

1981

# The Influence of Women in Vardis Fisher's Western Literature

Sylvia L. Alderton

*Eastern Illinois University*

This research is a product of the graduate program in [English](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

---

## Recommended Citation

Alderton, Sylvia L., "The Influence of Women in Vardis Fisher's Western Literature" (1981). *Masters Theses*. 3008.  
<https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/3008>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact [tabruns@eiu.edu](mailto:tabruns@eiu.edu).

THESIS REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates who have written formal theses.

SUBJECT: Permission to reproduce theses.

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow theses to be copied.

Please sign one of the following statements:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

May 8, 1981

Date

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University not allow my thesis be reproduced because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Author

THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN

VARDIS FISHER'S WESTERN LITERATURE

(TITLE)

BY

SYLVIA L. ALDERTON

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1981

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

May 8, 1981  
DATE

8 May 1981  
DATE

THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN  
VARDIS FISHER'S WESTERN LITERATURE

BY

SYLVIA L. ALDERTON

B. A. IN ENGLISH, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, 1976

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters of Arts in English at the Graduate School  
of Eastern Illinois University

Charleston, Illinois

1981

404906

## ABSTRACT

### THE WOMEN IN VARDIS FISHER'S WESTERN LITERATURE

Vardis Fisher, a writer who wrote about the early west, uses his life experiences and extensive historical research as a basis for his western novels. With his background in the Antelope region and his historical research, Fisher presents both women in the Antelope hills and women in the hazardous far west surroundings. He instills in the reader a panoramic view of the pioneer women as they experience life in the old west.

The Antelope women are isolated in their environment with little social contact. They are effected physically, psychologically, and economically in this remote area. Most of the women overcome the obstacles of the environment and work physically to make economic progress to enable their children to experience a better life than they have known. Their greatest dilemma is the loneliness in their surroundings.

The far west women are effected physically, psychologically, and economically, but they suffer greater devastation than the Antelope women. They experience extensive journeys into the unknown and are confronted with many hazards. These women often experience the pain of death of loved ones and some are forced to animal-like existence to enable their family to survive.

Both the Antelope Hills and the far west women undergo unique changes with the majority attaining new levels of competence. The women endure in Antelope and the far west, but survival is more difficult in the far west. The women in both areas emerge as the bed-rock of the spirit of the old west.

## THE WOMEN IN VARDIS FISHER'S WESTERN LITERATURE

Vardis Fisher, a writer who wrote about the early west, is remembered as being a historical novelist, who used his life experiences and extensive research as a basis for his western novels.

From early childhood, he was influenced by dominant women as he witnessed the struggle of his English ancestry mother, Temperance Thornton Fisher. In her marriage to the rough and tough Joseph Fisher, she was confronted with abusive language from her mother-in-law while the entire family lived in Annis, Idaho. Her mother-in-law's vulgarity was in contrast to Temperance's conservative religious beliefs.

After their children were born, Joseph decided to move his family further down the Snake River into the unpopulated mountain region. Perhaps the move was seen as a chance to escape from the foul-mouthed mother-in-law, and this had a bearing on Temperance's consent to leave her comfortable home and expose herself and her children to the barren frontier. Joseph was an outdoorsman; he adapted well to the elements and felt comfortable away from civilization.

The Fishers had no concept of the difficult time ahead as they journeyed into the wilderness, but settling in the Antelope Hills region, they spent years struggling in an animal-like existence. The family's neighbors were the wild animals with the animals' skins serving as bedding for the family.

The most difficult adjustment for Vardis was the ever-present loneliness of the basin accompanied by a constant fear of death. Vardis existed in this environment for five years before he started to school.

During his elementary and high school years, he studied hard and took his frustrations out by writing plays. His desire for further

education was intense, and he continued his studies in college. During his early college career, Vardis married his childhood sweetheart Leona McMurtrey.

Vardis expected the same perfection from Leona as his mother had expected from him, but in her simple pagan way, Leona failed. In desperation, she escaped by committing suicide.

Fisher had unconsciously depended on Leona, and her death almost destroyed him. "For as he makes abundantly clear, it was his own failure to make sense of his life that led Leona to this step."<sup>1</sup> He pondered this tragedy and through his frustrations he recognized both his own inadequacies and his dependence on women. He tried to make sense of his life by choosing women protagonists in western environments as dominant characters in his novels.

His fascination with the courage of women extended to the far west environment where he obtained historical accounts of their existence, and from this information, he characterized their thoughts, actions, and conversations. These women, like the Antelope Hills women, were characterized as being removed from one environment to another to suffer economically, psychologically, and physically but to a greater extent.

With his background in Antelope and his extensive historical research, Fisher produced novels containing a panoramic view of the pioneer women from the mundane existence in Antelope to the dying women in the far west, thus instilling in the reader the "gut feeling" the women experienced in the environment of the old west.

Women in the Antelope Hills country are isolated in their environment with little social contact. Most of these women come from cities or more populated rural areas, but in Antelope, loneliness becomes a consuming part of life. Many of the women are affected psychologically by this mundane existence, but once they accept the environment and become determined to overcome the obstacles, the women become conscious of immediate goals. For most of the women, their goals are to provide a better future for their children than they are experiencing. The virgin territory offers many opportunities for economic gain which become evident as time passes and the women encourage each other to work physically to make the family farms paying propositions.

The women and their families in the Antelope Hills are subjected to a harsh environment, but the settlers traveling to the far west suffer a greater devastation. These far west settlers usually leave friends and relatives behind and after turning the majority of their possessions into cash and supplies, they embark on dangerous journeys into unknown territories unaware of new hazards.

Women traveling to the far west are affected psychologically as they see their property being lost to the cruel environment. The lack of knowledge of ways to cope with the hazards are of great concern and cause discouragement as the women begin to realize death of family members may be imminent.

In an effort to survive, many ration meager food supplies and become animal-like in the defense of their children. Others sacrifice their lives. Only a few are fortunate enough to be untouched by tragedy.



Both the Antelope Hills and the far west women undergo unique psychological and physical experiences with the majority attaining a new level of competence from their experiences. In most instances, the Antelope women endure in their mundane existence of day to day struggle for economic gain, but the far west women are usually forced to struggle for survival, which is a more difficult existence. From the lonely mundane life styles in Antelope to the survival struggles farther west, the women emerge as the bed-rock of the spirit of the old west.

Fisher captures the spirit of the women in his early novels centered in the Antelope Hills region of the country which was unsettled by white men. Most of the families moving into this area are from the surrounding territory and are leaving a better existence for a less desirable one.

In the novel, Toilers of the Hills, Opal Hunter is introduced as a main character exposed to the desolate Antelope Hill country. Since their marriage, Opal depends on her husband, Dock, as he makes decisions concerning the family. Dock moves his family to Antelope territory and becomes one of the first settlers. The loneliness of the environment does not affect Dock, who is busy building roughhewn buildings, working with his crops, and planning to be the best dry farmer in the Antelope region, but Opal is exposed to the reality of her surroundings and evaluates the day-to-day happenings.

"As Opal listened to him, she wondered if there was truth in what he said, and with new interest she awaited what the future held."<sup>2</sup>

The hope for something better sustains her as the spring rains come and melt her roof a little more and the mud comes pouring down on her floors. These rain storms drown her baby chicks, and Opal is forced to take care of her animals by wading in ankle-deep mud.

The environment affects Opal in various ways as the rains come. Her chicks are destroyed by the sweeping rains, and she depends on them for food and income. She is physically affected by the mud. During the rains and for days afterwards, there is no escape from the mud which is inside and outside.

Although the rains are dreadful, they are necessary but are soon gone. In their place comes the hot sun and drying winds. The once beautiful crops are devastated by their environment, and Opal loses her glimpse of hope.

During her first years in Antelope, Opal is without close neighbors, and her only contact with the outside world is Dock's news from his occasional visits to town and an occasional visit from Mary, a distant neighbor in Antelope. In order to adjust to this discouraging environment, she plays mental games, imagining what the people are like, such as the strange Susan Hemp whom Dock talks about. "Of her Opal tried to imagine the secret and the lonely ways, the silent vigils in long winters and the desolate emptiness of her house."<sup>3</sup> In so doing, Opal is comparing her own loneliness to that of Susan as each copes with her surroundings.

Opal finds comfort in her loneliness as she enjoys an occasional visit from Mary, her distant neighbor. Mary loves life, and her love

for the flowers and trees touches Opal. Mary's simplicity of weeding and touching the flowers is seen by Opal as being a mental escape from the environment. With Mary's help, Opal becomes aware of the various colors of the wild flowers as they carpet the ugliness of the hills with a delicate and beautiful disguise.

As time passes, Opal adapts to her environment through the interesting tales told by Dock of the new settlers in Antelope. She catches occasional glimpses of the strange and silent women, and Opal wonders about the loneliness in their lives. Opal is less aware of her plight in Antelope as she allows her mind to imagine how the other women are living, and also she enjoys the limited beauty of her existence.

Up to this point, Opal has allowed herself to accept her situation in life, but her attitude is reversed when her filthy and unmannered children join her in greeting a slick, handsome machine salesman who has come to call on Dock. She is made aware of their poverty as she observes the man staring in wonder at her and her eight unsightly children. His faint smile brings the shock of reality to Opal.

She realizes that at one time she was a lovely lady. "Before she came to this wretched place she had been as fresh and lovely as women anywhere and her clothes had been beautiful and clean and sweet to smell."<sup>4</sup> Antelope has taken its toll on her entire being.

By using Opal, Fisher seems to be describing his own mother who experienced life in this backwoods environment. Although she had been a fresh and lovely lady in her youth, she became an unkempt creature in an untamed environment, much like Opal.

As Opal attempts to resolve her life's problems psychologically by taking time to recover from her shock of realization, she remembers her glimmer of hope that Dock will be a successful farmer. She walks to the fields to see the crops. She sees the prospect of a bountiful harvest which makes her feel proud of Dock's accomplishments but is still resentful of her condition and that of her children. The salesman's visit makes her aware of her needs, and the prospective crop is seen as a means to meet those needs.

When Dock drives into the yard in a used Ford, he loses Opal's respect because of his lack of responsibility and concern for his family. With his childlike sense of responsibility, he had not considered the needs of the family. Opal considers it from a responsible point of view, and she realizes the crop money needs to provide for their basic needs. She has matured to the point of accepting her environment in Antelope, but she also realizes she must first have the basics in order to improve her family's future.

Opal's mundane existence is similar to Lela Bridwell's, the leading woman protagonist in Dark Bridwell. Lela is also an early settler in Antelope, and both women experience extreme loneliness while struggling to raise their families in this primitive environment.

Lela reacts to her loneliness by withdrawing into silence. Her husband, Charley, a boisterous and uneducated man, believes he is helping by taking her to the Antelope Hills country to protect her from the sins of the town. In this place, she is subjected to Charley's philosophizing as he isolates himself and his family from the rest of the world. It soon becomes evident to Lela that the good life Charley is seeking

includes living off the land and taking advantage of his neighbors. Although he treats Lela with great tenderness, his actions are entirely different toward other people. Charley is unpopular with his neighbors because he takes advantage of them, but a greater problem arises when he abuses the neighborhood children with his pranks.

In her environment, Lela becomes aware of the streak of cruelty in Charley's personality. His insensitivity toward others deepens as time passes. He also beats his own boys and causes his oldest son, Jed, to become the meanest kid in Antelope. Lela suffers as she watches Charley's mistreating both the neighbor children and his own sons. She is aware of the hate that Jed harbors for his father.

Lela becomes more disturbed as she recognizes Charley's laziness and dishonesty, and she is less impressed with Charley's tenderness toward her. He does not buy his own machinery but, instead, borrows from his neighbors. If the machinery breaks down, he leaves it where it breaks. He makes no attempt to repair it or pay for the repair. On one occasion, the family is without meat, but suddenly there is enough for the entire winter. At the same time, a close neighbor is without meat because his supply has been stolen. The knowledge of these negative activities causes Lela to become so disturbed that the neighbors think she has lost her mind. In her depressed and withdrawn condition, Lela observes her neighbor as she hustles in a flurry of activity.

To abate her loneliness, she is drawn to her active neighbor, Prudence Hunter, who gives her confidence in herself. Up to this point in her life, Lela has experienced a constant deterioration of will and self respect, but as Charley begins diminishing in her eyes, Prudence

helps Lela. Prudence works from morning until night making cheese, raising chickens, and peddling vegetables to earn money to educate her children, and she encourages Lela to seek this type of economic opportunity in her environment and offers to help Prudence market her products.

From her conversation with Prudence, Lela gains courage. She faces Charley, accusing him openly of driving the boys from home and having his way in all of the family's decisions with the result being that the family has less than when they came to Antelope. Lela tells him that the family will do things her way from now on, and she will work to make the farm a paying proposition.

After her encounter with Charley, Lela is psychologically affected as she mentally reviews her idle years in Antelope. She sees Prudence and Joe labor together clearing land to raise crops and livestock. They plant, harvest, and, piece by piece, they acquire new machinery and add dollars to their dream for a better life for their children.

During these years, Lela and Charley borrow machinery, clothing, and food. They exist in an environment of idleness and waste by not working for maximum economic gain during these years in this area of opportunity. As Lela analyzes these years, she hates Charley for these lost years, but she loves him for the beliefs that he has and the tenderness he has shown toward her.

To insure the future, Lela decides she must take a firm stand and work physically with or without Charley. To do this she commits herself to this venture which causes her to become known as the silent woman. This determination begets a stoical attitude within her towards life.

Lela suffers additional humiliation and hurt when their daughter becomes pregnant by one of the young men Charley has abused in previous years. His negative actions continue to haunt the family as Jed, their oldest son, returns home to take revenge on Charley for childhood beatings. They fight to a point where Charley would have killed Jed had the family not clubbed him. As a result the family, led by Lela, prepares to leave Antelope after digging up their buried jar of savings.

Lela's decision to leave Antelope is the final devastation for Charley. Her ambition has given new life to her and her children but at the same time has destroyed Charley, and he rejects his young son's offer to accompany the family.

She is bitter about her life in Antelope and lashes out by totally rejecting the environment, which includes Charley. As head of the family, she hopes to improve their chances by looking for something better for her confused children. Without the unpredictable husband who had cherished her and shared his life with her for so many years, Lela experiences a hollow victory.

In the Antelope Hills, Lela is subjected to loneliness, a feeling of inadequacy of herself as a person, plus the negative circumstances of the environment, and as a result, she suffers the loss of part of her family.

Another woman to experience this type of life in Antelope is Prudence Hunter, Lela's neighbor who appears in Fisher's autobiographical tetralogy, but is most prominent in Dark Bridwell and In Tragic Life. She is subjected to the loneliness and ignorance of Antelope prior to becoming acquainted with Lela. Unlike Opal and

Lela, Prudence is presented as a disciplined and religious woman. She teaches her children that women, unless corrupted by men, are noble and virtuous and plants a strong guilt complex in them at an early age, and she insists that her sons must respect the women's position in society.

In Fisher's description of the life and circumstances of Prudence Hunter, detailed parallels can be drawn with Fisher's own mother's character and her position in the Fisher household in Antelope as she influences her son's intellectual and moral codes.

As Prudence continues to be frustrated in her primitive environment, she becomes more determined to educate her children. From her frustrations she unconsciously promotes her children's education as an escape from a part of her being. She also stretches the truth by exaggerating the intelligence of her children to her new acquaintances.

All of these efforts seem to help Prudence psychologically, but as time passes, she becomes more of an introvert. Her husband, Joe, battles with the environment to make it productive while Prudence complains to him about their condition of which he is acutely aware. To vent his frustrations, he has bursts of anger during which he mistreats his animals. Their son's first pony is impaled and gutted by Joe's lack of patience, and a second pony is stabbed numerous times with a pitchfork. These scenes of violence awaken Prudence to the realization that she must influence her family in a more positive manner.

Her Mormon background causes Prudence to be extremely sensitive when her neighbor, Charley Bridwell, teases her son, Vridar. Charley discovers Vridar asleep on his belly and proceeds to embarrass Lela,



Vridar, and Prudence. "He was awakened by a tickling on a white patch of rump that shone through his ragged trousers. For a moment he did not understand. Then there burst into his mind and over him like a hot wave of full realization of what the tickling had meant. He sprang up, burning with shame, and faced Charley Bridwell. Beyond Charley stood his parents and Lela. His mother was grinning but her face and throat were red."<sup>5</sup> Prudence is acutely embarrassed when any mention is made of the nude human body.

Shaken by the violent and embarrassing scenes, Prudence becomes angry with her life in Antelope and becomes verbal about their condition and reminds Joe of his poor management. Like Lela, she tells him that she will work physically to make the farm a paying proposition and from the profits the children will be educated. She is so emphatic that Joe is amazed, but he submits to her wishes.

Prudence becomes a slave to her work as she begins making butter and cheese to sell in the valley while she peddles eggs. Her work is contagious and soon Joe begins working long hours clearing more land to earn extra dollars. He patches up an old ferryboat and starts a sawmill to sell lumber in the area at bargain prices. This additional business causes Prudence to spend time running the ferry boat back and forth from the lumber mill to transport lumber to customers. She returns from these trips sweating and exhausted but takes up new unfinished tasks with a vengeance. Her strength comes from the vision of her children living good lives away from the slavery and stench of a place like Antelope.

Her first step toward the achievement of her goal occurs when she sends her sons to a one-room school building containing eight grades.

At this point in her life, she begins to recognize the Antelope country as both a haunted place but also a beautiful place. Like Opal Hunter and her friend Mary, Prudence begins recognizing the beauty of the flowers, trees, and the terrain as she enjoys the beauty and enchantment of the sunsets and the sounds of the birds. She develops an inner peace as she accepts her life in this place.

Prudence is happy when the spring comes, bringing the boys home from school. During this visit she conveys a warmth to them, but her son, Vridar, observes his mother as a victim of her environment. "She seemed to have aged, she seemed to have gathered part of the white winter, since he last saw her, seven months ago. There was a stubborn droop round her mouth, there was sadness in her eyes. Vridar glanced only once at her hands; for these, once lovely, were now horny and gnarled. They were hands that gripped the axe, molded cheese, squeezed the teats of cows: feeling nothing, year after year, but the hard surface of work. He saw that her shoes were rags of leather, her stockings full of holes, her dress stained with chicken filth. And yet, this was the proud woman who loved, above all else, a clean house and clean things and a fragrant way of life."<sup>6</sup>

Psychologically Prudence conquers her environment, and the concessions she makes are the sacrifices of her physical appearance and extremely conservative religious views. Her values are modified to make her surroundings acceptable for her.

Her physical appearance is that of a person in extreme poverty. The unkempt condition of her hands is a yielding of self by her in order to gain economically. There are the additional changes, observed by Vridar, when he discovers her unkempt house and her unsightly clothing.

The sacrifices that Prudence makes enable her children to become educated and the farm to become a paying proposition. The beauty of the environment and her economic gain for her family are rewarding to her in her mundane existence in Antelope, and Prudence experiences peace.

For others in the Antelope Hills environment, there seems to be no need to escape. Neola Dolle, another woman protagonist in the tetralogy, but most prominent in Passions Spin the Plot and We Are Betrayed, later marries Vridar Hunter. Neola, a second generation in Antelope, grows up in these conditions. She is a pagan type individual and accepts the simple life. Neola is uninterested in improving the intellectual condition or her life style. She meets Vridar in grade school and dates him occasionally throughout high school although his erratic behavior is confusing to her. Neola's pleasing personality and lack of motivation places her and Vridar in different world; therefore, she makes no effort to encourage him in a romantic relationship but instead dates young men whose values are similar to her own.

After high school, Neola works in a local restaurant, and Vridar goes away to college. Through his family, he learns of Neola's activities with other men in the community but is determined she will be his wife.

Although Neola is less educated, she recognizes Vridar's jealousy and the ambition she has for her life. After receiving a letter from Vridar which warns her against dating other men, she answers his note.

"Dear Friend: If you don't like my gait (gate) don't swing on it. Neola Dolle."<sup>7</sup>

Throughout their romance Neola is told by Vridar of his love and need for her. After their marriage, Neola is disturbed by her husband's

inconsistent treatment of her. His irrational behavior stems from his desire to make Neola religious and educated, and his schooling takes them away from Antelope.

Psychologically it appears that Neola is more able to deal with the problems of their relationship than her husband, but as time passes, Vridar continues to try to mold his wife into something different. She begins feeling like a failure and reacts by following her husband's desires by returning to classes in an attempt to please him.

During this time, Neola tries to study but is uninterested and becomes more disturbed and unhappy. Vridar is aware of her inability to adjust to the academic world. When both Prudence and Vridar have dreams which indicate the future destruction of Neola, he is visibly shaken. He tells her about the dreams and observes a strange and knowing look in her eyes.

Neola continues to be disturbed by Vridar's distrust of her, and she endures his fits of jealousy when he sets up situations with men teachers and dance partners to emphasize his distrust of her. He becomes more aware of her beauty and has a great admiration of her cloke of black hair. "Her red lips smiled and showed her perfect teeth. She wore dark red and the color was part of her, like that in her cheeks; and it set off the dazzling luster of her eyes and hair . . . Vridar observed, too, that women looked at her, but not in the way of men."<sup>8</sup> This realization by Vridar promotes his insecurity and makes her existence more wretched.

Unlike her mother-in-law Prudence, Neola is not ashamed of her physical body. She has been accepted in her Antelope environment by

most of the rural people as an attractive and personable young woman. Her desire to be a woman, wife, and mother are her main goals in life, but each time she becomes pregnant, she is forced to contend with Vridar's outbursts and accusations which are unfounded and detrimental to Neola. While Vridar is away in the war, Neola returns to Antelope to work and earn money to support herself and the children. During this period of time, she stays with Vridar's parents in an environment of tension. Neola is aware of Prudence's disapproval of her, but she finds peace in her friend, Joe's, presence.

Neola realizes that Vridar spends much of his time with other women and that he is trying to create a permanent split with her. As he writes about his various relationships with women, Neola smiles. When he occasionally returns to Antelope, between the war and further educational endeavors, he confronts Neola with his confessions, and she smiles. He becomes more frustrated and suspicious of her real feelings, but he is unable to determine her motives. As Neola remains in Antelope, her letters are studied by Vridar as he tries to determine which messages are from her heart.

Neola encounters further humiliation as she becomes aware of Prudence's spying on her and reporting unfounded gossip to Vridar. Because of their different philosophies of life, Neola is in continual conflict with Prudence, and she makes admissions to Vridar in her letters that she has been so hurt by the accusations that she has contemplated suicide.

Neola continues to feel that she is a heavy chain around Vridar's neck as they return to the city for Vridar to complete his education.

After failing academically, Neola tries to please Vridar by escaping to the simple things of life. He recognizes her enjoyment of empty talk and nice clothes, but he is more concerned in her becoming educated to meet his standards.

After meeting with Vridar's rejection, Neola becomes so disturbed with her inability to please him that she takes the fatal step. In disbelief, Vridar comes to view her body. "Her eyes were closed. There was a smile on her white face and it was the smile that he had known and loved; and there was brown stain on her lips, her chin; but he did not see the stain."<sup>9</sup>

Although she is dead, her body retains a smile. It is the same smile she used in life to escape from the hostility of her surroundings. Products of the Antelope Hills environment in their hostile condition are responsible for Neola's death. Her family accepts the simple life, and she is a part of this type of life style. Her husband's family is in conflict with their mundane existence and it causes instability among the family members. Neola had been comfortable in the environment of living and enjoying the simple life, but her husband is nurtured on a devastating journey into a complicated life of expected achievement. In spite of his ambitions, he is also attracted to the pagan side of Neola's personality. If she had remained in Antelope and rejected Vridar, the environment would have affected her positively and neither Vridar nor Neola would have suffered the consequences of their stormy relationship.

Another young woman growing up in Antelope in the same generation with Neola is affected by the quiet uneventful environment. Unlike Neola's reaction, June Wegg, in April, manages to develop her mind and

imagine herself as an entirely different person in order to escape from the mundane existence. She becomes April, an attractive young lady who is ambitious and preparing to leave Antelope and escape to the city where excitement and opportunity abound.

Her home environment is comfortable and meets her physical needs, but her physical appearance is discouraging. June is a plain girl who is short and dumpy and may be thought of as a perfect bastion of homeliness. Her one redeeming feature is a nice smile.

June's life in Antelope is lonely with her one male companion being Sol Incham who is considered to be the homeliest man in Antelope. Sol is much older than June. She is aware that the people of Antelope expect them to marry, and this expectation causes June to feel trapped in her isolated environment.

She realizes that her mother, Kitty, is extremely unhappy in Antelope and that her mother's unusual behavior is causing June to be unsure of her own future. Kitty is described as appearing like a fat cat curled up in a bed reading love stories, crying, screaming, and trying to escape from her environment just as the characters in her books. Kitty makes life miserable for her husband and family members and gains no insight into the proper treatment of a husband from all of her reading.

June condemns Kitty for her inability to cope with her environment and her attempt to escape from reality by submerging herself in the cheap novels. Kitty responds by crying, beating her head into her pillow, and clawing at her face as she blames her husband for her misery.

To escape from the negative effects of her mother, June leaves the house and walks in the woods and feels at home in her remote existence.

Being poetic by nature, she seeks out the beauty of the mountains, clouds, sunsets, and the countryside which she loves.

June imagines herself as Miss April, to escape from the boredom of her life, but suddenly realizes Willie, a neighbor boy, is coming toward her. She runs from him leading him further into the woods, and he accuses her of trying to seduce him. They have a verbal battle, and he tells her she is the homeliest girl he has ever seen and leaves her in the woods.

After this encounter, June returns, from being April, to reality and considers a life for herself in the Antelope country. The women have babies, hardships, and their lives are ugliness. She shares her thoughts with Sol and tells him she wants to be like the April side of her personality and have wild fulfillment in her life.

Sol does not seem disturbed with her convictions, so June visits a friend of hers, Susan Hemp, who lives in the mountains, as she is seeking answers for her life. Susan is a strange old maid. June has heard many stories about Susan's unusual life style. As they talk about their lives in Antelope, June is brought to the realization that she has competition for Sol. Shaken by Susan's confession, June returns home to evaluate her life.

As April, June tries to find a place in Antelope, and she attends a dance to observe the activities from the sidelines. A handsome, devilish man in his thirties, Bill Dugan, tries to seduce her but to his amazement, she rejects him. He is embarrassed by her rejection and makes comments about her parents and her relationship with Sol. He suggests that she should marry Sol because he is crazy about her. His loud comments cause her to receive curious and pitying glances from the bystanders.



Infuriated by her encounter with Bill, she starts her five mile walk home. A last chance for excitement occurs when Jack Swensen drives past and offers to drive her home. She makes a final attempt to find excitement by accusing him of trying to seduce her, and he promptly stops the car and makes her get out and walk home.

Discarding her pretense of being April, June walks to a grove of trees, thinks about her evening, and her life in Antelope. "With a cry that was both laughter and pain she flung herself upon the earth and shuddered and wept."<sup>10</sup>

Although June is comic in character, she presents the pulse of Antelope in her encounters with the young men, and, psychologically, she is gaining knowledge of the Antelope Hills society outside of the confines of her home. During this time in her life, Sol had been absent from her home for several weeks, and the June part of her character notices the absence.

As time passes, once again Sol is seen coming down the road, and June becomes defensive and greets him as Miss April. She converses with him in an aloof manner while packing a picnic lunch. They stroll into the woods and prepare to eat their picnic lunch. During their conversation, which is dominated by June, she expresses to Sol her wants and desires for her life.

June wants to be Miss April and have an exciting and fulfilling relationship which would have to be accomplished someplace other than Antelope Hills. Here in Antelope there is the process of getting married and having a baby. The man works harder, and she has another

baby, and then he has to work harder than ever. He begins to age, and he has to mortgage the farm, and then they continue to have more babies. On occasion they go to a dance, and he dances with the young girls and she holds the babies. As time passes, he gets further into debt and turns to whiskey. He cannot pay the taxes on his farm, and she becomes a shapeless hunk. In this depressing environment, they begin hating each other, and they quarrel with each other and gossip about their neighbors. By this time they have innumerable progeny, and there is no longer any warmth or affection in their environment.

Her negative views of life in Antelope so overwhelm Sol that he grabs her, kisses her savagely, and leaves. June is completely surprised by Sol's reactions, and in the weeks that follow, she contemplates her existence in this place. Sol's visits have stopped again and as she grows more lonely, she decides to leave Antelope Hills. As she is walking away from her home, as April, she passes Sol's cabin and feels an obligation to be June long enough to say goodbye.

Much to her surprise, her heart pounds in anticipation, and her view of the inside of the cabin becomes misty. Sol is away, and she decides to leave a note, but realizing the unkempt condition of the cabin, she decides to clean it for him before leaving. When she is through, she writes a note and pins it to his tablecloth, but then decides to cook his meal before leaving. After preparing the meal, she decides to stay and eat with him, and as he enters the cabin and admires her work, April disappears from June's personality, and she becomes plain June Wegg.

June discovers the thrill of seeing the admiration in Sol's face and the love he has for her. She did not realize before that this feeling of love existed between them, but she trusts now that it does and decides to share her life with Sol in Antelope.

Psychologically June accepts her future role in the Antelope environment where she will reside with Sol in the tiny cabin. She is confident that her physical and economic needs will be met and that she will psychologically accept her environment in Antelope. Her dependence on Sol enables her to find her niche in Antelope as she becomes subservient to her surroundings.

As Fisher portrays the women in the Antelope Hills novels, they are exposed to a lonely life of hard work. They are affected psychologically by their environment but most of them adjust. In spite of the hardships in the dull existence, most have the basic physical needs of life.

From his historical research, Fisher concludes through his novels that the far west women experienced greater hardships than the Antelope settlers and on many occasions their basic needs were not met. The frontier women traveling to the far west are exposed to new and devastating circumstances. The vastness of the west is overwhelming, and the leaders lack leadership qualities, thus creating danger for the travelers. Unlike the Antelope settlers who have come from surrounding areas, the far west families travel great distances. These families invest their savings in food, supplies, tools, wagons, horses, livestock, and other items which are needed to sustain them through their trip and after they arrive at their destination. In most instances, they are exposed to the elements with little protection as they travel, and some lose family members before arriving at their destination.

The Mormon's, led by Brigham Young, are an example of far west travelers. They encounter additional problems because of their life style and religious beliefs. The Mormon's have large families and the inhabitants of the areas where they attempt to settle are fearful of their way of life. The harsh treatment that they encounter forces them to keep moving further west until they eventually settle in Salt Lake City.

During their journey, many have family and friends murdered by unfriendly citizens along the way, with the criminals going unpunished. The Mormon women encounter the elements, total domination by the men, and seem to accept being subservient to their husbands and their desires.

Harriet Amelia Folsom, the leading woman in Children of God, is an exception and is the first woman in this wagon train to free herself from being completely dominated by men. An important difference between the Antelope residents and the Mormons is that the latter men provide for the women both economically and physically and expect, in return, that the women will be good mothers to their children.

In the environment of Salt Lake city, Amelia is a young lady living with her parents and is quite content with her existence. She is a conservative and beautiful young woman. Unlike the majority of Mormon women, Amelia has definite convictions about the direction of her life.

She has been provided for physically and economically; therefore, her needs are few. In her environment, she respects the leadership of Brigham Young, but it is also evident that she is somewhat cynical concerning the existence of multiple wives in the various family groups.

When Harriet becomes aware of Brigham's interest in her becoming another one of his wives, she is resentful. Unlike the other women in

his life, she is reluctant to be swept off of her feet by this sainted leader. Brigham is persistent in his courtship and continues telling her of his love for her. In his frustration and her rejection, he advises her of her duty to pray to God for a decision to marry him. Psychologically, Amelia is resentful and advises him, "In such matters, I consult my heart and not God."<sup>11</sup>

As the days of their courtship progress, it becomes evident that Amelia is a strong-willed person. She ponders a future with Brigham and is determined the arrangement will provide a positive future which is unlike most of the multiple marriages she has witnessed in the Mormon settlement. In her terms, she demands a house away from his other wives and the privilege of choosing her own friends. She insists on accompanying him in public to visit the settlements and appearing with him in public at his right side. Amelia requires that he call her "Amelia" and provide her with nice clothes and allow her to sit at the head of the table by him. Brigham surprises the entire community when he submits to her wishes.

Amelia's influence on her husband makes a significant impression on the people in the settlement. Amelia is recognized as more than a baby factory in her environment. There are numerous feelings in the settlement that are aroused against Amelia because of this unusual arrangement. The wives are envious of her position in the family and jealous of her nice clothes and private house. The men are outraged by Brigham's example that he is setting by yielding to Amelia's wishes.

Prior to his encounter with Amelia, Brigham takes any woman for his wife whom he desires. His leadership causes the women to be

subservient to his wishes. In her desire to be equal, Amelia presents herself as a new challenge for Brigham as she becomes his wife after he meets her terms.

Many of the men in the community consider Brigham as weak and being replaced by a woman; however, in the areas where he lacked leadership and decision ability, Amelia complements and supports him. In his declining years, Amelia travels to the various settlements with Brigham advising and supporting him. In some respects he has diminished in his position as leader of the Mormon community. His marriage creates jealousy among his wives, and he loses the respect of some of his followers.

In her environment, she has forced her husband to relinquish some of his authority and position. By her support of his position and his fulfilled relationship with her, he remains in his leadership position for a longer period of time than would have been possible without her.

In the far west, Amelia is unique, particularly in a Mormon settlement. She is not subjected to the hard work and large families of the other women, but instead she is an example of the far west woman who liberates herself and proves to her society and environment that she is more than common. She is equal to her man.

Most of the far west women do not have the opportunity to prove themselves as being above the ordinary as Amelia had done. Many of the women were concerned with the first law of survival and concerned themselves with their fellow travelers and their families.

In Fisher's novel, The Mothers, one of the less fortunate emigrant trains heading west contained several families who had been traveling

westward without leadership since they had left the banks of the Missouri river. They had endured many hardships. Some had lost their animals and many of their possessions in the Utah salt flats, but they were still determined to push on toward California. Quarrels, tempers, and fears ruled the people as they battled time and delays in a race against the oncoming winter.

The party has difficulty in deciding which route they should take after stopping off at Fort Bridger. In their desire to reach California, some decide to take a short cut. This short cut takes a month, and during this time one man perished while they traveled fifty miles.

It is now September, and in this new region of the country the settlers rely on prior traveling information. They were told that the sierra snows began to fall in late November, and there is still a distance of six hundred miles to travel; however, they are suddenly aware from the low hanging clouds that snow is already falling in the mountains.

The word "snow" travels through the camp, psychologically affecting the women and their families as they discuss the available routes to California. Stanton meets with the group, and they decide that Mac and he will go for help as Tamsen Donner, a tiny spirited woman, who is always smiling, cheerfully prepares rations for their journey. After they leave, there is a silence among the people as they break camp to continue their journey.

In their haste, many of the families make the mistake of throwing away necessary water containers. As they approach the pass, it is evident that there are three or four feet of snow blocking their path. At the summit they can see the tops of the pine trees protruding from the snow. Realizing their position, the people pin their hope on the return

of Stanton and Mac.

All of the families are nervous, and during a quarrel, Margaret Reed's husband stabs a man named Snyder, killing him in self defense. As the group becomes more verbal, they decide to hang Jim Reed but finally decide to banish him and his family from the camp.

Because of the conflicts, many of the families begin traveling separately and taking different directions. The Donners go ahead of all of the families and some suspect they have turned back with Stanton and Mac.

Tamsen Donner remains cheerful in spite of their shortage of food, and each day she sees their animals grow weaker. Being an educated woman, she has acquired many books, but she begins throwing them away in order to lighten the load for the animals. She is discouraged when most of their animals are killed or taken in an Indian raid, but her spirits are lifted when Stanton returns with a small amount of supplies for the families. Tamsen takes their share and hides it in their wagon to ration to the family.

When part of the families and the Donners arrive at Alder Creek, Tamsen's husband receives a bad injury to his hand while he is fixing an axle. Shortly afterwards, the snows come and Tamsen instructs the people to help her build brush lean-tos to protect them from the driving snow storms.

Tamsen exhibits great courage as she looks after her ill husband and she keeps everyone in a positive frame of mind. Being interested in flora, she searches around the lake from morning until night and obtains different types of growing edible vegetation for food for her family and others in the camp. The Donners are people with wealth and position,



and they are bringing gold with them on this westward journey. In this harsh environment, Tamsen makes a remarkable adjustment to her surroundings and because of her ability to adapt she is able to encourage the others to survive this ordeal.

To relieve her mind, she paints and sees the snow-covered mountains as beautiful and not as the deadly trap they are becoming. She denies food for herself to feed her husband and her children. Tamsen makes the children conserve their energy by spending most of their time in the brush lean-tos but makes sure they go out into the fresh air each day. She is a great-hearted woman, and she smiles and encourages the children to tease each other and laugh to keep their spirits high while their stomachs are empty.

As time passes, Tamsen watches George grow weaker. The cold becomes more intense and the numerous storms pile snow higher, but she continues to be cheerful. After weeks of isolation a rescue party makes its way through the deep snow in the direction of Alder Creek. Tamsen is first to see the men approaching and goes to meet them.

Because of her resourcefulness, she has kept the people in her camp alive by cutting their rations and using everything edible for food. The rescue party finds she has cooked water plants, charred bones, boiled hide, mice, one rat, and one squirrel. Her unusual intelligence, endurance, and attitude are contributors to the camp's survival. Her encouragement made the children laugh and tease each other bringing mirth into the scene of gloom.

After receiving supplies, the older and stronger people in her camp leave with the men in an attempt to get through the pass and on to Sutter's

Fort. Tamsen's husband, George, is dying, and being a faithful wife, she remains behind and rations the new issue of food to the remaining people.

To encourage herself psychologically, Tamsen continues to paint the scenery. To the others, the snow and the rugged mountains are a representation of death, but to Tamsen, they are wonders of nature, and she seeks their beauty in her canvas. After each period of painting, she shows her canvas to her husband and the others in her camp.

Being a small woman, Tamsen has remained about the same physically during her stay at Alder Creek, but she is mentally disturbed as she realizes she must find a way to get her two small children out of the camp and back to the fort. After the men leave Tamsen's camp, she returns to the routine of survival. Food becomes more scarce and the people grow weaker and some die. To keep the people alive she resorts to feeding them small pieces of flesh from the dead bodies in the camp.

Tamsen is bothered mentally by this diet but is more concerned about the survival of her two daughters in the camp. She devises a plan to pay two men named Stone and Cady to take her little girls out to the fort for a price. She pays them \$500.00 of her gold, and they take the girls to the other camp and abandon them. After they are gone, Tamsen discovers from a man named Clark that Stone and Cady are crooks and have taken the money but have no intention of taking the girls to the fort.

Tamsen becomes alarmed about the safety of her girls and wades through the deep snow to the lake camp. Finding them safe and ready to

leave with a rescue party, she ignores the pleas to give up returning to Alder Creek and accompany the rescue party out of the pass.

As she starts back to her camp, she becomes so weak that she walks and crawls through the deep snow. As she arrives, she finds the camp has been looted and George is under the litter caused by the searching. She does not know if the money is gone nor does she care.

Tamsen is physically exhausted, and to keep from freezing she crawls into bed with her husband whose heart is faintly beating. For twelve more days she remains, and at last, she knows he is dead. Wrapping him in a clean sheet she leaves him on his bed of pine boughs. She prays, kisses his cold forehead, and prepares to leave the camp.

This courageous woman, however, has waited too long to start her journey from Alder Creek. "A faithful wife, she believed, remained with her husband no matter what the cost; and she remained."<sup>12</sup> Tamsen is driven by the thought of her children at the far end, and she staggers and crawls toward the lake camp. As she arrives, she collapses and, unable to move, falls into a deep sleep, and by morning she is dead.

The far west environment claimed the life of Tamsen Donner and many of her loved ones and acquaintances. Her daughters survived because of the resourcefulness and attitude of their mother. Her courage surpassed those in her camp, making her an outstanding heroine.

A short distance away at the lake camp, Peggy Breen is also courageous as she faces similar circumstances in her ordeal of survival for herself and her family members. As they had crossed the Sink, she had filled their water casks and insisted the family drink their fill of the foul water. She immediately rationed their water and food supplies

and was reluctant to share beyond her family.

After short rest periods the Breens continue their journey with some of the other families toward the pass, and the snow continues falling. Because of the hazardous situation, and the families being suspicious of each other, they travel at a distance from each other until the snow becomes so deep they can go no further. For protection from the driving snow and cold, they build tiny cabins. The deep snow claims their animals as they are struggling and dying in its depths.

Peggy is aware of their critical situation and faces the reality of their chances of survival. Her husband, Pat, complains of being sick, so Peggy takes her sons with ax, knives, and basin to slaughter an ox. In her desire for the family to survive this ordeal, Peggy is determined to salvage this source of food. "She raised the ax and with all her strength fetched the head of it down on the beast's skull. There was a dull thud and the skull sank a little. She took a knife and cut the animal's throat."<sup>13</sup>

It is doubtful that Peggy had this much courage prior to her arrival in this environment, but as she takes the first step to aid her family in surviving, the entire camp becomes interested in her butchered ox. She promises her dog a large bone and the intestines of the animal. She assures the people that her family will use the rest. She decides to continue butchering as many of the animals as her family will need for meat. At first she had planned to keep all of the meat but having a soft spot in her heart for children, she decides to sell the rest to the other families.

As the snow continues to fall, Peggy sees the men sawing and carrying wood for the fires and by the second day she is helping. The depths of the snow reach fourteen feet when it finally subsides, having covered the remaining animals so they cannot be found.

Peggy's kindness extends to Mr. Baylis, a traveler who became critically ill during the storm. She allows him to remain in her cabin, but in spite of her help, he dies. The news of his death makes Peggy more fearful, and she becomes more animal-like in her protection of the family's food and water supplies. She had been somewhat generous with her food prior to his death, but now she chased people from her door. Peggy is a devoted and protective mother. "Her eyes were full of her children."<sup>14</sup> Her total existence is directed toward the survival of her children. A rescue party had left earlier to go for help and Peggy and her family are hopeful they will return shortly.

Peggy's personality is a composite of the American frontier woman. She is hard, cunning, and a realist. She calculates their chances, and her goal is to save all seven of her children. She is hopeful that the party will arrive in time to lead them to Sutter's Fort and that the entire family will survive.

As the critical days pass, Peggy is aware that others attempt to leave the camp but because of the deep snow are forced to turn back which leaves them in worse condition than before. Peggy helps Virginia Reed, a young girl who tries to get through the pass with her mother. Virginia's legs are stiff and frostbitten and the Reed family is without food. When Virginia's mother demands help from Peggy, she reluc-

tantly welcomes them but at once centers her concern on Virginia.

Peggy is aware of Virginia's critical condition and secretly feeds her extra food. "Day after day, until Virginia was strong enough to sit up, Peggy fed her sugar and flour. Nobody but Virginia knew it. Margaret Reed did not know that this bighearted Irishwoman had saved her daughter's life."<sup>15</sup>

In the stench of the Breen cabin, Peggy continues to be the boss. Two of her children keep the fire burning, and the rest stay in bed to conserve their energy. Peggy looks at the winter from the beginning, and, as a wise mother, rations her food supplies and prepares herself to face it for its duration. As she realizes the family dog is starving to death, she kills it and keeps the meat for a few more days of food.

As the long days pass, she gives the best food to both her children and the Reed children while her personal diet consists of glue and bones. Psychologically she feels defeat because of the dwindling food supplies and additional deaths that continue to occur in the camp. She becomes fearful that the party will never return to rescue them. As the days pass, the Breens and the Reed children stay in bed, and no one moves.

The people in the cabin are aroused from sinking into death by seven men who have bucked the snow. These men bring a small supply of rations to the few in the camp that are still alive.

Peggy and the ones in her cabin, appearing as skeletons with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, totter out of the cabin while the men, horrified by the smell, are overwhelmed with amazement and pity. "They looked in turn from face to face, doubting their senses, and wondering if these persons were alive or only ghosts."<sup>16</sup> Overcome

with emotion, Peggy weeps and tells the men that they have existed on boiled hide during the last few weeks.

Peggy's determination causes the people in her cabin to survive. Her authority in the critical situation of survival exposes her as a courageous frontier woman conquering the treacherous environment of the far west.

Another frontier woman to be devastated by the environment of the far west, is Kate Bowen a main character in Mountain Man. Like Amelia, Tamsen, and Peggy, Kate and her family have joined the western movement. They are traveling alone and are camped close to a river. Her husband, John, takes his gun and goes in search of two of his horses, but when he fails to return, Kate sends their three children to find him. Being from a Pennsylvania town, she does not realize the dangers of the environment.

Suddenly her mother instinct tells her there is something wrong. Seizing an axe, Kate runs down the path her family has taken and comes upon a bloody scene. Her husband is scalped and tied to a tree, and the three children are being scalped by redmen. "Kate turned not to stone but to female tiger. Her fury was such that her strength was multiplied tenfold as she rushed and raised her axe."<sup>17</sup> With single blows of her axe, Kate kills four of the redmen, but two escape taking Mr. Bowden with them. Still in shock, she crawls from one bloody child to another and spends much of her strength pulling a slain Indian off of her daughter.

As Sam Mainard, a mountain man, comes on the scene, Kate has fallen into a deranged state and considering him as an enemy, she grabs the axe and a rifle and confronts Him. Sam is sympathetic and encourages

her to discard her weapons. He digs graves and carefully moves the bodies to the open earth.

Kate, blood-covered and looking like a wild thing, watches as Sam gently lowers the blanket covered bodies into their graves. The boys are buried in one grave and the girl in the other. With lips moving but no sound coming out, Kate kneels in prayer at the graves as Sam covers the bodies with earth.

Psychologically, Kate moves out of the real world as she sits with one hand on each grave and her rifle in her lap. Although Sam brings her food and hot coffee, she neither eats nor drinks. He realizes her mental condition and taking one of his new robes, he places it around her shoulders to protect her from the cold night air.

Although Sam tries to force her from her world of grief to the real world, she refuses to return. He tries to encourage her to go with him to the river and catch a riverboat that will take her back to her people. His pleas are met with a blank stare.

Sam tries to meet her physical needs by building a cabin for her that is a short distance from the graves. During the three days he is working, she never moves from the graves. He hunts and brings jerked meat to her cabin because he is aware of her inability to hunt food for herself. As the days pass, Sam has been hopeful that Kate would return to the real world but as Sam realizes, from his observations, she will spend the remainder of her life in her world in the isolated environment.

As Sam prepares to leave Kate, he pulls their old wagon containing few possessions to the front of the new cabin and waits for her response.



In a final effort to communicate with her, he sings in his deep baritone voice. Unable to reach her, but moved by her motherly protectiveness, he fixes food for her and then leaves. He is relieved to see her standing by the cabin doorway as he glances back from a great distance.

In her world, Kate spends part of her time reading her bible and singing to her children. To enhance their graves, she searches the area and finds lovely flowers and plants them on and around her children's graves. Kate spends time, each day, watering the flowers as she sings to them.

In her deranged state of mind, Kate looks forward to the nights. She anticipates the moonlight. She believes she can see her children as angels, and she smiles at them, and they smile back at her. She reads special scriptures to them and they smile and nod at each other. When she is exhausted, she returns to the cabin and drags her bedding to the doorway of the cabin so she can be closer to the graves and the moonlight.

As the years pass, Kate becomes a legend in her isolated environment in the far west. Other mountain men help Sam in supplying Kate's needs. She can be seen each day in winter and in summer as she carries water to the flowers. Kate remains in the confused state of mind that she entered on the day of the massacre, and she reaches the point where she is no longer certain of the location of her children's graves.

One winter morning when it is forty degrees below zero, Kate chops the ice to water the flowers. She finds no water, but her axe slips out of her hands and into the hold in the ice. She struggles for hours trying to reach the axe and becomes partially frozen. Giving up, she crawls back to her cabin to sit and wait for the moonlight. As Kate continues to freeze, the temperature drops to fifty-two degrees below

zero. The tiny, gray-haired body sat in the doorway of the cabin. The eyes are open watching for the moon, and the left hand rests on the Bible. Kate Bowden is dead.

Kate is a victim of the far west environment. She is so affected mentally by her family's deaths that she never recovers. In some respects she is able to conquer her environment by retreating into her own world. In this world, she had no need for anything but her Bible, axe and water pail.

Her physical needs were provided for by the mountain men, but she was not capable of utilizing them properly. Although she is completely devastated by her environment, her presence in the area has served a purpose. In this isolated environment, her actions have expressed a mother's love to those who saw and heard about Kate Bowden.

When Sam returns to visit Kate and finds a new grave marker, he is grief-stricken. "The grief that choked and blinded him would have been no more intense if he had looked at the grave of his mother."<sup>18</sup>

Although Kate never spoke to Sam, her actions relayed her mother love for her children. Having witnessed this love, he never forgot her dedication as she sacrificed herself to the cruel environment of the far west.

Another woman moving to the far west is Eilley Cowan. Eilley is the main character in Fisher's novel, City of Illusion. She gets involved in the far west stampede for riches. After staking her claim, she resides in her small cabin close-by. Eilley is not afraid of the unsavory men that have claims close to hers. Claim jumping becomes

common in this type of environment; therefore, she is forced to guard her claim with her gun.

Eilley has the physical roughness of a man, and in this environment she is in competition with men throughout her life. She hires Sandy Bowers, a shabby alcoholic, to guard her claim and they go into partnership. As time passes, Eilley decides to marry Sandy for convenience of his guarding their mine and also for her to have children.

Fisher describes the pathetic couple as they are preparing to be married. Each had one outfit to dress up in, and each outfit had been with its owner for many years. Eilley's dress is her only dress and it dates back to her first marriage. "She had only one dress besides her homely house things. It was, indeed, the dress the bishop had given her on her first wedding day; and though fashionable then, it was now out of style, and torn and soiled from having been dragged across a continent."<sup>19</sup> The hat she wore had a crushed brim.

Mr. Bowers wore his soiled and threadbare suit that was too little. His shoes were old and they pinched his feet until he limped. He takes a bath and combs his hair after meeting with disapproval from Eilley.

Unlike the antelope women or the previously mentioned far west women, Eilley's primary goal in life is wealth and her dream of becoming the dominant person in the growing town of Virginia City. Her desire to attain this goal surpasses her considerations of being a wife and mother. She mentally prepares herself and manipulates people to assist her in achieving her goal.

Soon after their marriage, their claim begins to be profitable and Eilley climbs the social scale dragging Sandy with her. She attempts

to have him educated, but this is a miserable failure. They purchase expensive furnishings from Europe. Eilley's displays of her wealth incite the women in Virginia City to push their husbands to outdo her.

At the height of her social climb, Eilley feels confident with her wealth and her desires turn to the next important goal in her life which is having a child. After having two babies, who die in infancy, she adopts a dying girl's child. Eilley feels fulfillment in being a mother, and she becomes content in her environment. As her child grows up, Eilley continues showering affection on the child but the child eventually rejects Eilley. She finds it difficult to cope with this rejection.

At the same time, Sandy's health begins failing. Although she is concerned about Sandy, her first concern is her position in the community. Since Virginia City is a town of wealth, gambling, and corruption, another group of women, the harlots, begin to threaten Eilley's position. Their business draws the profits from the mines and they are able to use their money to buy the city. Eilley becomes alarmed by this threat.

In her greed, Eilley becomes consumed with the desire to possess the most money and is determined that her display of wealth will be the greatest in Virginia City.

As Eilley ponders her position in the community, her greatest threat, Julie, the outstanding harlot in Virginia City, is murdered. Because of her strange value system, Eilley feels obligated to the murderer. She takes food to his cell and comforts him before he is hanged. She attends the hanging and the funeral before turning her attention back to her sick husband.

Sandy has become critically ill and Luff, Sandy's friend, comes in the night to advise Eilley. She had never liked Luff because of

his bad luck, and she considered him as being a bad influence on Sandy. Although Sandy is rich, he still considers Luff as his friend. "Sandy tried vainly to hold on to his old friends, but Eilley and Virginia City were against him; they followed after an illusion and missed more fundamental values."<sup>20</sup>

The illusion of the far west can be considered as being the force which destroyed Eilley. In her blindness to attain wealth, she worked the mine physically and then forced Sandy to work physically in her place. As her wealth grew, she became so psychologically consumed with displaying her hard earned wealth that she overlooked Sandy, who enabled her to attain her goal.

As the illusion is recognized by Eilley, it is too late. Her daughter has rejected her and Sandy has died. The mines are exhausted and her investments are proving to be bad ones. She loses both her fortune and her ability to borrow any more money.

As she watches her illusion, Virginia City, crumble, the investors kill themselves in a chain reaction. As the last of the people leave her city, they try to encourage her to come with them. She refuses, insisting there is wealth to be had northwest and north of the existing mines. She refuses to recognize the fact that Virginia City is an illusion. After everyone has left, Eilley remains. She dies in Virginia City, and her small urn of ashes are scattered among the graves of her husband and children.

Throughout her life, Eilley is a woman of strength. She fights for her position in the community of men and is powerful enough that she manipulated prominent men in the community. When the heyday of wealth prevails, she is a top citizen and when it fails, she still has hope.

Eilley is not a likeable character, but she is an admirable one. She struggles physically to obtain her first mine and gains economically from her labors. Her failure as a business woman is poor investment and wasting her wealth to prove she has money. Her show of wealth is her greatest mistake as she squanders it in an effort to outdo other families in Virginia City. Unlike all the others, after the crash, Eilley is optimistic she will find new wealth. In respect to both her successes and her failures, the far west development results from the courage and sacrifices of people like Eilley Bowers.

In his western novels, Fisher depicts life in Antelope as being boring, mundane, and a spare existence, but he presents the far west as a hazardous and unrelenting type of environment. Hardships are faced by women in both environments. Most of the women struggle physically and psychologically to survive in their environment. Economic gain is hard to acquire and easy to lose in both regions.

If Fisher had not been exposed to his dominating mother in Antelope, as a small child, he could not have captured the pulse of the environment through his novels. His explicit description of Prudence Hunter as she exists in Antelope enables Fisher to unravel the mysteries of his personality through his extensive evaluation of the women. In the various Antelope novels, he expands his horizons beyond family and characterizes neighbor women as he has known them and as he believes they reacted to their environment. It is through these portrayals that he is able to see the products of the environment and determine to what extent he has been affected through them.

Perhaps he is attempting to reject Antelope in his early novels, but it soon becomes evident he wishes to claim his Antelope heritage. Although he suffers the mental anguish of losing his wife and seeing his mother deteriorate to an unkempt condition, he is fascinated by their courage.

After his wife's death and with the psychological help from his brother, Fisher is able to evaluate his attitude toward women in a positive manner. As he continues writing, Women's strength in adversity becomes the most prominent subject in his novels.

After completing the Antelope novels, where he dwells basically on the mundane and lonely existence, he reaches beyond and researches history in an attempt to present the courage of the far west women. Most of the far west women are presented as mother figures in greater conflict with their environment than the Antelope women. Fisher's admiration for the courageous women is evident as he supports them in their environment and creates for his readers their thoughts and feelings in relationship to their families.

From the experiences of the women in Antelope and the far west, there is a similarity in existence and there is also a broad difference. Most women adjust to the mundane existence of Antelope with little thought of danger. The survival rate is devastating in the far west as many of the women lose their lives in their journey into the unknown regions. The hazards of weather and the lack of knowledge of the environment in the far west cause the frontier women to acquire a special courage and discipline in order to survive.

In his western novels, Fisher paints a vivid picture of the hardships of the women for his reader. His novels prove his experience of living

in the Antelope country is a lonely existence for the women, but the point of courageously battling the environment is his main theme for the far west women. The environment in both regions require special sacrifices from the women, and Fisher's women protagonists emerge as the bed-rock of the spirit of the frontier west.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph M. Flora, Vardis Fisher (New Haven: College & University Press, 1965), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Vardis Fisher, Toilers of the Hills (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1928), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>5</sup>Vardis Fisher, In Tragic Life (Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1932), pp. 63-64.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 337-338.

<sup>7</sup>Vardis Fisher, Passions Spin the Plot (Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1934), p. 92.

<sup>8</sup>Vardis Fisher, We Are Betrayed (Garden City: Country Life Press, 1935), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>10</sup>Vardis Fisher, April (Garden City: Country Life Press, 1937), p. 186.

<sup>11</sup>Vardis Fisher, Children of God (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), p. 565.

<sup>12</sup>Vardis Fisher, The Mothers (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1943), p. 333.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 282-283.

<sup>17</sup>Vardis Fisher, Mountain Man (New York: Pocket Book, 1977), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>19</sup>Vardis Fisher, City of Illusion (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941), p. 48.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

## Bibliography

- Fisher, Vardis. April. Garden City: Country Life Press, 1937.
- Fisher, Vardis. Children of God. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939.
- Fisher, Vardis. City of Illusion. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941.
- Fisher, Vardis. Dark Bridwell. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1931.
- Fisher, Vardis. Forgive Us Our Virtues. Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1948.
- Fisher, Vardis. Gold Rushes & Mining Camps Of The Early American West. Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1979.
- Fisher, Vardis. In Tragic Life. Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1932.
- Fisher, Vardis. The Mothers. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1943.
- Fisher, Vardis. Mountain Man. New York: Pocket Book, 1977.
- Fisher, Vardis. No Villain Need Be. Garden City: Country Life Press, 1936.
- Fisher, Vardis. Passions Spin The Plot. Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1934.
- Fisher, Vardis. Pemmican. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956.
- Fisher, Vardis. Tale of Valor. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958.
- Fisher, Vardis. Toilers Of The Hills. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1928.
- Fisher, Vardis. We Are Betrayed. Garden City: Country Life Press, 1935.
- Flora, Joseph M. Vardis Fisher. New Haven: College & University Press, 1965.