

# MidAmerica XXIV

*The Yearbook of the Society  
for the Study of Midwestern Literature*

Edited by  
DAVID D. ANDERSON

The Midwestern Press  
The Center for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature and Culture  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan  
1997

Copyright 1997  
by the Society for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America  
No part of this work may be  
reproduced without permission of  
the publisher

In honor of  
Paul W. Miller



## PREFACE

The publication of *MidAmerica XXIV*, the yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature for 1997, marks another successful year in the Society's history. The twenty-sixth annual conference, the symposium "The Cultural Heritage of the Midwest" and the concurrent Midwest Poetry Festival, was large and diverse, and three outstanding contributions to that conference are included here: the prizewinning poem, "Planting Asparagus," by Rodney Phillips, the prizewinning essay, "Meridel Le Sueur, Earth Goddesses and Engel's Approach to the Woman Question," by Nora Ruth Roberts, and the prizewinning story, "Songs I'll Not Hear Again," by Jim Gorman. All three are representative of the many contributions members of the Society are making to the literature of our region as well as to its study.

Equally gratifying at the conference was the presentation of the Mark Twain Award for 1997 to two distinguished novelists, Toni Morrison and Jon Hassler. The MidAmerica Award for distinguished contributions to the study of Midwestern literature was presented to Paul Miller, distinguished contributor to our knowledge and understanding of the literature of the region and the nation. This issue of *MidAmerica* is suitably inscribed to him.

August, 1998

DAVID D. ANDERSON



## CONTENTS

Preface	5
Planting Asparagus	
The Midwest Poetry Festival Prize Poem	Rod Phillips 9
Meridel Le Sueur, Earth Goddesses and	
Engels's Approach to the Woman Question	
The Midwest Heritage Prize Essay	Nora Ruth Roberts 10
Songs I'll Not Hear Again	
The Midwest Fiction Award Prize Story	Jim Gorman 18
Hardly Flyover Country:	
Recent Developments in Midwestern Studies	
An Honorable Mention Essay	Edward Watts 36
"Stayin' with the Lan'": Midwest,	
Migration and Metaphors	Suzy Clarkson Holstein 46
Mad About Books: Eugene Field's	
<i>The Love Affairs of a Bibliomaniac</i>	Robert A. Shaddy 53
Feminist Discourse and the Alien Word:	
A Bakhtinian Analysis of Meridel Le Sueur's	
<i>The Girl</i>	James M. Boehnlein 70
Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson—	
and Ivan Turgenev	Paul W. Miller 80
The Structure of Sherwood Anderson's	
Short Story Collections	David D. Anderson 90
Consequential Identity in Hemingway's	
<i>A Farewell to Arms</i>	Clarence Lindsay 99
Louis Bromfield in France	Dorys Grover 115
Growing Up in Detroit:	
Jim Daniels's <i>M-80</i>	Janet Ruth Heller 122
Annual Bibliography of	
Midwestern Literature: 1995	Robert Beasecker, editor 133
Recipients of the Mark Twain Award	Inside Back Cover
Recipients of the MidAmerica Award	Back Cover



## PLANTING ASPARAGUS

ROD PHILLIPS

This is not like growing radishes or leaf lettuce,  
not a simple matter of sowing seed and mixing  
oil and vinegar for a garden salad a month later.

This is an investment, a wager that you'll be here  
in four years for the harvest of the first spears  
a wish that your children will continue  
to cut the new spears each May.

A trench two feet square must be excavated  
and filled half full of horse manure and peat,  
before laying down the gnarled roots,  
sprawling like huge milky spiders  
under knee-deep dark loam.

Once established, it may outlast all else you do in this life—  
A bed Jefferson planted at Monticello still thrives there,  
beside a crumbling garden wall  
made of only stone.

Michigan State University

MERIDEL LE SUEUR,  
EARTH GODDESSES AND ENGELS'S  
APPROACH TO THE WOMAN QUESTION

NORA RUTH ROBERTS

The recent death of Meridel Le Sueur (1900-1996) not only constitutes very nearly the end of an era but provides an opportunity to re-examine her relationship to the Communist Party's so-called proletarian writing of the 1930s as that has been presented and discussed by the new generation of left feminists (myself included). Basically what is at stake are two questions: first, a rethinking of the position of the communist movement on the problem of women and the origins of women's subjugation—especially as that was developed by Frederick Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) and the relationship of that statement of traditional Marxism's view of the "woman question" to the shaping of Le Sueur's own feminist vision as she applied that to her commitment to Midwestern regionalism.

A tandem re-reading of Engels's *Origins of the Family* and Le Sueur's earliest fiction, framed in the ancient Demeter/Persephone myth, suggests a fundamental correspondence that we have all been overlooking. Among Le Sueur scholars, Elaine Hedges, in her introduction to *Ripening* (1982), has made the most cogent analysis of Le Sueur's early appropriation of the Demeter/Persephone myth as a deeply felt personal metaphor for the separation and rejection Le Sueur felt from her own mother, socialist activist Marion Wharton. However, extended study of Le Sueur's writings, interviews (including my own with her in 1991) and journals suggests the consideration that Le Sueur tends to personalize in a beguiling non-didactic way references to sources for her work that may derive as much from her early exposure to Marxism, which she tends to refuse to express in the kind of ideological statements she deliberately stayed clear of, than solely from a personal psychodynamic. Following the trace of

that myth into some of Le Sueur's last work "The Origin of Corn" would bear that out, and, as Hedges suggests, the Demeter/Persephone myth, in various guises, informed the better part of Le Sueur's early work.

Certainly, the Demeter/Persephone myth has been widely accessible, especially to forlorn young women who feel cut off from their mothers, and Hedges's analysis may well have some merit. However, by the evidence of such autobiographical essays as "the Ancient People and the Newly Come" (1976), it is just as easy to assume that Le Sueur's early consciousness was strongly influenced by the standard texts and ideology of the early socialist movement in which her parents played significant parts, and which closely adhered to ordinary Marxist teachings. If the young Le Sueur was the favorite of Big Bill Haywood, Eugene V. Debs, and Emma Goldman, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that she was privy in perhaps a rudimentary way to discussions of official Marxist views. Maintaining these views as fundamental to her communist vision, even through the twists and turns of the policies of the CPUSA which she joined at the age of 24, could well have allowed Le Sueur to see herself not in opposition to traditional Marxism, but in some ways a lone voice maintaining the faith—at least on the woman question.

It is in that light that Le Sueur's lifelong development and association with the Demeter/Persephone myth invites re-examination. As Hedges suggests, Le Sueur's early Persephone story (1927) is a virtual intact transplant to Kansas of the ancient myth of the earth goddess that Edith Hamilton traces to early stages of Greek culture still, according not only to Engels, but to Marxist anthropologist Evelyn Reed, and, most recently, to classics scholar Jane Ellen Harrison, in the early stages of the struggle to replace the matriarchal gens with a patriarchal system that would replace communal relations with private property. The story, as Le Sueur tells it, is that Freda (Demeter) has come to Kansas with her fair young daughter, and the farm community is joyous because her very touch (like the mythic touch the ancients attributed to the goddess and to women in general) makes their crops grow, their fruit trees bear, and even their bread rise and bake to perfection. On the scene there arrives a bull-breeder, March (easily traceable to the switch from agriculture to animal husbandry that brought with it the pre-eminence of males over females in the production process). March abducts Freda's daughter, just as Pluto had abducted Persephone, and, as in the myth,

a gloom comes over the land and Freda herself, like her originary, hunts desperately and despondently for her daughter. She does find her, growth resumes, just as the myth has traditionally been seen as an explanation of the origin of the northern hemisphere's seasons in anthropomorphic terms.

Contemporary anthropological interpretations, including Reed's—which closely adheres to Engels's—and Harrison's discuss the breakdown, often violent disruption, of the matrilineal connection from mother to daughter as a struggle by the emerging forces of patriarchy to take control of the matrilineal tribe and gens system. As Engels—and Reed—make clear, the matriarchy discussed is not merely a reverse of the oppressive patriarchal system. Engels, basing his analyses on the anthropological work of the American Lewis Henry Morgan, who initiated his investigations with North American Native American tribes, starting with the Iroquois, and his own studies of classical Greek and German tribal accounts, developed a view that primitive society had been, although matrilineal, primarily communal. Eleanor Burke Leacock summarizes Engels's portrayal of this stage in her introduction to the 1972 International Publishers edition of Engels's treatise:

The significant point for women's status is that the household was communal and the division of labor between the sexes reciprocal; the economy did not involve the dependence of the wife and children on the husband ... The children in a real sense belonged to the group as a whole; an orphaned child suffered a personal loss, but was never without a family. Women did not have to put up with personal injuries from men in outbursts of violent anger for fear of economic privation for themselves or their children. ... the distinction did not exist between a public world of men's work and a private world of women's household service. The large collective household was the community, and within it both sexes worked to produce the goods necessary for livelihood (33).

As Engels and then Reed develop the case, all this changed with the imposition of patriarchal culture and private property which was to bring about the subjugation of women. Reed's analysis of the Agammenon myth in which the wife Clytemnestra slays her husband in retribution for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia and is in turn slain by her son suggests both that the mother-daughter tie was the primal tie and that overturning that tie to establish patrilinearity involved a good deal of bloodshed. Applying that idea to the Perse-

phone myth shows that the early development of the mother-daughter tie was a fundamental aspect of mankind's development. By transposing this myth to modern-day Kansas and returning to it frequently in her work, Le Sueur certainly seems to be going beyond the psychodynamic of her own mother-daughter relationship to suggest a "rape of the land" as she puts it in "Corn Village" and the rapacious nature of patriarchal capitalist relations in an ongoing way that is very much in keeping with Marxist philosophy.

Toward the end of the "Persephone" story the narrator, accompanying Freda's daughter on a train ride to safety, sums up what seems a condition that extends beyond the author's own private gloom to suggest the entire state of woman since the fateful overthrow of communality that Engels delineated:

What strange realms had thrust her forth to be born of her mother in the night, to put upon her the burden of endless movement through fields, upon the earth, through many days under the burden of shadowless nights, marked with the mark of strangeness to be usurped by an unfamiliar man, to walk through unfamiliar places, and to carry unfamiliar burdens (83).

The difficulty in trying to prove that this note of doom in Le Sueur's own statement has a basis in Engels's work as well as in her own psychological condition is that, as Hedges notes, she herself was not an ideologue. Hedges reports:

What mattered to Le Sueur was not ideology. She has described her impatience with those at the American Writers Congresses who delivered "great theoretical ideological speeches," attempting to make a "bureaucratic intellectual, inhuman, non-human kind of thing of Marxism." (15)

Hedges, in her own interpretation, appears to be missing an essential point. Le Sueur, even in this statement, seems, by negation, to be championing, not so much a rejection of ideas as a humanization of Marxism, and that, more than an opposition to Marxism, seems to have been her primary mission. Even in her private journals, Le Sueur rarely discusses an ideological basis for her communist beliefs, although she does refer to attendance at several workers study schools. Her clearest private statement is culled from her 1935 journal:

Communism of course wouldn't give people a subtle knowing just as such—but relieved again of the money value who can tell what would happen, surely it is a good adventure ... a marvelous trying at least ... Remov[e] the money value which is mixed up with mentality mechanization, and the ideal all have produced each other and you could begin to know what 'human nature' is ... No one thinks that communism is a panacea. ... I think they are more realistic about it than prophets have ever been—but to be rid of the horrible smell of money—to be rid of the stench of the seller and the buyer—Oh Lord. ... [1935].

Hence, Le Sueur's revival of the ancient pre-private-property species myth of the interconnectedness of woman, land, and reproduction can more clearly be accepted as being in concordance with traditional Marxist views.

This continuity in her vision is borne out by a look at her late-life paean to fecundity, identified as a continuation of her fascination with the Persephone myth, which seems to uphold the conjecture that Le Sueur's work calls for analysis more in theoretical/ideological terms than in psychodynamics. To do less may be a denigration of the importance of her own presentation of the communist perspective as it remained a steadfast concern throughout her life. "The Origins of Corn" (1976) marks an important break in Le Sueur's ties to formal narrative structure at the same time that it develops a central celebration of the communal values bequeathed to humankind in the Native-American gift of corn. In this sense it bears some resemblance to Henry David Thoreau's last manuscript, *Faith in a Seed*, which was just published in 1993 for the first time. Like the Concord nature-worshippers, including Walt Whitman whom they influenced and who, in turn, was an important influence on the development of Le Sueur's early break from familial Puritanism and in her devising of non-traditional writing methods,<sup>2</sup> Le Sueur opposes the development of corn and native agriculture to rapacious capitalism. Near the opening, she offers a "Hosanna" to "the ancient women Gatherers, free wanderers [who] loved the tiny grass, tendered hand pollinated it, created the great crop of nutrition which cannot free itself without the hand of human" (254).

References abound to the Native-American gift of corn as "transmutation of communal love. ... thrown like a seed ball from people to people in twenty-five thousand years of a mothering congregation of protein, of corn nuptials, cohesions, solidarity. ...

Corn, fertility, thus, is a species trace memory that allows us to “lay underground with corn, hoarding the endosperm, preserving inside the shuck ancestral bridal arrayment, communal goodness. . . .” (255).

To fully grasp the imagery of this seemingly overobvious piece, the reader does well to place it in the context of Le Sueur’s total political and poetical life, and, thus, within the context, again, of Engels’s vision as Le Sueur interpolated it. If we see Le Sueur’s imagery of seeds and “endosperms” hoarded underground for centuries that can once again come to life given propitious circumstances as “communal goodness,” and “transmutation of love,” as a poetic suggestion that the communal goodness of pre-historic peoples in the earliest stages of matriarchal communal clans can once again be brought to life, the poem makes sense as an assertion of a restatement of faith in the communist future based on the primary notion of the “hoarding” of primary images of desire and communalism within the species itself.

To be sure, it is possible to trace Le Sueur’s fascination with Native-American culture and Midwest agrarianism to sources more personally significant than Engels’s theories about the ancient connection between agriculture and matriarchy. In “The Ancient People and the Newly Come,” Le Sueur discusses the important influence on her childhood consciousness of a neighboring “Mandan Indian we called Zona,” whom she describes as one of the three key matriarchal nurturing forces in her early life. Zona seems to be one of Morgan’s Native-American informants come to life inculcating Le Sueur with a vision that will prepare her for her future communist commitment. As Le Sueur says: “She showed me that the earth was truly round, sacred, she said, so that no one could own it. The land is not for taking. . . . She said that men and women were rooted, interpenetrating, turning to the center.” From her association with Zona, Le Sueur learned:

I knew the turning earth and woman would defend me. I saw the powerful strong women, and I was a small green girl with no breasts and hardly a bowel for anger, but gleaming among them, unused, naked as the land, learning anger, and turning to cauterize and protect the earth, to engender out of their rape and suffering a new race to teach the warriors not to tread the earth and women down. At their own peril! (45).

For all the twistings of the CP's relationship to regionalism and Browderite popular front Americanism, Le Sueur maintained fairly consistent loyalty to her home area, which can perhaps be better understood as a connection to her agrarian mythos than to a specific defiance or acceptance of CP policy. As Douglas Wixson<sup>3</sup> helpfully explains in his book on Le Sueur's long-time friend and ally, Jack Conroy, the CP itself was rather capricious in its attitude toward Midwestern regionalism and even toward its stable and lesser-known writers. During the early years of the establishment of the John Reed Clubs the emphasis was on developing new, raw, especially working class talent—as Mike Gold has rather famously or infamously directed. That effort drew together Le Sueur, Conroy, Nelson Algren, and the young Richard Wright into forming the basis for the publication of the Midwestern worker-writer journal *Anvil*. This was all well and good, and the working-class nature of *Anvil* was even utilized by the CP leadership in a strategic move against the pro-Trotskyist *Partisan Review* crowd of New York intellectuals. However, in an organization directed by a bureaucratic leadership whose primary mission is to maintain control of the organization and fend off all challenges—as I see the CP in the period—a squeeze-play can be used in two directions. In the pre-war Popular Front period, the CP switched tactics, attempting to get star-quality names like Hemingway to head up their lists of anti-fascist supporters, and let such lesser-known enclaves as the *Anvil* group go by the boards. Richard Wright's fury at this move is of course a matter of public record. As for Le Sueur, she undoubtedly felt betrayed as her 1935 Writers Congress speech indicates.<sup>4</sup> However, if she had looked to the CP or even to official Marxism, for support of her Midwestern loyalty, she was looking up the wrong row. Throughout its history, very nearly from its introduction in the mid nineteenth century, the question of regionalism vs. internationalism, or even the question of the specialness of a particular ethnicity, has vexed the best minds of the Marxist tradition. The official view that the working class, like the capitalist class, is fundamentally internationalist, and that ethnic and regional—and gender—loyalties are frequently divisive and contravene international working class solidarity, has clearly been a major source of disaster for the Marxist movement from the early tendencies toward anti-semitism, failures to understand the woman question in its realities, and, in our time, disasters in Afghanistan and Chechnya

As I have indicated, Le Sueur was not one to engage in high-level theoretical debates on the international question. But neither was she about to abandon her fundamental agrarian vision and its ties to Midwestern history, development, and landscape just because the CP leadership or the Soviet policy-setters couldn't decide on a way to apply the various tendencies of Marxist thought to support an opportunistically advantageous position in that period. Le Sueur went on to write *North Star Country*, a patchwork of biographical sketches and historical snippets of the Midwest compiled for Erskine Caldwell's Folkways series, financed in the last days of the WPA. In this work, she focuses on the people, the settlers from all parts, mostly men oddly enough, but ordinary men, working men, men who built Jim Hill's railroads and suffered ever greater pressures to make a living on the land.

Finally, in her last writings, in "The Origin of Corn," "Winter Prairie Woman," and the unfinished snatches at the end of the *Ripening* edition, Le Sueur returns to the replenishing soil of her native Midwest. Here, combining Native American legend, the celebrations of all layers of womanhood, and the hope for the renewal of the land itself—in essence, the stuff of the Midwest mythos—Le Sueur reshapes the clay she has been molding all her life into an icon of the goddess of the reassertion of the life force that has been at the heart of her work all along and which now, at a new dark of the time, with forecasts of the end of history, would seem to serve to revive the faith of her followers in the essential goodness of the species, of the planet, that is at the basis of the originary Marxist teaching she seemed to adhere to right to the end.

New York City

#### NOTES

1. I am indebted to my good friend Edmond Kovacs for the encouragement and continued support that led me to take on this re-examination.
2. In her interview with me in August, 1991, Le Sueur discussed the early influence on her work of Walt Whitman, D. H. Lawrence, and the South African writer Olive Schreiner, to the extent that all of them allowed her to define for herself a sense of sexuality, sensuality, and a writer's identity free of the Puritanism that had been imbued in her by the women in her family—especially her grandmother.
3. See Douglas Wixson. *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1900*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
4. See James W. Boehnlein's discussion of Le Sueur's speech to the Writers Congress in "Midwestern Voices and the Marginal Canon: Reconsidering Proletarian Fiction." *MidAmerica XXII*. The Midwestern Press, 1995. 50-59.

## SONGS I'LL NOT HEAR AGAIN

JIM GORMAN

“No, it’s not a boat,” Father says. “Here, look at it carefully, Annie. How could it be a boat?”

We have come up from his truck to the porch, laughing and hugging, and wrestling with the dog, and now we’re sitting on the glider with this wooden thing that’s not a boat lying across our laps. It’s as long as a yardstick and no wider than your hand, and it comes to a point at both ends—just like a toy boat, like the one I’ve asked him to bring for the pond.

He taps it with his knuckles and says, “See, it’s hollow, a hollow box.”

I guess again. “Maybe it’s a place for jewels, Daddy, a secret place?” I put my finger in one of the four holes on the top.

“No,” he says. He is gruff now, showing his tiredness. He looks at me through narrowed eyes, rubs his cheeks. He’s not shaved in a couple of days and there’s a smell about him, tobacco and sweat. “No it’s not a secret place, Annie. Look—”

Mother has just appeared in the screen door, and she says, “Stop playing the schoolmaster with her, Ray. Just tell her what it is.”

He glances back at her, his eyes narrow again. Then he looks at me. “It’s for playing music, Ann,” he says. “Remember the violin at school? It’s an old kind of violin, I think. It’s got to have strings—that’s what’s missing. You need to stretch strings right up through here.” He runs his finger up the middle where a straight piece of wood is fixed on top. “This piece looks like a man’s skinny necktie, with bars, like stripes, that run horizontally. At the top the piece goes beyond the wooden box and ends in a point. There’s two pegs sticking out of it and a hole for a third.”

He says, “You have to tighten the strings with these pegs. See how they turn. They tune the strings. The strings make the music, then it gets louder inside, then it comes back out through the holes.”