature” (155). Indeed, Robert Lecker places the university institution in such a central position that he finds that “the ideal examination of any canon would include an analysis of [ . . . ] curriculum development in schools and universities” (4). The McClelland and Stewart situation presented in the previous pages complicates the canonizing power of the university. Undoubtedly, the university is a major player in the canonization of novels in the Canadian canon. As previously noted, Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland were clearly aware of the potential power of the universities when they set the foundations for the New Canadian Library and aimed at a university target market. But what must be noted is that the university literary curriculum itself relied heavily upon—and therefore held less decision-making power than—the publishing house, McClelland and Stewart. The true canon-makers (or, to use Dale Spender and later Carole Gerson’s term, “canonical ‘gatekeepers’” [“Canon” 48]), in this case, are Jack McClelland and Malcolm Ross.

As already mentioned, the New Canadian Library was founded partly because of the assumptions of Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland that the lack of Canadian literature in university curricula was both problematic from aesthetic and educational points of view and potentially lucrative from a financial point of view. Implicitly, for McClelland and Ross, Canadian concerns and Canadian culture were different than (read distinctive from) American concerns and culture, and Canadian concerns and Canadian culture and specifically Canadian literature were of a quantity and quality to warrant a series of “classic” novels and serious literary study at the university level. In hindsight, it seems reasonable, even obvious, that the literary critics of a country would want to study

the literature of their country, that there would be a need in Canadian universities for Canadian literature. But the archives indicate that while there undoubtedly existed a *scarcity* of Canadian literature available for university use, this scarcity did not translate into an acknowledged *need*: a great many professors of literature, it seems, were content with the American-dominated curricula. The need for Canadian literature in the university curricula had to be created. It was largely because of the concerted efforts of McClelland and Stewart that Canadian literary studies, and consequently the New Canadian Library series, came to be taken seriously in the universities.

The point I am making here is that Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland did not merely articulate an already-existing canon of Canadian “classic” novels that was being taught (and further canonized) in Canadian universities; they chose novels they believed would be suitable in a canon and turned to the universities to validate their choices. And to accomplish that, they first created a need for that canon. On April 20, 1954, Jack McClelland sent Malcolm Ross a letter. In the letter, McClelland thanks Ross for a previous letter in which Ross had discussed the possibilities a series of “classic” Canadian texts might offer. Since much of McClelland’s letter is pertinent, I quote from it here at length:

The key to the whole problem, as you realize, is the economic one. If the interest in Canadian literature could be moved to the first year courses it would be very helpful, although this would only be part of the hurdle. I would like to get your reaction to a rather wild scheme that we have been thinking about here, that might be a means of

getting on with the project.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that we were able to convince the majority of University English departments in this country that every student studying English at the University level should be familiar, at least to some extent, with Canadian literature. Theoretically this idea should not be too hard to sell, although one sometimes wonders because we still get graduates from the English language and literature course at Toronto who apply for jobs with us and who have never heard of people like Thomas Chandler Haliburton, etc. For the sake of argument, however, let us say that at some convention or meeting of professors we were able to get complete endorsement of the idea that Canadian literature should be at least a fringe subject in first-year University.

We would then propose to sell them a package deal which would give them in an inexpensive way the tools with which to start. We would offer them four outstanding Canadian books in pocket book form [ . . . ] for, say, a total subscription price of \$5.00.

The idea of the course, broken into two parts, would be as follows: in September the student would receive the first pocket book, say SUNSHINE SKETCHES as a start [ . . . ].

He would then be required to srite (sic) a short assessment or review of the book and a short autobiographical note about the author [. . .]. (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 20/54)

McClelland continues to outline in remarkable detail a potential syllabus—including detailed descriptions of assignments—for a university course in Canadian literature. Malcolm Ross's response, received on May 25, 1954 (no send date is given) states that he will "try to propagandize the idea in the next few weeks and let you know" (Series A, Box 54, File 15, May 25/54). The archives indicate that in the years following, various representatives of McClelland and Stewart (often Jack McClelland or Malcolm Ross) continued to "propagandize" versions of the idea, contacting university professors and administrators, sounding them out in regards to whether they might be willing to increase the volume of Canadian literature being taught in their courses if McClelland and Stewart were to provide them with texts.<sup>27</sup> These exchanges show, first, that despite the fact that occasional professors were seeking more Canadian literature, the university requirements at the time did not include a requirement that students be at all familiar with Canadian literature. That the curricula *should* include it was something of which the universities had to be convinced. Second, the exchanges suggest that the impetus for the creation of a Canadian canon did not come from the university itself. Instead, the impetus came from two editors looking to the university for a market and for the cultural power it had to validate the pro-Canadian culture mandate of McClelland and Stewart by declaring Canadian literature worthy of study, two editors who took it upon themselves to try to change the way universities view Canadian literature, two editors who went to the lengths of creating possible syllabi and then propagandizing those syllabi in order to convince a

university community that there was a demand for Canadian novels so that they might supply that demand. This is not to say that these two men are entirely responsible for the canonization of these novels, but to complicate the notion that universities are the primary canonizers of literature.

One might argue that since Malcolm Ross had a university education, he had been shaped by the university, and all of his endeavours—such as the creation of the New Canadian Library—were in fact mere extensions of the university's cultural power. Certainly on some level this is true. But a number of other factors bear consideration. First, we must consider the fact that Malcolm Ross approached the project not as a representative of the university, but as a representative of a publishing house, one who saw in the university a potential market. Second, he did so with the conviction that the university suffered a substantial lack—Canadian texts—a lack he was determined to fill, and one he could fill only as a publishing house representative and not as a university representative. Third, his goal of substantial curricular and cultural change did not affirm the university's curricular emphasis on American and British canons but instead assumed such an emphasis was flawed, and hence, undermined and worked against the university curricula.

The success of their considerable persuasive efforts soon became evident and by 1961 Jack McClelland's personal files show that he was grappling with the administrative difficulties (such as inventory storage and royalty situations) that the success of the New Canadian Library brought him, that "even though the success of the series is very real and very satisfactory the success itself creates problems" (Series A, Box 47, File 2, Dec. 21/61). Evidently, Ross and McClelland set in motion the larger canonization machinery

with all its many aspects and contributing factors. Their success was of such magnitude that they found themselves in the position of having to downplay it. In a letter dated March 8, 1966, Carl F. Klinck offers to write an anthology “which might be forthrightly called Approaches to Canadian Literature” (Series Ca, Box 6, File 29, Mar. 8/66, 1). He suggests to Malcolm Ross that the book be built “around the volumes in the New Canadian Library series at present and with respect to planned additional volumes” (Series Ca, Box 6, File 29, Mar. 8/66, 2). Ross discusses the idea with other members of the editorial staff, and Steve Totten replies that

I am nervous about his comment of page 2 however of building around the NCL volumes. To a certain extent this would have value to us [ . . . ] but I feel we might be limiting ourselves too completely because people will then say either (“just a promotion piece for the series” or b) this leaves out too much important material.) (sic) By all means if he has a choice of two or three books (or authors) and one of them is in NCL yes—use that instead of non-NCL. but don’t make it exclusively NCL” (Series Ca, Box 6, File 29, no date, but attached to Mar. 8/66).

But even though the New Canadian Library editors on occasion downplay the impact of the series, their success is of the magnitude that they receive a number of correspondences like the one dated May 14, 1974, in which the writer (E. G. Mardon) states, “At the present time, you are deciding what novels I use!” (writer’s emphasis) (Series A, Box 68, File 18, May 14/74).

My intent here is not to point out shady moves and sleazy motives in order to demonize Malcolm Ross or Jack McClelland. I specialize in Canadian literature and have benefitted extensively from New Canadian Library and from their efforts. What I do want to point out is the tremendous, almost mind-boggling cultural power of these two men, and particularly of Malcolm Ross, since, as general editor, he had the power of veto over the series. In the early days of the Canadian literary canon of novels, Ross and McClelland set in motion the mechanisms to canonize nearly everything in that canon; very few novels were canonized in Canada before 1980 without being in the New Canadian Library series: Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers is the exception. Earlier, I mentioned Paul Lauter's comment that despite canons' substantial influence, they are not created by "cultural cardinals." In the case of the Canadian literary canon, however, it seems that there are in the figures of Malcolm Ross and Jack McClelland one or two truly powerful cultural cardinals. Undoubtedly, they relied on the universities and other cultural producers and institutions to validate their choices and their canon. Were this not the case, every New Canadian Library novel would be a "classic," and of course, a great many aren't. And a number of other important factors—such as advertising, reviews, relationships with booksellers, the strength of the dollar, for instance—still require exploration. But the introduction of novels into positions where they might be canonized rested, to a significant extent, on the efforts and opinions of these two men. Indeed, by the mid-1960s, Canadian writers recognized the power of this series and made considerable efforts to appear in the series—whether those efforts be lobbying the opinions of various university professors, as Rudy Wiebe did (Series A, Box 45, File 33, May 10/69), or offering to write a novel exclusively for publication in the New Canadian



Library series, as Robertson Davies did (Series A, Box 45, File 35, Nov. 28/66)—regardless of the fact that remuneration continued to be minimal.

The disadvantage of having a canon heavily influenced by a few cultural cardinals is that their biases and preferences hugely dominate the canon. One of the most unfortunate consequences of this is that the Canadian canon—particularly the early canon—almost completely ignores writings of First Nations people and other people of colour. I found in the New Canadian Library archives a single attempt to correct this problem, and the solution considered is nearly as painful as the problem itself in that it considers a few token books about First Nations people (note *about*, and not *by*) a representative and comprehensive treatment. On November 12, 1959, Steve Totten (a member of the New Canadian Library editorial staff) writes Jack McClelland about his conversation with a professor at University of British Columbia.

I got talking about the Indians and the literature about them. Belshaw discussed with me the question of books dealing with the early Indians. He thinks that if we should be doing books in the New Canadian Library on the aboriginal Indians, that we might be better to do three books—one book might be on the British Columbia coastal Indians; another might be on the Plains Indians, taking specifically the Cree Tribe as indicative; another book might be on one of the tribes of the Six Nations or the Six Nations as a group. That would seem to give a fairly comprehensive treatment of the various types of Indians in Canada. (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Nov. 12/59)

Although McClelland and Stewart were clearly interested in discussing and promoting the Canadian immigrant experience, it seems that the only Canadian cultural heritage the editors of the New Canadian Library series were actually interested in promoting, in the end, was the heritage of those who had emigrated from Europe, a particularly telling and ironic bias given their efforts and intent to create a distinctive Canadian canon.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this chapter is with a short quote from Linda Hutcheon's The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (1988): "literary history—especially of the novel genre—can likely never be separated from other forms of history" (189).

## Notes

1. Malcolm Ross, in using the phrase, was presumably using “West” to mean Europe and North America—West as opposed to the Far and Near East—whereas I take certain liberties for this chapter and distort Ross’s “West” to mean western North America.
2. I read the novels against archival documents surrounding the publication history of the New Canadian Library. The “objective knowledge” I offer in this chapter is simply information showing that particular representations of nuclear family in the western Canadian canon are at least partly the result of material forces and are not exclusively the result of aesthetic choices.
3. In all except the earliest editions of the New Canadian Library series, McClelland and Stewart identify themselves as “The Canadian Publishers” on the back of the inside title page (along with publication information) of the novels.
4. Stephen Scobie, in “Leonard Cohen, Phyllis Webb, and the End(s) of Modernism,” in noting that “canon-formation is an intrinsically conservative process” (57), uses a different method of identification. He measures the canonical status of works by noting the frequency with which they are anthologized. He assumes, in his method, that the canonized works become mainstream and the mainstream works are anthologized more often than works which are neither mainstream nor canonical. His definition and method, although highly useful for shorter works such as short stories, essays, and poetry, are less useful for this dissertation since novels, because of their length, are seldom included in anthologies.
5. Certainly, Lauter is correct in his claim since he speaks primarily of American literary canons, but I will suggest, later in this chapter, that the Canadian canon does perhaps have a “cultural cardinal” or two.
6. Richard Jenkins notes that Bourdieu’s definition of class is sometimes problematic. For instance, in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984), Bourdieu constitutes class by using statistical data about individuals and then classifying those individuals according to their occupations. This method, Jenkins suggests, “imports into his research a somewhat impoverished understanding of class identity (as occupation) which is at odds with his attempts to understand social life in all of its complexity” (88-89).
7. As an example of this, see Denis Salter’s “The Idea of a National Theatre” for an interesting discussion showing the influence of British models of cultural production, as well as specific British figures and institutions, on the development of Canadian theatre.
8. John Guillory strongly disagrees with Tompkins, finding her work “unhistorical.” He takes exception to her interpretation of the representation of popular fiction in the American literary canon, and objects especially to

Tompkins[’s claim] that popular fiction “has been rigorously excluded from the ranks of ‘serious’ literary works.” as though the two categories did not define *each other* in a system of literary production. [. . . ] Tompkins’s project of ‘reconstituting the notion of value in literary works’ dissolves the aesthetic, in a gesture now foundational in the critique of canon formation, by substituting for it a pseudo-historicism disguising the fact that the values being ‘revalued are very simply *contemporary* values.’” (24) (his italics)

Indeed, Guillory goes so far as to identify Tompkins’s work as a “reversion to moralism” (25).

9. Tompkins credits “a modernist point of view which tends to classify work that affects people’s lives, or tries to, as merely sensational or propagandistic” for the fact that many sentimental novels—such as The Wide, Wide World (1852) by Susan Warner and Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe—“dropped from sight” for decades and only recently attracted critical attention (xi). Sentimental literature has made a comeback in university curricula particularly in the last two decades with the arrival of critical works by people like Annette Kolodny, Jane Tompkins, and Paul Lauter, all of whom call for re-examination of the canon and for inclusion of texts hitherto considered “inferior” to the “high art” of texts considered “worthy” of canonization thus far.
10. The American literary fascination with incest and the perfecting of it is not limited to nineteenth-century stories. Wallace Stegner’s The Spectator Bird (1976) is perhaps one of the most extensive explorations of incest in American literature. In it, the protagonist discovers an extensive extended family whose members practice a highly regulated and intentional in-in-breeding (a term used to describe the interbreeding of those already highly inbred) in a concentrated effort to perfect incest in the name of scientific exploration.
11. I use the term “widely-received” rather loosely, since the market for Canadian writing was a fraction of that for American writing. Reading through the archives of McClelland and Stewart, this becomes painfully clear. To relate a single example, on January 29, 1958, a Mr. A. L. Grove expresses surprise that “a sale of ten thousand copies of [a] book in Canada would be considered an extremely good sale. I was aware that the publishing business in Canada operated under a considerable handicap but I was not aware that the sales volume was as low as this” (McClelland and Stewart Archives, Series A, Box 47, File 3, Jan. 29/58). Jack McClelland’s reply, dated February 7, 1958, is telling: “It is the exceptional book that sells 10,000 copies in Canada today, at the most two or three a year. This is a country in which a sale of 2,500 copies means that the book is a best seller. [. . . ] It’s not an inspiring business” (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Feb. 7/58). My point here is simply that the stories of which I

speakers seem to have had a ready Canadian audience, however small that audience might have been in comparison to standard British and American readerships.

12. Sara Jeannette Duncan, in The Imperialist, also writes conventional pro-nuclear family ideas, and the subplots of the novel are largely concerned with matchmaking compatible lovers, a common preoccupation in sentimental novels. But Duncan's work aggressively takes on the British/American/Canadian tensions dominating the Canadian political scene at the time. The nuclear family and the matchmaking in this novel, however conventional, exist as a vehicle to accomplish her political ends. Duncan also makes concerted efforts to change the Canadian literary landscape and bring to the attention of the Canadian readership literature and forms she considers to be superior; she is heavily invested in Canadian canon-making. See Chapter 4 of Carole Gerson's A Purer Taste: The Writing and Reading of Fiction in English and Nineteenth-Century Canada for more about this. Some of Duncan's other writings (such as "A Mother in India") present much more complex representations of family.
13. Roy St. George Stubbs's review of As For Me and My House, in the August 9, 1941 edition of Saturday Night, notes that Horizon "might be a Western Canadian town; it might be a town in the Mid-Western States." He relates his own suspicion that Sinclair Ross intentionally keeps the location ambiguous in order to court American readers, and notes with some alarm that Canada might lose Sinclair Ross as a result.
14. It was also working itself out from under the influence of the British canon, but I found that the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library archives I was able to examine—with their more frequent references to American works, events, and publishers—suggest that the American canon was the more formidable influence and McClelland and Stewart was more concerned about the threat posed by the American influence.
15. If Mencken's reviews of Cather are anything to go by, it bears noting that, as the "coming-of-age" writers were attacking various kinds of elitism, they were promoting other kinds of elitism of which they may have been unaware. Mencken's discourse and vocabulary, as he praises Cather's representations of immigrants, take on the affectations one expects from writers making distinctions between high and low brow art. Mencken lauds Cather for

striving toward that free and dignified self-expression, that high artistic conscience, that civilized point of view, [...].

Beneath [...] the tawdry stuff of Middle Western Kultur, she discovers human beings embattled against fate and the gods, and into her picture of their dull struggle she gets a spirit that is genuinely heroic, and a pathos that is genuinely moving. [...] There is not only the story of poor peasants,

flung by fortune into lonely, inhospitable wilds: there is the eternal tragedy  
of man. (Mencken 8-9)

16. It's not always easy to know exactly which techniques these critics appreciate, but it's clear that they do appreciate the technical aspect of Cather's writing. For instance, Mencken notes that "Her work for ten years past has shown a steady and rapid improvement in both matter and manner. She has arrived at last at such a command of the mere devices of writing that the uses she makes of them are all concealed—her style has lost self-consciousness; her feeling for form has become instinctive" (8).
17. For more on this, see "The Long Shadow of Sir Walter Scott," Chapter 5 in Carole Gerson's A Purer Taste. I should mention here, however, that W.J. Keith doesn't quite agree with me. As noted in Chapter One, Keith examines the *deus ex machina* ending of Wild Geese in light of a number of nineteenth-century novels, including Scott's Bride of Lammermoor.
18. I have no evidence of this, but I suspect that part of the reason Wild Geese has been the subject of relatively few critical articles has to do with the questionable authorial status; that is, the fact that both Douglas Durkin and Martha Ostenso wrote the novel, and 30 years later signed a declaration stating that Martha Ostenso was a pen name for the combined efforts of both of them (Atherton 3) is a fact that makes certain discussions particularly difficult. David Arnason, in The Development of Prairie Realism: Robert J.C. Stead, Douglas Durkin, Martha Ostenso and Frederick Philip Grove states that "Ostenso wrote the first draft [. . . while] Durkin rearranged and revised the manuscript" (132). But since Ostenso and Durkin had little problem deceiving the literary world for the first 30 years of this novel's existence, critics might be reluctant to discuss the novel at all for fear of giving credit or criticism to the wrong people.
19. My source for stating that the novel is a staple on Canadian literature courses is nothing scientific or quantifiable; my source is simply my own experience and conversations with other graduate students. In the Canadian universities I have attended, and in the Canadian novel courses I have taken, Wild Geese has been a staple. Graduate students with whom I have spoken who have taken Canadian literature courses in other universities make the same claim.
20. The document, written in 1954, refers to "an idea [Ross] had suggested to [McClelland] last year."
21. Some examples: In a May 11, 1954, letter to Malcolm Ross, McClelland asks him if he "could adopt such a plan for first-year English students at Queen's" (where Malcolm Ross was an instructor), going on to say that Ross's answer will determine the future of the series (Series A, Box 54, File 15, May 11/54). In a New Canadian Library meeting on January 20, 1962, "it was decided that if a book is long and unlikely to have a college market, we should forget it" (Series A, Box 45, File 33, Jan. 20/62). When an argument to include a novel (Rudy Wiebe's

Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962)) includes a list of university professors who "expressed strong interest in seeing PEACE in the NCL series" (Series A, Box 45, File 33, May 10/69), McClelland's response is that "the difference between these people expressing interest, seeing the book in the Series and using it in their courses is rather substantial" (Series A, Box 45, File 33, May 20/69).

22. The Sinclair Ross and Ostenso novels seem to have been primary choices for the series from the outset. With the exception of a brief hesitation about the Ostenso novel by Malcolm Ross, a hesitation soon replaced by enthusiasm, neither novel is questioned about its suitability for the "classics" series. Both novels appear on some of the earliest lists of potential New Canadian Library books that are in the McClelland and Stewart archives. Both Sinclair Ross and Martha Ostenso's novels are on the October 21, 1954, list (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Oct. 21/54) and on the November 23, 1954, list (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Nov. 25/54). See also a memo from S. J. Totten dated April 14, 1954. Totten summarizes Malcolm Ross's idea for the series to Jack McClelland and includes a list of potential novels of which Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House is one (Series A, Box 54, File 15, Apr. 14/54, 3). See also a list in a letter to Malcolm Ross (presumably from Jack McClelland though the sender of the letter does not sign) dated January 24, 1958, where Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese is considered as an alternate choice to Hugh MacLennan's Barometer Rising (1941) since "it will be included in the series eventually anyway" (Series A, Box 47, File 3, Jan. 24/58). The Sinclair Ross and Ostenso novels are discussed a number of times in early letters, always under the assumption that they will be published in the New Canadian Library series.
23. Some examples: A November 24, 1959, letter from Jack McClelland asks Malcolm Ross if two Sara Jeannette Duncan titles are "*worth proceeding with*" (Series A, Box 47, File 2, Nov. 24/59, 2). The report of a meeting held on January 28, 1961, states that High Bright Buggy Wheels (1951) by Luella Creighton "is *better* than WILD GEESE (sic)" (Series A, Box 47, File 7, Jan. 28/61, 4). The same document states that Malcolm Ross insists on maintaining "*a high standard*" in the series (6). A letter McClelland sends to Mr. Peter Dwyer discusses an annual New Canadian Library review which would "form a good cumulative permanent record of the *best writing* in Canada" (Series A, Box 54, File 16, Oct. 11/61, 1). Discussing the same subject, Malcolm Ross states that the "essays included should not be technical, merely learned or *without literary value*" (Series A, Box 54, File 16, Nov. 13/61). Margaret Laurence's The Tomorrow Tamer (1963) is said to be a book of "*excellence*" (Series A, Box 25, File 27, Sept. 23/69, 2). None of these terms, from "literary value" to "excellence," are ever defined or even explained. All italics mine.

24. As Linda Hutcheon notes in her guest column "Academic Free Trade? One Canadian's View of the MLA" in the May 1999 issue of PMLA (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America), this phenomenon of desiring and being dominated by American cultural forces did not cease in 1972. Hutcheon states,

Spatial and cultural proximity to the United States, a large and influential force, has had diverse effects on Canada-based academics, ranging from fear of what the media refer to as 'American cultural imperialism' to pleasure at participating in a larger professional context. But what both these extremes betray is a sense of being secondary, even somehow culturally and professionally colonized. [...] Canada persuaded Britain to legislate it out of one colonial situation (a political and historical one), only to realize that it was already trapped in another (an economic and cultural one). (Hutcheon, "Free Trade" 312)

Hutcheon ends her column on a note that tells of this continued tension: "Mice [a metaphor for Canadian academics] have always had a few things to teach elephants [a metaphor for American academics . . .] and a friendly elephant's imposing presence can sometimes be more comforting than threatening" ("Free Trade" 317). Hutcheon's column provokes an intense response both in me, as I find myself inexplicably balking at the idea of such academic national dependence, and in Tracy Ware, whose response in the following issue (January 2000) of PMLA is summed up by and concluded with a quote from Tommy Douglas: "'Every man for himself, as the elephant said while dancing among the chickens'" (Ware 90). But whatever the state of dependence or co-dependence between the nations, and whatever the reaction to it, the continued existence of the tension described above is evident.

25. The resistance to McClung's brand of sentimentalism wasn't confined to the NCL staff. Decades later, (1977) Dick Harrison laments what he believes to be the loss of a good Canadian writer to sentimentalism. He admires "the tone of pragmatic anti-romance which [...] dominates the first half of her first book, Sowing Seeds in Danny." He notes that these early writings "could have provided Leacock with a model for his Sunshine Sketches" and showed that McClung "was a worthy forerunner of W.O. Mitchell as a prairie humourist." But the anti-romantic tone, Harrison complains, is ultimately overtaken by "the sentimentality that mars much of her work" (87).
26. See Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983) for a discussion on how nation is a mental construct, an "imagined community."
27. For instance, a November 12, 1959 memo notes that, after discussing the publication of certain historical works in the New Canadian Library series, Steve Totten "sounded out [Reg] Watters on the idea of some of the historical



works which we had considered. He said that in his Canadian Literature course he could use an edition of MACKENZIE'S JOURNALS. [...] As you remember this was a title that we discussed [...]" (Series A, Box 47, File 1, Nov. 12/59). The memo notes that Totten also interviewed other professors at the University of British Columbia.

## **Some Final Thoughts and New Directions**

This has been, I hope, a thesis of exploration. I have attempted to explore, among other things, two patterns of representations of family, one appearing in the western American canon, and one appearing in the western Canadian canon. My method has been, first, to explore in detail the representations of family in four “classic” western novels, two from each canon, pointing out the ways in which all four novels deconstruct the nuclear family but arguing subsequently that whereas the two western American novels reconstruct it the two western Canadian novels leave it fragmented. (And I have pointed to other novels in each western canon, unexplored in this thesis, that offer up similar representations of the nuclear family.) Second, I have explored in detail the way those representations of nuclear family are extended in each novel by its interactions with the genre of the formula Western. Finally, I have explored one aspect of the canonization machinery that contributed to connections between the representations of family in the Canadian novels and the appearance of those novels in the Canadian western canon. Along the way, I have examined representations of illness and the ways they comment upon family in these novels, showing the ways they foreground prejudices and deviance of particular characters, and showing the way they function to apply pressure to the foundations of the nuclear family. Furthermore, I have troubled distinctions between “pulp” and “classic” fiction, and I have complicated the allegorical readings of so many critics who read the nuclear family primarily as metaphor for nation.

And so, where does one go from here? I see three new directions in which a sequel to this study could head. First, recuperate some of the marginalized Canadian and

American western works that this study ignores. This dissertation identifies a pattern and offers a reason for its existence, but it does little to change the problem of reifying “classic” texts—in fact, it only exaggerates that problem by expending so much space and energy discussing “classic” texts and so little energy discussing other texts. While I have little proof to offer, I suspect that studying more, and more marginalized, works on both sides of the border, destigmatizing and legitimizing more western “pulp” fiction and other kinds of forgotten fiction, bringing it to the attention of the “literary establishment,” would not only recuperate marginalized texts into the canon but would also offer many different representations of family in both western literary canons, significantly complicating the arguments and observations in this thesis. This kind of recuperation and complication is important political work, I think, and it needs to be done. After, and only after, all the marginalized texts of the time period studied have been recovered—a herculean task, I suspect—would it be appropriate to look at representations of the nuclear family in western Canadian texts in terms of “the Canadian imagination,” or in western American texts in terms of “the American imagination.” Until they have been recovered, any such study is necessarily incomplete.

Second, a subsequent study might look to more recent novels in both countries and see if current canonization trends still follow the patterns of representations of family articulated in the first two chapters of this dissertation. If those patterns are being challenged, it would be interesting and important to know what exactly brings about that act of resistance. If those patterns remain unchallenged, it would be interesting and important to learn why they haven’t been resisted. Either way, the premises and theories of this dissertation would have to undergo re-examination; contemporary Canadian and

American literary markets are very different machines than they were during the early and mid-twentieth century. McClelland and Stewart, for instance, no longer has the canonizing power it once had, smaller presses can claim more and more credit for the selection of fiction on the contemporary Canadian market, and the universities (according to a number of canon theorists) are now the primary canonizing forces. Furthermore, thanks to efforts of people like Paul Lauter, Robert Lecker, and other canon theorists, non-canonized works, though still neglected, make their way onto university curricula with more frequency than they once did. And all of these variables would influence contemporary canonized representations of the family and would merit reconsideration. However, it would be an interesting and valuable study that examines whether the American literary market still exerts the kind of influence over Canadian canonization it once did, and it would be just as interesting to see how current cross-border literary relations affect representations of family. Moreover, examining representations of nuclear family in recent fictions would undoubtedly be influenced by the multi-ethnic character of much recent fiction. Recent decades have brought to literary markets a substantial amount of First Nations writing, Asian-North American writing, and African North American writing, for example. These literatures offer not only different representations of the North American west than do the writers discussed in this thesis, but they also offer different representations of the nuclear family.

Third, a sequel might examine the beginnings of the western American literary canon. This dissertation examines the beginnings of the western Canadian literary canon struggling against an already existing American canon to arrive at a partial explanation for differences in representations of family, but doesn't look at the early days of the

American canon. As previously noted, a number of theorists have examined the history of the American canon and its ongoing flirtation with the familial, allegorizing it for nation. But I think that an examination of the material, concrete forces at work in the western American publishing machine is in order to see what kind of economic forces have guided the canonization of representations of American family through the centuries. Again, this would be a herculean task, and again it would have the same fault that this dissertation has—it would reify existing “classic” works. But I think it necessary that the allegorization of family for nation—however telling that allegorization is—be complicated by an examination of the practical elements that influenced canonization.

And to conclude a dissertation that explores the unhappy family as a means of achieving distinctiveness, I close with a quote from Tolstoy’s Anna Karenin: “All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion” (13).

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