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# WESTERN WOMEN AND TRUE WOMANHOOD

## CULTURE AND SYMBOL IN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

JUNE O. UNDERWOOD

History cannot happen," says Henry Nash Smith, "that is, men cannot engage in purposive group behavior without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence." Although Smith does not mention it, women too engaged in purposive group behavior. They too had images that organized their experiences and gave impetus to action. And since women were part of the great western migration, the images that made sense to them and engaged them in action within the westering experience were formative in their history.<sup>1</sup>

This article will look at nineteenth-century western women and the symbols that formed their particular history from the 1850s through the 1890s. Such an examination must speak to both traditional concepts of women in history

and literature and newer literary and historical analyses. The literature and history of the "western women" of whom this essay speaks is that of the trans-Mississippi plains West—the West of the cowboy, the homesteader, wagon trains, freighters, buffalo hunters, and farmers. Although other "Wests" existed, this is the West that captured and captures the popular imagination and thus is instrumental in formulating myths. It is the West of the popular media and of a large number of historical studies. As such it served as a focusing lens for images, male and female.<sup>2</sup>

My thesis is that women, like men, had images that gave form to their experiences; they brought these images west with them. Women's images, however, were not the same as those guiding men. Western women, like their eastern sisters, organized their lives around domesticity and piety, and then used those concepts to expand their spheres. In doing so, women often became abolitionists, enacted suffrage laws, fought for child labor laws and temperance, insisted upon schools and libraries, and saw themselves as strong and capable. Adaptation of the images to permit change in the new environment was essential to western women's lives.<sup>3</sup>

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The study of American women's history has been expanded enormously in the last twenty years. It has moved through various foci, beginning with histories of women as victims of patriarchy and limited spheres, moving on to histories of extraordinary public women or those who operated outside traditional spheres, and finally examining the lives and culture of ordinary women. The same process has occurred in the study of western women and to some extent those histories have fed off one another. The cultural historians examining western women acknowledge, to varying degrees, that white middle-class women brought eastern concepts of proper behavior and thought west with them. While historians disagree about whether women were happy or victimized by their frontier existences, they all examine women's experiences as closely as possible, trying to comprehend the culture to which the women belonged.<sup>4</sup>

The study of women's culture begins with the assumption that the cultural subject dictates what is important in that culture's life. Without that assumption, historians and literary critics are likely to impose their own contemporary values and judgments on historical materials and to overlook the culture's angle of vision. Thus in understanding nineteenth-century western women's culture, we must place it in the context of nineteenth-century American women's culture as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth-century American women's culture is a particularly rich area for study because women were at that time supposed to operate in a separate sphere from men. The industrial revolution moved production outside the home; work, for males, was separated from leisure, and likewise, home was separated from work. For women, of course, home and work remained the same. This radical differentiation of the lives and workplaces of women from the lives and workplaces of men was a primary cause for the separation of male literature from female literature and, because of the basic structures of power, the legitimizing of the dominance of male concerns and literature over female.<sup>6</sup>

Male literary tradition shows nineteenth-

century men moving west to rid themselves of worn-out land and worn-out ideas. They were escaping civilization.<sup>7</sup> When nineteenth-century women moved west, however, they were charged with carrying civilization to the frontier, with conserving values of family and social harmony, education, and religion.<sup>8</sup> Transferring those values west was particularly important because the nation worried that from the uncivilized frontier came violence and anarchy. Middle-class women were to be the bulwarks against that chaos. In the context of Smith's analysis, nineteenth-century cultural myth dictated that women be the transmitters of the values of the culture; they were the standard bearers of a civilized society. Thus, unlike men, who came to explore and conquer "virgin territory," women came to make gardens, to bring order and harmony to a lawless society.<sup>9</sup>

While the words used to denote the prescriptive roles of women (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity) sound like hackneyed phrases from stale pop histories, it is important to note that these "civilizing" women were feisty, bright, funny, and totally human. They were neither masculine Calamity Janes nor victimized drudges. Nor were they superwomen or earth mothers. Like other feminist scholars, I began my work with a dislike of "the chief figure of the American West . . . the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sun-bonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before." The Western women about whom I speak did not submit patiently and passively to the wills of their husbands or to fate. Their submission was to their consciences, which served to bolster their efforts to move beyond the private sphere and allowed them to exercise their talents in more or less public ways. They were, in fact, the women described in most of the recent historical studies.<sup>10</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the prescribed roles of women were encompassed by the "Cult of True Womanhood." As Barbara Welter puts it, "In a society where values changed frequently,

where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found.” The true woman was supposed to be submissive, pure (sexually innocent or sexually faithful), pious, and domestic.<sup>11</sup>

Of these four traits, the ideal of purity seems to have remained constant throughout the century. As such, it perhaps was the least important in *changing* women’s history, although it was a continuous expectation with which women had to contend. The other three—submissiveness, piety, and domesticity—were dynamic, giving women ideologies that allowed them actively to manipulate their visions and therefore their history.<sup>12</sup>

One use women made of their codified roles was to extend their domesticity through charitable and relief work. From the cent societies of the early 1800s through the female reform and charitable benefit groups of the 1830s, women refused to remain tethered exclusively to the private home. Another aspect of their culture, their “bonding,” enhanced that extension. Women of the nineteenth century, in part because they were limited to a separate sphere, bonded together in family, social, church, and reform organizations. As an outgrowth of the bonding and the domestic and religious codes, women together engaged in serious religious work, becoming the primary workers in benevolent societies and charitable endeavors and taking on the role of missionaries. Somewhat later, they bonded together to better society (in groups like the abolitionists), to help the unfortunate (in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union), and to educate themselves (through social and study clubs). Invariably, they remodeled their prescriptive roles to suit the needs, personal and public, that they perceived around them.<sup>13</sup>

Women brought their myths, traits, and behaviors west. Lillian Schlissel, Sandra Myres, and John Faragher, among others, have testified to the weight and importance of the acculturation of western women.<sup>14</sup>

These cultural traits, carrying the seeds of

rebellion within them, were used to good advantage by western women. For example, frontier urban and village women used “piety,” as it was interpreted in a Protestant society, to mean that they had a direct relationship with God. Part of their religious duty was to examine their individual consciences and act upon them. In examining their consciences and because of their nurturing, domestic duties, they felt a God-given responsibility to protect the home. One of the biggest threats to women’s domain in a chaotic frontier society was alcohol.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, a nondenominational religious and political group, became in some western states the single most popular and powerful organization outside of political parties. By 1884, in a state like Kansas, the WCTU had unions in every organized county and an overwhelming majority of the towns and villages. The most recently incorporated towns, at the very edge of the frontier, had their own unions. Dodge City, at that time at the peak of the cattle-trail trade, was constantly threatened by WCTU organizers and went to extraordinary lengths to keep them out. But with the demise of the cattle trade, the city fathers changed their tune. By 1886, one year after the last trail drive, the WCTU organized Dodge City, and by 1887, publicity materials bragged that “the WCTU ladies have long ago unfurled their banners” in the city.<sup>16</sup>

Suffrage followed this route to acceptance among conservative women. The WCTU established itself as a forum for discussion of how best to protect children, home, and society from alcohol abuse. Using personal charisma and great rhetorical skills, Frances Willard convinced women that the only way to protect the home was to work toward suffrage. Conservative church women, at first horrified, became convinced it was their God-driven duty to become political. After wrestling with God, they were literally converted to suffrage. Within the WCTU, “home protection” became the password for woman suffrage. In 1880, members of the Kansas WCTU at their annual meeting passed a resolution calling for the vote for

women statewide in order to uphold the prohibitory laws on the books. Only with the vote, the Kansas WCTU argued, could women truly protect the home.<sup>17</sup>

Other groups continued this trend slightly later. In the 1890s, the newly formed Federation of Women's Clubs took up the domestic image and converted it to "Municipal House-keeping," forming the base for the reforms of the Progressive Era. The state federations, like the state WCTUs, were widespread and inordinately popular. In western Kansas, where tag ends of homesteads were still available through the turn of the century, women's clubs belonging to the federation outnumbered the clubs of any other district in the state. The General Federation of Women's Clubs formed a power base and a training ground for women who became involved in reform.<sup>18</sup>

Both the prescriptive images for the "True Woman" and the bonding of women into formal organizations for reform have been well documented. Most of the documentation has focused on eastern urban groups and has not looked at literature or the West for comparisons. However, if we even partially accept Smith's thesis that male frontier symbols were determining factors in American history, then seeing what happens to women's symbols on the western frontier should further illuminate our history.

One significant place to examine symbols is in literature. Women in most western literature are seen as ahistorical, fixed in a single mode, outside time. The codes and images imposed by western literature portray women's domesticity and submissiveness as fixed and inevitable. Piety in women is either evil or pitiable. Only "purity" (sexual innocence or fidelity) has changed in western literature, and that change has been viewed through a male rather than female lens. In other words, the female culture had images and codes that were adapted according to the time period and place in which women found themselves. But western literature sees possibilities of change only in the ideal of sexual purity, an ideal that women did not themselves actively manipulate. The primary images of women found in western literature

(and presumably the expression of some collective desire and coherence) are those of the resourceful, submissive helpmate (who sometimes becomes the entrapping civilizer), the victim, and the bad woman.

These images, or versions of them, have been discussed by numerous scholars, literary and historical. Barbara Meldrum, Doris Grover, and Beverly J. Stoeltje have all looked at the literary stereotypes that pervade popular westerns. Glenda Riley and Sandra Myres, historians, have also dealt with the images of women.<sup>19</sup> Myres has documented both early and recent sources that develop the three images of the victim, the sturdy helpmate or drudge, and the bad woman. She refutes the reality of these stereotypes, pointing out the incredible diversity of women who inhabited the frontier: "Views of frontierswomen . . . were numerous and often contradictory. Whatever the frontier, women were there, but they were described by generally negative, semi-romanticized stereotypes which obscured their real lives and character. Most of these stereotypes derived not from the reality of women's lives but from nineteenth century ideas of what women should be." Riley likewise has examined myths, two in particular: the overworked isolated pioneer woman and the frightened hater of the native American. Both of these stereotypes are versions of the pioneer woman as victim. Neither, she observes, is documented in history.<sup>20</sup> Myres and Riley, then, have analyzed the cult of true womanhood, but their concern was not with how symbols were used by a group, but how these symbols became misused by a literary tradition.<sup>21</sup>

Julie Roy Jeffrey has analyzed the literature that would have influenced frontier women moving to the trans-Mississippi West. She has also examined the effects of pioneer life on women's roles. While it was true, she points out, that pioneer life had less rigid role requirements than settled society, it was also true that to take away the cultural prescriptions was to remove women's sense of themselves as special, as having moral superiority: "The cult of domesticity, with its insistence on female service, could

be stretched to expand women's moral and cultural responsibilities. . . . The necessity of creating a new society in the West could be seen logically as [women's] not men's." Upon examining the literature women would have been reading in preparation for going west, Jeffrey concludes that it "consciously attempted to fit the Western experience into a framework which promised women the opportunity of fulfilling their social role. It shows an acceptance of social norms of domesticity and an expectation, or hope, that the norms could function on the frontier." Jeffrey's conclusions, then, are that the images with which women were presented as they prepared to move west, as much or more than the actual conditions they experienced, prepared them to use their symbolic ordering of the world in specific ways.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, out of the codified ideals of purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity, and from the realities of the separate sphere and women's bonding, came two sets of myths. The mainstream literary myths of the pioneer mother/sturdy helpmate, the bad woman, and the victim are matched by the historical myths of woman as the spiritual civilizer, the harmonizer, and the builder.<sup>23</sup>

The mainstream western literary myths about women view them as "others," as objects, seen from the perspective of the deepest held hopes and fears of the protagonist or author. This is as true of classic westerns as of dime novels, and for some female authors as well as male. That may seem a paradoxical view for women writers, but what Virginia Woolf says about the nineteenth-century British woman novelist also applies to western literature: the female writer's "mind was slightly pulled from the straight and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority." This occurred because, according to Woolf, women novelists "had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think through our mothers if we are women." The tradition, then, of the western, as well as that of mainstream American literature, is male. Western women authors tend to use male literature as models and therefore

their vision is pulled slightly askew. The most obvious example of this aspect of western literature is the writing of Willa Cather. According to Hortense Calisher, Cather was "saved by 'the land.' It allowed her to speak from a major vision, and for that, even from a woman, to be acceptable. . . . But as a woman of her time, her consciousness of being able to speak for her country and its cosmos gave her the confidence to speak 'like a man.'"<sup>24</sup>

The first "other" of the western male mythology is the helpmate—the resourceful, tough, submissive woman, good at riding, shooting, and marrying, like Molly of Wister's *Virginian*. Spunky Molly rises to every occasion, including that of bowing to the wishes and demands of her handsome man. She can put him back on his horse after he's been shot, yet defer gracefully to his dictates on literature and her place as his wife. The same figure appears in Mari Sandoz's *Miss Morissa*. Beverly Stoeltje documents this phenomenon in the early Crockett almanacs as does Russell Nye in later dime novels. In Dorothy Johnson's story "A Man Called Horse," even the Native American women become resourceful helpmates. A. B. Guthrie's character Rebecca, in *The Way West*, partially fulfills this role, and a modern-day example can be found in Spangler's wife, Opal, who tries to shoot down helicopters in *The Last Cattle Drive*.<sup>25</sup>

The resourceful helpmate is almost always an appendage to a male protagonist. As a character she is developed only as far as necessary to elaborate on the hero's character and advance the story. Only Sandoz's *Morissa* is clearly the protagonist, and that story is a good Victorian love tale, whose plot could have just as easily been set in England, and whose spunky heroine is destined from her first appearance to succumb to the handsome hero. The story does give glimpses of the western woman professional, but *Morissa* has only gone west because she was jilted. Scarcely a ground-breaking theme.

The woman as victim, forced to travel west against her will, carried off by Indians or bandits, and/or driven mad by the wind, is one of the most powerful figures of western literature.

Sometimes, as in Scarborough's *The Wind*, she is a refined and educated lady, too frail to adapt to the frontier.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes she combines victimization with victimizing. Beret in *Giants in the Earth*, once recovered from her madness, becomes a religious fanatic, and because of it, sends her husband Per to his death in the blizzard. Other frontier victims can be found in everything from the earliest captivity narratives through Cooper and Hamlin Garland to Wright Morris.<sup>27</sup>

The woman as victim is perhaps more fully and subtly rendered than the other stock figures of women. Walter Prescott Webb, in his 1931 classic, *The Great Plains*, declaimed that "the Plains exerted a peculiarly appalling effect on women. . . . The wind alone drove some to the verge of insanity and caused others to migrate."<sup>28</sup> Webb was responding (as his examples show) to the seductive power of *The Wind* and *Giants in the Earth*, a power that places them among the great novels of the West. The critical and historical use of these books, however, tends to turn their relatively fully rendered characters into simplistic examples of how the plains victimized women. Thus a powerful literary treatment becomes reduced to a single view of woman as the "other," one who portrays the deepest fears of all people trying to settle the West. The more usual literary treatment of woman as victim can be seen in Hamlin Garland's pathetic creatures, such as Mrs. Markham in "A Day's Pleasure." These women are merely figures of pathos, viewed from the outside, figures of deep depression.

Finally, the bad woman or woman of sexuality is sometimes seen only briefly, in the flick of a curtain in *The Virginian*, or with a heart of gold in "Stage to Lordsburg," but most particularly in contemporary novels like Larry McMurtry's *Leaving Cheyenne*. The earlier westerns treated women's sexuality gingerly except when it belonged to an order outside civilization, to prostitutes, "squaws," or Hispanic women. Later, A. B. Guthrie deals more explicitly with sexuality in *The Way West*, and many novelists have continued to explore the subject. In the most recent westerns, women

are viewed as fulfilling an old American dream, love without ties. In a myth-shattering novel like *Little Big Man*, Thomas Berger can only revise women's history by having his women be overwhelmingly lusty. Again, these women characters are more fantasy than reality.<sup>29</sup>

The one author whose characters do not seem to fit into these fantasized types is Willa Cather. All three of Cather's novels rooted in the homesteading West, *My Antonia*, *O Pioneers!*, and *A Lost Lady*, have strong, self-sufficient female heroes. Antonia, for example, embodies all the fecund, enduring qualities of the earth mother. And that is perhaps the point. While she is powerful, she is perhaps scarcely human, viewed only from the nostalgic, jaded perspective of the male. We know nothing of the quotidian of her existence, only her place as Mother of the Divide. Magnificent she may be—fully human, not quite.

Alexandra, in *O Pioneers!*, on the other hand, is a fully developed character. But her most important strength comes from her resistance to the ordinary cultural roles expected of a woman. She is a rebel within society, productive in conquering the earth and making it bloom. The narrator of *O Pioneers!* explains, "You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best."<sup>30</sup> Alexandra, like Cather, rebels against the female culture, and while Alexandra is a great literary character, even a great role model, her isolation from female society cannot give us any understanding of its communal mythologies and their strength. Alexandra is an embodiment of the male myths of self-reliance, of taming the land, of isolated heroism.

And finally, Marian Forrester, of *A Lost Lady*, is viewed through the eyes of a young man, one who cannot forgive her for her sexuality and wishes that when her husband died she had committed suicide: "It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms."<sup>31</sup> Marian's character

is tantalizing but always seen through the screen of others. She too is isolated from society and so different that she does not participate in ordinary women's culture.

In the majority of western novels women are depicted as "the other." Only victims and rebels are given fully human status. And of these two, only rebels have positive and fulfilling lives. Yet they are isolated from the female culture and seen only from the outside. These observations are not criticisms of mainstream western literature, although it is hard not to sound critical in discussing ahistorical reductionism. All literature, however, needs mythologies and "others." Plots advance through stereotypes, and victims are needed for heroes to save. We all need to see our primordial fears expressed and placed outside ourselves. However, it is vital to understand that the coding of the "other" in western literature was done by males or by females heavily influenced by male literature. It has no countering views. Some British Victorian novels exhibit the same kinds of projections, stereotypes, and characters, but because British literature is traditionally concerned with social reform and community as well as individual conscience and isolation, the identification of type with reality does not so readily occur.

In addition to the male viewpoint, with its attendant difficulties in depicting women, are cultural and historical blind spots. In her essay "On Seeing and Not Seeing," Anne Firor Scott describes this problem of perception: "It is a truism . . . that people see most easily things they are prepared to see and overlook those they do not expect to encounter." Her essay goes on to document "a case of historical invisibility, an example of a significant phenomenon for which all data have existed, much of it readily available, for nearly a century, but that until recently remained almost totally invisible to historians of American culture and society."<sup>32</sup> Scott's "case" is that of women's voluntary associations, groups of the kind this article describes. Their historical invisibility in part fostered and in part was fostered by literature. Women's communities, private and semi-

public, which were so much a part of their cultural heritage, did not become part of the literary heritage.

While we are only beginning to understand women's roles and images, western male mythology, symbol, and history have been extensively studied. In the 1890s Frederick Jackson Turner said that the frontier developed a new kind of human being (male, that is), one whose traits of self-reliance, individualism, and egalitarianism became the dominant factors in American culture and politics. Further analysis of that ideal can be seen in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, whose thesis is that images control history and that men sometimes act in accordance with images even when the reality they face directly contradicts the image. Smith recounts the literary and political symbols of the Mountain Man, the Yeoman Farmer, and Manifest Destiny, which, he believes, formed the way Americans viewed the West and the men who settled it. The West was to be lusted after, conquered, and possessed—an object, like a woman, to be taken by the fittest male.<sup>33</sup>

Men's version of the frontier placed them in opposition to community and self-effacement. The best male was individualistic, often defying tradition and settled communities. He was a loner, self-reliant, with little tolerance for the weaknesses of others. Men, according to the myth, had no interest in formalized religion; it was woman's duty to carry on the traditions. Men were subject to sexual desires they had a right to satisfy, but good women were pure. To some extent, the myths of the Yeoman Farmer modified those extremes, but only slightly. The Yeoman Farmer was the backbone of society, but he was so because he worked close to the soil and was self-sufficient. Self-reliance, individualism, and relative isolation were seen as desirable frontier traits. Community, bonding, and nurturing were desirable female traits. Women, then, were held to and held themselves to ideals that were antithetical to the historical and literary ideals of the (male) frontier.<sup>34</sup>

As western literature developed, both in its popular and its classical form, the contradictory



nature of the male and female ideals were explored. The male ideals, as might have been expected, were generally depicted as positive and desirable. The female, however, as the "other," had imposed upon her the fears and desires of the male. Certain aspects of the female culture, particularly that of "civilizing," which encompassed bonding and spirituality, were seen as undesirable.<sup>35</sup> Because male myths prized individualism and self-reliance, community and religion were seen as threatening or ridiculous. For example, in traditional westerns, males are either frankly secular or pantheistic. Aside from occasional yearnings at sunset, or vague rumblings on the nature of God, religion is left to women. And, literarily speaking, when women get religious, it means trouble. Beret, in *Giants in the Earth*, sends Per Hansa to his death because of her religious fanaticism. Enid, in Cather's *One of Ours* drives her husband to war by her religiosity (which is, not coincidentally, connected to her sexual frigidity). In the movie *High Noon*, the character played by Grace Kelly must give up her Quaker principles in order to live with her man in the West.<sup>36</sup>

When piety is not seen as a negative trait, it is often made the object of fun (Mrs. Pendrake, the preacher's wife in *Little Big Man*) or of pity (Wilhomene, in Wister's "Hank's Woman," who murders her drunken, abusive husband only when he shoots her crucifix). Even in men, piety is generally disapproved; in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, the preacher is good but ineffectual.<sup>37</sup>

Thus piety, one of the primary strengths of historical western women in the nineteenth century, is seen in literature as foolishness, fanaticism, or hypocrisy. It is almost always destructive. For historical women, the opposite was true. Most women of the period felt piety was the single most important factor of their lives.<sup>38</sup> Piety allowed women individual and communal acts of conscience. While domesticity and submissiveness officially submerged women into fixed roles, the Protestant relationship with God insisted that each individual, male or female, respond to his or her conscience. Every soul had a duty to pray to God

alone and to submit only to His directives. Even when those directives, as understood by pious women, contradicted the secular directives around them, they must be obeyed. Thus women's consciences allowed them to break out of their prescribed roles. Those breakthroughs took place early in western history. Women's public power was very strong in frontier communities. But none of this is reflected in the literature of the West. What is primarily reflected is that pious women did not exhibit the male values of their communities, values against which they sometimes had the temerity to rebel.

A second trait, submissiveness, fares much better in western literature. Submissiveness is viewed either as a positive trait, as when the heroine submits to the superior wisdom of the hero, or a sign of weakness to be pitied, as when a woman must submit to a brutish male. Regardless of the circumstances, however, women who submit are "good," admirable. An interesting twist of this kind of characterization is that of the "resourceful woman," who actively defies the hero, who is fairly capable in her own right, and who, in the end, does as she is directed. Molly in *The Virginian* is a good example of the resourceful woman who submits to the always superior male.

For historical nineteenth-century women, however, the important submission was to God, not man. While the acculturation of women insisted that husbands and males were the ultimate authorities, piety kept women from being absolutely in thrall to human authority. In addition, the community of women to which they belonged provided women with a refuge when they defied male authority and refused to submit. This is particularly evident in the overwhelming popularity of the WCTU, which acted as a support group for wives of alcoholic husbands and women interested in social reform. Women found solace in their religion and in their relationships with other women. Both of those countered the insistence upon submissiveness to husband and father.<sup>39</sup>

Purity, the third trait of the "True Woman," is somewhat more difficult to examine historically.

Sexuality has always been present in the lives of men and women. We know that prostitutes and illegitimate children were facts of nineteenth-century life; we know that women organized to prevent young girls from being legally seduced and formed groups to meet trains and coaches to keep women from being tricked into brothels. There were various purity campaigns during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some sympathetic to women, some not. Elizabeth Hampsten and Ruth Moynihan have shown that ordinary women expressed sexual desires and worried about contraception as much as contemporary women do.<sup>40</sup>

Very little of this awareness of women's sexuality, except antiprostitution campaigns, has been a part of western literature. Aside from characterizations of thin-lipped reformers and faithful or faithless wives, female sexuality has not been included in traditional westerns. The few exceptions turn out to be equally stereotyped; they lust and weep, nothing more. Over the last twenty-five years or so, however, a change on the part of writers of westerns, reflecting perhaps a change in their psyches, has resulted in a changed view of western women.

Contemporary westerns have a more ambivalent attitude toward women's sexuality. Wright Morris, in *Plains Song*, depicts one woman who is tormented by her abhorrence of and her duty to submit to sexual intercourse. And even more usual in modern westerns is the depiction of the "good" woman who actually likes sex, a woman such as Mollie in *Leaving Cheyenne*, whose sexuality needs at least two men to satisfy it.<sup>41</sup>

A less literary but all pervasive trend in popular contemporary westerns is to incorporate explicit sex. Like saloon brawls, the steamy beds of white women captured by tawny braves, or of bold mountain men entranced by dusky maidens, have become standard, if slightly boring, fare. Like saloon brawls, also, such scenes seem designed to fulfill the fantasies of the primarily male audience of pop westerns; they do not reexamine or explore the West seriously.<sup>42</sup>

Thus the old notion of purity has been

replaced by a newer one, but one that still has the male viewpoint as its referent. Historically, there is no evidence that nineteenth-century women's sexuality formed an important part of their work in changing history.

Finally, domesticity was a reality as well as an ideal in western women's lives and in western literature. In literature, it is a given, an absolute, rather than part of a historical process. In reality, however, it gave women an ideology that allowed them to move into public roles and to serve the social needs of an uncivilized nation. "Home Protection" and "Municipal Housekeeping" were the slogans that expressed the deeply held cultural sentiments of American women for one hundred years.<sup>43</sup> The perseverance and hardihood that made frontier women successful in domesticating and civilizing their immediate environs also served them well when they had a moment to catch their breath and observe the conditions of others around them. The extension of domesticity was most obvious in western women's work in child labor laws, minimum wage and maximum hour laws, age of consent laws, child-care centers, parks and playgrounds, pure food and drug acts, clean city water systems, municipal sewage and garbage systems, libraries, and other such civilized amenities. Woman's suffrage was successful in the West not because men recognized the worth of women, but because women needed political power to promote the welfare of others and to extend their roles outside the confines of their homes.<sup>44</sup> But in western literature, the best woman is the private domestic one; women who combine in groups to effect public reform are anathema to the individualistic ethic of the western male.

Unfortunately this analysis sings the same old tune—much of western literature has never been attuned to women's culture. Works that depict strong women view them achieving in the same arena as men, conquering the land, isolated, individualistic. Women bonding together for social reform become laughing stocks, Carry Nation figures, ugly and deformed. I don't believe, though, that westerns are any more fixed and unchanging than history itself. And

so, I'd like to take one last traditional idea, that of adaptation, and suggest a new direction in western literature.

Walter Prescott Webb attributes the settling of the plains to man's ability to adapt. Men had to stop at the edge of the plains, he says, until they acquired the proper attitudes and tools to deal with them. Beverly Stoeltje observes that "the very nature of the 'frontier' in any geographical setting, implies a process of adaptation." She goes on to say that "behavior forms are drawn from cultural images already in the possession of the individuals who are adapting. These images are then modified or new ones created which will conform to the demands of the environment or situation."<sup>45</sup>

Wallace Stegner, in *Wolf Willow*, also addresses adaptation, but he does so through narrative autobiography. On his return to Whitemud, he comes across the Farm Wives' Rest Home. The Farm Wives' Rest Home was part of a United States based General Federation of Women's Clubs movement to provide rural women with a place of refuge when they came into town on market day. The Farm Wives' Rest Homes (or Ladies Lounges, as they were more commonly known) were widespread throughout the United States and Canada and were particularly important to the plains states. Whitemud's Farm Wives' Rest Home, says Stegner, is evidence of a culture's ability to adapt, "the most humane institution in all that village, and . . . purely native, the answer to a local need."<sup>46</sup>

What the historical evidence, the social analysis, and Stegner's remark suggest, then, is that adaptation is a trait not merely of men and tools, but also of women and social conditions. Women in the West adapted domestic mythologies in order to respond to the demands of their physical and social environment. The Ladies Lounges are one form of adaptation. Another is women's demand for suffrage. Still other adaptations resulted in their work for social welfare laws and humane institutions for the weak and victimized. I suspect that if we broaden our understanding of women's history and explore the idea of adaptation, we may

come to see how the homestead West affected women, not by driving them into religious fanaticism or madness, but by requiring them to adapt their customs and acquired culture to local conditions. The opening of the West demanded that some group be responsive to the need for the mercy and nurturing denied by both the conditions of the frontier and the mythologies instrumental in its male settlement. Women carried that burden, and they did so out of the strengths and adaptations of their own images.

Literature—even a literature as sunk into tradition as western literature—is not fixed. If Wright Morris can write *Plains Song*, a radical departure from his earlier vision of women, then other imaginative and skillful western writers can show women in their historical context, with their mythologies working for them. Historically, women bonded together to effect changes in the often savage and uncouth land in which they found themselves. The bonding was itself an adaptation to a historical condition, the industrial revolution. They strengthened that adaptation through their religious roles. And they brought their images, their bonding, and their religious strengths to the frontier, where they acted, in a variety of ways and under varying conditions, to change history. Those actions deserve to be chronicled.

#### NOTES

1. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. ix. See also Richard Etulain, "The American Literary West and Its Interpreters: The Rise of a New Historiography," *Pacific Historical Review* 45 (August 1976): 328-42; Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); and Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

2. Two studies dealing with definitions of

western women are Glenda Riley, "Images of the Frontierswoman: Iowa as a Case Study," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (1977): 189; and Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 173-213.

The best new historical studies of this period are John M. Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981); Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); and Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

3. For perhaps the best essay on the adaptation of women, see Beverly J. Stoeltje, "'A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The Image of the Frontier Woman," *Journal of American Folklore* 88 (January-March 1975): 25-41. See also Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," *Frontiers* 7 (1984): 1-9.

4. See the "Introduction" by Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth Pleck, *To A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 9, 11-13; and Ellen Dubois, "Politics and Culture in Women's History," *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980): 28-36.

5. See Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 145-59; Dubois, "Politics and Culture," pp. 29-30; and Cott and Pleck, *Heritage of Her Own*, pp. 11-25. For the effect of this scholarship on western women's history, see Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," pp. 173-85.

6. Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the

Age of Jackson, 1800-1840," in *Heritage of Her Own*, pp. 182-96.

7. See Etulain, "The American Literary West," especially pp. 322-23, 328-37.

8. The term "civilizers" has been so overused that it has become pejorative, and many historians of the women's West begin by denying that westering women "civilized." If civilizing is to retain a positive connotation, however, women's role on the frontier should be considered as an extension of their "civilizing" mission. Julie Roy Jeffrey, in *Frontier Women*, documents that western women did bring such missions with them (pp. 3-24, 179-99); Sandra Myres agrees that the civilizers were "spirited, if selfless participants" in frontier opportunities (Myres, *Westering Women*, p. 11).

9. Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, pp. 179-99; Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, pp. 11-13.

10. Glenda Riley, among others, describes the stereotypes that western writers have forced upon western women ("Images of the Frontierswoman," pp. 189-94). The quotation is from Emerson Hough, *The Passing of the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), p. 93.

11. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

12. See Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 512-29; Susan Dye Lee, "Evangelical Domesticity," in *Women in New Worlds*, ed. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1981), pp. 293-309; Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, "For God and Home and Native Land," in *Women in New Worlds*, pp. 310-27.

13. For female bonding, see Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy"; Barbara Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism—the Woman and the City, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). For an overview of women's work in voluntary associations, see Anne Firor Scott, "On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility," *Journal of American History* 7 (June 1984): 7-21.

14. See Faragher, *Women and Men*, pp. 180, 182-84; Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*, pp. 14-16; Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, pp. xii-xvi; Myres, *Westering Women*, pp. 167-72.

15. Jed Dannenbaum, *Drink and Disorder: Temperance Reform in Cincinnati from the Washingtonian Revival to the WCTU* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 1-9. See also William J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Mary Austin, *Earth Horizon: An Autobiography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), pp. 137-58. Austin's family was part of the western Illinois frontier.

16. *Minutes of the Woman's Christian Union of Kansas at the Sixth Annual Meeting* (Fort Scott, Kans.: J. H. Rice and Sons, 1884), pp. 5-10; *Minutes of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Kansas* (Fort Scott, Kans.: Monitor Steam Printing House, 1886), pp. 5, 12; "Handbook of Ford County Kansas," (Chicago: C. S. Burch, 1877). All three documents can be found at the Kansas Center for Historical Research, Topeka.

17. "Then and Now," *Our Messenger*, February 1881, p. 1. *Our Messenger* was the state WCTU paper. See also Gifford, "For God and Home and Native Land," pp. 320-21, and Gifford, "Home Protection: The WCTU's Conversion to Woman Suffrage," unpublished manuscript written in conjunction with the Research Institute on Women's Public Lives, University of Kansas, Summer 1980. The poster by Kansan Henrietta Briggs-Wall shows Frances Willard surrounded by her "political peers": an Indian, a madman, a convict, and an idiot. None of these males were enfranchised to vote; neither were American women. The antipathy of Abigail Scott Duniway to the WCTU and the prohibitionists was late in arising and was more a part of her temperament than it was typical of western women. The WCTU appears to have been the impetus for suffrage in many western states; its suffrage resolution in Kansas came four years before an Equal Suffrage Association was founded. See also Katherine Harris, "Feminism and Temperance Reform in the Boulder WCTU," *Frontiers* 4 (1979): 19-24.

18. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980). See also Anne Firor Scott, "On Seeing and Not Seeing"; and

June O. Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas: Women's Organizations 1880-1920," forthcoming in *Kansas History*.

19. Barbara Meldrum, "Images of Women in Western American Literature," *Midwest Quarterly* 17 (Spring 1976): 252-67; Dorys Crow Grover, "The Pioneer Women in Fact and Fiction," *Heritage of Kansas* 10 (Spring 1977): 35-44; Sandra Myres, *Westering Women*, pp. 1-11; Glenda Riley, "Images of the Frontierswoman"; and Beverly J. Stoeltje, "A Helpmate for Man Indeed." Jensen and Miller's "Gentle Tamers Revisited" (pp. 173-84) reviewed images allotted to western women as well as Riley's response (pp. 173-84).

20. Myres, *Westering Women*, pp. 5-6; Riley, *Frontierswomen*, pp. 171-81.

21. Meldrum and Grover point out that the stereotypes are not always egregious but the exceptions merely reinforce the rule: fictional western women have been narrowly and stereotypically depicted.

22. Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, pp. 11-12, 24.

23. For documentation of the mainstream view, see Myres, *Westering Women*, pp. 8-9, and Riley, *Frontierswomen*, pp. xi-xii.

24. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1968); translated from the 1953 French edition, pp. xvi-xxv. See Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962). Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1929), pp. 76-77; Hortense Calisher, "No Important Woman Writer," in *Women's Liberation and Literature*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), p. 225.

25. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1960); Mari Sandoz, *Miss Morrissa* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955); Stoeltje, "A Helpmate for Man Indeed," pp. 32-33; Dorothy Johnson, "A Man Called Horse," *Indian Country* (New York: McIntosh and Otis, 1949), reprinted in *The American West in Fiction*, ed. Jon Tuska (New York: New American Library, 1982), pp. 123-36; A. B. Guthrie, *The Way West* (New York: Sloane Associates, 1949); Robert Day, *The Last Cattle Drive* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977).

26. Dorothy Scarborough, *The Wind* (1925; reprint, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

27. Ole Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927); James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (1827; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898); Hamlin Garland, "A Day's Pleasure," *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Harper, 1899); Wright Morris, *Plains Song, for Female Voices* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

28. *The Great Plains* (1931; reprint, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, n.d.), pp. 505-6. Ironically, Webb includes his proclamations on women in the chapter entitled "Mysteries of the Great Plains."

29. Owen Wister, *The Virginian*; Ernest Haycox, "Stage to Lordsburg," in *Great Tales of the American West*, ed. Harry E. Maule (New York: Popular Library, 1963); Larry McMurtry, *Leaving Cheyenne* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); A. B. Guthrie, *The Way West*; Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man* (New York: Dial Press, 1964).

30. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 84.

31. *A Lost Lady* (New York: Knopf, 1923), p. 169.

32. Scott, "On Seeing and Not Seeing," pp. 7-8.

33. Smith's methods have been widely emulated; see Etulain, "The American Literary West," pp. 328-42.

34. Smith does not explore the dichotomy of male/female myths in terms of Turner but summarizes the contradiction in the last paragraph of his final chapter.

35. This strain appears in characters in mainstream American literature as well, for example, in Twain's Huckleberry Finn and the Widder Douglass, or in Kesey's Chief Broom and the lobotomizing Big Nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. For further analysis, see June O. Underwood, "The Civilizers: Women's Organizations and Western Literature," in *Women and Western American Literature*, ed. Helen W. Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 3-16.

36. Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1922).

37. Owen Wister, "Hank's Woman," in *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories* (Harper's, 1900), reprinted in *The American West in Fiction*, pp. 98-117; Walter Van Tilburg Clark,

*The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1960).

38. See Donald G. Mathews, "Women's History/Everyone's History," in *Women in New Worlds*, pp. 29-47; Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp. 83-102; and Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).

39. See Mary Austin, *Earth Horizon*, p. 42.

40. Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself*, pp. 96-150; Moynihan, *Rebel for Rights*, pp. 107-30.

41. Morris, *Plains Song*; McMurtry, *Leaving Cheyenne*. Morris, in 1975, said, "I am shifting over to the female some of the audacity that seemed to be wasted on the males. I am becoming more sympathetic with the new than I was with the old. . . . My fiction seems to be changing." *Conversations with Wright Morris*, ed. Robert Knoll (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 100, quoted in Joseph J. Wydeven, "Wright Morris, Women, and American Culture," *Women and Western Literature*, p. 219.

42. See, for example, Robert E. Mills, *The Cheyenne's Woman* (New York: Dorchester Publishing Co., 1983) and Kay L. McDonald, *The Vision is Fulfilled* (New York: Walker and Co., 1983).

43. The West of course included far more than just middle-class Anglo women (who were the chief exponents of the ideals). The frontier held maids, prostitutes, professionals, homesteaders in their own right, laundresses, editors, showwomen, laborers, farmers, waitresses, ranchers, and blacks, Swedes, Chicanas, Germans, Chinese—all female. How many of these women accepted or rebelled against the ideals is impossible to calculate, but many gave the ideals lip service, even while leading quite different daily existences. See Riley, "Women in the West," *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Summer 1980): 321-22. The more public and reformist a woman, the more likely she would belong to a number of organizations officially espousing the popular view of true womanhood. Studies of the effect of women's organizations and their ideals on non-Europeanized

women and of working-class women's ideals and societies are yet to be done, but the temperance and study clubs were far more prevalent in farm and working-class societies than studies of their leadership would lead one to believe.

44. Underwood, "The Civilizers"; Scott, "On

Seeing and Not Seeing"; Myres, *Westering Women*, pp. 213-37.

45. "A Helpmate for Man Indeed," p. 25.

46. Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), p. 305.