"How Do I Know What I Think Till I See What I Say?" William James's and Carl Jung's Ideas on the Unconscious Mind As Applied to Stegner

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

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Introducing Stegner

He was a man who cultivated the qualities of kindness, consideration, and generosity. So many of our writers and poets of [the twentieth] century have, directly or indirectly (by showing their absence), written about the critical need for love, empathy, and kindness in our society, but it is truly remarkable to find a writer whose life and work were so closely joined in their expression.

(Benson, Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work 413)

Born February 18, 1909, at Lake Mills, Iowa, Wallace Stegner led a life that could itself have been the subject of a compelling novel (Benson, A Study of the Short Fiction 162). As a young boy, Stegner and his family moved throughout the Midwest as his father transitioned from one failed career into the next (Howe, A Documentary Film).

Always a student, Stegner escaped his tumultuous young life by enrolling in the University of Utah at age sixteen, followed by the completion of a Ph.D. in American literature at the University of Iowa. With his education, Stegner became a gifted educator, successful author, and ardent conservationist (Howe).

As an educator, Stegner taught courses at the University of Utah as well as at Harvard University, and most notably founded the creative writing fellowship program at Stanford University. More impressive is his career as an author. From 1937 until his death from injuries sustained in an automobile accident in 1993, Stegner published over thirty books as well as numerous short stories and nonfiction essays (Howe). In 1938, he joined the impressive staff at Bread Loaf Writers Conference, where he began lasting friendships with Bernard DeVoto and Robert Frost (Benson, Wallace Stegner: His Life
and Work 79-82). He won the Pulitzer Prize for Angle of Repose in 1972 and the National Book Award for Fiction for The Spectator Bird in 1977 (Benson, A Study 163). Stegner also completed notable political work in the realm of environmental conservationism, from which came “Wilderness Letter,” one of the most famous modern environmental declarations (Benson, A Study 163).¹

Because of his renowned environmental work, Stegner critics and readers tend to view his works through an environmental or ecocritical lens. This unfortunately causes Stegner’s novels to remain confined to western American interpretations, as many believe that their greatest relevance lies in their geographical roots. Stegner’s scholarly nicknames, such as “The Dean of Western Writers” and, as Ann Ronald calls him, “William Faulkner of the West,” reflect this limiting influence (“Other Western Writers” 86). Some scholars state, however, that classifying Stegner as only a conservationist is obvious and simple, and his literary works deserve more attention for their philosophical and psychological attributes (Ronald, “Stegner and Stewardship” 146). This thesis explores the idea that Stegner’s works should be examined beyond their interest in environmental concerns by tracing the psychological journey of Joe Allston, a protagonist whose fictional journey spans the short story “A Field Guide to the Western Birds” as well as the novels All the Little Live Things and The Spectator Bird. Ironically, it is Faulkner himself who asserted, “[…] the writer don’t [sic] have to know Freud to have written things which anyone who does know Freud can divine […] And so when the critic finds those symbols, they are of course there” (“William Faulkner: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia”).
Although Stegner may not have composed his novels with specific psychological discourses in mind, one certainly can find psychoanalytical symbols in the natural environment throughout his works, making him reminiscent of Romantic poets and literature. In a question-and-answer session, Stegner stated that he wrote novels to examine his own life, because he believed “the unexamined life [...] is not worth living. We have to examine it, if only to persuade ourselves that we matter, and are in control, or that we are at least aware of what is being done to us [...] My life challenged me to make sense of it, and I made fictions” (qtd. in Benson, *A Study* xi). It appears, then, that Stegner’s writing process was itself a type of psychological exercise, as he used fiction writing to examine facets of his personal life. According to biographer Jackson Benson, themes often emerged in Stegner’s works after Stegner’s unconscious struggle with them, and *The Spectator Bird* and its companionate stories emerged as “novels of discovery” (*A Study* 70). Benson’s assertion supports the idea that Stegner’s work can be examined through a psychological lens, as Stegner’s themes are clearly vast, and “discovery,” in Allston’s case, involves important conscious realizations, such as the resolution of grief, the value of pain, and the growth of the spirit.

“A Field Guide to the Western Birds,” *All the Little Live Things*, and *The Spectator Bird* can thus be examined for components of the psychological — rather than the merely physical — environment they create. In examining the psychological landscape Stegner creates around Allston as well as the discoveries Allston makes throughout the three works, it is helpful to use well-known and applicable psychoanalytical theories. These theories are Carl Jung’s theories on the unconscious and synchronicity, and philosopher William James’s study of conversion experiences—a
study Jung appreciated. By accessing his unconscious thoughts through his interactions with his natural environment as well as through synchronous experiences in his day-to-day life, Joe Allston gradually experiences psychological conversion throughout Stegner’s three Allston-centric literary works.

Psychological Theories

*I hope it will not be construed as presumption on my part if I make uncommon demands on the open-mindedness and goodwill of the reader. Not only is he expected to plunge into regions of human experience which are dark, dubious, and hedged about with prejudice, but the intellectual difficulties are such as the treatment and elucidation of so abstract a subject must inevitably entail.*

(Jung, *Synchronicity 3*)

Jung’s theory on the individual unconscious is useful when assessing Joe Allston’s psychological journey because it allows for thorough examination of the repressed elements of Allston’s thought process and memories, as well as the examination of how these repressed instances affect his overall functioning. In *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Jung states, “when people let their unconscious speak, they always tell us the most important things of their intimate selves — then even the smallest detail appears to have meaning” (43). Allston’s character development evolves more richly if we consider Jung’s theory.

Simply put, Jung’s theory on the individual unconscious states that humans repress certain urges — aggression, guilt, eroticism, etc. — into the unconscious so that they need not be dealt with directly. According to Jung, “the repression serves…[as] the freeing from a painful complex from which one must escape by all means because its
compelling and oppressing power is feared” (*Psychology of the Unconscious* 63). This repression also, however, leads to a suppression of emotion that leads to a narrowly drawn self-control which, when too overtly confronted with repressed material, will break down (Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious* 63). This breaking down often occurs because of guilt and leads to “misunderstandings and unhappy situations” (Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious* 63). It can also, however, lead one to redefine one’s psyche by experiencing what William James would call a psychological conversion.

Throughout the story-arc that Stegner creates for Joe Allston, Allston has many dealings with his unconsciously suppressed emotions, memories, and thoughts. He frequently deals with feelings of inadequacy concerning his career and unfulfilled life in “A Field Guide to Western Birds,” feelings of guilt over his relationship with his son before his son’s untimely death in *All the Little Live Things*, and feelings of anxiety over his aging body as well as guilt and repressed desire over a near-extra marital affair in *The Spectator Bird*. In order to convert to a different mental landscape, Allston experiences certain phenomena that trigger his repressed emotions. The occurrence of these phenomena in Stegner’s stories can be related to Carl Jung’s theory on synchronicity.

In “On the Nature of the Psyche,” Jung states, “all knowledge is the result of imposing some kind of order upon the reactions of the psychic system as they flow into our unconscious—an order which reflects the behavior of a metapsychic reality, of that which is in itself real” (413). To understand Allston’s psychological disposition in Stegner’s texts, one must examine his psychological reactions to significant circumstances in his environment. Jung’s theory on synchronicity is helpful because “Jung used the word ‘synchronicity’ to characterize the significance of the simultaneity
of events that could not be causally linked” (Shamdasani, “Forward to Synchronicity” ix).

Jung himself writes,

> The problem of synchronicity has puzzled me for a long time, ever since the middle twenties, when I was investigating the phenomena of the collective unconscious and kept on coming across connections which I simply could not explain as chance groupings or ‘runs’. What I found were ‘coincidences’ which were connected so meaningfully that their ‘chance’ concurrence would represent a degree of improbability that would have to be expressed by an astronomical figure.

(Synchronicity 21)

Synchronicity exposes meaningful coincidences, or what Jung calls “apparently acausal events” (Synchronicity 8). According to Jung, synchronistic phenomena are distinct from mundane interactions and mere coincidences because “acausal events may be experienced most readily where, on closer reflection, a causal connection appears to be inconceivable” (Synchronicity 8). In other words, some synchronous events cannot be explained by rational means. An important component of these acausal connections is their ability to heighten the unconscious because they are mysterious, which allows the unconscious to “flow toward the conscious” (Jung, Synchronicity 30). It should also be noted that, according to Jungian scholar Robert Aziz, “a synchronistic event remains a synchronistic event whether or not its meaningfulness is recognized” (76). This idea is particularly important in Joe Allston’s case, as synchronous events that occur throughout his narrative, such as his timely introduction to other characters who awaken his repressed emotions, often serve as catalysts to his conscious realization of his unconscious thoughts with and without his awareness of their doing so. Synchronicity, therefore, brings Joe’s unconscious to the surface — a necessary step in his psychological conversion process.
Late nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist William James has been associated with the founding of functional psychology, which considers psychological processes and behavior in terms of adaptation to one’s environment. He was also greatly admired by Jung and is, therefore, also an apt theorist to apply to Stegner’s body of work. Particularly significant to Joe Allston’s character is James’s theory on the varieties of religious experience, or what will in this thesis be referred to as “psychological conversion experiences.”

Although James titles his lectures on conversion experiences *The Variety of Religious Experience*, he states in “Religion and Neurology,” “[P]sychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed. To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution” (1). These so-called religious propensities James examines are psychological in nature, as he deems them “neurology,” “the reality of the unseen,” “the divided self,” and other titles strongly reminiscent of psychological discourses. Additionally, Jung quotes James in “On the Nature of the Psyche” as one of the foremost definers of the concept of the unconscious (427). James’s theory on conversion experiences, therefore, can fit into a psychological framework. When defining conversion, James does in fact state that there is a psychology of conversion (“Conversion” 107). According to James’s philosophy, conversion is similar to regeneration, and does not need to be essentially religious. He states:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms,
whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.

(“Conversion” 101, emphasis added)

Stegner presents Allston as an individual with an unconscious that is far divided, as James describes, from his conscious mind. Throughout each text, Allston experiences “mini-conversions” in which he accepts small parts of his psyche, such as his guilt, anxiety, and arrogance. Examining the three texts as an entire narrative paints a picture of a grander psychological conversion experience, as Allston comes to integrate multiple repressed corners of his mind. As one of Stegner’s only first-person narrators, Allston is a particularly apt character to analyze for psychological conversion, as James states that the experience is often prompted by writing one’s autobiographical history (“Religion and Neurology” 1). As previously noted, Stegner wrote his fictions in part as a psychological exercise, as they often draw on his own thoughts, experiences, and insecurities.

These three psychological theories — Jung’s on the unconscious, Jung’s on synchronicity, and James’s on conversion experiences — allow Stegner’s Joe Allston texts to be read in a new literary framework. Rather than examine the physical environment in these works literally as most critics have done in the past, this thesis will examine the interior, psychological environment that Stegner creates through Allston’s first person narration. By systematically analyzing each text with Allston’s psychological journey in mind, one can see that Stegner often uses natural images to reflect Allston’s unconscious turmoil. This turmoil causes many coincidental circumstances in “Field Guide,” All the Little Live Things, and The Spectator Bird to embody properties of Jung’s acausal connections, meaning they can be analyzed using his theory of synchronicity. Because these synchronous experiences often force Allston to confront his repressed
memories and feelings, Allston experiences mini-conversions in each text that culminate in an overarching narrative of growth and integration. Allston undergoes a dramatic psychological conversion experience from a repressed retiree in denial about his feelings to a wiser man able to feel a fuller range of emotions. References throughout Stegner’s three texts to Romantic writers such as Wordsworth, Keats, and Thoreau further bolster this argument, as these figures often used natural imagery to make deeper statements about the human condition as Stegner does in his characterization of Joe Allston.

“A Field Guide to the Western Birds”

*But even down there I may sometimes hear the banging and thrashing of this dismal towhee trying to fight his way past himself into the living-room of the main house.*

*(Stegner, “A Field Guide to the Western Birds” 358)*

Stegner begins Joe Allston’s journey in his 1956 short story “A Field Guide to the Western Birds.” The process of writing the story served, for Stegner, as his own start on a psychological journey of discovery. In the forward to *Collected Short Stories*, in which the story appears, Stegner states, “I see these stories, inventions on a base of [my] experience, as rest stops, pauses while I tried to understand something or digest some action or clarify some response” (ix). Because Stegner dedicated two entire novels to Allston’s character after publishing “Field Guide,” it can be inferred that the particular events examined in Allston’s story carried great and complicated weight with its author. The conceptual root of the Allston stories, therefore, draws at least in part from
psychological material personally related to Stegner. In an analysis of “Field Guide,” it is imperative to examine the story’s psychological undercurrents.

“Field Guide” serves as the first step in Allston’s conversion from a repressed mental state to one in which feelings and experiences are integrated into his overall conscious psychological make-up. The story itself can be read as a microcosmic example of the types of psychological experiences and conversions that Stegner later creates for Allston in lengthier and more intricate novels. The story follows a younger Allston than in the later novels shortly after his retirement to the California countryside with his wife, Ruth. The couple attends a cocktail party in which they hear a young piano player, Kaminski and must decide whether the fellow is a prodigy. Allston immediately dismisses him as a pompous amateur (after nerves drive Kaminski to drink and make a fool of himself), only to have his perspective challenged by his wife and his realization that he and Kaminski have much in common. This realization results in a painful self-loathing that carries Allston into his next appearance in All the Little Live Things.

As “Field Guide” signifies the start of Allston’s journey, it also signifies a time in which Allston is ardently repressing his unconscious. Stegner writes “Field Guide” and other Allston-centric stories from a first-person perspective, which allows readers to discover the self-deception that runs rampant in Allston’s self-schema. This deception and repression of the unconscious is best demonstrated by the comparison of Allston’s inner thoughts to the natural occurrences Stegner describes in the narrative, as well as Allston’s reaction to these natural occurrences. In his introduction to Surveying the Interior: Literary Cartographers and the Sense of Place, Rick Van Noy states that Stegner and other Western authors “have set out literally to map the interior of the United
States but have also in important ways mapped the interior of their own consciousness.”

(5). Stegner’s use of natural imagery symbolically connects to the psychological
underpinnings of his novels, as demonstrated by the following passages.

The very start of “Field Guide” finds Allston stating that he “never felt better […]
retirement is not the hangdog of misery that [he] half expected it to be” (Stegner 311). He
describes his move from New York City to California, admits to indulging in an early-
morning highball, and takes care to describe his brown suede suit. In the very next
sentence, natural images demonstrate that Allston’s perception of himself may be
inaccurate. Allston narrates,

Down the terrace a brown bird alights—some kind of towhee, I think, but I can’t
find him in the bird book. Whatever he is, he is a champion of pugnacity. Maybe
he is living up to some dim notion of how to be a proper husband and father,
maybe he just hates himself, for about ten times a day I see him alight on the
terrace and challenge his reflection in the plate glass.

(Stegner, “Field Guide” 312)

This description of the brown towhee is ripe with psychological symbolism. Stegner
parallels Allston’s physical appearance with that of the bird, as brown exteriors
characterize both. The bird further relates to Allston’s self-description in that it cannot be
found in the bird book, just as Allston’s New York friends cannot understand why he
would choose to move to the West Coast. With these similarities in mind, one can assume
that the bird’s other qualities mirror those inside Allston. The bird is described as
pugnacious which, despite Allston’s tranquil tone at the start of “Field Guide,” is an
accurate adjective for Allston considering the verbal and physical altercations he has with
Kaminski and, eventually, with characters in All the Little Live Things and The Spectator
Bird. While the label “pugnacious” is an accurate one to apply to Allston, Allston does
not yet realize that this is so because of his repressed psychological state. It is also
noteworthy that Allston should mention the bird’s supposed failed attempts at marriage and fatherhood. This sentence serves as a projection of some sort, as later plots in *All the Little Live Things* and *The Spectator Bird* reveal Allston’s shortcomings as both a father and a husband. Again, at this starting point in his journey to psychological conversion, Allston is unable to see that the environment is speaking to him, and he is displacing his own insecurities and alleged failures onto his perceptions of the environment; this reciprocity that Stegner establishes is reminiscent of many Romantics. The final image Allston provides of the bird — that of it attacking its own reflection — is the most telling of all. The bird literally charges at its own mirror image, but Allston sees his own mirror image in the bird whether he realizes it or not. Additionally, as it is Allston’s voice that narrates, it is important to realize that he is imposing the violent connotation on the bird’s actions. The bird is not playing with its reflection, nor is it admiring it — it is challenging it. This final image, therefore, suggests that Allston unconsciously dislikes what he sees when he gazes into the mirror of his own psyche.

Not surprisingly given his psychological state, once Allston finishes describing the towhee, he takes the ice from his drink and uses it to chase the bird away. He says, “‘Beat it, you fool.’ The towhee, or whatever he is, springs into the air and flies away. End of problem” (312). Rather than confront his unconscious, Allston chooses to bury it deeper. His assertion that this ends the problem, however, is inaccurate, and throughout the course of “Field Guide” Stegner creates scenarios in which Allston’s repression and need for a psychological conversion become clearer, often through other confrontations with his unconscious as well as synchronous experiences.
While looking out over his backyard, Allston also makes observations about a hawk’s actions. These observations reflect important information about Allston’s psychological make-up that he cannot directly express in his narration because of his repressed psychological state. As Jung succinctly states, “The unconscious mind of man sees correctly even when conscious reason is blind and impotent” (*The Portable Jung* 550). Allston notices “the little hawk hovering above the tips of the eucalyptus trees. It holds itself in one spot like a helicopter pulling somebody out of the surf” (Stegner 316). The hawk’s hovering mirrors Allston’s own stagnant position, as both seem stuck observing their surroundings rather than truly interacting with them. Just as the hawk does not land on the eucalyptus trees, so does Allston refuse to use his intellectual faculties to reach beyond the surface of his conscious mind in order to find the true motivations behind his actions. Additionally, the “somebody” that Allston refers to in the hawk passage may, in fact, be in reference to his own unconscious mind because of its association with “the surf.” This ocean related imagery is reminiscent of William Wordsworth, who uses sea imagery to refer to the surface of his own mind in his autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*. Additionally, when discussing dream symbolism, Jung refers to “the ocean of the unconscious” (*The Portable Jung* 374). Pulling someone out of the surf, therefore, suggests that Allston unconsciously recognizes his need to go beyond the surface of his intellect and find what emotions are buried there, such as the self-disappointment, guilt, grief, and fear of dying that are explored further in subsequent novels.
It is interesting to note that Stegner’s conclusion to the hawk passage provides a basic narrative blue-print for Allston’s overarching journey in “Field Guide,” *All the Little Live Things*, and *The Spectator Bird*. Allston states:

> From its hover, the kestrel stoops like a falling stone straight into the tip of the Eucalyptus and then shoots up again from among the glitter of the leaves. It disappears into the sun, but just when I think it has gone it appears in another dive. Another miss: I can tell from its angry kreeeee! as it swerves up. All the other birds are quiet; for a second the evening is like something under a belljar. I watch the kestrel stop and hover, and down it comes a third time, and up it goes screeching. As I stand up to see what it could be striking at, it apparently sees me; it is gone with a swift bowed wingbeat into the sun.

(Stegner, “Field Guide” 316)

The bird’s three successive swoops echo Allston’s three stories: in each, he attempts to dive down into the depths of his mind and comes back to the surface once he begins to process painful memories, just as the bird dives into the dense trees and comes up screeching. Allston may find the evening to be located under a bell jar when watching this bird because he unconsciously recognizes the connection between his own actions and those of the bird, and thus focuses on the creature as if it exists in a vacuum. The bird’s quick departure after spotting Allston makes sense because it is an iteration of Allston, himself; when Allston sees reflections of his unconscious thoughts and feelings, he flees or removes the mirrored image. These passages in which Allston sees his unconscious reflected in birds that often symbolize singers or artists establish his position as a mere *birdwatcher*, which, in line with Jungian archetypal symbols, reflects his inability to access, assess, and express his feelings. Thus, Allston’s birdwatcher status manifests in both literal and figurative ways. Allston’s journey in these works takes him, after all, from someone who sells the writing of others to someone who creates his own written history.
In a literal sense, Allston’s position as a birdwatcher directly reflects his unconscious beliefs about himself, as demonstrated in the passages with the towhee and hawk. Additional segments of “Field Guide” also demonstrate how Allston’s psychological process works by using natural imagery and Allston’s feelings toward such imagery to reflect his unconscious state of mind. Benson points out that, in Stegner’s work, “the landscape becomes invested with emotion” (A Study of the Short Fiction 71).

In Joe’s case, it is buried emotion. When discussing the natural vista of his backyard with his wife, Allston states that the outwardly beautiful California countryside “ought to be enough. If it weren’t, I would not be an incipient birdwatcher; I would be defensively killing myself writing those memoirs, trying to stay alive just by stirring around” (315).

In this brief passage, Allston suggests that the distraction provided by nature’s outer beauty allows him to escape deeper thought, which correlates with the idea that what exists superficially on the surface of his psyche allows him, for a time, to ignore his unconscious issues. These general and less penetrating observations of natural surroundings prevent him from writing his memoirs. Writing his own memoirs requires that he face his true self rather than the carefully constructed and repressed self that he presents to other people.

In a more metaphorical sense, Allston’s position as a birdwatcher places him in scenarios in which he experiences synchronicity, and thus is forced to interact more directly with repressed corners of his mind. When not observing nature, Allston often observes other humans and in so doing displaces his unconscious feelings and self-loathing onto their character traits. Allston even compares dinner party guests to birds when he states, “It is all out of some bird book, how the species cling together, and the
juncoes and the linnets and the seed-eaters hop around in one place, and the robins raid the toyon berries \textit{en masse}, and the jaybirds yak away together in the almond trees” (332). Displacement occurs in “Field Guide” with Arnold Kaminski, a young adult piano prodigy whom Allston is asked to evaluate during a dinner party. Kaminski parallels many of the traits Stegner imbues Allston with, especially pomposity, confrontational tendencies, and latent alcoholism.\footnote{6}

When first introduced to Kaminski, Allston immediately decides that he not only dislikes the musician, but also already knows that Kaminski will not live up to the hype that surrounds him. This becomes clear when Allston narrates, “My first impression, in the flick of an eye, is \textit{What in the hell can Sue be thinking of?} My second, all but simultaneous with the first, is \textit{Bill Casement had better look out}” (322). Despite these rash and strong feelings, Allston admits that he “can’t pick out any obvious reason why Kaminski should instantly bring [his] hackles up” (322). Allston’s hatred for Kaminski stems from his unconscious — he does not understand his vehement reaction because he is too repressed to connect Kaminski’s undesirable character traits to his own.

These undesirable character traits are revealed through Kaminski’s drinking and confrontational, defensive attitude. These are traits that Allston also possesses. Allston’s meeting with Kaminski is an example of Jungian synchronicity, apparently random and coincidental but actually full of deep meaning. As previously mentioned, Jung’s theory deals with acausal events, or coincidences that cannot be explained by rational means. The interactions between Allston and Kaminski can be considered synchronous because they do not, in the context of the story, have expressly rational roots: Allston’s career as a literary agent does not make him a musical aficionado, and there is little rational
explanation provided as to why a budding professional pianist would choose a California retiree’s dinner party to practice for his debut. The apparently random connection between Allston and Kaminski sparks their mutual dislike of each other, as they both see their own arrogance reflected in the other.

Allston’s reactions to Kaminski’s behavior and piano skills reflect the significance of the synchronicity behind the two characters meeting. When observing Kaminski’s drinking and hot temper, Allston refers to him as a monster (327); however, in the early passage with the towhee, Allston admits to both his own day-drinking and a confrontational attitude, and thus his classification of Kaminski as a monster reflects his unconscious feelings about himself. Allston also begins to adopt a very immature attitude regarding Kaminski and his behavior, as demonstrated by his use of hyperbole when he states that Kaminski’s attitude is “exactly one of the seven thousand two hundred and fourteen things in him that irritate the hell out of me” (330). Because Kaminski’s attitude is synchronous to Allston’s, it can be said that what truly irritates Allston is not Kaminski, but Allston’s feelings towards himself that he cannot access because of his repressed mental state. When discussing Kaminski’s performance, Allston states, “I shall make it a point to be as wide-awake as a lie detector, and though I shall listen with an open mind, I shall not be his most forgiving critic” (333). Use of the description “lie-detector” suggests that Allston has already decided that Kaminski is a fraud and thus should be discounted as a musician. Later in the text, Allston states, “[I]t is being made increasingly clear to me that one of my causes of irritation at him is precisely that I don’t know what goes on inside him” (347). This statement is extremely important for a psychoanalytical analysis of Allston’s character, as it suggests that, on a subconscious
level, Allston recognizes that his own frustrations with himself stem from his inability to bring his repressed emotions out of his unconscious. Because Allston’s conscious feelings towards Kaminski mirror his repressed feelings towards himself, readers see that Allston unconsciously recognizes that he is himself a fraud.

Another instance of synchronicity in “Field Guide” that reflects Allston’s repressed psychological state occurs in his specific evaluation of Kaminski’s musical selections. Kaminski chooses to play three pieces, all of which Allston coincidentally happens to be familiar with. The piece that Allston has the most criticism towards is a Bach piece. Allston believes that the Bach Chaconne is the “most magnificent piece of music ever written,” but also contends “it has licked Kaminski in a spot or two” (338). Allston’s connection to this piece is yet another indicator of his inability to access his emotions, as Bach compositions are believed by many to be inferior to those of other composers such as Beethoven because of their rigid mathematical precision and relative lack of emotional impact. According to music scholar Ortrun Cramer, “All great Classical composers after Bach studied his works and learned from them, but no one succeeded, as Mozart and Beethoven did, in grasping and further developing Bach’s science of composition in such a way, that something entirely new emerged” (1). It makes sense, then, that Allston feels a strong connection to the Bach piece, as its “science” does not require him to access the emotions that a more passionate piece of music might elicit. His heavy criticism of Kaminski’s interpretation of the piece is also significant, as it may be a reflection not only of Kaminski’s playing, but of Allston’s own unconscious knowledge that the music itself has inherent flaws because it does not possess the emotive power of a greater work. The Schoenberg piece that Kaminski plays elicits nothing but confusion in
Allston, which further supports the connection between Allston’s repressed emotions and music, as he blames his inability to properly feel the tension inherent in Schoenberg’s compositions on both Kaminski’s piano skills and flaws in Schoenberg’s compositional skills (338-39). The synchronous connections between Kaminski, Allston, and Kaminski’s musical choices, therefore, serve as further evidence of Allston’s unconscious psychological state.

After Kaminski’s performance, Allston convinces himself that the young man ultimately fails as a pianist and thus does not have the bright future that his fans at the party see for him. This rash and biased judgment is the basis for his micro conversion experience at the end of “Field Guide,” as well as for the start of his overarching conversion experience throughout Stegner’s three Allston-centric stories. After sharing his opinions concerning Kaminski with his wife, Allston is surprised to find that Ruth, whose opinion he holds in high esteem, believes he played quite well. This causes Allston to experience an epiphany of sorts when he realizes that his opinion is not, as he pompously believed at the party, necessarily an accurate objective representation of what goes on around him. This epiphany is the mini-conversion he experiences in “Field Guide” as well as the springboard for further developments of his psyche in Stegner’s later novels.

According to Benson, Allston “is wrong and comes to admit it, realizing that the identification of the human species can be a lot more difficult and fraught with possible error than he earlier in the story thinks it to be. At the end, [Allston] is mired in doubt” (A Study of the Short Fiction 85). This doubt demonstrates that Allston has experienced disequilibrium over the course of “Field Guide.” Additionally, while Benson’s analysis is
limited to Allston’s feelings on the human species in general, it can be asserted that Allston’s feelings at this juncture in his narrative arc are also reflective of his own personal psychological journey. Although Allston is not complete and happy at the end of the story, as James states those who have experienced conversion often are, he has reunited previously divided parts of himself because he recognizes some of the self-deception he has been experiencing in relation to his unconscious psyche. By the end of the story, Allston is no longer the confident but repressed man he was at the start. He states that his natural surroundings are “all blind, all difficult and blind,” and also describes himself as “a frivolous old man” (358). This suggests that Allston’s perceptions of his natural surroundings are changing. Because his descriptions of his natural environment reflect his psychological landscape, these revelations also suggest that he is beginning to reconfigure his psychological self-schema.

While Allston’s revelation that his feelings toward Kaminski were misguided allows him to experience a type of psychological conversion in “Field Guide,” it also sets the stage for Stegner’s deeper analysis of Allston’s psyche in future novels All the Little Live Things and The Spectator Bird. This is seen most clearly in one of “Field Guide’s” final passages. Allston states,

In the morning, probably, the unidentifiable bird, towhee or whatever he is, will come around for another bout against the plate glass, hypnotized by the insane hostility of his double. I tell myself that if he wakes me again at dawn tomorrow with his flapping and pecking I will borrow a shotgun and scatter his feathers over my whole six acres.

(Stegner, “Field Guide” 358)

It is significant that Allston now calls the bird “unidentifiable” after he previously identified it as a towhee with a fair amount of confidence at the start of the novel, as this reflects the uncertainty he now feels towards his perceptions. This passage is also
significant in its relation to Allston’s earlier description of the towhee because it echoes the idea that the bird fights its own reflection. Because the towhee is a reflection of Allston himself, Allston’s idea that he would like to shoot the bird while it fights with its mirror image suggests that his newly awakened emotions and heightened awareness towards his own psychological vulnerabilities frighten him and evoke defensiveness.

Also significant in this passage may be Stegner’s use of the word “pecking,” as it could foreshadow the appearance of Jim Peck — a character who echoes Kaminski and serves as a reflection of Allston’s unconscious thoughts and feelings — in *All the Little Live Things*. Allston later says that when he next observes the bird he will “ruminate on the insanities of men and birds, and try to convince [him]self that as a local idiocy, an individual aberration, this behavior is not significant” (358). This sentiment is extremely important to Allston’s changing psychological process, as it suggests that the confidence he felt at the beginning of “Field Guide” has left him, because he now must struggle to actively convince himself that his interpretations of natural phenomena are correct.

Additionally, the defensive tone of this passage suggests that, on a slightly less unconscious level, Allston realizes that his behavior is in fact significant because it prevents him from accessing emotion and the depths of his psychological processes. Allston’s wavering confidence and epiphany that his perceptions and emotions are less stable than he previously believed in his ultra-repressed state serve as the first step on his overall journey to a Jamesian psychological conversion experience, and thus usher him into his mental state at the start of Stegner’s first full-length Allston novel, *All the Little Live Things*. 
All the Little Live Things

Nevertheless, Marian has invaded me, and though my mind may not have changed I will not be the same. There is a sense in which we are all each other’s consequences, but I am more her consequence than she knew. She turned over my rock.

(Stegner, All the Little Live Things 8)

Stegner revisits Allston’s character in his 1967 novel All the Little Live Things. Here, an older Allston ripe from his emotional awakening in “Field Guide” is forced to confront the guilt and grief he feels about his failed relationship with his deceased son, Curtis. In terms of his overarching psychological journey, this novel demonstrates that the feelings Allston buried in his unconscious regarding his son must be brought to the surface of his mind so he can learn that painful feelings are necessary to a healthy psyche despite their unpleasantness. In order to access these feelings and experience psychological change, Allston undergoes synchronous experiences that include his contentious relationship with young hippie Jim Peck, as well as his father/daughter relationship with his young, optimistic, and terminally ill neighbor Marian.

All the Little Live Things differs from “Field Guide” in that Allston narrates having already lived through the events of this novel rather than as if he is simultaneously going through the novel’s events and conveying them to the reader. This lends itself to a rich psychological reading of Live Things, as the hindsight Allston offers demonstrates his psychological growth in the novel as well as his awareness that he has allowed himself to feel previously repressed emotions. For example, before diving into the specifics of his time with Marian and Peck, Allston states, “[F]or sixty-four years I have inhabited this skull which from the inside seems comfortably habitual, but which I might not even recognize if I could stand six feet away and see its hairless shine in the starlight”
(Stegner, *All the Little Live Things* 11). This sentiment conveys the idea that, because of his experiences with Peck and Marian throughout *All the Little Live Things* that forced him to feel painful grief about his son’s death, Allston now recognizes that he has not been well acquainted with his own mind and motives. Allston suggests that he was comfortable living inside his head before he examined it, because a more clinical and objective stance revealed its repressed — and less attractive — attributes. The “hairless shine” descriptor emphasizes this, as the nudity evokes the idea that a more complete picture of Allston’s psyche is exposed after his conversion experience.

Even more so than in “Field Guide,” Stegner fills *All the Little Live Things* with images evoking Allston’s need to bring his unconscious feelings to his mind’s surface. In “Wallace Stegner’s West, Wilderness, and History,” Elliott West states that Stegner’s “desire to unify—to reach across and heal that historical divide—is evident in many of Stegner’s fictional creations” (85). In his essay, West primarily refers to Stegner’s desire to unify the West’s environmental past and present, as well as his call for frontier lands to unite with more industrialized areas in order to create environmental harmony and foster preservation. It can be argued, however, that this need to unify also applies to the novel in a psychological sense, as many natural images suggest that Allston’s psychological environment is also deeply divided between the conscious mind and the unconscious, and thus must be unified in order to heal the psychological wounds he obtained from guilt and grief.

While “Field Guide” primarily uses bird imagery to convey Allston’s inability to access certain parts of his unconscious thoughts and feelings, *All the Little Live Things* often uses images that revolve around roots, gophers, and other natural phenomena that
burrow into the ground. This is significant on a psychological level, as it suggests that, in this novel, Allston is uncovering even more deeply repressed unconscious material than that revealed to him after his experience with Kaminski. This trend begins early in the novel, as Allston’s first encounter with his physical environment demonstrates:

The basin was disturbed by no more humps of loose dirt, but something drastic had happened underground. The leaves that a few days before had been green now drooped like heat-withered cellophane. Along the branches, here and there, were the browning wisps of blossoms the tree had frantically put out when the gopher began working on its roots. Before I even saw that it had begun, it was finished. Trying to produce flower and fruit and complete its cycle within a few days and way out of season, the tree was dead without knowing it.

(Stegner, *All the Little 6*)

Allston provides this description in the novel’s literary present, meaning that his experience with the uprooted cherry tree occurs before he launches into the story behind Marian’s death. This passage, therefore, holds extreme significance because it can be read as an indicator of Allston’s psychological progress throughout *All the Little Live Things*. The basin and foliage on its surface represent Allston’s mind as it was before it was affected by Marian’s death, as their surface appears undisturbed by any action occurring below ground. Despite the lack of visible burrowing, however, the basin still shows signs of disturbance. This supports the idea that, throughout *Live Things*, Allston’s conscious mind is disturbed by his repressed feelings, which affect him in psychological rather than physical ways. The gopher, then, is his unconscious, which works away at his mental faculties’ roots until change occurs. The fact that this change revolves around his realization that pain needs to be felt in order to allow the healing process to begin is represented by the imagery that portrays death and dying. These images, such as the drooped leaves and wilting flowers, serve two purposes. First, they suggest that Allston’s conscious mind is uprooted because his previously unconscious emotions are no longer
repressed. Second, it foreshadows the concept that past painful memories of his son’s
death as well as more recent scars given to him by Marian’s demise are the primary
causes of this psychological awakening.

Passages that describe underground or buried natural occurrences continue
throughout the novel, and often serve to denote Allston’s unconscious struggles just as
the towhee does in “Field Guide.” A recurring image that supports this phenomenon is
Allston’s obsession with keeping poison oak from growing on his property. Allston fears
poison oak because he does not want it to overrun the more desirable natural foliage on
his property; nor does he want to risk acquiring a rash by exposing his skin to the plant.
On a symbolic level, the suppressed poison oak plants represent the repressed corners of
Allston’s unconscious, which, if allowed to grow, would cause him to face the troubling
emotions that he so carefully keeps from his stable emotional façade. By the novel’s end,

though [he] had sprayed every resurgent clump and bush for two years and more,
and had cleaned the hill, now some bird or wind had dropped a berry and started
[him] a new crop [of poison oak] where it would be the devil itself to spray
without killing what [he] wanted to preserve.

(344)

In this passage, Allston has a conscious mind that is more integrated with his previously
repressed psychological distress, and thus the poison oak grows freely in his backyard.
The fact that a bird’s action most likely stimulated the plant growth is also significant, as
imagery related to Allston’s unconscious revolves around bird imagery in “Field Guide.”
This further supports the notion that Allston’s reluctant acceptance of inevitable poison
oak growth signifies a monumental shift in his psyche.⁷
Allston becomes aware of his shifting unconscious primarily through interactions with characters he encounters in *All the Little Live Things*. The introduction of these characters, as well as the relationships they develop with Allston, are more than coincidental, as Jung might suggest. One of these characters is Jim Peck, the young hippie who sets up camp on Allston’s property. Immediately, this action suggests Peck’s symbolic significance, as his residence in Allston’s yard mirrors his residence in Allston’s psyche. Peck’s character serves a function similar to that of Kaminski in “Field Guide,” as his arrogance and other personality traits inflame Allston because they remind him of himself. Jung states, “[R]esistances are usually bound up with projections, which are not recognized as such, and their recognition is a moral achievement beyond the ordinary” (*The Portable Jung* 146). Because Allston has not fully expanded his mind at this point in the novel, he is not capable of the “moral achievement” Jung describes, and thus loathes Peck without recognizing their shared traits. Peck, however, also directly parallels the youthful, rebellious attitude of Allston’s deceased son, Curtis, and because of this connection his presence awakens the guilt Allston feels regarding his relationship with Curtis — as well as Curtis’s tragic, possibly suicidal demise. In “Father’s and Sons in Stegner’s Ordered Dream of Man,” Forrest G. Robinson states that the parallel between Curtis and Peck may serve to remind us of the psychoanalytic concept in which something familiar is repressed and then displaced onto something else, where it appears strangely familiar. Peck’s strange resemblance to Curtis is indeed ‘uncanny’; the demanding, rebellious interloper becomes the locus for the displacement of Joe’s repressed rejection for his son.

Robinson affirms the psychoanalytical implications of Curtis and Peck’s commonalities,
and this analysis suggests that Allston’s interactions with Peck can be read as synchronous experiences that lead him to psychological conversion by awakening his repressed emotions towards his son.

Upon his first encounter with Peck, Allston immediately admits that the man both angers him and causes him to feel familiar sensations, as he states, “I came away implicated, entangled, and oppressed, and I knew exactly why […] he angered me in a remembered way, he made me doubt myself all afresh” (10). Allston responds to Peck in this confrontational manner because Peck reminds him of both Curtis and himself. Peck thus forces Allston to face the character traits that he and Curtis share and that he loathes, such as their mutual quick tempers and arrogant adolescent demeanors. The connection between Peck and Curtis is immediately established when Allston states that his feelings towards Peck are “remembered,” as this implies that his response to Peck is similar to his past interactions with Curtis. At this early point in the novel, because Allston has not yet confronted his unconscious, he does not recognize the Curtis/Peck parallel. Allston continues to experience déjà vu throughout his confrontations with Peck, such as when they argue about Peck’s residence and Allston states, “our argument, including the half-exposed contempt and hostility in it, reminded me of too many hopeless arguments in the past” (32).

The parallel between Curtis and Peck supports the notion that Peck’s introduction into Allston’s life can be considered a version of acausal synchronicity or, as Jung might suggest, a miracle. As Allston has no previous connections to Peck, Peck’s schooling, or Peck’s social circle, it stands to reason that their meeting does not have an explicit cause other than apparently random happenstance and Peck’s attraction to Allston’s secluded
property. Peck’s appearance in a tree house overlooking Allston’s home, property, and life is highly symbolic of Allston’s need to recognize a burdensome shadow in his life; Peck’s presence is a taunt suggesting, ‘Engage with me.’ This appearance, coupled with the undeniable unconscious awakening that Peck inspires in Allston, is what Jung would call an only apparently acausal coincidence—a coincidence imbued with deep meaning and potential for growth that is, in fact, not coincidental.

Evidence of this unconscious awakening can be found throughout the novel, and is particularly strong when Allston begins to realize that the “remembered” emotions he experiences when dealing with Peck stem from his failed relationship with his son. Gradually, Allston finds that he cannot ignore Peck despite his best efforts (Stegner, All the Little 105), and eventually he comes to the realization that Peck mirrors his son when he says: “He reminds me of things I do not want to remember. He threatens me, he endangers my peace. If he and Curtis are the future, then I am an irreconcilable past. They leave me nothing, not even the comfort of my blindness, because I think I see them very clearly” (195). This passage comes from Allston’s letter to Marian, and thus represents a moment of deep psychological reflection. It also fits in with the “see what I say” theme that serves as a quasi-psychological guide for Allston at this point in his journey, as he admits that his ability to “see” Peck and Curtis ruins his emotional equilibrium. “See,” here, refers to both his literal vision as well as his writing exercise, as he can both observe the similarities between Peck and Curtis and consciously realize his awareness of these similarities when he writes it down. By actualizing these connections, he furthers his psychological journey because he comes to grips with the dormant guilt he feels towards his son’s demise. Finally, once Peck leaves Allston’s property, Allston calls
Peck “Curtis all over again,” and admits that his interactions with Peck always leave him feeling guilty (24-25). Thus, synchronous experiences with Peck force repressed guilt to come to the forefront of Allston’s psychological environment.

As previously mentioned, critics such as Jackson Benson as well as Stegner, himself admit that Stegner’s work often draws on his own struggle to confront his past adversities. A major area in which Stegner suffered was his relationship with his father. An abusive alcoholic who terrorized young Stegner and his mother, brought economic ruin on his family, and eventually took his own life and that of his young lover, Stegner’s father was often a haunting part of Stegner’s past (Benson, *Wallace Stegner* 16). Stegner also suffered with his relationship to his own son, which, according to Robinson, was “troubled in ways altogether reminiscent of Joe and Curtis” (105). The Curtis-Joe-Peck triangle in *All the Little Live Things*, then, holds psychoanalytical implications not only for the characters within the novel, but for Stegner, himself.

While Peck brings out Allston’s guilt, synchronous experiences with Marian bring out his grief. Despite Allston’s tumultuous relationship with Curtis, he feels a tremendous amount of grief regarding his son’s death and works to keep these painful feelings buried in his subconscious. Marian’s arrival and subsequent diagnosis with terminal breast cancer, however, force these feelings to surface. The connection between Allston and Marian can be considered synchronous as, like with Kaminski and Peck, no underlying reasons exist that would explain why Marian, her husband, and her daughter move next to the secluded Allstons and pursue a relationship with them in California’s remote hills. Because Allston feels a responsibility to care for Marian in a quasi-paternal role, her
suffering and eventual death cause him to mourn, and in so doing confront his dormant
grief over Curtis’s death.

One way in which Marian helps Allston along in his psychological journey is by
challenging his view that nature must be contained in order to be manageable and
beautiful. While Allston rants about gophers, Marian states, “Who are you to say they
haven’t got as much right to live as a quail? They can’t help it if they’re not pretty, and
can’t sing. All they’re doing is just innocently digging away and eating the roots they run
into” (61). This passage speaks volumes about Marian’s influence on Allston.

Throughout the text, gophers symbolize Allston’s unconscious emotions — such as his
grief — and his desire to eradicate them from his yard demonstrates the care he takes to
keep these painful feelings out of his conscious mind. Marian’s acceptance of gophers in
her yard symbolizes her greater acceptance for all facets of nature, and this worldview
eventually helps Allston begrudgingly integrate what was once subconscious into his
everyday thoughts.

The comparison Marian makes between gophers and quails also holds
significance. As “Field Guide” established, Stegner often hints at Allston’s buried
emotions through bird imagery. By comparing gophers to quails and admitting that a
gopher is not as inherently appealing as a quail, Marian’s statement suggests that, in order
to achieve psychological growth, Allston must recognize the value in “gophers” despite
their occasionally destructive tendencies. Finally, the reference to roots suggests that
gophers instinctually rock the foundations of what they burrow into, just as Allston’s
acceptance of his pain and grief would disrupt his unfeeling façade. By using natural
images that often symbolize different aspects of Allston’s mind to describe Marian’s
philosophy, this passage describes what Marian eventually helps Allston achieve: psychological conversion due to his reawakened grief. The very fact that Marian expresses herself with this language can be considered an act of synchronicity in itself, as Marian’s speech acausally aligns itself with Allston’s inner thoughts which, as he later demonstrates, often involve pests such as gophers.

Perhaps the most significant passage in *All the Little Live Things* that represents Allston’s struggle with his unconscious and budding psychological growth occurs toward the middle of the novel. At this point, he begins to write a letter to Marian, whose illness has already forced his painful emotions to seep into the forefront of his mind. Here Allston begins to produce his own written material rather than publish that of others. This letter-writing exercise can be seen as an important step on Allston’s journey to psychological conversion, as it helps him integrate the many facets of his psyche by allowing him to, as he puts it, know what he thinks by seeing what he says (11). Letter writing permits him to sort through his emotions, as he feels freer to write his feelings down and analyze them than to express them verbally. The fact that Allston does not intend actually to give these letters to Marian emphasizes the interiority of this task. In one particular passage, Allston discusses the gophers that invade his yard, and in doing so creates a map of his psychological process as it stands in the middle of his *All the Little Live Things* conversion experience. He states:

I walked around the house and discovered that within the past twenty-four hours a gopher had come boring straight under the walk, leaving collapsing bricks in his wake, and was already throwing up mounds of dirt in the rose garden. These things make me swear out loud. They’re infallible, they find your weakness like heat-seeking missiles […] I had discovered that the system was not made for gopher country, in which it got undermined, or from adobe soil, which in the dry season cracked so wide that all the sand went down to China and the bricks caved after it […] You can tell a gopher’s general direction by the way the later mounds
lie. Dig across the line of these and you cut his main tunnel. This is the only effective place to set traps, one facing each way. His instinct is to plug up the place where you have broken into his passage.

(Stegner, *All the Little* 198-99)

Here, as in other moments throughout the novel, the gopher represents Allston’s unconscious. As Allston has already begun to confront his repressed pain at this point in his journey, his description of the gopher’s destructive tendencies implies that these painful emotions — which still exist in the depths of his mind, just as gophers tunnel underneath a physical landscape — wreak havoc on the surface of his conscious mind. Thus, his desire to swear when he sees a gopher’s tunnel mirrors his instinct to beat back his grief and guilt. The fact that he recognizes that his rose garden was not “made for gopher country,” however, implies that, on some level, he realizes that his stoic psychological façade cannot permanently suffice to repress his pain. Allston also seems to understand that his instinct is to “set traps” and catch gophers, thus preventing them from unearthing his soil just as he prevents his unconscious emotions from unearthing his callous conscious mind. Additionally, the gopher’s instinct to fill any holes in his underground tunnel mirrors the tendency of the unconscious to conceal itself and stay suppressed. The gopher passage, therefore, provides a summary of Allston’s mental processes while simultaneously implying that Allston’s awareness of said processes and the existence of his suppressed feelings is growing throughout *All the Little Live Things*.

In “History, Myth, and the Western Writer,” Stegner states: “[Y]ou don’t choose between the past and the present; you try to make the one serve the other […] I do not think we can forget the one or turn away from the other” (qtd. in Handley 222). Stegner puts this statement into practice in *All the Little Live Things* when Marian’s circumstances force Allston to look into his past and acknowledge the pain he still
harbors about his son’s untimely demise. Marian’s present circumstances first begin to take their toll on Allston when she is diagnosed and he decides to compose the letter that, as mentioned, allows him to put his earlier assertion that he must write his feelings in order to know what he truly thinks into practice. This letter is significant not only because it showcases Stegner’s effective use of natural imagery for psychological purposes, but also because it allows Allston to examine the root of his negative relationships with both Curtis and Peck. Allston not only discusses his fear of Peck’s generation, but also goes into great detail about his relationship with Curtis. Although Allston partly blames the twentieth century for what he calls Curtis’s addiction and “corruption,” he does admit, “I have to blame myself for not finding any way of reaching him” (128). Allston goes on to describe his inability to “think of [Curtis’s] face composed on the final satin without a clutch in [his] chest” (185) and his feeling “ambiguously, but bitterly responsible” for Curtis’s death (189). Because of the deep connection Allston feels with Marian as well as his anticipation that her illness would force him to suffer through her loss, he is able to reflect on his feelings about young Curtis’s death mask, which is described as “unmarked by pain” (185). This description indicates that Allston likely struggled so much to connect with his son because Curtis served as Allston’s mirror, or, in Jungian terms, shadow. Jung states,

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it is therefore, as a rule, met with considerable resistance.

(\textit{The Portable Jung} 145)

Allston’s newfound ability to ruminate on his relationship with Curtis, then, allows him to become more open to painful growth. Allston also draws parallels between his
respective relationships with both Marian and Curtis, as he feels that he failed to save
Marian’s life when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and failed to prevent Curtis
from adopting immoral tendencies that, in Allston’s view, contributed to his death.

On the subject of this letter to Marian, Allston states:

I had never finished it, signed it, or sent it. But it reminds me that even back in
midsummer Marian had begun to force or coax me out of the burrow where I
lived with the gophers and the moles and the other creatures of the darkness.

(Stegner, All the Little 196)

In this statement, Allston explicitly connects himself with gophers and thus begins to
look at the creatures as more than vermin he needs to exterminate. Additionally, by
crediting Marian with coaxing him out of his “burrow,” Allston suggests that agonizing
emotions buried deep within his psyche are beginning to emerge from his dark
unconscious. Because of synchronous experiences with Marian that force him to confront
painful memories from his past, therefore, Allston experiences a psychological
conversion in which he no longer denies feeling guilt and grief about his perceived failure
as a father.

Allston’s letter to Marian reveals an additional source of guilt that greatly
impacted his adolescently immature psyche: his relationship with his mother. In Wolf
Willow, Stegner claims, “[If you] expose a child to a particular environment […] he will
perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies” (21). Thus, the tumultuous
psychological environment Allston was exposed to in his youth greatly affects his daily
mental processes. Allston characterizes his mother as a depressed working-class woman
who did all she could to provide opportunities for her only son. Because of this, they had
to move frequently, and Allston states, “There [was] no plan or continuity or
permanence” (Stegner, All the Little 191). This demonstrates that Allston’s current
problem with the world’s imperfections and randomness has its roots in his childhood insecurities and traumas. Further supporting the idea that his current psychological problems began in his childhood, Allston states, “I had hidden myself in corners and window seats and backyards and sheds with books or projects of my own, knowing even at seven or eight that the maid’s child would be suffered and sometimes sentimentally made over, but not indulged” (192). Thus, Allston learned to suppress his feelings from a young age. Allston also describes his own ambitions while his mother was working and states, “[I]t never occurred to me […] that instead of blotting up teachers’ attention and devouring books I might be out earning some money to make my mother’s life easier” (Stegner, All the Little 191). Allston, then, still harbors guilt about that lack of care he demonstrated toward his mother. These deeply rooted psychological issues are clearly behind his inability to connect with Curtis emotionally. His letter states that he learned to live without emotion at an early age through “a full retreat of the soul” (189). His formative years, then, clearly shaped his dominant psychological make-up, which is highly intellectual but unfeeling. It is through writing to Marian that Allston can allow painful memories of this time to enter his conscious mind and unite his divided self.

At the very start of All the Little Live Things, Allston asserts, “I don’t believe in conversions and character changes any more than I believe you can transform a radio into a radar by rewiring one or two of its circuits” (11). The very fact that Allston so vehemently denies that conversion experiences exist suggests that the concept is integral to the plot of his story. Allston’s journey in All the Little Live Things causes him to transition from the self-doubting, emotionally adolescent man he was at the end of “Field Guide” to a more emotionally enlightened but depressed figure at the end of All the Little
Live Things. On the broader scale of his overarching psychological journey, the end of this novel represents an emotional low-point, as he feels guilt and grief over Curtis’s death in his past as well as over Marian’s death in the present. James states, “Hope, happiness, security, resolve, emotions characteristic of conversion can be […] explosive. And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them” (The Varieties of Religious Experience 220). As Allston will learn, these painful feelings are essential to feeling alive and whole. Allston admits to his newfound emotional turmoil when, in narration that occurs after Marian’s death, he states: “[M]y eyelids flutter open, and I am still on the table, the gown in pulled away to reveal the incision, the clamps, the sponges, and the blood, the masks are still bent over me with attention at once impersonal and profound” (11). The fact that the “masks” are still attending to him suggests that his psychological journey does not end with All the Little Live Things.

Despite his initial rejection of conversion experiences, Allston mentions them throughout the novel. He does so again toward the middle of the novel, after his initial encounters with Marian have begun to take effect and he chooses to rescue an opossum from a dog rather than allow it to die. After doing so, Allston admits that he “show[s] signs of conversion” (83). This moment holds extreme significance, as Allston goes out of his way to rescue an animal he would once have considered “vermin.” Symbolically, as with gophers, opossums could represent Allston’s tendency to play dead. By rescuing this creature, therefore, Allston demonstrates a critical step in Jamesian psychological conversion. According to James, one can choose to accept or not accept the universe, and “in passing from one [mindset] to the other a ‘critical point’ has been overcome” (“Circumscription of the Topic” 20). While Allston’s action does not demonstrate
complete acceptance of all nature’s facets, it does represent a significant step in his journey.

In yet another significant demonstration of his personal growth, Allston states that after Marian’s death he would not choose to go back to his previously frigid emotional state. He states, “[E]ven in the gnashing of my teeth I acknowledge my conversion. […] I shall be richer all my life for this sorrow” (Stegner, All the Little 345). Here, Allston admits to experiencing a conversion, and even correctly suggests that the psychological roots of said experience lie in his ability not only to feel painful emotions, but also to recognize that these feelings can be productive and even enriching. This experience seems to be an example of a conversion similar to Tolstoy’s as described by William James:

[T]he happiness that comes […] is not the simple, ignorance of ill, but something vastly more complex […] the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before.

(“The Sick Soul” 81)

By recognizing that his sorrow need not be synonymous with a weakened quality of life, Allston demonstrates the positive effects of his conversion. Significantly, his assertion that his sorrow will enrich him comes shortly after he resigns himself to the inevitable growth of poison oak on his property. This provides further support for his mini-conversion in All the Little Live Things, as James states, “when we come to study the phenomenon of conversion […] we shall see that a not infrequent consequence of the change operated in the subject is a transfiguration of the face of nature in his eyes” (“The Sick Soul” 78). The fact that Allston begrudgingly allows nature to take its predestined course and stops killing little live things after Marian’s death suggests that he has
experienced psychological conversion because he more frequently accepts his inability to
control completely his surroundings as well as his painful emotions.

While these instances support Allston’s continuing conversion in *All the Little
Live Things*, they do not suggest that he has completely integrated all parts of his
unconscious into his conscious mind because of his extremely depressed state and
reluctant attitude. At the novel’s conclusion and in no uncertain terms, Allston states, “I
do not accept the universe” (Stegner, *All the Little* 340). He must make more progress
toward accepting the world in front of him, as well as the relatively small role he plays in
the world, before his journey from repressed curmudgeon to actualized, psychologically
integrated adult can be complete. He must dig more deeply into his past.

**The Spectator Bird**

*But I have made my pilgrimage to my mother’s cottage. It was as meaningless as I
knew it would be. The cultural vitamin deficiency is not appeased by nibbling the
clay and plaster of the old home. The cultural amputee is still trying to scratch the
itch of the missing limb.*

(Stegner, *The Spectator Bird* 116)

Allston’s story concludes in *The Spectator Bird*, a 1976 novel whose tone
embodies a more somber quality than its predecessors. In *The Spectator Bird*, Allston
believes his newly developed rheumatism is a sign of his inevitable death, and as a result
suffers bursts of depression and regret. When he receives a postcard from an old friend
with whom he had romantic tension during a trip to Denmark with his wife, Allston and
Ruth return to the extensive journals he kept during the trip, and in reading them Allston
embarks on the final step of his psychological journey: accepting himself and the universe despite their imperfections.

This acceptance represents the final step in Allston’s psychological conversion from adolescent curmudgeon to emotionally available, accepting adult; however, as with the other Allston stories, he experiences a change of heart throughout this novel in which he realizes the value of his marriage to Ruth and lets go of the lingering feelings he has for Astrid, as well as the guilt he feels for possessing said feelings. To accomplish this change, Allston accesses buried memories and emotions not just involving other people, but also involving natural and social spheres. Allston’s final transformation takes place while reflecting on his trip to far-off Denmark. His mother—a major source of both his formative psychological experiences and current deep-seated guilt—came from Denmark, and Allston made it a point on his trip to visit the castle in which she worked. This broader scope reflects the idea that *The Spectator Bird* represents the conclusion of Allston’s narrative and more expansive psychological journey. Additionally, the more worldly symbols and events reflect the specific problems Allston grapples with in this novel, as these problems are often more related to broader themes such as death and dying than more narrow subjects such as humility and grieving.

Although *The Spectator Bird* does not frequently contain the rich natural imagery found throughout “Field Guide” and *All the Little Live Things*, certain passages that describe natural phenomena still denote Allston’s unconscious state throughout the novel. One such passage occurs at the very beginning and sets the tone for Allston’s initial state of mind: dark, depressed, and out-of-the-ordinary. Allston narrates,

[T]he winds are changeable and gusty and clouds drive over and an occasional flurry of fine rain darkens the terrace bricks, this place conforms to none of the
clichés about California with which they advertise the Sunshine Cities for the Sunset Years.  

(Stegner, The Spectator Bird 3)

Here, wind symbolizes Allston’s thoughts, which are “changeable” after their refinement in Stegner’s previous Allston stories. Additionally, the word “changeable” suggests that the repressed thoughts and feelings in Allston’s unconscious could experience more tumult throughout this novel. If, as in other novels, the ground — or terrace bricks — represents Allston’s conscious mind, then it stands to reason that it would be hit by the clouds’ occasional rain showers, as his previously suppressed emotions are now integrated into his consciousness. Allston’s quip about California’s stereotypes serves two functions. First, it reminds readers that Allston’s retirement experience has thus far not been the relaxing romp he was expecting, as he has endured numerous instances of painful growth, both emotional and psychological. Second, it hints at Allston’s internal state at the start of The Spectator Bird. Throughout this novel, Allston grapples with the idea that the end of his life is approaching, and he must integrate his unconscious disappointment with himself and his environment into his conscious mind before he can accept the inevitable end of his life.

Information provided after this passage is integral to the novel’s psychological setting, as it both reminds readers of Allston’s past psychological victories and defines where growth must occur in order to spur further psychological conversion. Allston recognizes that his retirement has not unfolded as planned when he states,

[T]he bush tits are doing what I thought we would be doing out here, just messing around, paying no attention to time or duty, kicking up leaves and playing hide-and-seek up and down the oak trunks and generally enjoying themselves. It is meditation of this kind that keeps me, at nearly seventy, so contented and wholesome.

(Stegner, Spectator 3)
On the surface, this passage seems as if it comes from a healthy psyche, as it suggests a fair amount of reflection and self-knowledge. This is partially true, as Allston’s bird imagery reads differently in this passage than in the other novels’ bird descriptions. Here, Allston directly acknowledges his connection to birds, and because of this Stegner does not need to imply Allston’s unconscious parallels with the birds’ actions. Stegner demonstrates that Allston has undergone significant psychological redefinition in both “Field Guide” and *All the Little Live Things*, as the parallels he makes between himself and his natural surroundings no longer happen on an unconscious plain. The last line of this passage, as well as information provided in proceeding paragraphs, however, indicates that Allston still has a long way to go. While he describes himself as contented and wholesome, he later concedes that his wife thinks him irritable and depressed and wants him to work on the memoirs he planned to compose after relocating to California. Later, when speaking of himself in the third person, Allston states: “There has not been one significant event in his life that he planned” (4). Allston is still not properly in touch with his emotions — specifically those regarding his aging process.

Significantly, the theme that writing can lead to psychological renewal and recovery is mentioned early in this novel. Although it first seems that Allston will write new memoirs to appease his wife, he ultimately embarks on a deep study of his own past by revisiting the journals he kept during a trip to Denmark after Curtis’s death. By reading these journals aloud to Ruth, Allston recognizes not only his current unconscious fear of death, but also revisits the guilt he feels about his feelings for Astrid as well as his life-long discontentment with natural imperfections throughout the universe. Just as the Marian letter aided Allston in *All the Little Live Things*, so does the deeply personal
material in his past journals help him not only to recognize his current unconscious thought processes, but also to integrate his past with his present. According to Melody Graulich, through Allston’s story “Stegner provides a hopeful vision of refuge and finally an example of reciprocal solace for life’s inescapable wounds” (59). In this way, Allston’s and Ruth’s decision to revisit his journals provides a perfect end to Allston’s psychological journey, as the exercise permits him to integrate not only his unconscious emotions with his conscious mind, but also his past self with his present self. This act is also significant in that it allows him to abandon his peripheral position as a literary agent and engage with his own written work. In a true demonstration of his psychological growth, Allston early recognizes his life-long desire for continuity when he states: “[I have] always been hungry for some continuity and assurance and sense of belonging, but [have] never had ancestors or descendants or a place in the world. Little orphan Joe, what a sad case” (Stegner, Spectator 19). Allston recognizes throughout his growth in The Spectator Bird his ability to find the continuity he craves in his own life’s story by revisiting his roots. As Jung states, “To be ‘unhistorical’ is the Promethean sin” (The Portable Jung 459).

Allston’s true psychological journey in The Spectator Bird begins with synchronicity, as a rediscovered postcard from Astrid inspires Allston and Ruth to revisit their time in Denmark. Allston’s reaction to the post card’s unearthing demonstrates both his recent psychological growth as well as the synchronous quality of the event. He states:

Enter the unexpected—and I dislike the unexpected, as the man said, unless I have had the chance to prepare for it. The fourth item I took out of my pocket was a postcard, closely written, and forwarded to our New York address of nine years
ago. At the bottom of the hill, at the last edge of sun, in the smell of crushed eucalyptus button, I stopped and read it.

This passage recalls Allston’s pre-*Spectator Bird* progress because, despite his mildly flippant tone, he admits to himself that he dislikes the unexpected in any scenario. In “Field Guide” and most of *All the Little Live Things*, Allston would have suppressed this character trait. Additionally, the fact that the postcard is nine years old holds psychological significance, as he now cannot ignore what his past self attempted to bury. The fact that he discovers Astrid’s note on the edge of twilight suggests the pivotal role it will play during Allston’s journey toward self-acceptance throughout this novel, as does the mention of crushed eucalyptus — environmentally literate Stegner would have known that eucalyptus oil is a well-regarded cleanser.

Allston discovers this postcard under synchronous circumstances. While he spends most of *The Spectator Bird*’s early pages ruminating on his mortality, he does not make reference to Astrid or his trip to Denmark, and certainly does not seek out any old correspondences. Thus, the postcard’s discovery does not seem to be caused by any specific set of circumstances and can be considered an acausal event. The postcard does, however, heighten Allston’s growth, as he immediately seeks out the journals he kept in Denmark after reading it. These journals aid Allston in connecting his past and present self in terms of both his affair with Astrid as well as his relationship with his Danish immigrant mother, whom he finally mourns through his letter to Marian in *All the Little Live Things*. Allston even states that reading the journals “was like a letter from a dead Joe Allston to the one who survives” (17).
While the postcard and journal rediscovery can be considered coincidental experiences that further Allston’s psychological conversion on their own, the content found within them hints at more than coincidental experiences from Allston’s past that helped him during his trip to Denmark and continue to help him in his present-day California. The overarching psychological conversion Allston undergoes in all Stegner’s works allows him to revisit psychologically rich times in his life in order to mine them for new significance. The most significant content Allston revisits is his interaction with Astrid, which helped him process Curtis’s death in the past and now helps him evaluate his marriage and accept that his family name will die with him.

Allston’s relationship with Astrid is both rich and difficult, as it can be considered both an emotional extra-marital affair as well as a mild case of incestuous behavior. At the start of Allston’s journals, before he reaches Denmark and discovers Astrid, he writes about the tumultuous ocean he and Ruth must cross. Here, as in “Field Guide,” Stegner uses the image of a tumultuous ocean to reflect the turmoil of Allston’s mind in a particularly Romantic way. The long and memorably rough journey is significant for two reasons. First, as previously demonstrated, it sets the tone of Allston’s mindset at both the time of his writing as well as the time of his reading. In the tradition of Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth, the ocean stands for Allston’s mind, which was disrupted by his grief following Curtis’s death, as well as his anxiety about his impending death and fear that he will leave no legacy. The journal’s initial environment, then, characterizes Allston’s psychological distress and foreshadows the rearrangements his psyche will undergo as both writer and reader. Second, it connects Allston’s own impending death to Curtis’s death by drowning. This imagery indicates Allston’s
vulnerable emotional position, as well as stresses the deep connection between Allston and Curtis that is emphasized in *All the Little Live Things*. This difficult journey to Denmark also foreshadows the importance of what transpires with Astrid upon his arrival.

In Denmark, Allston and Ruth stay with Allston’s distant cousin, Countess Astrid, who lost much of her fortune and reputation after her husband left her. The grief she feels over his loss as well as the feeling of failure she experiences toward both her marriage and her wealth align her with Allston, who grapples with similar feelings regarding Curtis and fatherhood. These parallel circumstances exhibit synchronicity, as neither Allston nor Astrid had any knowledge of the other before their meeting, and their instant attraction to each other helps both to come to grips with their respective circumstances. In Allston’s journals, even his description of Astrid parallels his own tendency to suppress his pain when he writes:

> She would be statuesque except she is so animated. An almost feverish eagerness possesses her in conversation, she lights up even before you say anything. Everything is so funny, or so wonderful, or so nice. Maybe the strain of speaking English, in which she is fluent but not always correct, keeps her hyped up.  

(66)

Interestingly, this eagerness to please and stay animated could be seen as a parallel defense mechanism to the cockiness Allston demonstrates in “Field Guide.” The fact that Allston could not identify this behavior as a defense mechanism, but rather assumed it was to compensate for a language barrier, demonstrates that he had not undergone, at the time of his relationship with Astrid, any of the psychological transformations found throughout Stegner’s novels. Additionally, as both a family member and native of Denmark, Astrid unconsciously reminds Allston of his mother, which partly explains his
eagerness to spend time with her and assist her; he wants to redeem himself after years of neglecting his mother. Allston states, “I can’t avoid the feeling that she is just such as girl as my mother was when she first got the courage […] to spend her savings on a third-class ticket to America, all by herself” (39). While this connection certainly accounts for some of their very close, nearly physical relationship, despite their blood ties and Allston’s marriage to Ruth, an alternate explanation for this relationship also exists which would connect it to Allston’s struggle with his mortality in California present time.

The Allston who wrote these Denmark journals was obviously a broken man consumed with guilt and grief about both his son’s death and his treatment of his mother. Distanced from his wife because his of compulsion to bury his painful feelings deep in his subconscious, Allston was emotionally unavailable. While he reads her the journals, Ruth speaks to Allston’s tendency to suppress these feelings to the point where he cannot get over them when she says, “I think you only get [the feeling that you are distanced from these journals] because you don’t like to remember. You put things away and never look at them again” (75). The journals, however, are fraught with existential questions that often have to do with Allston’s purpose on this planet as well as whether he will leave a legacy now that his son has passed away (64). Because these questions often revolve around his perceived failure to cultivate a lasting family, it can be speculated that he sought an affair with Astrid because she was the only blood relative he had left, and he needed someone to fill the void left by his emotional detachment from Ruth. By developing an almost unnaturally close relationship with Astrid, Allston took comfort in the fact that he did not alone carry the burden of his familial line. Additionally, because
he did not feel he could properly comfort Ruth, he dealt with Astrid’s grief regarding her husband and lost fortune rather than his wife’s grief regarding her deceased son.

While Allston’s relationship with Astrid helped him in the past by allowing him to displace his anxiety about his legacy as well as his seeming inability to comfort his wife’s grief due to his own suffering, it takes on a new significance when Allston and Ruth revisit it while reading the Denmark journals. According to Benson, “[Stegner] admired Faulkner for the richness of his associations from the past and mourned the poverty of these associations in most western novels” (Benson, “Writing as the Expression of Belief” 25). It stands to reason, then, that Stegner would use Allston’s examination of his past to inform Allston’s functioning in the present. By reading the journals to Ruth and subsequently revealing his relationship with Astrid and the emotions it stirred, Allston places himself in a vulnerable position that he has not previously allowed himself to occupy. In this position, he has direct and honest conversations with his wife about Curtis, his mother, his own insecurities, and his marriage. These conversations help Allston not only to bring his unconscious fears from the past and present to his mind’s surface, but also to recognize the value of his marriage and life partner. An example of one of these conversations is as follows:

[Ruth:] ‘You’ve never gotten over [Curtis’s death].’
[Joe:] ‘No, I guess not.’
‘Why not, Joe? It’s been over twenty years. I loved him, too. I thought I couldn’t bear it when he died. But I have. It’s the only way. It’s not healthy to go on grieving forever.’
[…]
[Joe:] ‘Yes? Well…sure it bothers me. It was the worst thing that ever happened to us. If you can finally bear it, all that proves is you’re a born survivor, and I’m not […] Anyway it’s not his death, or not only his death.’
‘What then? Do you still feel guilty about all the clashes you had?’
‘That, sure. I don’t suppose I’ll ever get over blaming myself. I should have been wiser, somehow. But that’s not all of it, either […] [It’s also] the way the world
wags. […] The difference between what we’d like to be and what we’re able to be. How to respect myself when I know I’m confused and cowardly. How to respect a world where nothing I believe in is valued. How to live and grow old inside a head I’m contemptuous of, in a culture I despise.’

(Stegner, *The Spectator Bird* 104-05)

This passage illuminates the fact that Allston’s journals open deep and honest dialogue between him and his wife that allows him to sort through his uncertainties and traverse a path toward a psychological conversion in which he becomes better equipped to accept himself and his environment. In these dialogues, Ruth often acts as an objective, devil’s advocate-type figure, which allows Allston to sort through his mental anguish and understand where these conundrums emerge. This dialogue demonstrates that Allston has grown since the time in which he wrote the journals because he is now able to openly, albeit reluctantly, share his feelings with his wife. The struggles that he lists in this particular passage echo many of the questions he asks himself in his Denmark journals, and this connection demonstrates the link between Allston’s past and present selves. Because of the synchronicity found in Allston’s discovery of Astrid’s postcard, in his revisiting of his Denmark journals, and in his significant relationship with Astrid, Allston is able to further his psychological growth and mend what James would call his “divided self.”

Throughout *The Spectator Bird*, Allston’s psychological journey is often reflected by his physical state. It is often in his most physically painful moments that he achieves the greatest psychological growth, which re-emphasizes the idea that a large component of his conversion involves allowing himself to feel repressed pain. For example, after the previously mentioned conversation with Ruth, Allston states, “I stood up, and found out that I was so stiff I almost couldn’t stand. My toes, ankles, knees, hips, ground bone
against bone. My finger joints were sore and hot to the touch as I casually washed them in the air” (106). It is significant that, in this passage, Allston does not complain about his physical ailments, but rather describes them fairly clinically and proceeds to go to bed once he is through stretching. This presents a stark contrast from the novel’s start, as Allston frequently complained about his ailments, and worried that these physical symptoms signified the immediate end of his life. Here, however, Allston seems more accepting. This is an important step in his overarching conversion process. In “The Divided Self, and the Process of Unification,” James states, “[P]eace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life” (87). This idea is integral for Allston, as learning to accept what he cannot change — such as his ignorance in “Field Guide,” Marian’s death in All the Little Live Things, and his physical deterioration in The Spectator Bird — serves as an important theme in his overall conversion to a person who accepts and embraces a wide spectrum of emotions and the ways of the universe.

In terms of his continued conversion within The Spectator Bird, Allston faced the difficult task of confessing his feelings for Astrid to his wife in order to evaluate his guilt over the affair, as well as the value he affixes to his marriage, just as he confessed his treatment of his mother and Curtis to Marian. Throughout the novel, Allston unabashedly shares his journals with Ruth, thus confiding in her with his innermost feelings about the affair. This is a significant step for Allston, as he overcomes his natural instinct to relegate his intimate feelings to his unconscious. This sharing, then, is a sign of his growing conversion, as he comes to realize Ruth’s value by confessing to her and
allowing her to ask probing questions that expand his understanding of his painful emotions. At the end of the novel, Allston states:

> It is something—it can be everything—to have found a fellow bird with whom you can sit among the rafters while the drinking and boasting and reciting and fighting go on below; a fellow bird whom you can look after and find bugs and seeds for; one who will patch your bruises and straighten your ruffled feathers and mourn over your hurts when you accidentally fly into something you can’t handle. (Stegner, *The Spectator Bird* 203)

This passage demonstrates enormous character growth on Allston’s part. From the start of his arc in “Field Guide,” Allston has unconsciously and, eventually, consciously found his internal mental state reflected in the actions of birds. Here, he refers to both Ruth and himself as birds, which signifies that Allston has both expanded his conscious recognition of his connection to birds — which readers first saw in “Field Guide” — as well as recognized that his relationship with Ruth provides him with incomparable companionship. It is significant that he is speaking in metaphorical terms rather than simply describing what he sees in nature, as this represents measured growth. James quotes Professor Leuba, stating, “When the sense of estrangement […] fencing man about in a narrowly limited ego, breaks down, the individual finds himself ‘at one with all creation’” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* 271). Additionally, the fact that Allston acknowledges that he has emotional hurts at the end of this passage is important. This admission holds weight because he is open to the idea that Ruth could help him with his “bruises” and mourning, whereas at the novel’s start he depended merely on painkillers and numbness.

*The Spectator Bird* is the final stop in Allston’s psychological journey, and as such it presents him grappling with his repressed anxiety regarding his inability to leave a
human legacy at the end of his life. During a conversation with Ruth that takes place after
a night spent reading his Denmark journals, Allston states:

   Everything that happens to me happens offstage, everything is reported by a
   messenger. When I die, I’ll have to read about it in the papers, because not even
   that will really have happened to me […] I just don’t exactly feel like I’m the
   master of my fate and the captain of my soul.

   (Stegner, The Spectator Bird 166)

In this passage, Allston demonstrates his fear over that fact that he cannot control his
physical deterioration. Significantly, however, he also implies his awareness, still, of his
tendency to exist on the outskirts of his life rather than fully participate in it due to his
suppressed emotions. Thus, as the novel’s title suggests, Allston realizes that he has been
a spectator in his life rather than a participant. With this discovery, he will be better able
to change even this deeply held reluctance.

   To become less of a spectator, Allston must take it upon himself to accept both
   painful emotions and the imperfections in his life and outer universe. The ending of his
Denmark journals signifies the fact that he must take on this mantle. Significantly, his
journals do not have a conclusive ending, as the last page contains “Nothing but some
jottings—some flight times, some telephone numbers, something in Danish” (185). This
significant anticlimax subtly suggests that the story Allston tells in his Denmark journals
does not end with his departure from Europe. The inclusion of “flight times” supports
this, as it hints at Allston’s relationship with birds and bird imagery that develops over
the course of his three stories.

   The final passage of his Denmark journals is also significant to Allston’s
conversion. The passage relays a conversation that took place between Allston, Ruth, and
Astrid concerning the incest that occurred in Astrid’s family in order to maintain its royal
title. Astrid describes the vast amount of inbreeding that has occurred, as well as her
father’s almost obsessive need to continue with the tradition in order to maintain pure
blood lines. Much like Astrid’s relationship with Allston, this train of thought reflects
Allston’s anxiety over his self-perceived failure to provide an heir to his family name
after Curtis’s death. The fact that Allston felt it necessary to document this explicit incest
demonstrates that he found the subject interesting perhaps as a possible fleeting idea for
his failure to leave a legacy, and possibly because of the ludicrous desperation on
Astrid’s father’s part.

Significantly, Allston does not include his kiss with Astrid in his journals, which
could signify his decision to bury it and its accompanying feelings in his unconscious, as
he knew the action was a betrayal to Ruth, an incestuous taboo, and a reflection of his
desperation to find both comfort and new opportunities after Curtis’s death. In a true
demonstration of the effectiveness of his psychological growth, he spends a chapter
ruminating on the kiss at the end of *The Spectator Bird* in which he comes to the
realization that “in every choice there is a component, maybe a big component, of pain”
(199). Although brief, this line signifies that Allston has undergone a genuine
psychological conversion experience, as he is willing not only to feel pain by thinking
about his time with Astrid, but also to reinforce the idea from *All the Little Live Things*
that pain is a necessary and often unavoidable consequence of living. After a short story
and two novels dedicated to his journey, Allston has finally reached a point in which his
most troubling unconscious thoughts have emerged into his conscious mind, thus
allowing him to feel pain and sorrow in productive ways, as well as to embrace the
randomness and imperfections in his wider universe.
When Allston makes this realization, he is out pacing his property in the moonlight. This provides a nice contrast to Stegner’s introduction of Allston in “Field Guide,” in which he is standing in the sun. While this may seem like an inversion of archetypal enlightenment imagery, it is fitting in Allston’s case because his particular conversion experience allowed him to access and assess the dark, buried emotions stored in his unconscious. According to Jung, “The encounter between conscious and unconscious has to ensure that the light which shines in the darkness is not only comprehended by the darkness, but comprehends it” (The Portable Jung 647). While on this walk, Allston describes the natural scene facing him when he states:

There are two big live oaks along that two-hundred-foot stretch, one in the corner above the turn and the other where the drive widens into the parking area. Between them is open meadow in which, last fall, I sowed two hundred daffodils by throwing the bulbs broadcast and digging them in where they fell. Every time I turned at the top of the hill and started back toward the house, I was looking across them toward the moon. There was not enough light for them to show yellow; their bowing heads gleamed palest silver-gilt above the pale grass. When I came back, moving out of the shadow of the oak, individual blossoms grew luminous, like big exhausted fireflies.

(Stegner, The Spectator Bird 200)

This concluding natural vision greatly contrasts with that found in All the Little Live Things, as the landscape described is full of natural beauty that pleases and is partly, but randomly, cultivated by Allston. This time, he has killed neither birds nor gophers. This landscape also provides a solid concluding image of Allston’s mental state at the end of The Spectator Bird. The two live oaks seem to represent Allston’s conscious and unconscious minds, while the field in between symbolizes the great divide that existed between the two before his conversion experiences allowed him to move out of the shadows. The daffodils that Allston had strewn represent his “apparently” disordered synchronous experiences, which ultimately led to the conversion that allowed Allston’s
psyche to become more ordered and unified. The fact that these blossoms are perennial symbolizes that Allston’s journey is still on course, as his new emotional openness will allow him to ruminate further. James states, “[I]t may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible” (“The Sick Soul” 85). While Allston is not a fully enlightened soul at the end of his narrative arc, he has experienced a dramatic psychological conversion through Stegner’s use of natural imagery, which is reminiscent of the Romantics at their best.

Romanticism

*But often on this cottage do I muse*
*As on a picture, till my wiser mind*
*Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief*  
*(Wordsworth, The Ruined Cottage lines 117-19)*

Throughout his many novels, Stegner makes explicit references to Romantic figures, especially William Wordsworth. Stegner’s connection to authors from the Romantic Period explains, in part, why he uses natural images to further his novels’ symbolic underpinnings. Many of Stegner’s most frequently occurring natural images, such as descriptions of birds and burrowing animals, reflect typical Romantic symbols. Keats’s numbness and symbolic connection to a songbird in “Ode to a Nightingale,” for example, is echoed by Allston’s emotional numbness and psychological disconnect in “Field Guide.” Further, Allston’s specific references and connections to both Wordsworth and Thoreau support the notion that his growing acceptance of natural flora and fauna reflects his growing acceptance of himself and the general flaws of the universe.
Stegner’s connection to Wordsworth is relatively unexplored by scholars and critics alike; however, Stegner obviously was influenced by Wordsworth’s poetry. The most explicit example of Stegner’s use of Wordworthian text can be found in the epigraph to *All the Little Live Things*, where Stegner extracts a passage from Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage.” The passage reads, “Oh, Sir! the good die first, / And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust / Burn to the socket” (Wordsworth, “The Ruined Cottage” lines 96-98). This poem, originally part of a long poem entitled *The Excursion*, contains many significant themes that highlight Allston’s journey both within *All the Little Live Things* and throughout Stegner’s three Allston-centric texts. The lines in the epigraph directly connect to *All the Little Live Things*, as they seem to reflect the notion that Marian, who is an unquestionably “good” figure throughout the novel, experiences an untimely death while Allston, whose heart is “dry” because of his relative inability to access painful emotions before his conversion, must continue to live.

“The Ruined Cottage” is an incredibly bleak poem narrated by a listless traveler who happens upon a cottage overrun by its natural surroundings. Once he has found the cottage, said traveler happens upon an old man who dictates the story of the cottage’s previous occupant — a woman who presumably died by “yielding to the foolishness of grief” (line 119). The old man tells the traveler this story to warn him against the destructive powers of listless grief, and thus can be considered a figure reflected by Marian in *All the Little Live Things*, as well as Ruth in *The Spectator Bird*. Throughout Stegner’s novels, Allston mirrors this lesson, as part of his psychological conversion experience involves his ability to productively feel and process his emotions rather than bury and suffer from latent guilt and grief concerning both his upbringing and his
deceased son. Although Wordsworth’s speaker initially presents the cottage as bleak and overrun, by the poem’s end the old man describes it as “an image of tranquility, / So calm and still” (“Cottage” lines 517-518). Wordsworth’s message, then, is ultimately hopeful — while pain may remain, tranquility can also exist. “The Ruined Cottage,” therefore, reflects integral parts of Allston’s journey: his learned ability both to accept the universe and also to turn painful feelings into productive emotions.

In *All the Little Live Things*, Stegner integrates references to another Wordsworthian theme: that of a formative, pastoral childhood. When describing a meadow Allston sees as an “eighteenth-century landscape” (Stegner, *All the Little* 102), he states, “Most orderly and neoclassic that pastoral grove, those noble trees, those gracefully disposed figures; most romantic the touch of gaiety and aspiration as the child soars upward in the swing” (103). This sentiment is reflective of Wordsworth’s epic autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, which Stephen Greenblatt describes as “involving the interaction between the mind and nature and between the creative imagination and the force of history” (1553). In book one of this poem, Wordsworth describes the important role nature played in his formative childhood years as it guided him to form a moral conscience. Having stolen a mother bird’s eggs, he recalls,

> [...] Oh, at that time
> While on the perilous ridge I hung alone
> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ears! the sky seemed not a sky
> Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!  
> (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, “Book First” lines 335-39)

Clearly, Wordsworth places a great deal of emphasis on his childhood experiences, as well as how his memories of them shaped his life’s course. A lecturer at Oxford and great-great-great nephew to Wordsworth, Jonathan Wordsworth, once stated, “When
Wordsworth tells us that the child is father to the man, we don’t perhaps find it very surprising. [...] He was one hundred years ahead of his time in thinking of adult consciousness as having its foundations in childhood” (William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism). Allston’s journey throughout Stegner’s novels connects to this principle, as his slow recognition of the important role his childhood relationship with his mother played in his adult life is a major component of his conversion. Because Allston suppresses his memories of his mother and the way he treated her, he continually acts like an adolescent toward figures like Kaminski and Peck until he is able to process his lingering guilt and adopt a more mature attitude. The fact that he becomes more in tune with the natural world after integrating his childhood memories and experiences into his psyche only lends more credence to the idea that Stegner used Wordsworthian principles to shape portions of Allston’s psychological growth.

In fact, at the end of The Prelude, Wordsworth seems to undergo a similar transformation to that which Allston faces at the end of The Spectator Bird. Both men regain their voices and repair divided selves. In “Book Fourteenth,” Wordsworth embarks on a transformative climb of Mount Snowdon and states:

[A]t my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
Nor was time given to ask, or learn, the cause;
For, instantly, a light upon the turf
Fell like a flash; and lo! as I looked up,
The Moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without a cloud, and at my feet
Rested a silent sea of hoary mist
[…] Innumerable, roaring with one voice!

(lines 35-60)

After his breakdown, Wordsworth, in The Prelude experiences an epiphany in which he regains his ability to write, and recognizes the vast forces of power and unity found
among natural wonders. The perpetual brightening of the ground represents this idea, as it reflects his mental illumination. At the end of The Spectator Bird, Allston states, “The truest vision of life I know is that bird in the Venerable Bede that flutters from the dark into a lighted hall, and after a while flutters out again into the dark” (Stegner 203). This image evokes Allston’s own waxing and waning conversion, as the bird and its travels represent his own cycling journey into, out of, and back into the dark recesses of his mind. Romantic imagery and its psychological implications found throughout Wordsworth’s poems inform Stegner’s descriptions of Allston’s own conversion.

Stegner also references Thoreau’s Walden throughout his Allston novels. The connection between Allston and Thoreau serves as another example of the quasi-autobiographical aspect of Stegner’s Allston novels, as Benson points out that Thoreau and Stegner hail from the same tradition of environmental conservationism (His Life and Work 264). Here, however, Stegner seems more concerned with Allston’s mental environment than his physical surroundings. Significantly, Allston begins to call Peck’s home in his backyard “Walden” when he resents the disarray it brings to his otherwise orderly landscape. As Walden describes a life surrounded by nature as well as human development throughout four seasons, it stands to reason that Stegner’s references to the text are meant to draw parallels between Allston and Thoreau. While Stegner may not depict Allston as a follower of self-reliance—indeed, Allston’s ability to learn through his interactions with characters such as Kaminski, Peck, Marian, Astrid, and Ruth is integral to his conversion—the idea that man needs a spiritual awakening that can be found in nature and its ability to reflect human emotions rings true throughout “Field Guide,” All the Little Live Things, and The Spectator Bird.
While Allston may initially reference *Walden* in a sarcastic manner, his increasing ability to find value in natural chaos as well as the constant conscious and unconscious parallels he makes between himself and his natural counterparts — such as birds and moles — demonstrates that his mind is growing. Additionally, while Allston does ultimately need companionship to access his repressed pain, his move to rural California can be seen as a *Walden*-esque action, as he intends to remove himself from his urban friends and connections to Curtis in order to reflect on his life and compose a memoir. In fact, in *Walden’s* “Solitude” chapter, Thoreau does adopt an elderly female companion who helps him on his journey, which could be echoed in Allston’s relationship with Marian in *All the Little Live Things*. In “Sounds,” Thoreau asks, “What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking away at what is to be seen?” (147). This harkens back to Allston’s need to “see what he says,” an idea that he expresses at the start of *All the Little Live Things*. Throughout Stegner’s novels, then, it seems that Allston embarks on a conversion experience that reflects on Romantic principles and allows him to look beyond the surface of both his mind and natural surroundings in order to better understand and appreciate the nuances in both his psychological and physical environment.
Conclusion

“Nobody can teach the geography of the undiscovered. All he can do is encourage the will to explore, plus impress upon the inexperienced a few of the dos and don’ts of voyaging.”

(Stegner, *On Teaching and Writing Fiction* 34)

It is a pity that Stegner is not studied more in universities throughout the United States. Often, because of the geography of his works as well as his reputation as an ardent environmentalist, Stegner’s fiction is considered merely “Western” literature, concerned primarily with a conservationist’s agenda. This thesis is meant to widen and challenge that theory, and offer one of many possible ways to read Stegner’s novels: in a psychological framework.

“A Field Guide to the Western Birds,” *All the Little Live Things*, and *The Spectator Bird* chronicle the prolonged story of Joe Allston’s psychological journey from a repressed, adolescent-minded curmudgeon to a fully functional, mature, and self-aware adult. Although Stegner does not appear to have an explicit connection to well-known psychoanalysts and their theories, the conversion that Allston undergoes throughout Stegner’s novels suggests that these stories contain rich psychological underpinnings. Through Allston’s growing conscious awareness of his connection to and acceptance of his natural surroundings, he is able to access what Jung calls his individual unconscious and thereby become a more natural man. This access is often granted through synchronous experiences with significant peripheral characters. When Allston is able to integrate his repressed painful memories and emotions into his conscious mind, he experiences both minor and major psychological conversion experiences, which repair his “divided self” as described by philosopher and psychologist William James.
Further emphasizing the symbolic depths of Stegner’s use of natural imagery throughout his work are his frequent references to Romantic figures such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Henry Thoreau. In Allston’s case, it appears that natural images such as birds and moonlight reflect his mental processes in ways akin to both Wordsworth’s and Keats’s use of natural archetypal symbols in their poetry.

Additionally, references to *Walden* suggest that Allston’s connection to nature goes beyond its surface value, as his journey to California and subsequent interactions with his physical environment affect his mind in ways that parallel Thoreau’s experiences. While these Romantic figures certainly could not have been influenced by psychoanalysis considering their nineteenth-century context, Wordsworth’s reputation for psychological thinking and his celebration of the mind of man suggests artists often demonstrate ideas which are only later codified as theory. Stegner demonstrates Allston’s growth in a way in which Jungian and Jamesian psychological theories apply.

The fact that a great deal of original analysis stems from a mere sampling of Stegner’s large body of fictional work suggests that his novels and novellas deserve more critical and academic attention from a variety of critical perspectives and theories. Just as Allston is preoccupied with his legacy in *The Spectator Bird*, so did Stegner desire to leave behind a lasting body of work that would inspire his readers to appreciate history, multiple incarnations of the environment, and the art of storytelling. According to Benson, despite Stegner’s environmental and historical work, “[I]t is as novelist that he would want to be remembered—that was his aim, his delight, his real life’s work” (*His Life and Work* 421). Stegner deserves to be read more widely than his current readership,
and this thesis as well as other critical perspectives will, one hopes, inspire more individuals to examine Stegner’s impressive body of work.

2 Although Freudian theory may be more traditionally applied to literary analysis, Jung, a student of Freud, developed his theory on the unconscious using more than libidinal drives to explain repression and other unconscious phenomena. It is, therefore, more appropriate to examine a Jungian rather than a Freudian framework in this study.

3 Jung states, “Thus far, the unconscious is ‘a fringe of consciousness,’ as William James put it” (“On the Nature of the Psyche” 427). In a footnote, Jung continues to discuss James’s idea on the “transmarginal field” of consciousness.

4 Stegner primarily wrote from a third person, limited-omniscient perspective. His other notable first person narrators are Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose* and Larry Morgan in the novel *Crossing to Safety*. Jackson Benson posits that Stegner’s first-person narrators come later in Stegner’s career and are of the same “elderly writer-observer” figure status, and as such are closely connected to Stegner, himself (*A Study of the Short Fiction* 66).

5 One should, however, be careful not to refer to Stegner’s fictions as strict autobiography. Stegner himself cautions against this, as do Benson and other Stegner critics. In a taped interview with Kay Bonetti, she asks Stegner about his remark, “I am not Joe Allston.” He replies that Allston is someone who says things he would never say out loud and that he created someone to voice what he would never actually say (“Interview with Wallace Stegner”).

6 Both Carl Jung and William James are intricately connected to the founding principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. In a well-known letter to William G. Wilson, Jung writes, “The only right and legitimate way to [recover from alcoholism] is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you when you walk on a path, which leads you to higher understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through a personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind behind the confines of mere rationalism” (1). This bears great significance to Allston’s story, as he learns to abstain from liquor through synchronous experiences that allow him to think beyond “mere rationalism” and access his repressed feelings in order to accept the unorganized nature of the universe.

7 For more mentions of poison oak and other overgrown plants in *All the Little Live Things*, see pages 46, 47, 54, 61.

8 Allston almost humorously expresses his distaste for Peck when he constantly refers to him as “Caliban,” the antagonistic wild man from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Perhaps significantly, Caliban is worshipped by his mother, which may further emphasize the distance Allston feels towards Curtis, Peck’s doppelganger (*Stegner, All the Little Live Things*). Further, Caliban may “appear” monstrous at times, but is capable of depth of feeling as he expresses in his dream (*The Tempest* 3.2 148.56).

9 The acausal connections between Allston, Curtis, and Peck are reminiscent of a specific passage in Jung’s *Synchronicity*—that of the golden scarab. Jung describes an incident in which one of his patients had a dream in which she received a golden scarab during a time of her life in which she was psychologically inaccessible because, like Allston, she was too “rational.” Jung states, “While she was telling me this dream I sat with my back
to the closed window. Suddenly I heard a noise behind me, like a gentle tapping. I turned round and saw a flying insect knocking against the window-pane from outside. I opened the window and caught the creature […] It was the nearest analogy to a golden scarab that one finds in our latitudes […] I must admit that nothing like it ever happened to me before or since, and that the dream of the patient has remained unique in my experience” (Synchronicity 22). Jung later calls this incident “characteristic of a whole category of [synchronistic] phenomena” (Synchronicity 109). Jung credits this incident and its ability to open his patient’s mind to more “irrational and mysterious” realms with his success in treating her.

10 Allston also has an explicit connection to Romantic influences in The Spectator Bird. In a passage inspired by Stegner’s own experiences, Allston meets Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), whose many novels, including the acclaimed Out of Africa, contain themes that can be traced back to Romanticism (Goulding 64). During their conversation, Blixen challenges Allston about why he truly wishes to visit his mother’s birthplace, and thus helps him to analyze his past in a way that reflects the Romantic obsession with the formative nature of childhood experiences.
Works Cited and Consulted


