

Angle of repose – summary



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Jordan Pye 8-12-11 Angle of Repose Written by Wallace Stegner, Angle of Repose won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972. Based on the letters written by Mary Hallcock Foote, the inspiration to Stegner's character, Susan Ward, Stegner writes about a man, Lyman Ward, who has developed a bone crippling disease and has become dependent on others to assist him on his mission to discover his grandmother's journey to Grass Valley. To accomplish this, Lyman went through a vast amount of letters and placed them in order of occurrence.

His grandmother, Susan Burling Ward, had embarked on a journey of a lifetime with, her husband, Oliver Ward; on which they encountered many new hardships as they pioneered the West. Like many great quests, it leads him unfathomably into the murky shadows of his own life. Although people are not perfect and may face difficult circumstances in life, the noble character traits of Oliver and Susan enabled them to overcome their adversities. Born and raised in New York, Susan was well educated, a fine writer, and a good painter. On the other hand, Oliver was stalwart, gifted, stoic, but most importantly, was worthy as a husband and provider.

Leaving New York to pioneer the New Frontier, Susan was hoping that they would someday return as successes to reunite with her old friends. Beginning their journey in New Almaden, Oliver successfully acquired a job as a mine engineer. Also, Susan was getting a chance to be a writer for Scribner's magazine. Lyman tells it was a time of true happiness. When an incident occurred between a fellow employee, Tregoning, and their boss, Mr. Kendall, Oliver was asked to perform a job that went against his principles

and thus quit. Although he quit, Susan was delighted that he left his job than to keep it and do something immoral.

While Oliver was out of work, Susan offered to use her freelance earnings to support them while he searched for a job. Refusing, he sent her to stay with friends in Santa Cruz while he looked for employment in San Diego. Susan and Oliver displayed admirable traits in New Almaden even though it meant that harder times were to follow. Next, when Oliver and Susan moved to Leadville, Oliver informed Susan that he would be gone a great deal of the time at the mine. Trying to be strong, she countered and said that she had book illustrations to keep her busy.

Shortly after arriving, she met Frank Sergeant, Oliver's assistant, and was impressed by his excellent looks, and wanted to draw him. As she tried to adjust to life in Leadville, she was coddled by Frank Sergeant, who went to her house every morning to build her a fire, chop and carry wood, burn her trash, run errands for her, and take her horseback riding. At the beginning of Book 5, Michoacan, Lyman revealed why he wrote about his grandparents. He explained how his mother died when he was two and how his father was "a silent and difficult man," therefore, he was raised by his grandparnets.

Ward recalled a time when he had to write a report on Mexico for an assignment, and his grandmother, Susan, told of her time in Michoacan. She greatly preferred it, because of its history and culture, to any of the mining camps. It was apparent to Oliver that he had given his wife an enjoyable experience. Lastly, although Oliver and Susan were similar in many ways, they had many differences as well. In an illustrative incident, Oliver was in

town really late one night trying to discuss a project with a group of potential investors. When they refused his offer, he became drunk.

Not knowing where he was, Susan ventured out to look for him. Upon finding him, she was concerned about helping him, not realizing that he was drunk. Finally figuring he was drunk, she became incredibly upset with him and with the news that he had failed to obtain investors, Susan demanded Oliver to sleep outside. When Lyman and his assistant, Shelly, came to this part, Lyman related the departure of his wife, Ellen, to when Susan took the children to Vancouver Island. During the same time, Oliver led a survey party to Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

As a result, Lyman felt similar pain to Susan after Oliver left. An additional crisis that they faced in Mesa was because Oliver was so busy with the canal, he left important paper work about property to one Mr. Burns and consequently, he lost the property. Although irate at first, the two of them surmounted the mistake and moved on. Both, Susan and Oliver, had different ways of handling their adversities, but in the end, they always forgave each other. The metaphor angle of repose means it is the slope at which dirt stops sliding downhill and stays put.

An example of the metaphor was Oliver Ward digging trenches... first as a mining engineer, then as an irrigation engineer, and the dirt kept on falling back into the trench, making his work that much harder. Finally, he found a way to work without having the dirt back fall on top of him. When Lyman Ward was at Zodiac Cottage, he hoped to be able to relate the pieces of his life together the same way his grandparents did- meeting the challenges of the present by making something new out of the substance of their old lives.

The story of Susan Burling Ward was really the story of her marriage and her life as a frontier/mining wife who faced hardship after hardship, disappointment after disappointment as her husband struggled to make a living in a rough, competitive world without compromising his integrity. Even though Oliver and Susan Ward had many differences, in times of misfortune, they put their differences aside and worked together.