

Nature and Women in the Novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich



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Introduction

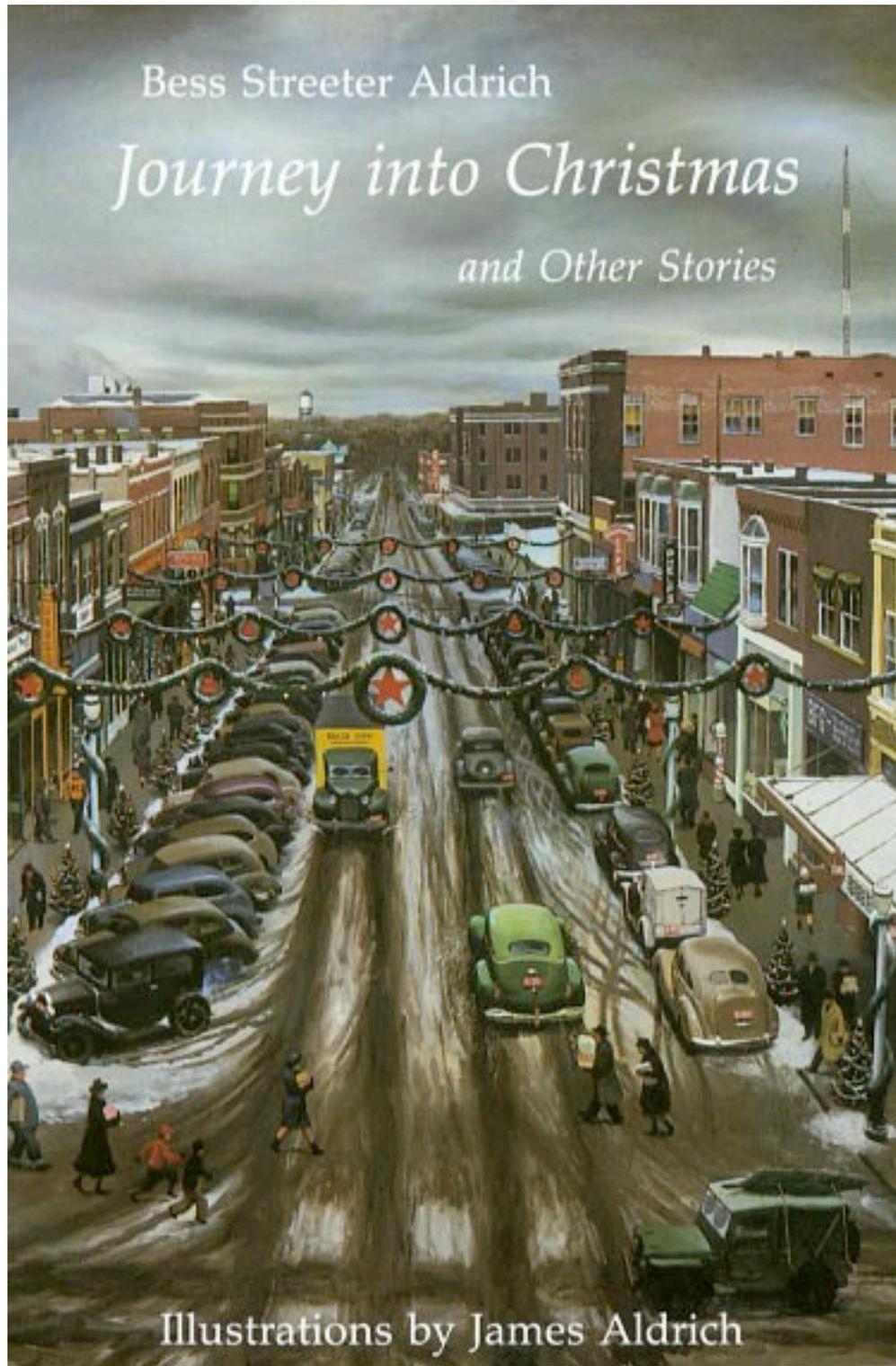
Bess Streeter Aldrich (1881 – 1954) was one of the most prominent and popular of the many "regionalist" novelists in 19th and 20th century North America. Her most popular book, *A Lantern In Her Hand* came out in 1928 and had twenty printings before 1930. It has been translated into more than twenty languages and has not yet been out of print. All of her novels have been published in Braille and all are now in print in paperback. Her best selling novel, *Miss Bishop* (1940) was made into a popular movie called "Cheers for Miss Bishop" starring Paul Muni (1941). She is included in at least 19 compendia of literary and historical biography such as *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, *The Dictionary of American Biography*, and *The Readers Encyclopedia*. Numerous magazine articles and four book length biographies of her life have been published (Marble, 1929; Williams, 1935; Martin, 1992, Peterson, 1995) and four Ph.D. dissertations have been written about her literary works and her social significance (Foreman, 1982; Jessup, 1985; Keating, 1985, Peterson, 1992). When she died, obituaries appeared in *Time* (volume 94) and *Newsweek* (volume 60) magazines (16th of August, 1954) and the *New York Times*.



Aldrich was a teacher before her marriage to a small town banker, and began writing short stories for adults, and children's fiction, for teachers' magazines as a hobby. After her husband died suddenly, she supported herself and four small children by publishing in *The Ladies Home Journal*, *American Magazine*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan* (that was very homey and proper in those days), *McCall's*, *Colliers*, and other less famous periodicals that were read mostly by women, and that included stories that women read to their children (Martin, 1992, p. 6, 15). However, she had to work to get her stories accepted because her writing was not melodramatic enough for many of the editors (Keating, 1985, p. 107). She also published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Harper's Weekly* and *Century Magazine*, demanding literary journals that did not usually publish "stories for ladies". In the 1930's and 40's "she was one of the most sought after short-story writers and best-selling novelists in the nation" (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 82) and one of the "most highly paid and widely read" (Petersen, 1999, p. vii). All of her novels after *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928) appeared on the best seller lists, and in 1931 her third novel was the number three best seller of the year (Witt, 1990, p. 14). She published 160 short pieces about half of which are available in ten different collections several of which are still in print.

Bess Streeter Aldrich is a transitional figure between the subservient Victorian housewife and a liberated woman. She was herself a strong willed, self-reliant person, and her female protagonists are courageous, persistent, independent, and successful. Aldrich was a master freshwater fisher at a time when this was considered quite unfeminine (Keating, 1985, p. 104). She often treated the inequality of the sexes. Many of her heroines are smarter, more reliable and more practical than their lovers and husbands. Aldrich did not remarry after her husband died, perhaps because she was clearly uncomfortable with sex, that she associated with "indecency and slime". Ironically she also believed that a woman could not be fulfilled by success in business or art or teaching or writing unless she became a mother. The only happy childless women in all her novels are Aunt Biny and Miss Bishop who are loving adoptive mothers. Most of all, Aldrich rarely questioned the basic assumptions of middle class, Mid-western life (Martin, 1992, p. 19 - 24).

Aldrich was also a transition figure in women's writing between sentimental romanticism and realistic naturalism. Critics have called her a "romantic realist" (Keating, 1985, p. 170). The most advanced fiction writers in the U.S. began to move away from sentimentality and romanticism during the Civil War, but the women's magazines were (and still are) publishing teary-eyed, romantic love stories in which the protagonists are separated until the last moment when they are correctly and happily and eternally united. She wrote family sagas because she objected to the overly romantic tales of courtship and she did not think that people lived "happily ever after" (Aldrich, 1942, p. 1). On the other hand, much of her work is sentimental, especially the large number of Christmas stories.



And she was often tritely romantic, partly under the pressure of her editors and publishers. Sophisticated critics, for example Leslie Fiedler, derided her works as “historical romances” with inevitable happy endings (Foreman, 1983, p. 149). But this is not always the case. Many of her characters suffer irreversible life long hurts. In *Miss Bishop* and *Spring Came On Forever*, the heroines never marry the heroes. The *Lieutenant’s Lady* is the story of an almost accidental marriage and a passionless young couple.

Her writing seems to have been derived mostly from fiction for women that was popular in her time, but she added a much more realistic, less romantic mood, a deeper love of nature, and stronger narrative style. She depended on her writing to support her family after her husband died, and so she was very strongly influenced by the suggestions of the editors of the magazines that purchased her stories and the publishers who put out her novels (Petersen, 1999, p. viii). But she was strong willed and there are interesting cases where the editors wanted her to make her stories more romantic and less "crude" but she persisted in presenting a realistic image of Mid-western life. Eventually the pieces were published and were well received by the public (Keating, 1985, p. 22 - 40). She herself felt that her major sources were Charles Dickens, James M. Barrie (Aldrich, 1949 in Petersen, 1999, p. x) and Louisa May Alcott (Foreman, 1983, p. 74). Her characterizations are as pointed as theirs, but often deeper and more rounded. Critics believe that she was influenced more by William Dean Howells though she did not seem to recognize this (Foreman, 1983, p. 9). One of her motivations as a writer was to oppose the negative picture of the Mid-west in the works of Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Ole Rolvaag, Mari Sandoz, Hamlin Garland and lesser known writers who emphasized the boredom, and hopelessness of prairie life and the small minded, smug provincialism of prairie people (Foreman, 1983, p. 13, 68; Atkins, 1981, p. 2).

She wrote after the main authors of the "local color" movement had finished their work but she is clearly a member of that school, and was probably influenced by them in her choice and treatment of material (Foreman, 1983, p. 180 - 181). As with those men and women, she was a realist who describes specific places and people in great detail, but she did so to make the point that there are universal themes and feelings of love, and loss, birth and death in all places.

There are often important literary influences that are not sources of style or even material, but rather attitude and mood. Aldrich read and wrote some German and admired Goethe. She wrote some popular verse herself, and quoted poems by Vachel Lindsay, Joyce Kilmer, and obscure Mid-western versifiers (Foreman, 1983, p. 75 -766). Almost all of these poets were nature lovers, and this attitude is clearly expressed in her prose works. She often quoted Shakespeare, the King James Bible and classical mythology (Petersen, 1999, p. xi). Valuable studies could be made of her use of these sources that give literary interest to her work and may have provided inspiration to the author.

She described her works as "bright tales of ordinary people" always in a rural or small town setting. Her works were distinctly against the grain of the "Roaring Twenties" that were debauched and urban, and the depression era novels that were depressing tales of family disintegration, sex, and violence. She did, however, deal directly and often with poverty, sickness, old age, and natural disasters. A very large majority of Mid-western critics and readers were very positive about her writing, as were many of the important Eastern critics including those in major papers in New York and Boston (Foreman, 1983, p. 64 - 66). At first, the most advanced East coast literary critics admired her early short stories for their lack of cloying sentimentality (Keating, 1985, p. 48, 49, 58). However, as she became more popular, these sophisticated Eastern critics, especially in the leading literary magazines such as the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the *Atlantic*, sometimes denigrated and satirized her work. They were especially critical of her lack of what they considered psychological subtlety. Nonetheless, they recognized the power of her writing and grudgingly admitted that she was a realist and naturalist, positive terms in those days (Martin, 1992, p. 15 - 19). Eventually, when she became established as a writer whose books were always best sellers, these high art critical magazines stopped reviewing her books, but they had to announce the appearance of her books (Keating, 1985, p. 8, 135, 193). All critics of her day recognized

her ability to create strong interesting characters, and everyone noted her love of nature (Witt, 1990, p. 14).

Bess Streeter Aldrich was well aware of her public and of the critical comments concerning her works. She kept thousands of reviews, both positive and negative, in scrapbooks, and she kept hundreds of fan letters that had interesting comments, not always positive (Keating, 1985, p. 97). She was especially pleased and flattered when her books were translated into other languages. She also read the women's magazines closely to help her construct and sell her stories. During World War II she was very flattered by a letter from Admiral Chester Nimitz who said that he and many of the sailors were reading her books to remind them of home. She was also aware that the stark realism in her books was not attractive to some potential readers, but she refused to romanticize either the dull times or the ugly incidents, though she kept the latter to a minimum. Moreover, she tried to offset what could have been dull episodes with humor and honest feelings (Keating, 1985, p. 177).

Many of her admirers and detractors placed Aldrich with the other Mid-western novelists of the highest literary quality including Sinclair Lewis, and Willa Cather. Others equated her with less well known or less highly regarded Mid-western fiction writers: Mari Sandoz, Hamlin Garland, John G. Neihardt, Ruth Suckow, Helen Hoover Santmyer, Martha Ostenso, Dorothy Thomas, Ole Rolvaag, and Laura Ingalls Wilder (Martin, 1992, p. 24, 25, 38; Zimmerman, 1996, p. 83; Petersen, 1999). She is most similar to Cather with her love of nature (Stauffer, 1979, p. 35; Keating, 1985, p. 77) but her characters express their affection for nature more often and more deeply than Cather's people. Aldrich also differs from all of the other authors listed above by her well developed sense of humor and by her much more individualistic treatment of social problems. Though she lived through the labor unrest and the red scare of the 1920's they never appeared in her works. The Civil War and each world war appear in her novels and short stories, from the women's point of view on "the home front". She treated the despair and social disruption of the depression from the rural and small town perspective, so there were no bread lines. There was poverty though not hunger.

Although a fear of "Indians" was a common problem for most of her pioneer heroines, Aldrich never described the ill treatment of the native people by colonial invaders, although her last novel portrayed natives as real people, some of whom were admirable and some not. She clearly disliked people who were "Indian Haters" including specifically General George Custer. Although she always sided with the small farmers against the moneyed interests, she presented the injustices of the North American capitalist agricultural system as matters of personal greed and unfairness. She never presented a critique of the general system, and she never proposed any political solution to the plight of the small farmers although she believed they were cheated of their fair share of the profits of their hard work.

Many critics consider her a realist because of the powerful verisimilitude and historical accuracy of her fiction. Aldrich agreed with the characterization (Peterson, 1995, p. xiii). She read old newspapers, borrowed diaries and scrapbooks and letters to construct lively but historically and sociologically accurate narratives of the lives of Midwestern pioneer families. She sometimes spent twice as much time researching the time and region of the book as in writing the novel. In the most extreme case, she spent fourteen months researching the *Lieutenants Lady* and five months writing it (Aldrich cited in Keating, 1985, p. 79). The apparent "truthfulness" of her action and settings and dialogues was based on conversations with elderly relations and neighbors from Iowa to Nebraska and as far west as Montana and Utah (Stauffer, 1979, 35). There are at least two scholarly studies of her historical accuracy, both of which found her fiction to be extremely close to the facts. One examines her treatment of Mid-western boosterism (Dalstrom, 1995) and another the lives of army wives on the Mid-western frontier. Her

books have been used widely as supplementary reading for American History courses in high schools and colleges (Martin, 1992, p. 20). Aldrich herself was aware of the transition from romance novels in her time. In *The Rim of the Prairie* she wrote that the new generation “turns down romance for realism” (1925, p. 57).

She is also a naturalist, in the literary sense, because she emphasized the helplessness of human beings to direct or change their lives in the face of natural and economic trends (Foreman, 1983, chapter V). Her farm families are at the mercy of drought, prairie fires, flood, tornadoes, blizzards, hail, and grasshoppers. Then, in the good times, the bumper crops are nearly worthless because the market can not absorb all that has been grown. She was, however, an unusual naturalist, because she and her protagonists usually kept an optimistic and humorous attitude even when the plot was full of personal sadness.

Six of her seven novels are sagas of pioneering hardships followed by economic development and increasing cultural sophistication from generation to generation. The families moved from sod shanties, to wood frame houses, to stone and brick mansions. The families progressed from pioneer farming to shop keeping and bank managing, to cultural attainments as teachers, physicians, lawyers, legislators, and finally to artists and writers who outgrew the Midwest and some of whom felt they had to move to Chicago or the Atlantic coast.

A modern ecocritic would ask: what habitats were obliterated by these new farms? What rivers were polluted with the silt as the broken sod eroded into the eutrophying waters of the Platte, Missouri, and Niobrara? What species became extinct in the human rush for comfort and agrarian stability? Aldrich was a nature lover (Foreman, 1983, p. 75), and she always made the reader strongly aware of the impact of nature on people and of people on nature. The loss of the native flora and soil erosion by water and wind were prominent in some of her books (e.g. 1935, 224, 240, 268) but this is not the main theme of any of her works.

An ecofeminist would ask: how did the control and abuse of women and nature in the real life and the fictional works of Bess Streeter Aldrich contribute to the tension and interest that we feel for her works? But the answer is that even the most abusive of her male villains would escape censure by Annette Kolodny (1975) or retribution at the hands of Mary Austin’s desert nymph from *Cactus Thorn* (c.1927). But these standard issues in environmental history were not the central concerns in her work. However, if we consider all of her novels we find an important environmental lesson was almost always present.

Vestiges of Pastorale

The thesis of this paper is that most of the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich contain significant elements of classical pastorage such that they represent a subtle elegy on the passing of the natural prairie and a warning about what this does to the humans who live in the altered landscape. With the destruction of the natural habitat, the people, especially the women of the region, became different because they were raised on well-established farms. The third and fourth generation was different still, because they were raised, more often, in towns. This in turn, created problems for young women who developed what Streeter considered “unnatural” anti-romantic attitudes about love, family and death.

Aldrich was not a classics scholar, but she loved to make classical allusions. She graduated from Iowa State Teachers College in 1901 in the days when that required a bit of Latin. It is clear that she had read, and perhaps memorized large volumes of English, American and even German poetry, to which she liked to make allusions, sometimes to the irritation of her critics (Martin, 1992, p. 31). The romantic poetry she

read was permeated by the pastoral conventions. She seems to have especially liked Keats, who wrote numerous pastorales. In the classical Greek or Latin pastoral elegy, women were associated with nature, good men and women loved nature, evil people were both "unnatural" and hated and destroyed nature, nature sympathized with the lives of the protagonists, and at death, the good people merged with nature. Nature was a major determining force in the lives of the characters in pastorale. All of these features of pastorale can be seen in the pioneering episodes of the novels and not, in general, in the later farming or town settings.

The association of women and nature, especially with flowers, is a double rooted trope. It is derived both from the pre-Homeric myths of the mortal man who loved a goddess, and it also comes from the poetry of King David and his son King Solomon who often wrote that women were like flowers, especially roses and lilies. The prehistoric classical trope was restated and codified by the Alexandrian Greek poet Theocritus (c. 300 BC) who created the pastoral elegy, a poem in a rural setting in memory of the dead. The elegy has many formal requirements that have influenced writers even today. In an elegy, the main character loved in vain; originally a man who loved a goddess, later a person who loved a beautiful but unobtainable mortal person. Classical elegies in Greek and Latin were bisexual, as were many people in those cultures, but this was obscured in the Dark Ages. Romantic period pastorales are heterosexual, as were all of Aldrich's characters. The death of the loved one caused all of nature to mourn along with the lover. This was also a theme that existed in the Psalms of David. Literary critics call it "The Pathetic Fallacy".

The tradition of the Elegy was greatly strengthened by Virgil who added a convention: at the end of an elegy the loved one merged with nature and entered the realm of nature and the stars. The pastoral elegy remained common throughout the middle ages, and became even more common in the Renaissance, both in popular songs and high art, music, and poetry. A majority of Shakespeare's comedies are pastorales: *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Winter's Tale*, *Midsummer Night Dream*, and according to Leo Marx, *The Tempest*. Milton, Burns, Shelley, and Keats wrote many famous pastoral elegies. It was a major influence on Emerson and Thoreau and it remained one of the most popular forms of poetry until about 1930.

Starting about 50 C.E. the Roman prose pastorale added two more elements - the ennobling effect of nature on people, and the superiority of all things rural over all things urban. This is played out in pastorale by urbanites entering a rural setting and becoming kinder, gentler and more moral people as a consequence of the beneficial influence of nature. This theme continued through the Renaissance, and was common in European essays and novels of exploration and pioneering in the New World, Africa and Asia. Leo Marx wrote *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, one of many books that have shown that pastorale has been an important influence on the formation of the American character.

The heroines of Imperial Roman times, and of Shakespeare's pastorals are, like Aldrich herself, a robust, intelligent, and jolly lot, full of hope in the most trying circumstances. They are largely admirable models for modern young liberated women in their physical strength and moral endurance. Most modern readers find classical heroines and the women of Aldrich's novels old fashion and un-liberated because they were happy, at the end of the novel, to marry their true love, and settle down to be a wife and mother.

Virgil was also responsible for another tradition, the georgic, a pleasant poem or novel of farm life. This type of literary, agrarian memoir has been influential ever since Roman times, when city people began to go back to the country and buy farms (and large rural estates). Similar georgic episodes have occurred since in western culture, including the depression era retreat of unemployed urbanites to the farms where they

had been raised, and the hippie "back to the land movement" of the 1960's in Europe and North America. Such novels strongly emphasized the positive aspects of farm life and largely ignored the poverty, boredom, and illness so common in rural places, although hard work was often romanticized.

One can interpret most of the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich as the progression from pastorate to georgic, and then to an urban novel. Her pioneer families epitomized the nobility that hardship and closeness to nature was believed to confer. But as the frontier was subdued, the novels became fairly cheery farm tales, although she was too honest and realistic to gloss over the hardships and dangers of farm life, unlike classical georgic. Finally, her families became the citizens of small or medium sized cities, though still surrounded by farmland, and affected by the acts of nature on the farms. What follows in this essay is an attempt to demonstrate that the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich constitute a history of the progression from pastorate to georgic to urban life, and how this affected both nature and the people of the region, especially women. Particularly, I hope to prove that she believed that wild nature made women properly feminine, and that nature was still effective in molding women by the hard life in the wilderness and on the farm, but that town and city life was so separated from nature that women became "unnatural" flappers and even more depraved females.

Nature Lovers

The good people of Bess Streeter Aldrich's novels are all "nature lovers" (e.g. 1931, 202). Aldrich knew that her species was encroaching on the lives of animals. She reminded her early twentieth century readers what they had lost.

For years in the great Midwest [prairie grass] held its own against the incoming hordes, would not be vanquished by mere animal hoof prints. It gave up only when man's inventions proved too strong to combat. The sharp steel of the plowshare, the pointed teeth of the harrow, the multiple gorging jaws of the tractor - before these it could no longer hold out.

But in 1855 there were trains and roadsides and in all but the new wheat-and corn-fields, it was still king of the prairie, green, thick, lush with moisture, flower-sprinkled, holding down the soil. A pity it came to be conquered. (1938, 140)



Young Woman photographing the prairie

The railway, that allowed the pioneers to finish the task of subduing nature came: "like a huge black animal snorting its way out from Dubuque, fouling the green prairie." (1939, 308)

As with all Victorian women of breeding, she and her heroines were ever observant of flowers in season.

The world was a lovely painting of sunshine, blue skies, honey-locusts, bees on the blossoms, - a palpitating, throbbing world of spring. (1928, 50)

Down deep in the damp timber for long months one could find Dutchman's-breeches, violets, columbine, shooting-stars, anemones, wild crab-apple blossoms, and the heavenly scented waxen Mayflower, and the very loveliest flower of all, the blue bells. The color of a bed of bluebells in an open patch in the timber was so beautiful it hurt you. (1938, 78 - 79)

The best men and women among her characters all took time to enjoy the beauties of nature.

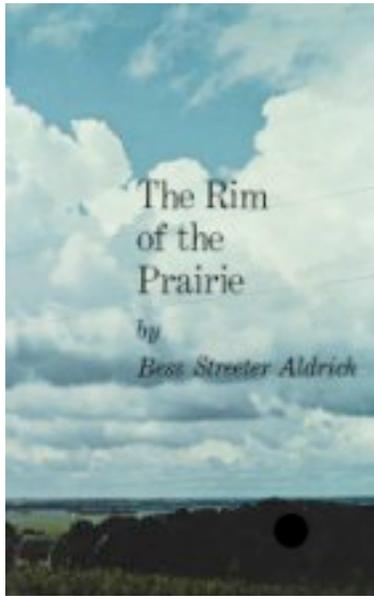
From under his shaggy white eyebrows he gazed long and lovingly at the prairie landscape, with the sun slipping down behind the green rolling hills. The graveled highway like a tawny path through a sea of green, stretched as far away as his blurred old eyes could see. (1931, 252)

Apparently, this feeling was shared by another member of her family: her 1925 book is dedicated to her late husband: "To Captain Charles S. Aldrich, who loved the hills that

rim the prairie." It is possible that this image of the horizon of the prairie is a reference to the theoretical work of another North American regionalist and nature lover of the same period, Mary Hunter Austin, who believed that the rhythm of the songs and poetry of a culture was determined by the style of the lines in nature in the region, especially the line of the horizon. (1923, 3 - 65)

The noble characters in Aldrich's novels were aware that their species has traded comfort and stability for the beauties of nature. In *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925) the heroine schoolteacher said:

All the nice things in life aren't the luxurious ones. I've learned that. Mr. Farnsworth, with all his money, can't buy a lovelier picture than the one you see from the farmhouse when you look over the rolling hills. And he can't hire a finer singer than the wood thrush that sings along Tinkling Creek. (265)



She even has a beloved character who tried to preserve a little of the natural preEuropean vegetation:

The Lord Himself planted that. . . I got one piece you know . . . it's only ten acres . . . but it's virgin prairie. I been keepin' that all these years. Every year the teachers bring the children in their classes out 'n show 'em. I'm the only one in the whole community, maybe county as far as I know, that's kept any. It ought not to be plowed up. The kids ought to see it . . . every generation of 'em ought to see the way it looked when the world began. (1925, 285)

In fact, she and her best characters even imagined Heaven as: "quite humble, and near a meadow where a thrush sings at evening in the maples." (1925, 351) for: "To top one of eastern Nebraska's low rolling hills in October and see the entire hollow bowl of the world fitting the hollow bowl of the skies is to glimpse a bit of Infinity." (1931, 145)

Nature Haters and Exploiters

Some of her characters were not kind to nature. There were pioneers who were proud of their civil "war record . . . and the record of an equally harsh war . . . the tussle with nature to make a home on the prairie." (1931, 21) "There was eternal warfare with the elements." (1935, 101) The pioneer men felt that "the wilderness was a giant with which to wrestle." (1935, 100)

Generally the men were more dangerous to nature than women but one "highly efficient woman . . . would have arranged the stars in symmetrical rows and dispensed with the Milky Way as being too messy." (1931, 91) Many of the pioneers were afraid and felt hate for the native people and the predatory native animals, especially wolves, bears, and even the coyotes.

But most of the damage to nature was done by well meaning people who were just too busy pioneering to notice what they were doing to the native plants and animals. "The feet of the oxen [of the wagon train] crushed a thousand wild blossoms in the prairie grass." (1935, 69) This was especially true of the farmers of this century who bought out their less successful neighbors and operated very large farms in order to have larger incomes to support what Aldrich obviously considered extravagant lives. In every one of her novels the moral dangers of greed is either the main or an important secondary theme.

Strong Women of Pastoral

Upper class women during the later Roman Republic and Empire were often literate, and they read prose novels that became the model for sentimental romances to this day. Many of these novels were pastorales. The most famous of these is *Daphnus and Chloe* that was very popular and is completely preserved. The plots of these novels have wild twists and improbable coincidences often involving mistaken identities much like Shakespeare's pastoral comedies that were based on them. The heroines of these Classical novels and of Shakespeare's plays are intelligent, strong, bold, hopeful, and often funny. Many pastoral heroines spend most of the novel disguised as boys. Both the Roman and Elizabethan authors make it clear that the rural people of pastorale especially the girls and women are superior because they feel the direct influences of nature. Bess Streeter Aldrich often quoted Shakespeare. She was a jolly person, and her writings are often humorous, so it seems likely that she was especially attracted to his comedies.

The pioneering female protagonists of the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich are strong in body and mind. Her first novel, *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925) takes place when the pioneering women are old and feeble, but there are memories of their robust youth. Abbie Mackenzie Deal, the main figure of *A Lantern In Her Hand* (1928) outlives her gentle husband Will, and survives despite continuous drudgery and lack of an outlet for her artistic abilities. In the sequel, *A White Bird Flying*, (1931) Laura Deal, Abbie's granddaughter is not strong in body or will but she is able to find moral strength with the inspiration of the powerful spirit of her pioneer grandmother who has merged with nature and who appears to Laura as the title suggests. The seven pioneer sisters in *Song of Years* (1938) were each a little different but all were willful, physically capable, jolly, and exuberant. The German pioneer immigrant heroine of *Spring Came On Forever*, (1935) was tiny but she was physically capable and emotionally robust in the face of abuse first from her father and then from her husband. The title character in *The Lieutenant's Lady* (1942) was fully able to meet the physical, mental, and spiritual demands of the women who followed the Indian fighters and peacemakers at the thin edge of the expanding American republic just after the Civil War.

The Superiority of Rural Over Urban

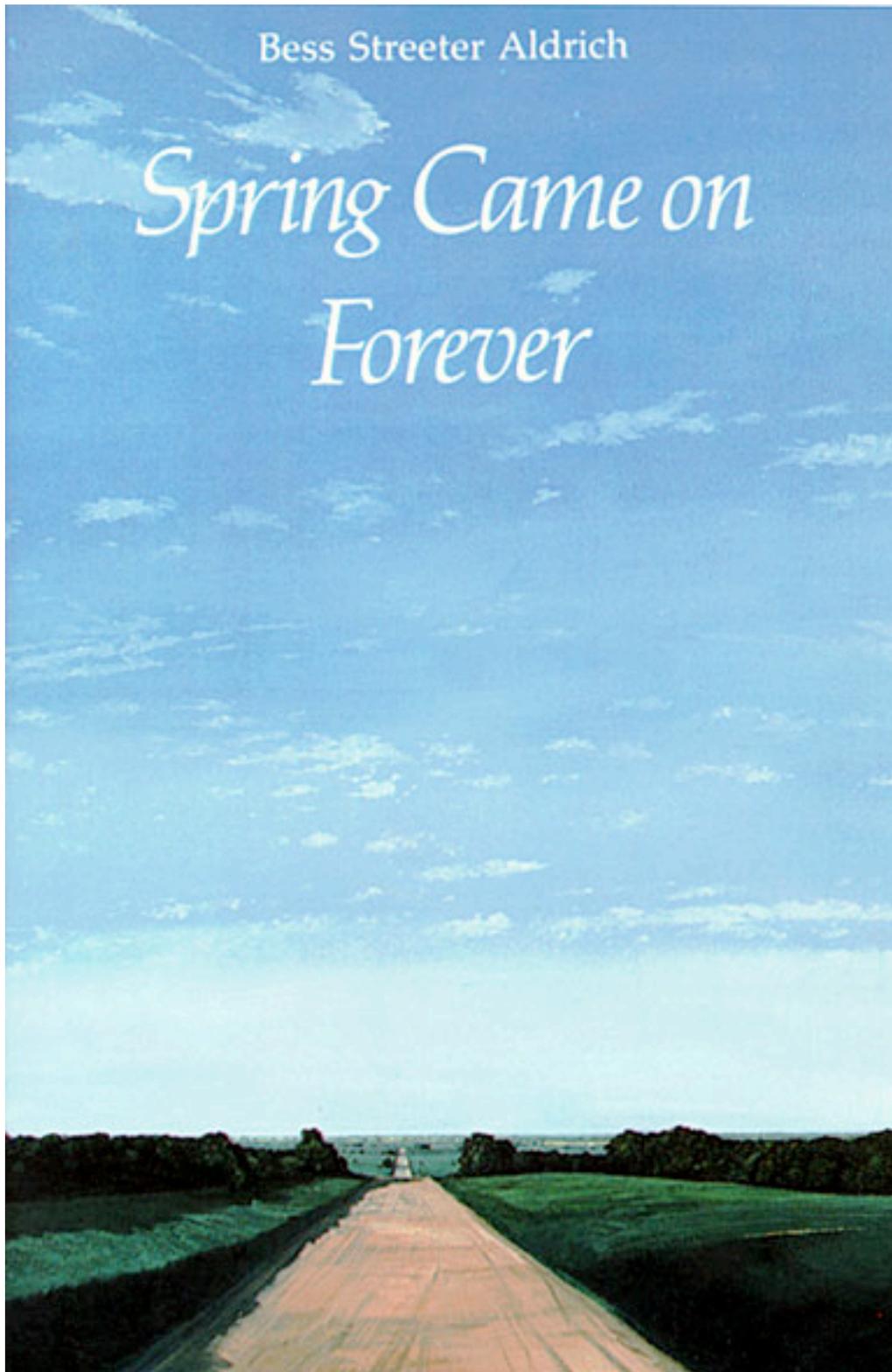
Pastorale has been a popular form of entertainment for over two millennia, and during most of that time it has been a medium of critique. Virgil used it to critique various politicians, now mostly forgotten. In the Italian Renaissance, Petrarca, considered by many the first modern European poet, used the characters in his pastorales as a safe way of criticizing the Roman Catholic Church. This critique was carried out in pastorale by bringing urbanites into nature to be corrected in their ways and minds by the rural people and by nature herself. In all the pioneer novels, the characters came from Europe or the eastern U.S. and most of them felt as if they were driven from their homes into a hostile wilderness. However, they discovered a new and better home, and they discover new strengths in themselves. In this way Aldrich adhered to the ancient pastoral theme and showed the superiority of nature over civilization especially for young women.

In some cases she made this topic the main theme of a novel. The male protagonist (he is too wimpy to be called the hero) of *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925) was a caricature of a Mid-western author who had gone east and become popular attacking Mid-western culture (Perhaps a portrait of Sinclair Lewis or Sherwood Anderson). But when he developed writers block, he returned to the prairie and fell in love with a local young woman, who, along with nature, gave him something to live for and write about. In *A Lantern In Her Hand* (1928) and *A White Bird Flying*, (1931) the pioneer women with artistic and poetic talent were stifled by the drudgery of their lives. Their daughters and granddaughters with talents went east and returned because they discovered that the land and the people of the West are more important stimuli to creativity than the artificial culture in big cities. In *The Lieutenant's Lady* (1942) the silly, greedy and selfish people of Omaha were contrasted with the serious and public-spirited army families. Whenever she had a chance, Aldrich championed her part of nature, the plains, over all other locales, and all things rural, or small town, over urban.

The Pathetic Fallacy

Aldrich employed the so-called "pathetic fallacy", the ancient metaphor that nature sympathizes with good people. The idea that nature could have feelings and could sympathize with humans is a powerful trope that connected people to nature from the times of Homer and King David, through Roman times and the Dark Ages, in the Renaissance and especially in the Romantic period.

Aldrich and her characters, like many prairie people, had a special feeling for riparian trees. A shy young woman walking along a road avoided being seen by slipping "into the friendly shadow of the cottonwoods and Lombardy poplars." (1925, 3) because "I grew up under the cottonwoods and I love them. They're the happiest, merriest trees in the world. When everything else is still and doleful and pessimistic, they dance and laugh and twinkle." (1925, 82) A different, and much bolder heroine loved cottonwoods too. "Their little shimmering, dancing leaves were a solace to Abbie. They seemed courageous and cheerful, undaunted by the hot sun, undisturbed by cold rains, unafraid of the rushing winds." (1928, 92 -93) Aldrich wrote that in Spring the: "willow and the cottonwood and the alders over by Stove Creek [burst] into green joyousness." (1928, 118) The "willows and oaks and elms along Stove Creek . . . looked familiar, - friendly." (1928, 216)



In *Spring Came On Forever* the young people and nature "were feeling the push of the sap against the dark of their bodies." (1935, 2) The swallows and the young lovers "sang the prairie's love song to the spring." (1935, 20) □ On the night of a prairie wedding "The moon slipped up from a fleecy cloud-bed and with silvery congratulations swung low over the farmhouse behind the cedars." (1928, 162) This, and many other instances of the pathetic fallacy in her works personified nature and made

the plants and animals, and other parts of the wild, characters who sympathized with the main protagonists in the novels.

Nature had emotions of its own unrelated to people. The spring rains "beat upon the . . . fields and pastures sending moisture down to the grateful sub-soil." (1935, 282) The dangerous parts of nature also were full of feeling. A prairie fire was a "mad" wild being. (1935, 106) A dangerous late snow-storm was "laughing drunkenly at the tiny pigmy inmates of the tiny prairie house." (1928, 98)

To Merge With Nature

A WHITE BIRD FLYING



Just as in Virgilian elegies, the good people of the prairie merged with nature in death. The pioneers of her novels not only loved nature: many did not fear death because they wished to merge with nature. The spirit of Gramma Deal, the heroine of *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928) merged with nature and became the title image of the sequel, *A White Bird Flying*. (1931, 69, 129)

The bodies anyway go back to the good old leaves and flowers, animals and people . . . under my eyes I've seen 'em all turn to the composition of the earth itself. In time the elements run up through the trees and grasses and come to life again. If I thought I'd just help along that way, it don't seem so bad. I like to think that I'll be a part of the prairie round about here somewhere. (1931, 150)

Old uncle Oscar "wanted to be in the wind, and a part of the prairie sod, and to hear the sound of the wild geese honking" when he died. (1931, 299) In *Song of the Years*, the pioneers died and became part of nature: "I'll be in somethin' a hundred years from now, even it it's just the prairie grass or the wind in the timber or the wild geese ridin' out the storm." (1939, 77, 489) President Lincoln, who died far away, was believed by one character to be part of the prairie corn. (1939, 453) Even in life, the noble pioneer farmer "was a part of Nature herself." (1939, 260)

In the college novel, *Miss Bishop* (1933), the description of the death of the astronomy professor, her friend and classmate, was both specifically appropriate, and something right out of Virgilian pastorelle:

And when Professor Fonda died, as though having looked long upon the heavens, he had suddenly become one with the moon and the clouds and the Milky Way.



Environmental Determinism

In classical pastorelle, nature, usually represented by the nymphs, was an important determining actor. Most, perhaps all of the American regionalist fiction writers believed that the natural environment determined the type of people and animals and vegetation that lived in their region of choice. In the case of the plants and animals, the opinion is well founded. It is also clear that people change nature, and that in turn changes the people of the future. Aldrich understood this. As she said "A section of real life is not so detached and finished, for the causes and consequences of it reach backward and forward and across the world." (1942, 1)

One of the major themes in Aldrich's books was the impact of the goodness and beauty of the Midwest. The power of the environment is evidenced even when it was not presented positively. In Aldrich's novels Easterners usually denigrated Midwestern nature. One depressed character agreed with this appraisal and said: "there's no great beauty here . . . without mountains and seas, the monotony of the landscape brings out in Midwesterners a pessimism of the spirit and a depression of the soul, - and that it's reflected in our writings." (1931, 166)

Aldrich simply turned this around and claimed that her prairie was beautiful. Sometimes the beauties of nature affected her characters clearly and directly. "The white birches drinking forever from glass-clear waters, the tall pines massed against sapphire skies, the clear spongy carpet of sweet-smelling needles, all filled Laura with the poetry of living." (1931, 78) And her people were often conscious of the effects of nature and "quite touched with gratitude at the generosity that Nature was displaying for their benefit." (1931, 145)

Many of her characters were not, however, conscious of the effect of nature. The kindly and community spirited small town banker, Mr. Mason, was morally superior to city bankers because "He was a son of the soil" (1916, 24) but he did not realize this himself. An April afternoon made one of her heroes feel " young, alive, strong, virile, - one with the maples in which the sap had long been running, with the newly opened cottonwood buds that had burst into green life, with the fallow fields calling for the seeding, with the mating songs of robins, with swallows on the nuptial flight." (1931, 165)



Aldrich did not always take environmental determinism for granted. It was a topic that her characters considered and debated. In *White Bird Flying* Grandmother

Deal wondered, "did living close to the prairie soil the way they had done, give them some sort of inner consciousness of the beautiful?" (1931, 68)

The Changing Role of Nature in Women

Aldrich's pioneer heroines were strongly influenced by nature. Sometimes nature was wild and dangerous; often it was very beautiful and filled her characters with love and gratitude to the Creator. But as nature was subdued and altered, it had less effect on her women, so that the second generation women were not often associated with nature, and the third and fourth generation of Midwestern women were either indifferent to nature, or outright antagonistic both to the natural world, and to what Aldrich considered the natural inner life of women.

Many of the pioneer women were likened to nature, or parts of nature. Aldrich's pioneering heroines were one and all nature lovers, although they each have a realistic understanding of the harshness and danger and unpredictability of natural processes. They feared dangerous winter storms, spring floods, summer tornadoes and drought, marauding Indians, snakes, and wolves. But they loved nature none-the-less.

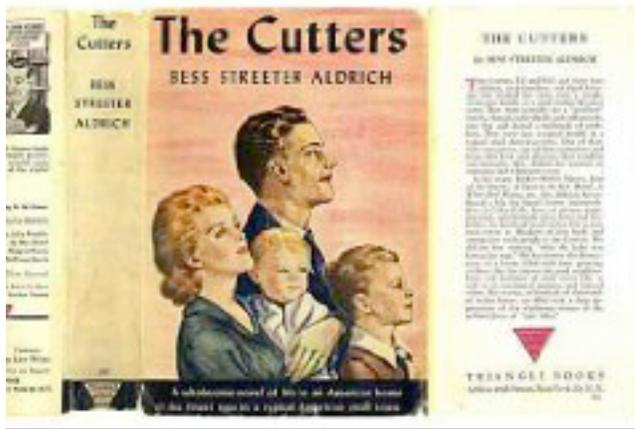
In *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925) the heroine, Nancy Moore, was a second generation Midwesterner. She loved the "thrushes and lilacs, and orchard", the creek where she was raised, and the prairie. (34) She was herself "like a gay little linnet." (163) The hero's mother, a pioneering woman, who never overcame her homesickness for Massachusetts was "like a bird in flight." (59). The covetous neighbor, Old Mrs. Rineland "With her beadlike eyes and a birdlike curve to her nose, . . . gave one the impression of a hawk . . . watching covertly." (78) Even a weak hearted pioneer woman was associated with nature. Old Aunt Biny was "as gentile and frail as the geraniums and fuchsia's she grew." (6) Thus, both complimentary and somewhat negative metaphors were used that associated women of the first and rarely of the second generation to nature. None of the other second-generation women were said to be natural or to be nature lovers. There are no third generation women in this novel.

The Cutters (1926) was a series of comic, rather unrelated chapters about the lives of a happy, noisy, small town, Mid-western family. The pioneer paternal grandmother, who lived with them, was associated with wild flowers. When her sons thought of her, they thought of the wild roses that she remembered seeing along the trail on which she had come to the prairie as a child. (160) Even years after her death, her family remembered: "Gramma, whose spirit, like a sweet fragrance, was to fill all their lives." (265) Even when people disagreed with this association they remarked on it. The hard-headed, big city granddaughter Barbara mocked her grandmother's Victorian notions of love and marriage by saying "Love! Oh, Granny dear, what is love? Moonlight and roses. Here to-day, and gone to-morrow as the preacher says. But a bank account! To have it or not! That is the question." (242)

It is only during the most passionate episodes that the second or third generation women or men were likened to nature. When Barbara discovered romantic love with the kind, young dentist in the little town, the young couple in love were "as friendly as the rain and the blossoms, or the lark and the sky." (232) When the teenage daughter, Josephine, grew up and married and moved into a home of her own she was "like a wild bird that [her mother Nell] could not hold." (266) Nell was so lonely for her children who had grown up and moved away that she feared she "would turn into a shrieking wild woman or a Niobe to weep herself to death." (266) The wild woman in white and Niobe are both figures from the same Greek myths of the nymphs from which the gentler pastorage arose. The later nymphs lived in groves of trees. Early nymphs may have been specifically the spirits of trees. At night, Nell like a nymph "was like a tree, a tree that bled at every pore." (270)

Cousin Barbara Cutter was presented as a financially independent, modern young woman, a flapper, who was not raised in wild nature, nor on a farm, and therefore, she had "outlandish" and "unnatural" notions about love and family and money. However Aldrich made sure that Barbara discovered love and moved back to the little town, surrounded by farms, to become a wife and mother. It seems strange that Bess Streeter Aldrich a suffragette, and in some ways a feminist, a widow who never remarried and who supported herself and four children as a journalist and novelist, would have these feelings, that were old fashion even in her day, but perhaps that tells us how powerful such conventions were in our society.

The Cutters was the first book in which Aldrich used the Victorian "Language of Flowers", a feminine, middleclass, North American and European tradition in which garden flowers were used to represent feelings. (Swarthout, 1975) Old childhood friends who still loved one another unlocked the "rosemary of remembrance." (Aldrich, 1926, 201) A more subtle and ironic use occurred in a chapter where the simple people of the little town planted geraniums that some of the snobbier citizens considered too plebeian, but that were the symbol of true gentility in the Victorian convention. (Aldrich, 1926, 196, Swarthout, 1975, 37) This is an unusual, subtle and very thoughtful application of the convention. Aldrich also used biblical fruit symbolism ironically in this novel: for as young Barbara Cutter fell more and more in love with the young dentist she sensed "the scent of ripening apples on the breeze" probably a reference to the apple of the garden of Eden.



The heroine of the best selling 1928 book, *A Lantern In Her Hand* was Nebraska pioneer Abbie Deal. "Her skin was as creamy-white as the May-flowers that grew in the Big Woods." (38) In the Fall "the hazel-bush was as brown-burnished as Abbie's hair." (41) Even as a little girl Abbie was a nature lover. "Her heart would swell in a feeling of oneness with Nature and the Creator of it." (31) Abbie's childhood friend Sarah was "a pretty girl. Her hair was crow-black, her cheeks pink as prairie roses." (68) In early middle age, when Abbie was widowed, "something would quiet her again. Something - she did not know what - the wind in the Lombardy poplars - the spirit of the deepening prairie twilight - the stillness of the star-filled summer night." (178) In old age Abbie was as "shriveled as the hazel-nuts near the old Iowa schoolhouse shrivel when the frost comes on." (243) She "was like an old mother partridge." (298)

But none of her children or grandchildren were said to be like nature, or to take much interest in nature. There were several third generation women who represented the problems Aldrich believed were common to those who were not raised in nature and with hard work. The most important such character was the flippant, ungrateful, and somewhat greedy granddaughter Kathie, who "was young and who had never wanted for a thing in her life." (290) But in the end she became able to love her young man and her grandmother partly from the gift of a string of family pearls through which Kathie learned the history of the family and of the pioneering hard work that brought the family to its prosperity. This eventually brought Kathie back to her family and to nature: "Oh Granny, I'd go with Jimmy just as you did with grandfather. I'd live on pumpkin seeds, you know. And dig a house in the side of a tree, just as you did." (295)

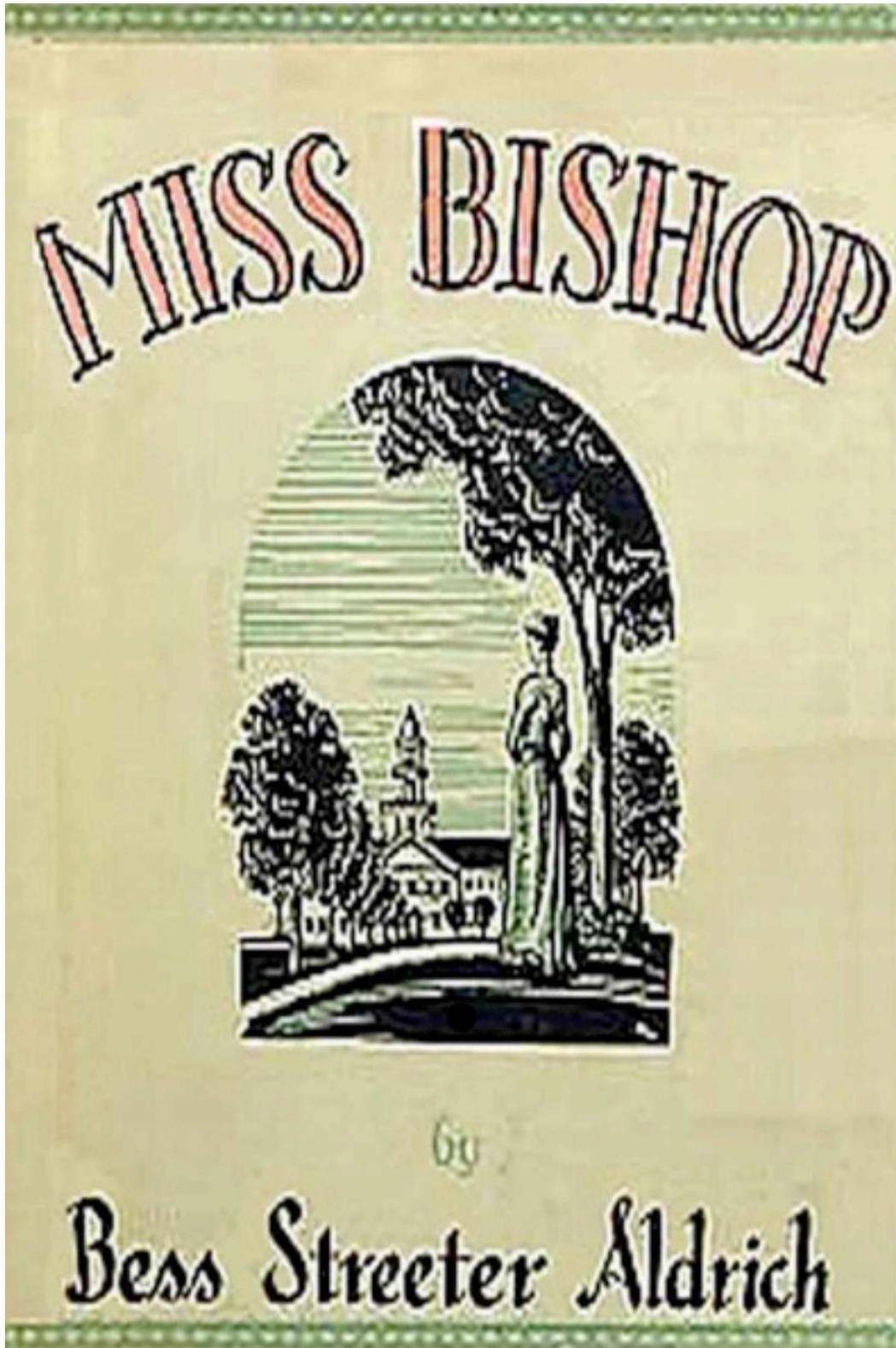
Aldrich's 1931 novel, *A White Bird Flying*, was a sequel to *A Lantern in Her Hand*. The image in the title represented the pioneer, Abbie Deal "of Grandma's love and sympathy, of the dreams and desires Grandma held for" the children and grandchildren. (12, 69, 129) The few remaining old people remembered other deceased pioneer women by their association with nature. Old Uncle Oscar remembered his late wife Mattie: "when the lilacs come out . . . it always seems she's around. Lilacs . . . always associate her with lilacs." (122) The heroine of this book was Abbie's misfit granddaughter Laura Deal. Nature was still felt to be female. "April in Nebraska is a moody creature, soft and hard, gentle and ferocious, as capricious as a girl." (157) but none of the modern young women were specifically natural or interested in nature. In this book, the granddaughter, Laura had to choose between living in a big Eastern city and wealth, or marrying for love. Eventually, through the intervention of the spirit of her beloved grandmother Abbie, Laura was married to the nice young farmer and they raised a happy family on the old farm where she taught her children to love the trees, and the meadows and the birds. (334 – 335)

Miss Bishop (1933) is an interesting variation on the Mid-western family saga. Instead of a biological family, it is the novelistic life story of Ella Bishop, a second-generation farm girl who was in the first graduating class of a little Midwestern college. She too was a nature lover. (18, 262)



Aldrich as a college girl

She was asked to remain and teach composition, and through many heartaches and personal disappointments, but professional success, she remained her long life, through two more generations of college women, her spiritual and intellectual daughters and granddaughters.



For a small town novel, there is a surprising amount of nature symbolism. When Ella was deeply emotionally hurt "Like the rushing of the water through breaking ice on Oak River in the spring of the year, her grief now came surging through her bitterness." (117) She found solace in her infant adopted daughter, Hope, who was "a little garden of fragrance" (132) who "grew like a little milkweed." (141) In her early twenties Hope was "as sweet and young as a wood sprite [who] dressed in leaf green that gave her the appearance of being one with the elms and maples just outside the window." (215) At the twentieth college reunion of her graduating class, one of her old friends in the Minerva Society had aged rapidly and lost her beauty. "She was a little wilted flower" (206) and "a faded pansy of a woman." (207) The reunion was surrounded by "the fragrant pungent odor of rosemary, for remembrance." (210) This last quotation shows that Aldrich was conscious of the flower symbolism that she used in this novel. This is the only place where she explained the convention. Perhaps she thought that her readers were familiar with the meanings of flowers, but that would not have been true of younger readers when the novel came out in 1933.

This is the only novel in Aldrich's work that was permeated by the Victorian "Language of Flowers". The life of the heroine was tragically and permanently altered when her lascivious and beautiful cousin Amy seduced Ella's fiancée and became pregnant so that he was forced to marry Amy who was repeatedly referred to as smelling of May-apple. (86, 103) This is a plant believed by the Victorians, and earlier Europeans to induce love and facilitate pregnancy. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981, v. 5, 560) Aldrich also used classical animal symbols to represent Amy: she was "a soft little turtle dove" a reference to the bird of Venus - Aphrodite, the goddess of heterosexual sex. Ella's never-to-be-used wedding dress was decorated with "little bouquets of pale pink rosebuds and blue forget-me-nots in silken relief against the snowy background - a lovely white monument for the grave of a dead hope, with flowers for remembrance." (98, 240, 281) Roses on a bridal dress represented "happy love" (Swarthout, 1975, 38) and match the irony of the "forget-me-nots."



Scene from movie made of *Miss Bishop*

In her middle age, Ella's adopted daughter, Hope, fell in love and married the son of one of Ella's college friends and the love of the young people for each other was

"like the white lilies" the Victorian symbol of purity and modesty. (Swarthout, 1975, 37) Hope's imperturbable and often gracious teenage daughter Gretchen was "Tall, olive skinned, with geranium-colored lips" following the Victorian conventions of olive for peace and geranium for gentility. (Swarthout, 1975, 37) But Gretchen was at times a disdainful and arrogant "modern young woman" who dated married men (290) but after the intervention of "Aunt Ella" she was reformed and married off to the grandson of another of Ella's college friends. (297)

In her old age, on the verge of retirement, Ella could smell the honeysuckles, the flower of fidelity (Swarthout, 1975, 37) on the college grounds. She walked in the full moonlight on the campus to which she had given her life and spirit, and "there was the heavy scent of syringas in the air" (317) the flower of memory. (Swarthout, 1975, 38) At her retirement dinner, to which hundreds of loving graduates returned, Ella was seated on a "sweet smelling . . . rose covered" chair and "Miss Bishop looked like a white rose herself" (330) the white rose being the symbol of "too young to love" (Swarthout, 1975, 38) perhaps a reference to her virginity and youthfulness of spirit.

It is worth noting that *Miss Bishop* was the only novel that used the "language of flowers" repeatedly. That language is largely a convention of garden, not wild flowers. This is appropriate to this urban (but small town) setting. In her other works, Aldrich associated the pioneer women with native wild flowers and birds that were appropriate to the season of the scene in the book that she was setting. The symbolism of these wild flowers is always the joy of women in the beauty of nature.

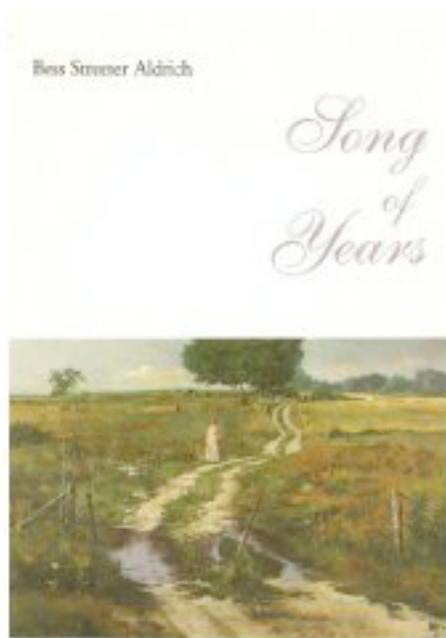
Spring Came On Forever (1935) is a tale of the German immigrants to central Nebraska. Unlike her earlier novels in which the proper pairs of lovers eventually married and lived to have grandchildren, it is a sad but uplifting tale of young love thwarted by prejudice and fate. The heroine, Amalia Stoltz Holmsdorfer was forced to marry a brutal pioneer farmer instead of the handsome and educated young blacksmith with whom she had secret (but rather chaste) trysts. In youth Amalia had "a flower-like face. Her full lips were rosy pink and in their velvet blueness her wide eyes were like cornflowers [with hair] the color of corn silk." (3) Her skin was "whiter than limestone." (65) Her secret lover called her his "little dove." (25) When she was forced to marry her father's hateful friend "something had frozen in Amalia's being that day, as the roots of the lilac bushes . . . freeze in the winter." (68) As she aged, the trees she had loved in her youth became hoary and old, as did she. (212) At 79 she was "tiny and weather-beaten, her hair in a hard little knob like a walnut, her skin a network of wrinkles, deep rivers on the map of Time" (233) like the land she had loved and pioneered. As the years passed, her lover, Matthias Meier, never forgot "the pansy-blueness of her eyes." (115) And he remembered Amalia especially when he heard a meadow-lark sing. (253)

Amalia was a nature lover who associated nature with the Creation. She managed her life-long hurt by retreating into external nature or into her own inner nature that was "a little chapel more beautiful than any church, built in a clearing in the woods" that she carried within her always. (167)

She wanted her son Emil to be a Lutheran pastor, so she took him out to the forest and taught him to appreciate the "edge of the sunset clouds and the light on the prairie like lakes of gold." He was to be a pastor and "he must see the beautiful along with the ugly burdens. He must sense the presence of God in every leaf and wild flower. It would help him in his work." (123) Emil was a poor student so he became a farmer. Therefore, some years later, Amalia began taking her grandson Joe into the woods to see the wild flowers. She taught him to love the trees and to see "the way God manifested Himself" in nature. (179) This too failed, but late in life she took her great-grandson Neal into the woods and taught him the names of the flowers and taught him to love nature. (212).

The modern women of this book were never likened to living nature. Most of them ignored nature and a few even actively disliked nature. (323) However, Amalia's hateful, urban granddaughter-in-law, who was lazy, neurotic, and greedy, was associated with dead flowers. (264) Matthias' granddaughter Hazel was a tom-boy who wanted to have an unconventional life as a: "champion swimmer – or a circus woman – or maybe fly a plane." (225) but in college she met and married Amalia's great-grandson Neal, thus healing, at least dynastically, the thwarted love of Amalia and Matthias.

Song of the Years (1938) has seven female and seven male pioneer protagonists who eventually were correctly paired, but after many ill adventures and near misses. The hero, Wayne Lockwood was one of the men who were associated with nature. He walked "steadily to the west in the light-footed rhythmic way of the prairie-wolf [or an] antelope." (3) He "like the prairie blossoms, the moon, and the stars, must follow some vagrant urge." (5) As he sang at his work in the fields "He could not know that his voice, carrying across the north prairie its unconscious longing, as the bittern calls for its mate, unaccountably stirred the pulses, and brought an unwanted mist of tears to the eyes of a young girl" who was to become, at last, his wife. (261) When Wayne was confused about what he should do, he felt that he had "become a tangled underbrush sort of mind, like those places in the timber where wild grape-vine and woodbine and sumac all twined together." (463)



The first time Wayne saw the heroine, Suzanne Martin, she wore a "gray print dress blowing like a huge puffball." (30) She and her sisters "flew about from one thing to another like the sound of wild grackles in the maples - chatter, chatter, chatter." (45 and 420) When Wayne looked at her he thought of flowers, but not a dainty flower like the windflower. " He couldn't think what" flower she would be. (347) He fell in love with her, and felt that "You're the girl carrying a candle for me to see by. You're the north star holding up the only light to guide me home." (365) When she was sad, the call of the mourning-dove "struck an answering chord in your breast; that long low mournful wail came from your own heart" (381) as if she herself were the bird. When she thought that Wayne was killed in the Battle of Atlanta she wept and "pounded upon God's breast [and after] her anger [was] gone, like a great summer storm that passes, sweeping the prairie land clean of dust and dirt and grime, but leaving it beaten,

too and very quiet." (401) It was winter, and in her despair she was "not really alive herself. Frozen, like the slough." (432)

Suzanne's sister Jeanie, in her wedding dress of yellow silk, was "like a stalk of lovely goldenrod", but her marriage was an unhappy one, and eventually "there was no semblance of the flower about her, unless one remembered how the drooping brown blossom looks when the frosts have blighted it." (476) The father and mother of the girls were people of powerful emotions "strong as a prairie fire" but in death "the smoldering embers turn to white ashes [and] scatter to the four winds of the past." (489) Thus, in this case, the immigrants of two generations, both men and women, were likened to nature, and loved nature, so that they felt some sadness that they had conquered nature (140). This book did not cover enough time to include flappers or other urban women.

The Lieutenant's Lady (1942) is a fictionalized biography based on an actual diary of a young woman who lived as an army wife in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Montana during the Indian Wars. Despite extreme hardships she and her husband were nature lovers who appreciated the bold scenery and the animal life even in the midst of danger. (133) They stood in awe at the first sight of the northern lights:

It was breath-taking. There in the sky above the musty old timbers of the stockade rose a great delicate arch of golden filigree like the altar of a cathedral, on which soft candles of mauve and blue and pink threw up their pale light.

They shared the "exhilarating uplift of the new Fall. Every yellowing leaf on every cottonwood in the timbered bottoms whirled in its own particular dervish dance." (217)

The young Lieutenant pledged his love to his fiancée: "Though the ice will separate us, the river always runs below. That is like my love for you" (38) but he did not liken his wife or any other woman to nature, nor did his wife feel that way about herself.

Uncle Henry, one of the elderly founders of Omaha, felt that all the young girls of his daughter's acquaintance were "pretty as pansies." (14) But these girls were born in the growing city and no one else in the novel likened the second generation of women to nature. He himself was so self-centered and domineering that "one might as well have tried to stop the Missouri's muddy flow as Uncle Henry." (253) This last novel only dealt with two generations, so we can see the progression to farming and city life, and the passing from pastoral to town life more rapidly than in her other novels.



Aldrich's substantial middle class home

In Conclusion

The pioneering passages in the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich contain the major elements that are required in a pastorate: the power of nature to form human personalities and to guide human fate; good people who love nature; evil or thoughtless people who hate or harm nature; the sympathy of nature for good people; and the death of good people who happily merge with nature. The good women of pastorate were always associated with nature, especially flowers. Women of later generations were not usually associated with nature except in the most passionate moments in their lives, both good and bad. Big city women were never said to be like nature, and small town women were rarely associated with nature, except in one novel that, uncharacteristically, used the Victorian "Language of Flowers". Thus, as people changed nature from a wild prairie, they changed themselves, because the farm environment caused different types of personalities to develop, and towns caused yet another set of people to occur. In this way, the novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich constitute an almost classical elegy on the loss of the wild prairie and a warning about how such changes in nature negatively affect people, especially women, and cultures in general.

It is likely that Aldrich would be called an essentialist by many modern feminists, in that she believed that there were fundamental moral imperatives that were built into the lives of women, particularly that women had a duty to themselves and to future generations to become wives and mothers.

There is no escaping from the conclusion that Aldrich was "an old fashion girl", as they would have said. She marked herself as such partly by invoking the language of flowers. When she published *Miss Bishop* in 1933, it is likely that there had not been a best selling novel emphasizing the language of flowers for a half century. This set of tropes was among the worst and most powerful aspects of the "feminine mystique" decried by modern feminists. It emphasized the feeling that women were delicate and helpless, like a cut flower in a vase, not like a wild flower in the forest. It could be interpreted that it meant that a women should not speak, but only indicate her feelings delicately by choosing and arranging flowers for the foyer of her gracious home.

On the other hand, the language of flowers is descended from the theory of signs: the notion that the parts of nature indicate by their outward appearance how people can use them. So, for example, it was sometimes believed that leaves with heart shaped leaves could be made into a tea that was beneficial to the heart. Both the language of flowers and the theory of signs are instances of nature as normative, and they are both derived from the trope of the book of nature that is at least as old as the story of the book of fate that Inanna the Sumerian love and fertility goddess stole from the scribe of the gods (c. 2000 BCE). Some modern ecofeminists and most modern deep ecologists agree that nature is normative, but they read different norms from those that Aldrich depicted in her novels. But right-wing politicians and anti-feminist religionists also use the book of nature to justify their beliefs that women are not capable of leadership in business or society, and that all women have a duty to become wives and mothers. Aldrich, who was also a successful business-woman, would have disagreed with the first premise, but she agreed with the second. This is another sign of her place in the transition from Victorian to modern female consciousness.



Aldrich later in life

Pastorale is another form that was going out of fashion just about the time Aldrich began to publish in 1895. The pre-Homeric pastorale always seems to have involved powerful women or goddesses, and even the effete Alexandrians and urban Romans imagined very capable young rural women as the heroines of their pastorales. The Renaissance pastorals of Italy, France, and England also featured very strong and sometimes cruel rural women. It was not out of character for Aldrich, who favored strong rural women, to preserve, even in this deep but subtle way, many of the features of pastorale in her novels. It seems to be Aldrich's contribution to employ pastoral conventions to deliver an old fashion moral in a new form as local color family sagas. The deep irony of her life and vision is that, with all the value she placed on nature, and its positive influence on people, especially women, it rarely occurred to her that people should preserve nature, or defend it in any way.

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