

Angle of Repose – A detailed outline

In the acknowledgements of his 1971 novel *Angle of Repose* which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Wallace Stegner wrote the following:

“My thanks to J.M. and her sister for the loan of their ancestors. Though I have used many details of their lives and characters, I have not hesitated to warp both personalities and events to fictional needs. This is a novel which utilizes selected facts from their real lives. It is in no sense a family history.” Indeed, the novel stirred a controversy because of allegations of plagiarism.

The same mixture of facts and fiction is at the heart of the narrator’s project. In this passage, Lyman Ward, a historian, gives a pretty detailed account of the story of his grandparents when they moved to Boise camp in 1880s. The main interest of this passage lies in the relation between reality and imagination in Lyman Ward’s rendering of, not only his grandparents’ story, but the history of those pioneers on the frontier: by doing so, the author questions the status of fiction.

The idealistic relationship between men and nature soon gives way to a darker disenchanted account of the failings of those pioneers, thus shedding light on the role of fiction as transcending what facts alone cannot account for.

I. Pioneers and nature: an idealistic portrait

= Men and nature belong together, as parts of one whole: ll. 48-50 men, animals and nature in the background on the photograph.

a. Different natural elements seem to welcome humans:

Water. Pool : is “smooth”. (31) / “rapid” is “a steady rush” and “mutter”. (l. 40)

Fire: “threw red light on the lava cliffs” “much planning went around their fires”, a symbol for “excitement” and passion that inhabited them.

- Nature is the perfect backdrop for human actions: “much hope went downriver and was renewed from upstream”: the allegory of hope– the extended personified metaphor of the abstract concept – extends to movement.

Heraclitus’ influence can be felt here: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.” The concept of “transitoriness” is somewhat transcended.

- b. **Subsistence and work appear effortless:** Even when men are in charge, the image of the logs “came down” (l.33) followed by men (“loggers”l.33) suggests nature is a cornucopia, provides men with everything they “need”. A lot of verbs of action here (l. 34-36): “sail out”, “harpoon”, “drag”, “pulled” that applies to all groups, leaving no one aside, “juniors”, “children” and “ladies”: communities.

- c. **Mapping out Eden:** biblical reference is the governing metaphor for the place. Origin of the word: from Hebrew ‘ēden meaning “delight”.

The topography is detailed (“canyon rim”, “meadows”, “lakes”) and relying on many senses (the “sage slopes”[color] and the “cold lakes”[temperature]) but then again combined with the word “story” denoting the comfort of home. Stegner was an environmentalist: as such, eager to make the environment an inhabitable place for humans.

II. A darker view of pioneers

Yet, despite this idyllic image, Stegner unveils the obstacles those pioneers met, as the quasi-oxymoronic expression “hopeful struggle” (l. 22) underlines.

a. Values: the limits of idealism

The narrator’s grandfather and his friends are depicted as enthusiasts whose “excitement” (l.44) borders on idealism.

A closer look at the verbs used: these are imperfective verbs: “was trying” (l.9), “expected” (l.16), “intended” (l.32), so are their projects, referred to as “forecast” (l. 32), “planning” (l.42) and “possibility” (l.15)

Therefore, the allegory of hope (ll.15, 42, 51 and 52) can therefore be construed as a lack of accomplishment rather than a mere manifestation of enthusiasm.

b. Big government: debunking the myth of personal initiative

This is reinforced by the opposite lexical field of accomplishment, namely when the “federal government” (l.11) is mentioned.

The perfective verbs and expressions are on the side of political actions: “proved able to do” (L.11), “fact” (L.15) and “reality” (l.15).

Personal initiative is no match to political action.

A jab is taken at political schemers: specialized publications (“Irrigation News” and “Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers” ll. 1-2) ≠ official publications. Navigating the “reclamation circles” was necessary.

c. Time: lack of synchronicity

This can be partly explained by the extended metaphor of time: “His clock was set on pioneer time” (l.12) / “he had heard the clock of history strike” (l.14), all those metaphors suggest the direct connection (≠ similes, indirect links) between those pioneers and time, without any middlemen, as though they were immersed in their own temporality.

The abundance of negative markers makes it unambiguous: “had not yet” / “hadn’t yet” / “never”.

More generally, time seems to be the greatest challenge, not only barely assessable (“twenty years before”, “some day”, “through the summer” VS “five years”) but something inherently fragile: “while they lived there” (l.22), “for a while”, repeated in lines 22 and 44, dramatic foreshadowing: one of the rare traces of the narrator’s superior knowledge.

III. The status of fiction

= the different positions assumed by the narrator, hovering between investigation and imagination, appear as a remedy to the failings of his ancestors.

a. The investigative research of a historian

Lyman Ward being a historian, it should come as no surprise that he should use the “archives” of his family in his attempt at understanding his family’s past.

- Primary sources: his grandfather’s “few papers” (l.1) + his grandmother’s “old photograph album” (l.46)
- Yet, also secondary sources, the unofficial annotations (A.J. Wiley’s dedication + his grandmother’s comment” > how his family (and humans in general) appropriated those primary sources.

>>> He uses deduction (“evidently” l.50) and describes himself as a “practitioner of hindsight” (l.9) but it appears that he is never solely interested in the verifiable.

b. Contemplating the wreck

Indeed, he admits he “never saw” the camp of his grandparents. Isn’t that surprising coming from the historical objectivity expected from a historian?

Lines 19-22 are a mental conjuring of the current day’s camp (in other terms, an act of imagination) to make a hypothetical description of the ruin. The paratactic style (absence of coordination and subordination replaced by commas) allows for an extraordinary concentration of details, much like American transcendentalists and their famous “inner eye” inherited from 17th century poet William Habington:

“Direct your right eye inward, and you’ll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered”.

>>>These relics smack of “lost cause” and “failure” (l.22)

Therefore, the historian fills in the gaps in this imaginative visit with other imagined details that will do justice to the “real” work of pioneers. Isn’t he anxious to defend the achievements and decisions of his grandfather? (“that doesn’t mean he was foolish” l.11, “...it was hopeful struggle, not lost cause” l.22)

c. A shift in point of view: embedded narratives.

And this active work of imagination of course extends to the description of the camp itself (ll.24-48).

The novel is an example of a work of fiction in which partial fiction is embedded.

The novelist presents us with two embedded levels of fiction (at the extradiegetic level = Lyman’s story// at the hypodiegetic level: his grandparents’) to do justice to the experience of those who lived on the frontier.

Even traces of a blurred authorship: it appears that he may have “hear[d] about it” (l.18), and one realizes that the allegory of “Hope” is originally [chronologically] his grandmother’s (l.51).

By interweaving verifiable sources and personal stories related to his main character, Stegner – by a powerful mirroring effect – shows that fiction is not merely a gap-filler for forgotten historical facts. Indeed, the romantic rendering of those forgotten pioneers is both a way to go beyond the concretely verifiable (the underwater camp) and draw a more humane portrait of those frontiersmen encapsulating their otherwise abstract drive and ambition.

Suggested introduction and outline – Angle of Repose

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The idealistic relationship between men and nature soon gives way to a darker disenchanted account of the failings of those pioneers, thus shedding light on the role of fiction as transcending what facts alone cannot account for.

Choose two among the following passages (one short, one long), and make a thorough analysis of it.

Abandoned in its gulch, its garden gone to weeds, its fences down, its ditches drifted full, its windows out, its bridge no more than broken cables trailing in the creek, every nail and fencepost tufted with the wool of passing sheep bands, it would look like failure and lost cause.

His clock was set on pioneer time. He met trains that had not yet arrived, he waited on platforms that hadn’t yet been built, beside tracks that might never be laid. Like many another Western pioneer, he had heard the clock of history strike, and counted the strokes wrong.

Even in low water, the rapid below was a steady rush and mutter on the air.

Much planning went on around their fires, much hope went downriver and was renewed from upstream.