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THE PRAIRIE MERMAID

LOVE-TESTS OF PIONEER WOMEN

ROBERT H. SOLOMON

In some fictional, historical, and autobiographical accounts of the lives of married women on the prairies of North America during the brief period between initial exploration and permanent settlement, there appears a rather widespread and complicated motif. In it the woman lives on an empty prairie, usually far from the edge of town; physically isolated with her husband, she is psychologically alone, too, and friendless, especially in terms of female companionship. Often her family is far away; always her husband is insensitive and unsympathetic, and, in general terms, unworthy of her devotion. Sometimes even before she is able to voice or demonstrate her needs for friends, family, love, and beauty, the woman must pass a cruel love-test; she has to silence all that she has learned about the failure of her life, love, and lover on the prairie.

Elizabeth Mitchell, a journalist interested in contemporary reforms, emigration, and the

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Garden Cities movement, describes the period in question as "the time of hard fighting and unceasing struggle," when one could see "settlers come in, but settlers go out again, sick of the country."¹ She records this experience in her book *In Western Canada before the War*, which also contains proud and sympathetic accounts of successful marriages on the prairie, similar to those in the work of Willa Cather, Nellie McClung, and others.² Mitchell's account of unhappy marriages on both sides of the international border closely resembles fictional accounts in *Wolf Willow* by Wallace Stegner, "The Painted Door," by Sinclair Ross, and "Snow," by the German-born, naturalistic writer, Frederick Philip Grove. In his autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border*, Hamlin Garland presents at least two generations of women caught in the same type of unsatisfying marriage. Not every woman on the prairies during this period fits the motif. But the theme of the unappreciated, devoted, and silenced prairie wife exists in Canadian and American fiction and nonfiction, created by writers of both sexes. By coincidence or intention, this motif follows the most popular of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid."³

ANTECEDENTS OF ANDERSEN'S MERMAID

"The Little Mermaid" (first published in Danish in 1835) was well known in Europe and America in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was available in translations, authorized and not, the latter much to Andersen's chagrin. Andersen, who wrote several fanciful autobiographical stories, including one called "the fairy tale of my life," maintained that the mermaid story was his creation. Nevertheless, he admitted to knowing the popular Danish song "Agnete and The Mermen," and Andersen's other tales demonstrate that he knew European folk literature and mythology, where ancestors of the little mermaid can readily be identified.⁴

Examples of female water-deities in Mediterranean, North European, and English mythology and literature include sirens, naiads, Rhine-maidens, Lorelei, and the Arthurian "Lady of the Lake." Hesiod records Aphrodite of the Waves, born from the blood-flecked seafoam following the castration by Cronus of the elemental god Uranus; this motif informs Botticelli's painting of a Christianized Venus rising from rose-decked waves. The goddess of birth and love bestows magical gifts of secret knowledge, wealth, or power. Other water-deities, such as the sirens in *The Odyssey*, offer seduction, confusion, enslavement, or death instead. Andersen adopts the bloody feet and the seafoam of Aphrodite and the singing of the sirens for his tale. His mermaid is silenced, as were the sirens when Odysseus closed the ears of his men to them, and this recalls another source, the myth of the rape of Philomela.

Philomela was "outraged" by her sister Procne's husband; in order to hide his identity, Tereus cut out Philomela's tongue. In some versions, Procne also is silenced, but the motif is the same: the silencing of a sexually betrayed woman. In the myth the women triumph, gain revenge, and are saved from lives of humiliation by becoming a nightingale and a swallow. This motif can be seen in art from the Renaissance to the poetry of William Faulkner. Like Philomela or Procne, Andersen's maid loses her voice and is betrayed by

a man she trusted; then she is transported above human indignities to the realm of the birds.

If Andersen's story contains references to older traditions, it also resonates with concerns peculiar in origin or intensity to the period in which he lived. The theme of the seduced and abandoned young woman fills nineteenth-century literature, as early as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and appears in popular literature such as cautionary paperback novels.⁵ Migration after the industrial revolution intensified universal concerns about the fate of young women who leave home. Emigration to the North American plains offered a particularly arduous test, redoubling the significance of the theme. Andersen's tale also reflects Victorian fears about the dangers of female passion. Finally, the story undoubtedly stirred Andersen for personal, as well as literary and social, reasons. A lifelong virgin, Andersen visited brothels only to tell fairy tales to the youngest women. He lied about a dull, insensitive father; ignored his bastard sister ("my mother's daughter," he called her); and never admitted the illegitimate birth of his own mother and her two sisters.⁶ Andersen's tale is an amalgam of the old and the contemporary, the universal and the personal. Across the Atlantic, the pattern of emigration, isolation, and privation on the prairie set the stage for a reappearance of the mermaid motif.

ANDERSEN'S MERMAID STORY

The mermaid story by Andersen is simple and direct. Six sisters live beneath the cornflower-blue sea with their father, a king, and his mother. Each maid tends a garden, in the center of which stands a topiary monument. The sisters sculpt fish or mercreatures; the little mermaid shapes the sun, reflecting her dangerous interest in things Apollonian, masculine (as the sun is in myths), and unreachable. In the center of the sun-spot is a statue she has rescued from a wreck, a bust of a handsome man. The maid is fifteen, the age of sexual awakening. Omens of danger surround her on her birthday, when she surfaces to spend a ritual time in the world of

men as her sisters have done before. It is winter; icebergs and freezing spray make the surfacing painful and dangerous. Nevertheless, she sees a handsome prince, falls in love with him, and rescues him from death. Hiding her face in seafoam, she dives beneath the sea to avoid capture by his companions. But as she sinks, the maid plans to become a woman and seek her love.

A seawitch gives her an odious potion, a drink made from the bosom-blood of the witch, symbolizing a second nurturing. The new kind of milk and knowledge represents passage to a new life. The mermaid also loses her tail to gain legs; every step will feel like a thousand stab-bings. She loses her mermaid's lifespan of three centuries; further, should her prince marry a mortal, the mermaid will dissolve into seafoam (reversing Aphrodite's birth). Finally, the mermaid will be silent, giving up her sirenlike voice. As in those nineteenth-century marriages that coincided with emigration and homesteading, selecting the wrong husband will be grievously painful, even fatal: her choice of prince determines the fate of the mermaid, in the tale and on the prairies.

The mermaid does select a cold and callous mate, who ignores blood flowing from her feet as the two of them travel to distant lands and mountaintops. He inflicts psychological suffering on his silent companion, telling her of a mermaid he really loves and of a princess he does not love but must marry. He offers neither recognition nor sympathy. The mermaid's hope for fortune ends when the princess emerges from a royal or magic chapel, looking like her twin. Prairie husbands betray silent mermaid-wives, but never out of love for another woman. There are few enough women in these stories; more important, there is a love that is greater—for taming “virgin land,” new “territory,” and “frontier.” Wives lose out to their husbands' homestead-fantasies.

ESCAPE: AN ILLUSION

Andersen's mermaid has another chance to escape. Her sisters and the king's mother have

sold their tresses (symbols of femininity) for a magical dagger with which the maid is to stab the betrayer. But she cannot; instead, the mermaid undergoes her final humiliation. She kisses the brows of the sleeping couple and stabs herself. But as she starts to dissolve, she is miraculously rescued by “sisters of the air” (Andersen's version of the Philomela-birds). The tale has become a children's story, with a happy ending and a cautionary message: the young readers are warned that the mermaid's life is shortened when a child misbehaves, lengthened when a child is good. Thus Andersen retreats from the problems presented by sexual maturation and the pressures that force women to be devoted to callous lovers. Unlike Andersen, those who record prairie mermaids write for adults. On the prairie, at the earliest time of settlement, rescue is impossible; the stories are more candid, and the mode of expression is that of gritty realism.

“CARRION SPRING”: A DOG'S LIFE

Of the writers who utilize the motif of the devoted, long-suffering, silenced prairie wife, Wallace Stegner develops it most clearly in his unusual mixed-genre work, *Wolf Willow*, subtitled *A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Prairie Frontier*.⁷ The story of the prairie mermaid appears in the section entitled “Car-rion Spring,” in the book's third part, “The Whitemud River Range.” Stegner's book deals with the settlement of Saskatchewan during the first decade of this century, a time of extreme isolation, privation, and psychological torment. In addition, it is a period of physical torment and endless winter.

“Car-rion Spring” is set in the earliest days of spring in 1906. The winter that year was so long and severe that prairie people still speak of it as the year when winter never ended, or the year without spring. For Molly Henry it has been especially trying, since winter coincided with her first months of marriage, her honeymoon time, and her first homesteading on the prairie. Six months earlier she had left “whatever civilization was offered by her

hometown of Malta, Montana," and in the period since October of 1905, "except for the Christmas blowout had enjoyed neither fun nor the company of another woman since."⁸ She had left family, female friendship, and familiar territory for a new life, love, and homestead. Like most prairie mermaid figures, Molly began all three at once.

Spring, however, has not come on time; the chinook winds appear in March instead of January. When the new bride opens her door, she is not met by the springtime fragrance of the earth, but by the smell of rotting cattle carcasses. Cows that were lost in winter, marooned during blizzards, "bloom," in the worst sense, in spring. This prairie world is dead, and it threatens to be deadly to Molly.

But Molly is life-oriented; she has been planning to take her husband and marriage back to better territory, back home to Malta, "back where there was a chance for them both."⁹ Her journey carries with it hopes of rescue, but as in all prairie mermaid tales, such hopes are more illusion than possibility; before long we see that Molly's husband will determine where the trip will conclude and how much silence Molly will have to adopt.

Leaving their homestead, in accordance with their plans, the failed homesteaders shake the hooflike hands of their male workers on the unsuccessful ranch. Molly's husband, Ray, looks prematurely old and almost ruined, physically. He has suffered frostbite on the face, and his scarred cheeks symbolize a blasted and cold personality, as well as his unreadiness for the homesteading experience. In the prairie mermaid stories the husband usually suffers or dies because he is unprepared for or unwilling to face the demands, physical or psychological, of pioneer life.

At first, however, Ray and Molly seem to be headed home; their movements resemble the journey of the mermaid to the wintry sea surface, albeit in reverse. They move past melting snowbanks, watery slush, and swollen creeks as they travel from the hard and frozen North to the wet and flooding South. As they move, even Ray is amazed to see cattle marooned and

stinking in the treetops. Molly tries to evade the realities she detests and thinks instead of the trees and blossoms of Malta. She remembers the sweet side of life there, symbolized by the candy store. But memory cannot overcome the fact that Molly is in a dangerous environment; Ray's betrayals come fast and furious.

THE LOVE-TEST

Instead of reaching Malta, Ray stops with the son of a man simply known as "Crazy Shulz," and the men play at scrambling through coyote burrows in search of pelts for bounty. Ray is not an Apollonian center nor a ray of sunshine in Molly's cold life. He melds with the dogs and coyotes, an animal in a naturalistic environment. In such places love does not hold power. A twenty-five-cent bounty is more attractive to Ray than a day with Molly.

Molly tries to give affection to a coyote pup she rescues, but the dogs nip at her as if she were their prey. She persists, puts a leash on the pup, and takes Ray to a picnic spot that they had visited six months ago, when she was a bride. But the past, with its dreams of successful homesteading and successful love, cannot be recaptured. Ray betrays Molly again by revealing to her that he has never intended to return to Montana. Instead he has been planning to take Molly to a second homestead, a larger one that has already been abandoned once, as a failure. It will be a bigger gamble, we must assume, and riskier. It seems foolish.

At this moment, Molly wonders to herself whether the pup she is trying to love might turn on her and kill her before she can tame it. Molly is at the moment of the love-test of pioneer women. She can argue or even leave Ray—although limited transportation, settlement, and communication, together with restrictions on divorce at the time, make that seem unlikely—or else she can surrender, stifle her needs, and silence her protests. "Sick and scared," Molly reaches a blasted, blue-purple, half-crushed crocus toward Ray's cheek, which is insensitive to touch after scarring by the endless winter; then, nervously, almost hysterically

it seems, she exclaims, "You should never wear lavender." Ray's promise is as dead as that of the prairie and of the marriage. Neither he nor the prairie should wear the royal color, purple.

Although Ray never behaves nobly, Molly remains devoted to her betrayer, and she is able (or is forced by circumstances) to silence her yearnings for a better life and love. With an insensitivity to his wife that matches the callousness of Andersen's prince toward his mermaid-companion, Ray asks Molly, "Haven't you got any ambition to be the first white woman for five hundred miles around?"¹⁰ One is tempted to ask: Stuck in semi-isolation, on a stinking mess of a prairie, with animal-like males as her companions, and betrayed by the only other member of her household, what woman would want that distinction? But Molly does not ask. In psychological terms, every step that Molly takes back to her old life, on a new homestead, will hurt as much as the steps the silent mermaid took when she followed her chosen man. The psychological pain may be matched by the physical distress that winter can cause; the fate of the prairie mermaid will depend on weather, land, and a man, and they have betrayed her hopes and trust once. We do not know Molly's future, but she has demonstrated undeserved devotion to a cold and cruel husband, marked at last by the silencing of her own needs.¹¹ She has passed the love-test of the prairie mermaid.

A MERMAID WITH ILLUSIONS:

"THE PAINTED DOOR"

In "The Painted Door," Sinclair Ross deals with a later stage in settlement, and there are more hopes, security, and companions than in Stegner's account.¹² Some farms are becoming permanent; the settlers even have community dances. However, the suffering of the unloved and unsatisfied woman in this story may be worse than Molly's fate. The marriage and homestead are seven years old, and Ann, somewhat self-deceptive and confused about her goals, has yet to feel happy in either. She is certain that her husband, John, is insensitive to

her needs for love, friends, and beauty. He seems to be; he can not understand why Ann wants to paint the inside of their bare-wood home. Perhaps unfairly, Ann feels that John regards her with the same pride of ownership that he has for his cows. Ann has anxieties, and whether or not she is fooling herself or torturing herself, it is clear that John does not know what is bothering her. His farm is successful, but his marriage is not.

Ann is irritated, for one thing, by John's refusal to shave. He will not remove that defense against frost-bitten cheeks. In addition, she feels that the only warmth John provides for a woman comes from a wood fire. Complex in personality, Ann is not an innocent mermaid, nor is she a foolish new bride, like Molly. She hungers for artistic expression, physical warmth, and recognition of her basic needs. She will be served.

Unwittingly, John presents Ann with the opportunity she desires. He gives ample evidence of his insensitivity to Ann's needs when, leaving for his father's farm as a storm approaches, he tells Ann that his friend Steven will be over to help with the chores. Ann has already felt sexual attraction to Steven; they have danced together. But John ignores her expressions of concern and leaves anyway. Steven comes, as does the expected and feared storm. The inevitable happens, and when Ann wakes up beside Steven, she stares at what she takes to be an apparition of John beside her bed. The spectre goes, and Ann slowly falls asleep.

The next day John is discovered against the fence, dead. Only Ann sees that he has paint from her door on his hand. She knows now that the face of John was not an illusion. Escape through infidelity, however, has been illusory for Ann. No sooner had Steven fallen asleep than Ann began to rationalize herself back into the loveless relation with her cold husband. Devotion comes, in "The Painted Door," on both sides of transgression. We do not know Ann's eventual fate, but the immediate outcome is the silencing of her previously strong desires for beauty, sex, and love. Ann is passing a particularly frustrating love-test, and

she does so eagerly, submissively, just as the mermaid-model does in Andersen's tale. Having rationalized about John's "superior" values, she seems unable to maintain her drive for personal satisfaction and self-assertion, even when her chief impediment, her insensitive, authoritarian husband, has been removed. John's death in fact reinforces Ann's devotion and guilt. To Steven Ann says nothing; her chance for escape passes, and the reader is left to wonder what psychological corner she has painted herself into. Of the women in the fictional prairie mermaid stories under consideration, Ann is the one who comes closest to escaping.¹³ By contrast, for the women in Frederick Philip Grove's "Snow," there is no hope at all.¹⁴

"SNOW": SUFFERING REDOUBLED

In "Snow," the motif of the woman who is trapped in an unsatisfying marriage intensifies: escape is unthinkable; silence is unbreakable. The scene is Manitoba, and the devotion of the wife to her foolish husband is complete. Again, as in all prairie mermaid stories, there is betrayal and suffering—in this case resulting from the weak husband's unassailable, authoritarian position. Molly and Ann foreshadow the strong and self-reliant women to come with later stages of prairie settlement, but the women in "Snow" rely totally on the strength and knowledge of their husbands, two unsuccessful farmers. When the men fail, their women face the possibility of starvation or of living on the charity of others. It is a stark scene.

In "Snow" the love-test is administered to two women; one is totally silent, and the other utters but one line. The setting is winter, as it usually is in prairie mermaid stories, and a man is missing in a storm. Redcliff, unsuited by temperament or training for the country he is attempting to subdue, has disappeared; his wife, who has no name in the story, remains painfully silent as able men search for her tenderfoot husband or his corpse. She lives in a drab, drafty shack. Grove describes this nameless woman as hardly more than a child; yet she is already mother to six. As a result, her predicament is

significantly worse than Ann's or Molly's; she is trapped in more ways.

It appears that this child bride has been devoted to her woeful Redcliff, who does not know a prairie winter's storm when he sees one approaching and who curls into a fetal position and sleeps into a frozen death when it comes. In prairie mermaid stories, children do not ameliorate but intensify the predicament of the woman. Redcliff's masculinity gave him the authority, one assumes, to attempt homesteading, for which he was unprepared, and to father six doomed children. The fate of Redcliff's wife is determined not only by her marriage but by her devotion to yet another failed homesteader, her cocky and egotistical father.

TWO FAILED MEN, TWO DOOMED WOMEN

The father in "Snow" has failed once as a bush farmer and has been reduced to depending on the dubious skills of his son-in-law Redcliff to save both generations. He is a dandy, a handsome man, but useless on the plains. He has been living on his looks alone, but now he has turned to the impossibly slim hope that Redcliff could make the dry land bloom. The father has his own wife, so devoted that she has stuck by him through one failure and the possibility of another one. Upon hearing of Redcliff's death, this nameless woman exclaims, "God's will be done."

It is a savage, naturalistic universe that Grove portrays, ruled by survival of the fittest, not the will of God. "Snow" has two loyal, long-suffering women, both caught in isolation, despair, and danger; linked to men who are failures; and forced to silence their desires and disappointments. The proximity of the two related women only intensifies their problems. Each is alone, in effect, on a land where few women can determine their own fates.

Grove's story contradicts Georgina Binnie-Clark's account, in *Wheat and Women*, of the opportunities that the plains held for the million or more surplus, or "redundant," women of England.¹⁵ She believed that women might

successfully emigrate to North America and run farms without men. Grove, however, paints a prairie that threatens to overwhelm women less self-reliant than Binnie-Clark's. His two women confront equally hopeless futures; one faces it in stony, eery silence, the other by silencing her personal feeling in one fatalistic sentence. Neither husband is worth the tears of his wife, just as the prince had not been worth the suffering of the mermaid. Generations of suffering wives are symbolized in this bleak, compressed story.

REAL WOMEN, REAL TESTS

The same kind of failure is recorded by Hamlin Garland in his autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border*.¹⁶ In his portrayal of American prairie pioneer women who are married to land-crazed men during the early settlement period, Garland's tears fall for the two he knew best, his mother and his grandmother, and for the girls he played with as a youth. Like Stegner, Ross, and Grove, Hamlin Garland did not see the promise that Binnie-Clark found for women on the prairies. Binnie-Clark was writing of a later period, from 1905 to 1908, and believed that the laws and natural conditions of the prairies favored the resettlement of some of the redundant single women of Great Britain at that time. But Garland's account of what he saw in prairie communities shows women suffering the fate of submissive, silenced prairie mermaids instead. His autobiography corroborates what Mitchell and the fiction writers tell us.

Garland's grandmother worked hard on prairie homesteads and finally suffered a stroke that, in his eyes, was caused by harsh living conditions. The stroke left her literally silent; his mother, on the other hand, was driven to stifle the complaints she felt welling up within her. Complaining only to her son Hamlin, she quietly accompanied her husband on repeated moves, despite her sensible misgivings about his suitability as a homesteader and the family's chances for survival. To Hamlin, she seemed to have "a prematurely old" body. Like Grove,

Garland paints a picture of successive generations of wives wasted by the arid prairie and insensitive males.¹⁷

Elizabeth Mitchell would have accepted Garland's reservations about prairie husbands. She said that pioneer homesteading on the prairie was so hard that "the burden of Empire-making most truly rests on the prairie woman, and she is often worn and old before her time." Mitchell believed "the farming life in Western Canada at present is really a terribly hard struggle."¹⁸

Like Stegner, Ross, Grove, and Garland, Mitchell feared what isolation and silence could do to women, in some marriages, at this time: "a woman alone in a house all day may find the silence deadly." As we have seen, Molly, Ann, and the two unnamed women in our stories found it deadly, but they also found actual or figurative silencing a necessary part of pioneer marriage. In certain marriages silence was the only socially acceptable or practical response of the pioneer wife. But Mitchell was a reform-minded person, and she found some husbands who treated their wives like "Queens." Furthermore, with optimism and prescience, she noted that a time was coming when

there would be more neighbors, and they would be nearer. There would be more ordinary sociality, and there would be more available help in times of troubles. A solitary man or a couple would no longer feel as if they individually were up against the heartless prairies, and were not sufficient for the struggle.¹⁹

Ironically, although she lived to be one hundred and died in 1980, Elizabeth Mitchell never returned to the prairies to see this change in marriages and in the fate of women.

GARLAND'S THIRD GENERATION

Garland, however, returned to the West time after time and was present whenever his family readied themselves for another move. When Hamlin tried to stop his father's peregrinations, the old man—called "The Captain," after his

Civil War rank and his imperious manner—declared, “I won’t surrender so long as I can run a team.”²⁰ Hamlin’s mother was worn out, so weak that she could hardly walk, but the “captain” of her destiny urged her on. He refused Hamlin’s offer of a New England-style home or an easier life in San Francisco. Virgin land and new territory to open lured the captain until his death.

To Hamlin the mother did voice her fears and complaints, including her confession that life on the prairie had worn her out. She told him that only her daughter’s grave had kept the old woman on the western prairie all these years. Garland describes himself as “wordless” when he considered other women he had known on the prairie: “the tragic futility of their suffering” moved him so.²¹ He saw that at least some of the prairie girls he had known in his childhood were becoming prairie women and wives, and, worst of all, mothers of new prairie girls. Unlike Mitchell, Garland saw no end to the cycle. As a child he had “felt rebellion toward my father who had kept my mother always on the border, working like a slave long after the time when she should have taken her ease”; and as an adult, Hamlin saw the pattern repeated on the prairie.²² He wondered why the love-test of silenced women had not ended: “Why should this suffering be?” and “Why should mother be wrenched from all her dearest friends and forced to move away to a strange land?”²³ Perhaps the clearest voice for the silenced prairie mermaids was Garland—the son, grandson, and friend—but his sensitivity to the suffering of his mother and the other women is tinged by the Oedipal rivalry he felt toward his father.

Generalizing from his family experiences, Garland questioned the appropriateness of the westering experience for any woman. He asserted that his mother “was not meant to be an emigrant—few women are.”²³ But Garland’s story also points out one of the necessary causes behind the appearance of the mermaid on the prairies: a husband who assumes total direction of his wife. Many a pioneer man, setting out with new tools, a new team, and a

new wife, must have had fantasies of power and control over both their fates. And many a pioneer wife, so young she seemed only a child, must have accepted that authority, believing (or merely hoping) that her husband deserved her complete devotion and trust. Armed with a woman who could not easily leave him, who was full of Victorian notions about her station in life, and who might be “redundant” at home, the pioneering man could feel that he had an efficient, absolutely essential tool. So a wife must have seemed to some of them. Sinclair Ross’s Ann may have been wrong about John’s likening her to a cow, but Stegner, Grove, and Garland write of men who regarded their wives as their possessions.

CONCLUSION

Thus we have the basic components of the prairie mermaid motif: an authoritarian, insensitive, and foolish husband; a young wife, full of old ideas of female subservience and submissiveness; a cold, arid, isolated land where there are no female friends; a homestead as old as the marriage and equally unsatisfying in terms of the woman’s needs for companionship, beauty, and recognition; a storm or a move, which crystallizes the situation and challenges the man’s sympathies for his wife, as well as her ability to express her desires to him; and a testing moment, when the wife accepts all that she has learned and silences her desires for beauty, companionship, and understanding. In the earliest, most primitive accounts, not only is rescue unthinkable, but even protest seems beyond possibility; in later ones, opportunities to meet other men and to travel increase, but no prairie mermaid is rescued. Guilt reinforces social convention; indeed, it is another convention that limits the freedom of choice offered to the pioneer wife. In the most pessimistic stories and accounts, successive generations of prairie mermaids follow in a chain that threatens to be endless; in the most foresighted versions, especially that of Mitchell, the death of the mermaid-wife is predicted.

The development of the mermaid motif in

the story by Andersen leads us to re-examine this febrile, homoerotic, and autoerotic man, whose love-life consisted of unfulfillable infatuations with people he hardly knew, including the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind. Andersen identified female sexual maturation with suffering, marriage with coldness, and devotion with wordless submission. If he represents the most extreme, least reasonable notions of his age, the appearance of mermaidlike women on the plains causes us to scrutinize the men and marriages of that period as well. It is possible that the extreme conditions of life on the prairies reinforced nascent tendencies in the post-Victorians who settled there, and that privation, which could bring out the best in marriages, at first encouraged the worst to flourish. The prairie mermaid died out eventually, but pioneer fiction, historical account, and autobiography all record that the little mermaid lived, at least for one brief period, as a prairie wife.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Mitchell, *In Western Canada before the War: Impressions of Early Twentieth Century Prairie Communities* (1915; reprint, Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981), p. 196. Mitchell calls the initial period "history beginning with high and stern adventure."

2. *Ibid.*, p. 37. The prairie farmer faces "Frost and Drought and Solitude and Poverty."

3. Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," in *The Complete Andersen*, translated by Jean Hersholt (New York: Heritage Press, 1949), section 1, pp. 57-59.

4. Elias Bredsdorf, *Hans Christian Andersen* (London: Readers Union, 1975). This biography challenges Andersen's diverse autobiographical statements; on this minor point, however, Bredsdorf corroborates rather than contradicts. See pp. 105-6 for discussion of the song.

5. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia Bennet is seduced, but she is neither abandoned nor coerced; nevertheless, the fear of damage to her future and to her family's reputation brings a crisis to the novel.

6. Bredsdorf, *Andersen*, pp. 15-16.

7. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Prairie Frontier* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 222. Molly comes from a town that the narrator ironically calls "civilization."

9. *Ibid.*, p. 222. See also Mitchell's remarks on settlers coming out of the prairies in this stage of homesteading.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 238. Stegner leaves undescribed the tone of this statement, and it is possible that Ray is being ironical. But Molly takes him seriously.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 238. Molly replies, with probable irony, "If that's what you want."

12. Sinclair Ross, "The Painted Door," in *Great Canadian Short Stories*, ed. by Alex Lucas (New York: Dell, 1971), pp. 95-115.

13. Ann's inner life is presented as complex, in contrast to Molly's and the women's in "Snow" and *A Son of the Middle Border*; as a result her marriage and future are less simplistic, too. Nevertheless, she is silenced, at least temporarily, just when she might have chosen freedom of expression and movement.

14. Frederick Philip Grove, "Snow," in *Great Canadian Short Stories*, ed. by Lucas, pp. 65-74. Grove's real name was Felix Paul Greve.

15. Georgina Binnie-Clark, *Wheat and Women* (1914; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 76. A reform-minded writer, she described the "woman-farmer" as "the true daughter of a new day" (p. 312), and noted that economic, social, and legal barriers to women-farmers were fewer in North America than in England and Scotland.

16. Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917; reprint, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1929).

17. Garland's mother also suffered a stroke, which disabled and aged her rapidly. Although she maintained her opposition to homesteading, she could never stop the "Commander-in-Chief," her husband.

18. Mitchell, *Western Canada*, p. 103.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

20. Garland, *Middle Border*, p. 437.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 238.