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# Shootin Up the Past: Terministic Frontiers in Angle of Repose and High Noon

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SHOOTIN' UP THE PAST:  
TERMINISTIC FRONTIERS IN *ANGLE OF REPOSE* AND *HIGH NOON*

by  
James C. Dalrymple II

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University

Master of Arts

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of James C. Dalrymple II in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### SHOOTIN UP THE PAST:

### TERMINISTIC FRONTIERS IN *ANGLE OF REPOSE* AND *HIGH NOON*

James C. Dalrymple II

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Master of Art

The West has long been an important geographic and symbolic space for the United States. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that space became the subject of numerous popular works of fiction, first in print and later in the cinema. These texts eventually formed a specialized genre, the Western, which had its own conventions, styles, and themes. Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* and Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, both seminal western texts from the mid-twentieth century, seek to reinterpret those conventions. While the Western is often characterized as a genre of violent masculinity and rugged individualism, these two texts employ conventional Western motifs in an effort to articulate a metafictional criticism of those ideas. Ultimately, they posit a reality in which traditional portrayals of the West lead to alienation, while also advocating an escape from that alienation.

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## The Western

The American West hardly requires any introduction. Virtually any American could easily make a list of things that characterize the West: cowboys, Indians, gunfights, outlaws, saloons, saloon girls, etc. While such figures and tropes are easily recognizable and widely familiar however, they also represent a highly stylized landscape that, many scholars have pointed out, is closer to myth than reality. Will Wright, for example, notes that “the historical reality of the West provided fertile soil for the growth and development of myth. The result has been one of the richest narrative traditions of modern times” (4). Richard White elaborates, saying that these common elements used to portray the West “evolved into a particular genre, the Western, which first as novels and later as films became a defining element of American popular culture” (613). Other scholars, such as Richard Slotkin, Patricia Limerick, and Richard Etulain, among others, have further examined the symbolic impact of the West and the Western on American society. Even more specifically, Cawelti notes that since 1945 “the West has become increasingly symbolic of traditional American rugged individualism” (6) and Jane Tompkins adds that “the West functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest” (4). Thus, if there is not exactly a consensus on media portrayals of the West, the Western is at least highly influential, pervasive, and, if ebbing and flowing in popular appeal, still highly regarded as consequential in the American cultural landscape.

While numerous texts have been subjected to scholarly lenses emerging out of Western criticism, in this paper I will look specifically at the relationship of Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon* and Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose* to the West as a genre. Generally speaking, John Cawelti has suggested that in seeking to characterize what



exactly the Western *is*, “the simple answer is that the Western is a popular genre about the West” (14). To this definition he adds setting (19), a specific complex of characters (29), and definite types of situations and action (45). Speaking more directly of Western cinema, Rick Altman argues that the genre includes “a combination of the travel genre’s exotic locations” (36); the “crime genre’s suspenseful situations” (37); popularity “with Europeans and difficult to produce in Europe” (37); and highlighting America’s “prime melting-pot recipe” (38). Tompkins further adds that “Westerns strive to depict a world of clear alternatives—independence versus connection, anarchy versus law, town versus desert” (48). Jim Kitses confirms this sentiment when he asks, “was the West a Garden threatened by a corrupt and emasculating East? Or was it a Desert, a savage land needful of civilizing and uplift? [...] This dialectical scheme positions the Western hero between the nomadic and the settled, the savage and the cultured, the masculine and the feminine” (13). Of course, the list of what characterizes a Western could go on and on but these are some of the genre’s more basic features, which, not coincidentally, also appear abundantly in *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose*.

If the point is not to catalog every possible element of the Western, it is to identify certain common tropes of the genre that convey specific ideological or cultural meanings. Ultimately, Cawelti says, “the Western is not simply a collective of characters or themes, but a culturally significant narrative” (12) that projects certain themes, ideas, and ideologies, while disregarding or hiding others. In the case of specific texts like *High Noon* or *Angle of Repose*, culturally significant narratives are finally conveyed through the syntactic combination of the western tropes, settings, and figures mentioned above, as

well as others. My project, then, is both to identify that syntax as well as to determine what narrative it suggests.

In referring to the arrangement of generic Western components in these two texts as “syntax” I mean to invoke Kenneth Burke’s concept of “terministic screens.” Detailed in *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke’s terministic screens suggests that a text is inevitably composed of various terms which direct “attention into some channels rather than others” (45). Burke dictates that “even if a given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (45). Thus, while terministic screens provides a method of analysis by which a text’s thesis might be observed, it also provides a means of assessing how that thesis interacts with similar statements in similar texts. In other words, Burke’s theory sheds light on both what a text says and what it obscures.<sup>1</sup>

While the Western has been approached from a number of angles, Burke’s emphasis on “terms” that reflect a particular reality makes his theory particularly well suited to these texts. Here terministic screens is not merely the rebranding of genre study, nor is it the superficial nomination of generic components as terms. Rather, it provides a way to look at the overall thesis articulated by various components and, ultimately, the cultural significance that thesis has. It also allows us to evaluate the reality screened by texts with similar syntaxes. In other words, terministic screens gives us a way to put like things together, as genre studies might, while also looking at the

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<sup>1</sup> This is similar to the several of the projects Burke himself takes up in *Language as Symbolic Action*. In his first two chapters, for example, uses rhetorical theory to illuminate texts by Poe, Elliot, and others. Though his reliance on literature varies, it uniformly indicates a strong connection between rhetoric and literary texts.

signification of those things across different texts and media. This is particularly useful when approaching a text like *Angle of Repose* that is not often characterized as a Western, but nonetheless includes an astounding number of Western “terms” seen in more traditional works like *High Noon*. In essence then, terministic screens allows us to group texts by syntax while situating our readings within larger efforts to find rhetorically and culturally potent media in popular culture.

In addition, if the Western is culturally significant, as Cawelti suggests, a rhetorical approach provides a bridge between story and society. Stephen Bygone has described rhetoric as “transitive: it joins utterance to action” (7). However, more importantly, he argues that Burke takes rhetoric one step further by demonstrating “that narrative is action” (10). This is not unlike Cawelti’s earlier statement, and Wright has also argued that the Western “contains a conceptual analysis of society that provides a model of social action” (185). Terministic screens thusly offers a means of observing these texts as actions, as “Burke’s kind of interpretation is not itself eclectic, but is a rhetoric always directed at the ‘uses’ of discourse. To consider ‘use’ is to consider context and effect together” (Bygrave 15). Thus, I will be looking specifically at the Western with the hope that a better understanding of its syntax will also shed light on its uses and the social action it precipitates<sup>2</sup>.

Though terministic screens might be an appropriate vehicle for looking at *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose*, it could be said that these two texts—separated by two decades, a medium, and a number of conventions—fit together only in the loosest sense,

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<sup>2</sup> This project, then, is similar to other applications of Burke. For example, *The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film*, edited by David Blakesley, reads film from a Burkeian perspective in an effort to draw rhetorically significant conclusions for more “literary” texts.

if at all. Indeed while *High Noon* has often been said to epitomize the Western genre, *Angle of Repose* is more often characterized as merely being about the West. Though this alone might be enough to call it a Western, especially by Cawelti's definition, it more importantly shares a number of generic terms with more traditional Westerns. For example, both texts have at their core marriages and in both cases those marriages are temporarily dissipated before reasserting themselves at the end. In both cases the members of those marriages, the Kanes in *High Noon* and the Wards in *Angle of Repose*, conform largely to traditional generic archetypes. What's more, each text presents its characters in a spatial struggle; in *Angle of Repose* the first generation of the Ward family leaves the East to make their way in the West and eventually settles (or reaches their "angle of repose") in California, while in *High Noon* the conflict centers around the struggle of the Kanes to leave their town and make a new life elsewhere. Beyond the stories themselves, both were highly praised and received among the highest awards in their disciplines. (*Angle of Repose* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1972. *High Noon* won numerous Oscars and was nominated for best picture, but dramatically lost in what is considered one of the Academy's biggest upsets and biggest mistakes.) So while there are indeed stark contrasts between the two texts, it is at least clear that they similarly deploy many of the formal elements that critics have used to identify the Western genre.

Of course, while *Angle of Repose* and *High Noon* have similarities and differences that might be discussed at length, my argument is ultimately that irrespective of their superficial resemblance (or lack thereof if we choose to see it that way) both texts exemplify a similar brand of criticism of Western terminology. Not surprisingly for two texts that include at least *some* similar components, Stegner's novel and Zinnemann's

film terministically screen frontiers. Of course, arguing that two texts about the West include frontiers is nothing new; however, in using the word “frontier” I mean to evoke two meanings. First, I mean frontiers in the traditional, “western” sense; both Stegner’s novel and Zinnemann’s film portray familiar splits between settled and unsettled land. Second, however, and more importantly I think, is the use of the frontier as Paul de Certeau conceives of it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Though de Certeau is not speaking directly about Westerns, he argues that stories are “continually concerned with marking out boundaries” (125) which act consequently creates in them “the frontier and the bridge, that is [...] a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority” (126). Taken this way, the frontier becomes a symbolic divide between ideologically charged ideas about the East and West, wilderness and civilization, and gardens and deserts. In each case, standard Western dichotomies are revealed as conveying conflicts between exterior and interior spaces. Thus, while both *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose* literally take place on the frontier, their culturally significant narrative is one about the struggle between legitimacy and exteriority.

While de Certeau’s use of the word “frontier” is designed to apply to stories generally, his notion of legitimate and alien space is particularly apropos for a genre that is often accused of working in archetypes. Indeed, a definitive feature of the Western has been a tendency to reflect its primary setting as either a garden or a desert and that positions its characters at the center of dichotomies of settlement versus nomadism, culture versus savagery, and masculine versus feminine (Kitses 13). In both texts this is particularly apparent as the Wards and the Kanes attempt to shape the environment around them into one archetypal form or another. However, while pointing out the

frontiers in both texts may be nothing new, the important thing is the role that de Certeau assigns to the frontier: “the theoretical and practical problem of the frontier: to whom does it belong? The river, wall or tree *makes* a frontier. It does not have the character of a nowhere that a cartographical representation ultimately presupposes. It has a mediating role” (127). This ambiguous, mediating role then, is the channel to which our attention is directed both in *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose*. Thus, by using de Certeau’s concept of the frontier I will argue that each of these texts epitomizes a screening of reality in which its characters do not belong to *either* side of the traditional Western generic dichotomies. Rather these texts posit an external space that deflects, to varying degrees, the reality of the traditional western. In making this argument I first look at *High Noon*, explaining how Zinnemann’s characters become entrapped within the Western and then leave it altogether. Second, I examine *Angle of Repose* by comparing its portrayal of the West to *High Noon* and demonstrating that it ultimately expands the earlier film’s thesis. Specifically, I show how the novel’s representation of its narrator vaults the story into the realm of metafiction while critiquing the consequences and possibilities of exiting a Western terministic screen. Finally, I conclude by commenting on the lasting influence of these texts’ treatment of the West in the media, American social life, and scholarly discourse.

### High Noon

On its surface, *High Noon* is a fairly typical Western<sup>3</sup>. It tells the story of determined Hadleyville marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) and his new wife Amy (Grace

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, its typicality is based on its relationship to earlier Western texts in film and literature. While many of those texts are largely beyond the scope of this paper, some are particularly noteworthy for their strong resemblance and relationship to *High Noon*. For

Kelly), all the while addressing themes of honor, violence, and civility that typify a long and detailed western discourse from Fredrick Jackson Turner to Henry Nash Smith and Richard Slotkin. More specifically, the film includes many (perhaps even most) standard generic elements described above by Altman and Cawelti. Thus, regardless of its innovation and facility with the genre (and despite the fact that Western icons Howard Hawks and John Wayne objected to its portrayal of the West), *High Noon* still falls well within the boundaries of the Western.

As a film typifying the component parts of its genre, *High Noon* is often criticized within the conventional western framework that examines ideas about violence, the frontier, etc. For example, Slotkin has said that the Western myth “relates the achievement of ‘progress’ to a particular form or scenario of violent action” (11). When read through this lens, it is clear that in *High Noon* “the movement of the entire film [...] is away from the sacramental moment of the protagonists marriage and toward the apocalyptic moment of his shoot-out, the sacrament the Western substitutes for matrimony” (Tompkins 35). Slotkin adds that it is also often “interpreted as an allegory, from a leftist perspective, of Hollywood’s surrender to McCarthyism” (395). Less specifically, numerous critiques of the film have been made pointing out that, in Benson’s words, it “alluded to the threat of infiltration, the ethics of informing, or the dangers of conformist hysteria” (131). Indeed stories about screenwriter Carl Foreman’s

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example, John W. Cunningham’s “The Tin Star” provided the basis for Carl Foreman’s later screenplay. Others, such as Stephen Crane’s “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” don’t bear an overt relationship to Zinnemann’s film but nonetheless serve as earlier, structurally similar examples that clearly impacted the Western syntax that the film draws on.

experiences with HUAC, John Wayne's dislike of it, and Howard Hawks' response in the form of *Rio Bravo* are all intriguing and shed light on potential readings of the film.

While *High Noon* can clearly be read politically or in terms of violence, my argument is that while it is a Western, it is also a meta-commentary on the genre's treatment of western themes. Released in 1952, *High Noon* falls into a category of Western made by filmmakers who, as Slotkin points out,

had a more highly developed sense of the genre *as genre* than their predecessors during the [prewar Western] 'renaissance.' This awareness of the conventionality of their working language liberated them from the obligation to treat the Western as a historical script and encouraged them to take odd or innovative slants on old stories (380).

In the case of *High Noon*, this "innovative slant" occurs as the film employs familiar generic tropes to articulate a critique of the genre. While the film is acutely aware of the "working language" of the genre, it uses the terms of the Western to screen a different thesis.

Of course, in using the words "terms" and "screen" I mean to bring us back to Burke and his terministic screens. Though this theory has been used largely in rhetorical criticism, it also includes a distinctly visual component. Burke describes the genesis of the idea occurring as he looked at a series of photographs of the same subjects but taken with different filters. He adds that "here something so 'factual' as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for documentary description of the event being recorded" (Burke 45). This description is useful for a couple of reasons. First (and most obviously), Burke's



description reveals the theory's underlying visual utility. Second however, and more importantly, Burke's description points out that different iterations of the same subject may signify in different ways. This is important for a discussion of the Western in that each text (whether a film like *High Noon*, a novel like *Angle of Repose*, or a more traditional text like the film and literary versions of *Hondo*) includes some of the same elements but channels them through different filters. Thus, like the photographs that Burke saw, *High Noon* and other texts can present similar images, but mean something very different with those images. Essentially, where the ordinary Western may endorse a series of oppositional dichotomies, *High Noon* undermines them. It rejects traditional Western values in favor of a more personal approach to the frontier.

Not unlike other stories (both in and out of the genre), *High Noon* applies its terminology as, to borrow from De Certeau, it "tirelessly marks out frontiers" (126). *High Noon* does this in both the general sense, as well as the specific sense of a Western. However, what makes *High Noon* special is that while it clearly does focus on the divisions inherent in a frontier, it also addresses the frontier's mediating tendency. In other words, Zinnemann's film emphasizes the frontier's ability to unite instead of divide. Burke elaborates on this idea when he says that there are essentially "two kinds of terms: terms that put things together and terms that take things apart. Otherwise put, A can feel himself identified with B, or he can think of himself as disassociated from B" (49). This conception of terministic screens can be readily observed in *High Noon*. As is the case with all terminologies, context matters here; though the film is a Western, it is also critical of its own genre. Thus, the film connects certain terms making them part of a coherent syntax, but that syntax is nevertheless self-critiquing. In other words, *High*

*Noon* brings Western terms together but in doing so emphasizes their potential for disassociation.

The opening shots of the film provide us with some of the first terministic screens to reflect frontiers. As the credits role and the lugubrious Tex Ritter sings, a group of three horsemen rendezvous on barren, scrubby hills. The environment is obviously that of a Western, as Tompkins has noted that “the desert is the classic Western landscape” (74). Yet while their surly appearance and the opening music foreshadows their role in the film, it isn’t until they ride into town that their character’s become clear: they’re the outlaws. As they enter the main street various citizens come out and look frightened. The music changes and becomes more foreboding. An elderly Mexican woman crosses herself. Thus, it becomes clear that the men bring trouble to the town.

As the three menacing cowboys ride through town scaring anyone in their path they solidify their role as outsiders. De Certeau’s notion of legitimate spaces and exteriority is evoked as these men clearly represent an alien presence. The ride into town during the first minutes of the film illustrates which is which: the town is the legitimate space, while outlaws are outlaws by virtue of their alien-ness. Their space, at least initially, is the exterior desert in which they are first shown.

Eventually the outlaw gang rides past the Marshall’s office and as they do the camera pans away from them and onto the wedding ceremony of Will Kane and Amy Fowler. As the wedding progresses we learn that Kane is the town marshal and that his new bride is, true to the genre, a pacifist and Quaker. Accordingly, the new couple’s post-wedding plans include leaving the town and starting a new life away from the

violence that has characterized Kane's profession. For the most part, everyone in attendance seems in high spirits and excited for the couple's future.

If the beginning of the film presented outlaws and assigned them their corresponding space, the scene of Kane's wedding provides a counterpoint. Unlike the wild desert, Kane's space is confined and enclosed. During the wedding nearly all of the shots are closed-form and thusly epitomize the "town-scape" that, moments before, was penetrated (or brought into conflict) by the outlaws. Significantly, Wright says, the Western "does not simply present a familiar setting, it envelops the setting in social and moral meanings which are immediately understood" (4). The opening shots of *High Noon* are illustrative of Wright's point. In this case, the settings emphasize a distinct demarcation, or frontier, between town and wilderness, civilization and chaos, alien and legitimate.

Yet despite the easy frontier that is created between the town, and its people, and the wilderness, and its people, Zinnemann quickly troubles this conventional western dichotomy. As Kane's wedding wraps up, the audience is introduced to one of the most potent symbols of Kane's relationship to the town: his marshal's badge. As a symbol of law, order, and Kane's responsibility, Kane removes his badge after the wedding in preparation to leave. However, significantly, he pins his badge to his gun, which is hanging on the wall. Though the occasion is supposed to be a happy one, the shot of Kane's gun and badge visually troubles their prospects for a happy future and recalls, among other things Anton Chekhov's observations that "if in the first act you hang a pistol on the wall, then in the last act it must be shot off" (Simmons 190). To observers of the western genre it is no surprise that the presence of the gun foreshadows an ultimate

showdown, but in attaching the badge to the gun Kane complicates the frontier relationship that, up until this point, had been fairly simple. Where the film had previously conveyed what Kitses would describe as a “binary opposition of the wilderness and civilization” (13), this act confuses that frontier. In essence, Kane appends a signifier of his own space to one characteristic of the (violent) exterior. Though the film goes on to present a number of conflicts, this scene marks an early bridge erected between two Western terms.

Of course, while Kane’s badge, and its relationship to the town, complicates the standard definition of civilization in a western, the portrayal of the outlaws is equally complex. Though they are initially given a “wilderness” space to inhabit, they almost immediately enter the town and remain there for the entirety of the film. Significantly, they spend most of their time waiting at the train depot for their leader to show up. This waiting provides some of the only traditional “landscape” shots of the film, as they look off into the wilderness beyond the town, as well as incorporates one of the most common icons of the genre: the railroad. With a long history in the genre, Vivian Sobchack notes that the railroad in Westerns “is not merely its physical manifestation; it *is* progress and civilization. It threatens the openness and freedom of the West and individual enterprise, but it also promises the advantages of civilized life and brings the gentling influence of the Eastern heroine” (67-68). Accordingly, the railroad might be described as a term of the genre, but in this case it brings not an English heroine, but a violent outlaw (indeed at one point in the film the railroad actually threatens to *take* the heroine away, as Amy leaves Kane over his refusal to repudiate violence). The presence of the railroad thus works against its traditional role. While it is clearly on the peripheries of the town and

allows the outlaws to continue occupying their exterior, wilderness space, it is also a symbol for the town itself. Much like Kane's badge attached to his gun, the railroad serves as a striking bridge between normally opposed elements.

As *High Noon* progresses, the frontiers established early in the film continue to be breached. Shortly after his wedding, Kane receives a message that Frank Miller, an old enemy and leader of the outlaw gang, will be coming back for revenge on the noon train. At the behest of the townspeople Kane agrees to leave with Amy and carry out his plans to start a new life. En route however, Kane comes to one of the major conclusions of the Western genre: "the villain must be killed or otherwise somehow removed from the community before the "good life"—as defined by the formula—becomes possible" (Tuska 37). Accordingly, Kane turns the wagon around and rides back into town.

Despite the best of intentions, when Kane returns he is met, to his surprise, by skepticism and rejection from the town's people. Kane tries to recruit help in the coming battle against Miller, moving from setting to setting. He visits old friends, the church, and even the saloon. However, in each case, he is rebuffed. Some people give him excuses, others (such as those in the saloon) suggest that they have more sympathy for Miller. However, what stands out in each of these cases is the fact that while they are presented as legitimate town-scapes that should be opposed to Miller, the people in each one are fully prepared to acquiesce to his domination. Indeed while they are supposedly part of Kane's charge as marshal (though some claim he no longer has legitimate authority in that role, having resigned earlier), they serve more as emblems of Kane's entrapment and pending conflict. The result, Wright concludes, is "that the town is the hero's real enemy, not Miller and his men" (76). Similar to the moment in which Kane's

badge and gun become one unified symbol, Kane's repeated attempts to enlist help suggest that the conflict is not between Kane and Miller but between Kane and Miller and the town. The implications of this tri-point conflict are significant. Though Kane represents legitimacy, both the alien and his supposed charges have turned against him. If Kane then occupies a middle space on the frontier, neither side welcomes him. Instead *both* sides of the frontier present destructive forces that threaten to take away everything that Kane values.

During these conflicts some of the same specific symbols from earlier in the story reappear, making either side of the frontier less appealing. For example, when Kane confronts his deputy, Harvey Pell, his badge becomes a symbol of power and ambition. During the scene Pell makes his case for becoming the next town marshal. Initially, Kane thinks that the man is just young and ambitious. However, during the course of the conversation Pell tells Kane that he feels qualified for the job but believes that Kane has prevented him from attaining it. The dialog carries on for several minutes and eventually becomes quite heated, but the end result is that Pell removes his badge and walks out, effectively eliminating Kane's one guaranteed ally. The power and conflict that are connected to the badge in this scene are not uncommon themes in the genre, but they are hardly the ones associated with honest lawmen. Indeed Tuska has observed that "before *High Noon*, town marshals were generally honest and capable, or dishonest, or just inept. [...] *High Noon* attacked this premise, showing a law man to be human and deeply troubled" (36). This scene epitomizes that trouble, showing a powerless and alone Kane side-by-side with a deputy that would let Kane die to get his job. The scene troubles the traditional Western dichotomy of savagery verse civilization; with Pell essentially

playing into Miller's hand Kane is further isolated on a liminal space between two supposedly opposing positions. Gary Cooper's acting during Pell's departure has been particularly noted, with Tompkins saying "the price the Western exacts from its heroes is written in the expression on Gary Cooper's face throughout *High Noon* as he tries to get help confronting Frank Miller's gang" (19). In this case, however, that price is being positioned firmly on the frontier.

Like Kane's badge, the railroad also isolates him as the film progresses. Of course, Miller is set to arrive on the railroad, but before that happens the two women in Kane's life, Amy and businesswoman Helen Ramirez (played by Katy Jurado), decide to leave on the train. Of course this complicates the frontier between civilization and wilderness because it threatens to take the civilized new bride *away* from civilization. However, it also poses a problem in that it provides a point of unity between Helen and Amy. For the first half of the film Amy and Helen were anything but friends. If Amy was the stereotypical cultured white woman, Helen, as a Mexican woman, represents a distinctly alien figure in the midst of Hadleyville. As a sexually marginalized character, Helen possesses "a distinctive subversive identity within the town's repressive moral and political economy" (Limon 605). Despite the fact that "her professional sexual practice has led to a 'primitive' accumulation of capital which she has used to convert herself into a 'legitimate' and competent businesswoman" (Limon 605), she remains on the periphery of society, conferring with powerful men in the town but never becoming one of the town's legitimate women.

It is surprising then, that Helen and Amy, women on two opposite sides of the generic frontier, eventually form an alliance to leave town. Kane clearly cares for both of

them; the film opened with his wedding to Amy and part way through Kane and Helen “confront each other at the height of Kane’s crisis and it is abundantly clear that Kane has fully experienced her evident passion and still cares deeply for her as she does for him” (Limon 606). Yet despite these connections Kane is unable to be with either woman. Not unlike earlier symbols, Kane’s relationship to these women leaves him isolated between two sides of the frontier. Eventually both women drive a wagon to the train depot to leave town. As Kane stands alone in the street Amy won’t even look at him, though Helen does. Of course, Amy will eventually renege on her promise to leave Kane, but Helen, proclaiming that she has “always hated this town” will leave for good. The fact that Helen leaves and Amy stays is no surprise, given the terminology of the genre, but, as Tuska observes, “in the Western, women, if they are heroines, must endorse violence and even be willing to become violent themselves” (37), which is exactly what Amy eventually does. Thus, the women in the film collapse the dichotomous relationships that were established. Helen, an illegitimate figure, leaves on the train, a legitimate symbol that has been given exterior-alien connotations, while Amy, a legitimate figure, also becomes associated with the train but remains to engage in illegitimate activity. The result is that the two sides of the frontier become united while Kane remains outside.

As the film continues Kane fails to recruit any help and is ultimately forced to engage Frank Miller and his men alone. In keeping with the conventions of the genre both “protagonist and antagonist must copy each other, reaching for similar weapons and striking similar blows” (Carter 362). Not surprisingly, however, Kane is victorious and kills the entire gang, after which he and Amy are able to finally leave town and head for a



new life. What *is* surprising, on the other hand, is the fact that his victory is only achieved with the help of Amy. At the last minute she decides to join him, which decision leads directly to Kane's victory. While many have observed that this act validates Kane's actions, it also functions similarly to the moment when Kane attached his badge to his gun: Amy, a symbol of legitimacy and civilization (albeit a complicated one), becomes entangled with supposedly oppositional images of violence and lawlessness.

Ultimately, what is perhaps most illuminative about this sequence of events is the Kanes' response to victory. After defeating Miller and his men and just before riding out of town Kane removes his badge and throws it on the ground. The gesture is deeply symbolic and the viewer senses that the (now former) town marshal has just removed a heavy mantle from his shoulders. Of this moment, Slotkin has noted that "the social implications of Kane's victory are anti-canonical" (395). Though Kane has done his duty and defended the frontier that had been his responsibility, it is not a responsibility that he wants, nor one that characterizes his desires. Wright expands on this idea, saying

The conceptual weight of the good/bad opposition is carried by the contrast between the hero and society, the town. By defeating the villains in a gun battle, the hero is really defeating the town in principle, as his last gesture shows. Thus, in an interesting transformation of the basic code of the Western, the "bad" half of the good/bad opposition is shifted from the villains who threaten society to the society that threatens the hero. (76)

Thus, by the film's dénouement, the tri-point conflict has been laid bare and it is only resolved when the new family leaves the town, exiting the frontier completely. Kane has

apparently overcome the dual facets of the violent town: Miller *and* the badge. The badge, the town, the outlaws, and the weapons all function as terministic elements that articulate a reality of Western violence. Kane and Amy, in leaving these elements behind, provide an alternative screen of dissent in which the West is more than the ordinary Western.

When Kane and Amy leave Hadleyville the film ends, allowing their future to remain ambiguous, if likely unmolested by outlaws. The significance of this is that their future remains undefined and indeterminate. For most of the film Zinnemann relied on the terminology of the Western: there was a rugged law man, a virginal woman, outlaws, prostitutes, and more. In each case these figures occupied a space that was clearly on one side of the terministic frontier or the other while at the same time troubling that dichotomy. Helen Ramirez and Frank Miller, for example, are both traditionally alien but curiously comfortable in the town, while Amy and Kane are part of the legitimate town space, but finally left it. In the end, then, this complication of Western terminology allows Kane to exist outside of either half of the dichotomy. He can't be part of the illegitimate space, and when he initially tries to go there realizes he has to return. At the same time, he can't be part of the town either: the citizens reject him and leave him to die. Thus, Kane's only hope is to go to a place that is *external* to either side of the frontier.

Ultimately, Kane rejects the frontier dichotomies and in so doing articulates a criticism of dichotomies and Westerns themselves. In the end the characters choose to leave the Western environment. Amy "finally accepts him [Kane] and leaves with him; the two of them essentially establish an alternative, better life than that offered by the

town” (Wright 77), which seems to be the point. Thus, Burke’s observation that “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (45) might be applied to *High Noon* as it directs attention to the damaging relationships caused by an existence predicated on Western terminology while leaving the door open for something that is potentially better.

#### Angle of Repose: Susan and Oliver

If *Angle of Repose* isn’t as whole-heartedly a Western in the vein of *High Noon*, it is at least western in its orientation. Telling the story of the Ward family over three generations, the novel is an expansive tale that “provides Stegner's most complete statement of his West” (Occhino 30), and, according to Stegner himself, “comes closest to what I think I understand about the culture I [came] from” (Willrich 252). Others have noted of Stegner that “no one speaks with more persuasion, with more humane insight about the American West” than Stegner (Stegner, *Conversations* 199) and Meloday Graulich has called *Angle of Repose* “Stegner’s richest novel” (87). Accordingly, *Angle of Repose* is remembered as a complex examination of the West and its significance in American life. In this sense, if *Angle of Repose* is not a clear case of Western genre study, it at least fits Cawelti’s criteria (14) of being about and set in the West.

As a commentary on and product of the West, *Angle of Repose* includes a number of familiar Western components that borrow directly from the Western terminology seen in *High Noon* and other texts. Though the story is ostensibly set in the 1970s and follows Lyman Ward, the narrative backbone of the novel is more precisely made up of Lyman’s research on the lives of his grandparents, Oliver and Susan Burling Ward, who lived a century earlier in the American West. Accordingly, much of *Angle of Repose* takes place

in western settings not dissimilar from those depicted in *High Noon*. Likewise, the western characters themselves present “an absolutely standard, almost cliché, situation: the wandering man and the nesting woman—the woman representative of stability and stasis and civilization, and the man a restless, creative creature in a wide-open environment” (Stegner, *Conversations* 172). The parallel to *High Noon* should be obvious; the characters are archetypal tropes from the genre, tropes that allow moral issues to be “simplified to the point of dichotomy” (Cortese 124). Indeed Stegner could just as easily have been describing the Kanes as the Wards and by tapping into such figures he brought with him a specific terminology that “tirelessly marks out frontiers” (de Certeau 126). More specifically, those frontiers are characterized by terministic screens that represent “the classic oppositions from which all Westerns derive their meaning: parlor versus mesa, East versus West, woman versus man, illusion versus truth, words versus things” (Tompkins 48).

As in *High Noon*, Stegner employs Western terms in *Angle of Repose* to offer a critique of that terminology. If the Western discourse tends to portray a “binary opposition of the wilderness and civilization” (Kitses 13) that “relates the achievement of ‘progress’ to a particular form or scenario of violent action” (Slotkin 11), Susan and Oliver’s story provides an alternative narrative. Though Stegner himself acknowledges their standard, archetypal nature, the manner in which their lives play out screens a reality that is hardly complicit in the problems of the Western genre. Instead, while Stegner uses Susan and Oliver as terministic screens to direct attention to the field of Western discourse, “within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology”

(Burke 50). In the case of *Angle of Repose*, attention is directed not toward a superficial reality predicated on Western terministic screens but rather the havoc that reality represents. In a similar way that Zinnemann's film multiplies frontiers "in terms of interactions among the characters—things, animals, human beings: the acting subjects (*actants*) divide up among themselves places" (de Certeau 126), the interactions of Oliver and Susan also divide their portions of the narrative into opposing sides of a terministic divide. So while Will and Amy Kane provide a solution to Western terminology (they exit it completely), Susan and Oliver demonstrate that alienation and estrangement ensue when there is no riding off into the sunset and out of the terminology of the Western.

Almost as soon as Lyman begins telling Susan and Oliver's story it is clear that the two characters represent different and opposing ideas. Oliver is the wandering man who "often rode a horse a hundred miles a day, four hundred miles in a week, accepting the testing that such journeys implied" (Stegner, *Angle* 17). Susan, on the other hand, "might have lived an idyll in her honeymoon cottage in the picnic West if her heart had not bled eastward" (Stegner, *Angle* 89). Susan even has Quaker roots like those of Amy in *High Noon*. Thus, it is immediately clear that the two characters are meant to represent an East-West dichotomy, as well as other relationships encoded in that split, such as civilization-wilderness or law-order. If Oliver "was in an almost archetypal sense 'Western,'" and Susan had "Eastern sophistication and learning" (Ahearn 23), then both characters assume familiar roles in a text about the West.

While Susan and Oliver obviously represent the East and the West, respectively, their marriage is what brings those concepts into conflict and ensures the articulation of a frontier. While each character is given a corresponding space from the very beginning,

their marriage is what allows those spaces to emerge as regions, or spaces created by interactions (de Certeau 126), on either side of a frontier. At the very beginning of the relationship, for example, Susan struggles with how to impress Oliver during one of his visits back East. Eventually she concludes that “Long Pond and Black Pond, liked by New York visitors, were not enough for a man who had seen the Yosemite and ridden the length of the San Joaquin Valley through square miles of wildflowers” (Stegner, *Angle* 49). Her solution is to take him to the more romantic Big Pond. Of course, this incident provides Susan with a number of spaces—Long Pond, Black Pond, as well as Big Pond—that are representative of her eastern experience. However, it also marks an early instance of those spaces becoming a theater for conflict between Susan and Oliver’s values. What’s more, Susan’s discerning between locales demonstrates an awareness of Oliver’s space, and its difference from her own. The two are clearly separated by virtue of their respective regions. If the “frontier is a sort of void, a narrative symbol [sic] of exchanges and encounters” (de Certeau 127), this simple courting ritual is perhaps one of the earliest instances in which that void is articulated.

As the interactions between Oliver and Susan deepen, the frontier void between them becomes starker and more determinative of their behavior. Though we are privileged only with Susan’s perspective, Lyman suggests 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” (Stegner, *Angle* 58). While this passage reaffirms Susan’s affiliation with the East, the use of the word “version” indicates that each partner conceptualizes the marriage differently. That conceptualization, in turn, stems from each character’s “standard, cliché” role as either representative of the East or

West. Thus, when only a few lines later Susan reveals that she wants to return to be a part of the Hudson's literary circle (and at the same time smooth away Oliver's western leanings), her region is coming into direct conflict with that of her husband. This conflict is evident again when, later, Oliver sends her "a floor plan, onto which she sketched a veranda that went three quarters around, and into whose blank rooms she inserted things she wanted, corner cupboards and such. Their letters of planning went back and forth like installments of a serial" (58). Though far less grim than Will Kane trading shots with Frank Miller (or engaging in rhetorical battles with the Hadleyville citizens, for that matter), these episodes represent a back-and-forth between opposing sides of the frontier. Each side, whether Oliver or Susan, constructs a reality—a house, a potential future, etc.—and the other side reinterprets that reality according to different values.

If the early years of Susan and Oliver's marriage reveal the opening of a void between them, their respective occupations provide yet another venue through which they attempt to read their surroundings according to their own, conflicting values. In Susan's case her work as an artist and writer provide her with the opportunity to see her new western surroundings in an eastern context. Whether in sketches or stories Susan consistently falls back on her past, which Lyman reminds us, was based

on the Romantic Poets and the Hudson River school, and what the West had so far taught her was an extension of those: beyond Bryant lay Joaquin Miller, beyond Thomas Cole spread a vast wild grandeur supervised by Bierstadtian peaks. It was never the West as landscape that she resisted, only the West as transience and social crudity. And those she might transform. (262)

In essence, then, Susan's profession becomes a means through which she may appropriate and define the West according to her preconceived notions. Like Oliver's sketches of their New Almaden home, her portrayals of the West are formed out of what she imagines it should look like. In this way Susan's artistic and literary career becomes a means by which she "proceeds to 'civilize' each respective homestead they establish" (Occhino 35). Her impulse is to circumscribe each new (western) environment into a mold established by her eastern experiences.

Conversely, Oliver appropriates his surroundings in a decidedly "western" way. Though almost wholly unsuccessful at making money, Oliver's ultimate goal is to physically reshape the West. After working a series of jobs for other people, Oliver's final effort is an irrigation project in the Idaho desert. One afternoon, having returned to the East after yet another failure, Oliver presents Susan with his "snowpeak of a vision" (Stegner, *Angle* 355). He hands her materials in which she "read about damsites, weather, rainfall, storage capacities, topography, soil analysis, placer production from the Snake River sands. She read two interviews with settlers already irrigating out of Boise Creek, and thought them enthusiasts of the same stripe as her husband" (Stegner, *Angle* 356). In the end, Oliver's project is a vast plan to bring water to the desert. To Susan's skepticism he responds that the Idaho desert "sounds to me like a country with a future" (356), which future is his own transformation of the environment. Thus, while his work is very different from Susan's (and we have less insight into what he is thinking) Oliver's objective is also to read the West according to his own vision. Unlike Susan's work, Oliver's is perhaps more common in a genre filled with entrepreneurs and pioneers who "primarily wanted wealth" (Wright 188) and who felt that the "ruggedness of the land



was something to be overcome, its vastness something to be populated.” (188). Stegner himself has suggested that this is as much an appropriative stance as any, saying that Oliver marred the landscape “on the theory that his was a way of improving life in the West. It is an almost admirable delusion, but I think it’s a delusion. She [Susan] looked up everything for its possibilities as an exemplification of the picturesque, I think” (*Conversations* 172-73). Thus, the occupations of both Susan and Oliver provide additional examples of conflict between different sides of the frontier.

If it is clear that Susan and Oliver exert their terministic roles to the point of conflict, the final outcome of this exertion is the disastrous climax of their marriage. As Lyman tells the story, Susan eventually begins an affair with Frank Sargent, a long time family friend and employee of Oliver’s. While Lyman doesn’t know exactly what took place, he speculates “that passion and guilt happened, in some form” (Stegner, *Angle* 496). Though Lyman attempts to be fair to his grandmother he reveals that the affair led to the drowning of Agnes Ward in the Susan ditch; apparently while Susan and Frank were having some sort of exchange before he left, Agnes became separated from her mother and fell in (Stegner 522-23). If that wasn’t bad enough, Frank proceeded to commit suicide (522), Oliver and Susan separated for ten years (514), and, in a final symbolic act, Oliver pulled up the rose garden he had planted for his wife (527). Though Oliver and Susan go on to have a reconciliation of sorts and live out the rest of their lives together at the Zodiac cottage, it is this series of events that defines their relationship in Lyman’s telling of the story. Ultimately their lives end in failure, misery, and permanent, if not total, estrangement.

While Oliver and Susan's estrangement could be viewed as a tragic turn of events that is nonetheless isolated from their opposing terministic roles, Lyman's telling of the story instead characterizes it as the culmination of those roles. As the family traveled from place to place pursuing Oliver's dream, Susan became increasingly secluded from the life she wanted. During her time in the Canyon she "had no alternative diversions, ears that craved music or the sound of voices could crave in vain" (Stegner, *Angle* 409). Later, when Oliver comes home drunk after yet another financial failure Susan "felt as empty as the mountains. After eleven years, she wanted to say after him. After eleven years you finally prove to me that Augusta was right" (416). Ironically, in Susan's isolation she continues to perpetuate the void that exists between them. She holds Oliver accountable to her friend Augusta, something she has done all along and which promoted Lyman to want to "tell her that it is dangerous for a bride to be apologetic about her husband" (55). Of course, that danger that Lyman alludes to is the series of disasters in Idaho and what led to those disasters was both Susan and Oliver's perpetuation of a regional void between them. Though Lyman "sides openly with Oliver" (Ahearn 23), he has "difficulty justifying that bleak and wordless break" (Stegner, *Angle* 528) that Oliver takes from the marriage. Culpability for failure is thusly attributed to both figures and, more specifically, the terministic roles that they assume.

Much as *High Noon* reveals the totalizing and violent affects of Western terministic screens, *Angle of Repose* suggests that Western terminologies will breed failure and alienation. However, while Zinnemann's film accomplishes that thesis by appending normally oppositional terms to one another, Stegner spends his time widening

the void and showing the problems inherent with the maintenance of dichotomies. Thus, in Graulich's words, the West for Susan and Oliver

is characterized by a merger of two sets of contradictory impulses, externalized in female and male character. Like the West, marriage may be the frontier where a synthesis can take place between women's and men's opposing needs, dreams, desires, and values—or it may be the territory where the 'legitimate inclinations of the sexes' remain permanently at odds. (87-88)

In the Ward's case, despite attempts at synthesis, both parties do remain permanently at odds. Like Will Kane, who can find no peace with Frank Miller on the loose, the Wards can find no peace while operating within their terministic roles. Instead, Susan believes that Oliver "had suffered as much as she, and she knew that for his suffering she was to blame" (Stegner, *Angle* 528), while Oliver eventually "put on weight and fell in love with flowers and learned to take his consolation from a lonely bottle" (17). In the end the two do remain permanently at odds, two terms positioned in conflict with one another and, as Burke says, "if *conflict*, then *victimage*" (55). Ultimately both Susan and Oliver are victims of their own frontiers by virtue of the conflicts those frontiers precipitate. The best they ever achieve is a state of rest, or "angle of repose," that Lyman's wife Ellen characterizes as living death and fifty years of penance (Stegner, *Angle* 550).

#### Angle of Repose: Lyman

Though Susan and Oliver never experience a bittersweet riding-out-of-town analogous to the end of *High Noon*, *Angle of Repose* does include an external space that critiques frontier terminology. That space takes the form of the twentieth century Zodiac

Cottage and is inhabited by Lyman Ward. Taking place in 1970, Lyman's story is largely free of the western dichotomies that he sees in the past. As a crippled, emeritus history professor living in his grandparents old home, he gains access to the West largely through letters left behind by the now deceased Susan. Though isolated in his own way, Lyman hopes to be left alone (Stegner, *Angle* 3) to work on the project of reconstructing what happened to his grandparents. Though he is a historian, his project isn't so much a history as it is "writing about something else. A marriage, I guess" (199). Accordingly, Lyman, as a historian and twentieth century commentator, occupies a physical and symbolic space that is set at a distance from the past.

If Lyman clearly occupies an external space akin, somewhat, to the Kanes' future in *High Noon*, what *Angle of Repose* offers in addition is space as region, and region screened by the terminologies of the past. As a "space created by an interaction" (de Certeau 126), Lyman's region emerges as he interacts with the stories of his grandparents, and this interaction thusly establishes a *new* frontier, but one that is more a "temporal" split than a geographic one. This frontier is not characterized by the tropes and easy dichotomies personified by "the freedom-loving, roving man" or "the civilizing woman" (Stegner, *Mountain Water* 195). Instead, Occhino characterizes Lyman as a kind of "frontiersman looking to the land as a source of future opportunity. [...] he does not have access to the unsettled physical West to which his grandparents traveled and of which his grandmother writes, but only to her experience of it. This removes Lyman one step from the West" (34). That removal takes place over time and makes history the terministic system that will screen his reality. In turn, this temporal relationship allows the book to assume a metafictional stance in relation to traditional representations of the

West (including, to some degree, Susan and Oliver's), which metafiction, as Hutcheon points out, "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (89). Thus, though Lyman tells Rodman otherwise, he simply "doesn't realize that by writing about a marriage, he *is* writing western history" (Graulich 87-88) and conjointly, western history is writing him.

Ultimately, as a person that Graulich describes as "caught in the cobwebs of the past while searching for the connections between past and present" (91), Lyman serves as a terministic meta-commentary on Western terminology, indicating its dangers but finally staking out an ambivalent position. Though poised in opposition to the past across a temporal frontier, Lyman's reality is reflected through an inherited terminology that, like all terminologies, embodies "choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity" (Burke 50). De Certeau describes this as the "paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them" (127). While Susan and Oliver's story might stress the frontier-as-disjunction and reveals problems with that position, Lyman's story turns the tables by emphasizing the frontier-as-conjunction and continuity with the past, but nevertheless problematizes that position as well. Thus, ultimately, "Stegner creates a story about interpretation, about how the myths of our literary tradition infiltrate our thinking and determine our conclusions" (Graulich 88). In Lyman's case that infiltration conjoins him with the past, but suggests that that conjunction may be as perilous as disjunction. In so saying, Lyman's portion of *Angle of*

*Repose* offers both a commentary on the terministic screens embedded in the Western, as well as a meta-commentary on the reality that those screens reflect.

Though Lyman's story eventually emphasizes the conjoining function of the frontier, it begins with numerous examples of disjunction, much as *High Noon* and Susan and Oliver's stories do. As the novel opens, for example, Lyman says that he is sitting at home "with the tape recorder whirring no more nosily than electrified time" (Stegner, *Angle* 3). Later, when he wants to move forward, he facetiously envisions his story as a play, saying, "in the fashion of the nineteenth-century theater, let Marian Prouse push across the stage the perambulator with a placard on its side: TWO MONTHS LATER" (166). Statements such as these foreground Lyman's awareness of time and its separating effects. Time becomes electrified or deliberately stagey, revealing the artifice through which Lyman is forced to approach the past and his exclusion from it. For him, the past is made up of what Kerry Ahearn calls Stegner's "faded mythic props and settings" (Ahearn 13). While for his grandparents (as well as the Kanes in *High Noon*) the West was immediate and physical, Lyman is not a part of that space. If he sees into the lives of his grandparents, it is at a distance. Though the frontier will eventually assume a changing role in his life, it is at least clear from the beginning that a frontier exists between Lyman and his grandparents.

As more of Lyman's story unfolds the casting of the frontier-as-disjunction becomes more complicated. Only a few lines into the novel, for example, after characterizing time as "electrified," he claims that his "antecedents support me here as the old wistaria at the corner supports the house" (Stegner, *Angle* 3). Of course, the passage suggests Lyman's reliance on the past, but also hints at a spatial merging;

Lyman's space, his house, is fused with his "antecedents," thereby conjoining Lyman on both a symbolic and a geographic plane. Other examples demonstrate that the past is reliant on Lyman. After reading one of Susan's letters he can't "help reading that as more than a literary flourish; I want to read it as a perception of Western necessity, something deeper than scenery" (Stegner, *Angle* 222). Here Lyman maps his own narrative onto that of his grandparents' lives. Later examples are even more illustrative. Just as he leans on his antecedents for support, his antecedents depend on Lyman's reading and what he wants as much as anything.

While examples of Lyman experiencing the conjoining effects of a frontier abound, perhaps the most illuminative episode is Susan's affair and the death of Agnes. Here, Lyman admits that there is little information about what happened. This poses a difficulty for him, for while his task has been relatively easy to that point, Susan's affair and the ensuing effects occur "at a place where she hasn't done the work for me, and where it isn't any longer a game. I not only don't want this history to happen, I have to make it up, or part of it. All I know is the *what*, and not all of that; the *how* and the *why* are all speculation" (Stegner, *Angle* 512). Significantly, what Lyman ends up speculating is highly colored by his own experiences. For example, though he gravely doubts Susan and Frank Sargent had sex, he is willing to entertain the idea simply because he has "seen the similar breakdown of one whose breakdown I couldn't possibly have imagined until it happened, whose temptations I was not even aware of" (496). Thus, Lyman reads his own experiences onto those of the past, which Van Noy says, makes "someone who comes to know more facts about his grandparent's history, but superimposes his own cognitive map on the information he receives" (157). Whereas Lyman initially provided

examples of his separation from the past (and paradoxically continues to do so throughout the story), the more he reveals about the past the more it is clear that both past and present mirror one another.

As Lyman moves past the climax of Susan's story and reaches the finale of his own, the terminology of the West and the frontier-as-conjunction begin to blur any lines between opposing sides of the temporal divide. Though Susan and Oliver's story reaches its peak with Susan's infidelity, the moment of truth for Lyman comes later, as he is forced to confront his own unfaithful wife. At the behest of Lyman's son—and against Lyman's wishes—his estranged wife, Ellen, comes to visit him. They spend an awkward day together that brings back painful feelings from when she left him for his doctor, and then she leaves. However, the next day Lyman ponders her infidelity, wondering “if I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather” (557). The question is an important one because it marks a complete synthesis of past and present. Moreover, the subtext of the question raises numerous others: will Lyman choose to do something that could potentially make him happier? In what ways will he allow the past to affect him? Is being “bigger” than Oliver actually an escape from the determinative qualities of the Western terministic screens? Because Lyman's question is posed in the last lines of the novel and never answered, the consequences of the question are left ambiguous. However, simply by asking the question, as Ahearn emphasizes, it “becomes apparent that the ‘biography’ represents not the conclusions of an objective mind that has weighed all evidence, but rather the speculations and pre-judgments of a man groping his way along. We are witnessing the construction of a rough draft” (25). Significantly, Lyman's final draft will be a reality deeply rooted in the terministic screen he inherited from the



past. No matter what he decides to do about his wife, that decision will be based on his understanding of the past.

Lyman's final predicament reveals that a present reality screened by a past terminology may lead to conjunction or disjunction, or, more generally, happiness or disaster. Though he is ultimately "determined to see his grandparents as estranged and their marriage as a frustrating alliance of opposing needs" (Graulich 94) his experiences with his own wife leave him struggling for something more meaningful. Thus, after Ellen visits, Lyman dreams of her and in the dream she tells him "there must be some other possibility than death or lifelong penance" (556). The dream and preceding events leave Lyman a changed man and he begins to contemplate the idea that if Ellen does not come back "of her own volition, I can even conceive, in this slack hour, that I might send for her" (556). This is a drastic turn around after having characterized his grandmother as a destructive, if sympathetic and complex, figure for five hundred pages. It also suggests a reassignment of responsibility. Despite the fact that it was Ellen who left, Lyman is willing to entertain the idea that he will try to repair their relationship. Essentially, in these last pages he begins to imagine a reconciliation for himself and his wife that never really occurred for Susan and Oliver. This possibility of reconciliation suggests that Lyman's journey through the terminology of the West infused his understanding of his own reality while also helping him finally see that, as Ahearn says,

Susan was not simply the victimizer in her marriage, but that there was a mutual lack of communication; mulish Oliver no more recognized his wife's discontent than Lyman saw Ellen's. By telling the story in such detail, he has in effect lived Ellen's frustrations; his sympathy for Susan

leaves him just one courageous, compassionate step from understanding his own wife. (26)

Though Stegner leaves that step untaken when he ends the novel, he also leaves the future open to that possibility. *Angle of Repose* thus suggests that one particular brand of terministic screens may cause estrangement and an irreconcilable frontier, as is the case with Susan and Oliver as well as the Kanes (as long as they are in the town), or it might work to bring unity. In Lyman's case, the choice is his because the reality reflected in the terms apparently includes both. As Burke says, "much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (46). As Lyman confronts the connection between past and present he becomes aware of new possibilities provided him by his choice of terms and, becoming aware, confronts the possibility of spinning new realities.

While much of Lyman's story takes place before he understands the effects of his research, one of his earliest metaphors sheds light on *how* a given terminology might lead to alienation for Susan but reconciliation for him. Near the beginning of the novel, while the temporal divide is still fairly strong, he compares time to the Doppler Effect. He explains that sound

has a higher pitch than the sound of the same thing going away. If you have perfect pitch and a head for mathematics you can compute the speed of the object by the interval between its arriving and departing sounds. I have neither perfect pitch nor a head for mathematics, and anyway who wants to compute the speed of history?" (13)

The metaphor recurs several times as Lyman tells the story of his grandparents and is a salient one because it suggests the past's changing resonance. If the experiences of Susan, Oliver, and others have a certain meaning in one situation, Lyman's Doppler metaphor suggests that those various signifiers might have different "itches" in another situation. Thus, as Stegner presents "history as he presents geography: as meaning different things to different people" (Van Noy 158-59), the things that led to disjunction for Susan and Oliver might mean something different for Lyman. Of course, Lyman hardly recognizes that fact until the conclusion of the novel, instead bringing to his research what Graulich calls "a set of cultural premises" (94), but when he does recognize it he experiences the most genuine moment of learning of the entire book. Ultimately he sees that though his life is built up around a Western terminology, the consequences of that terminology remain ambiguous and unwritten.

The conclusion of *Angle of Repose* suggests that the terministic screens arising out of western discourse are extremely powerful and potentially dangerous, but that the reality they reflect may have many possible outcomes and is not necessarily destructive. Occhino argues that Stegner conceives of the West "as an entity that does not yield itself to the fantasies imposed on it. People do not shape the West; rather, the West shapes people" (Occhino 35). Applied to *Angle of Repose*, she adds, "both Susan and Oliver are thwarted because they discover that the West cannot fit itself to their respective images of it. [...]The incompatibility of their hopes for the West eventually estranges them from one another" (Occhino 35). On the other hand, Lyman may not be thwarted because he finally comes to accept a situation and allows that situation to shape him. If his entire project is to fit the past into a predetermined image, the final pages of the novel show him

to be adapting that project to achieve new goals. Thus, while the frontier may pose a threat for Lyman, it might also have “a mediating role” (de Certeau 127).

### Implications

While the commentaries and meta-commentaries embedded in *Angle of Repose* and *High Noon* complicate the lives of their respective characters, they also reverberate through subsequent western texts and affect the terminology of the West itself. In each case the critical eye that these texts turn on the Western, as well as terministic approaches they take to do so, have become characteristic of the genre. Though these texts certainly did not reshape the genre by themselves, they serve as prominent examples of a broader effort to force the Western to reflect greater reconciliation while deflecting overly determinative archetypes. Consequently, later films like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* or, much later, Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*, as well as later western novels such as those by Cormac McCarthy, have been forced to grapple with the effects of western terminologies in an environment more conducive to metafiction than myth. Ultimately, then, there may never have been a John Grady Cole if there had not first been Will Kanes or Oliver and Lyman Wards.

Beyond the literary and cinematic morphologies that these texts have precipitated, their efforts with terministic screens have also resonated in broader American popular culture. In speaking about the West, both Stegner and Zinnemann tap into a set of terms that conveys, to return to Cawelti, a “culturally significant narrative” (12). Certainly the literary repercussions of *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose* factor into this narrative. However, western discourse is unique if only for the fact that, as White says, almost from the beginning “imagining the West in certain ways thus became a means to shape popular

consciousness and to impart certain visions of what an American social order should look like” (623). In effect then, as these stories seek to reinterpret their generic terminology they also seek to reconstruct America itself. From attitudes about gender and history to public policy concerning the environment and violence, they help reflect a social reality less about confrontation and difference and more about understanding.

The significance of this reflected reality is that it continues to exert a powerful influence over subsequent social action and related scholarship. For example, Kelly Jensen has recently discussed the archetypal male cowboy in contemporary country music. Significantly, she points to Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*, *High Noon*, and other texts, as defining modern ideas about western figures (93). Others, such as Ryan Malphurs, have examined the frontier as a culturally determinative factor in politics and media. Specifically, Maphurs has argued that the popular media has facilitated an association between George W. Bush and figures like John Wayne, Wyatt Earp, Buffalo Bill (186) and the mythic cowboy. Still others, such as Peter Tragos, Gretchen Schwartz, and Mike S. Dubose have applied gender, mythic, and cultural critiques arising from western criticism to other, disparate media<sup>4</sup>. What emerges then is the West as a rhetorically potent precedent for the study of broad culture. In this context, texts like *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose* offer examinations of figures that are influential across American society. Moreover, a complicated understanding of these earlier texts opens a

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<sup>4</sup> Tragos’ article “Monster Masculinity: Honey I’ll be In The Garage Reasserting My Manhood” focuses on the mythic aspects of gender construction. This is similar to the project taken up by Schwartz in “‘You Talkin’ to Me?’: De Niro’s Interrogative Fidelity and Subversion of Masculine Norms.” Dubose looks at political aspects of mythic and cultural criticism in “Holding Our for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America.”

discourse on more contemporary representations and informs our study of both past and present popular culture.

While it is clear that both *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose* are important texts that exemplify the resonance of the Western, a terministic reading situates them within the public realm. It should be noted that, as Bryan Crable observes, since Burke's death his work has often been used in the "study of contemporary rhetoric and social change" (118). However, my use of terministic screens argues that these texts are *part* of that social change. Indeed Bygrave frequently emphasizes the importance of texts or statements in Burke's theory, noting that the message is ultimately that "art is both corrective and subversive; it is indeed corrective by its subversiveness" (21). In this case, then, *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose* serve as the statements, or works of art, that engage with and determine culture. If terministic screens "suggests that symbols, terms, and language form the building blocks, the bricks and mortar, of the structures of our collective life," it is also important to remember that realities can be "reconstructed as we alter our discursive practices" (Stob 131). The result is that these Western texts reinterpret their genre (and its corresponding space) and in so doing offer and commence new practices within culture.

If both *High Noon* and *Angle of Repose* have drifted quietly into the canon of their respective mediums and out of the public limelight, they are still foundational texts that provoke innovative applications of specific terminologies. De Certeau says that this "is precisely the primary role of the story. It opens a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*. It creates a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social actions" (125). Accordingly, the stakes are high for western stories, particularly in the wake of Stegner

and Zinnemann. They impact multiple facets of American life and, ultimately our returning to them shows that if “we are all invested in the stories we tell” (Graulich 92), our stories are also invested in us.

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