

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 125



Volume 125

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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## Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 125

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# Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

## Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

## Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Yearbook, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

## Citing *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*

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George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review* 6 (Winter 1949): 85-92; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 40-3.

William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (AMS, 1987), 65- 91; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 94-105.

### **Suggestions are Welcome**

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Project Editor:

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# Bess Streeter Aldrich

## 1881-1954

(Also wrote as Margaret Dean Stevens) American novelist and short story writer.

### INTRODUCTION

Best known for her novels set in the early settlement days of the American Midwest, Aldrich has been honored for her realistic portrayals of the American pioneering experience. Used often as supplemental reading in American history classes, Aldrich's novels and short stories are driven by their characters, many of them strong, fearless, and hardworking women. Her stories of pioneers were inspired by the experiences of both her mother's and father's pioneer families and are set in the prairies of the Midwest. Aldrich took special care to acknowledge the strength, hardiness, and loving sacrifices of pioneer women, and her protagonists are usually female paragons for whom family is of the highest importance.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Cedar Falls, Iowa, in 1881, Aldrich's family had a history of pioneering. Her grandparents, whose stories appear in her books, traveled with their families from Illinois to settle in Iowa when it was still a wilderness. Aldrich began to write at an early age, and at fourteen won a camera in a short-story contest. She earned her first writer's fee at the age of seventeen when the *Baltimore News* bought one of her short stories for five dollars. After training as a teacher at Iowa State Teachers College, Aldrich taught in high school and college for several years before her marriage, writing articles for teachers' magazines and short stories under the name of Margaret Dean Stevens.

In 1907 she married Charles Aldrich, and they moved to Nebraska. Her husband encouraged her to write under her married name, and she did so, publishing her first collection of short stories, *Mother Mason*, in 1924 and her first novel, *The Rim of the Prairie*, in 1925. Her husband died suddenly of a heart attack in 1925 when the youngest of their four children was four years old. Subsequently, Aldrich supported her family with her writing, publishing a book every two years and writing a total of 168 short stories. From 1930 she also served as book editor for the *Christian Herald*. She died of cancer in 1954 at the age of seventy-four. After her death, the street in Lincoln, Nebraska, where she had lived was renamed Aldrich Road in

her honor. A greater posthumous honor came in 1973 when she became the seventh person inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame.

### MAJOR WORKS

Aldrich's most famous book, *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928), became a worldwide best seller. It was written to honor her mother, embodied in the central character, and is based on stories Aldrich heard as a child from her parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and stories sent to her by others who had experienced the pioneer life. Its sequel, *A White Bird Flying* (1931), was one of the three top-selling books of the year, along with Willa Cather's *Shadows of the Rocks* and Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. *Miss Bishop* (1933), about a spinster teacher who devotes her life to her family and her students, was made into a film, *Cheers for Miss Bishop*, in 1941. Aldrich's last novel, *The Lieutenant's Lady* (1942), was based on the diaries of an army officer and his wife and also became a best seller.

Many of Aldrich's books are collections of her short stories. *Mother Mason* and *The Cutters* (1926) contain series of stories about pioneer families. Others, such as *The Man Who Caught the Weather* (1936) and *Journey into Christmas* (1949), are collections of stories first published in various periodicals.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Aldrich's novels and short stories were extremely popular during the 1940s and 1950s, and her work was in much demand by periodicals such as *Woman's Home Companion*, *McCall's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, and *Harper's Weekly*. Although her writing was not critically acclaimed for its artistry, she enjoyed a wide readership who loved her simple, sentimental stories about hope and struggle, hardship and romance. She sold every story she wrote, although some of them were rejected many times before their sale. Her work was considered wholesome, uplifting, and cheerful, reflecting her personal attitude about life, but while she wrote of love and personal sacrifice, she avoided the subjects of sexual passion and the sordid and seamy aspects of humanity. Her work has been faulted for this, and for her insistence that marriage, family, and the rearing of children is woman's highest and most satisfying calling. These ideals were, however, those that she believed in firmly and exhibited in her own life.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Mother Mason* (short stories) 1924  
*The Rim of the Prairie* (novel) 1925  
*The Cutters* (short stories) 1926  
*A Lantern in Her Hand* (novel) 1928  
*A White Bird Flying* (novel) 1931  
*Miss Bishop* (novel) 1933  
*Spring Came On Forever* (novel) 1935  
*The Man Who Caught the Weather* (short stories) 1936  
*Song of Years* (novel) 1939  
*The Drum Goes Dead* (short stories) 1941  
*The Lieutenant's Lady* (novel) 1942  
*Journey into Christmas and Other Stories* (short stories) 1949  
*The Bess Streeter Aldrich Reader* (short stories) 1950  
*A Bess Streeter Aldrich Treasury* (short stories) 1959  
*Across the Smiling Meadow and Other Stories* (short stories) 1984  
*The Home-Coming and Other Stories* (short stories) 1984

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## CRITICISM

*Times Literary Supplement* (review date 13 December 1928)

SOURCE: Review of *A Lantern in Her Hand*, by Bess Streeter Aldrich. *Times Literary Supplement* (13 December 1928): 992.

[In the following brief review of *A Lantern in Her Hand*, the critic notes the novel's "absorbing interest."]

There is imaginative power in this story [*A Lantern in Her Hand*] of pioneering days in Iowa and Nebraska, and even the most homely and trivial happenings in the eighty years of Abbie Deal's life are so dramatically treated as to give the chronicle of her struggle against an adverse destiny an absorbing interest. Abbie herself is a memorable figure, with her sturdy loyalty and romantic longings, the heritage of her aristocratic Scotch and peasant Irish ancestors. Jolting in the covered wagon as it made its slow advance westward over the prairies from the little village of Chicago, the child Abbie listened avidly to her sister's oft-told tale of the lovely lady, Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie. All through her maidenhood the legend of Isabelle, made concrete in the shape of a string of pearls, a family heirloom, acted as a beacon to Abbie's thoughts of fame as singer, writer, or painter. When she was nineteen, just after the Civil War, Abbie refused a chance of going to New York and married Will Deal. The Deals took the trail westward from Cedar Falls to the young State of Nebraska, where Abbie reared her six children with indomitable courage through all the hard years of famine and drought, grass-

hopper plagues and snow, until the determination of the early settlers bore its fruit in rolling miles of rich cornland and wealthy cities.

**Bess Streeter Aldrich** (essay date December 1941)

SOURCE: Aldrich, Bess Streeter. "The Story Germ." *The Writer* 54, no. 12 (December 1941): 355-7.

[In the following essay, Aldrich illustrates how to build character and a story line by describing how she created Miss Bishop.]

Several times in the past years your editor has asked me to contribute an article and each time I have been too busy, or thought I was, which is nearly the same thing. This morning another pleasant request has arrived and in the same mail a letter from a young woman with that old query: "Can you help a beginning writer? Where do you get your ideas? How can . . . ?" etc., etc. I wouldn't go so far as to say it is the hand of Fate, but the simultaneous arrival of the two causes me to put aside the desk work of the moment and do that article for *The Writer*.

Now I have written and sold about one hundred and sixty short stories and have had ten books published with their by-products of serialization, syndication, English sales, foreign translations, plays, and a movie or two. But I still do not know just how to go about helping a young person in his own story writing. It is the greatest lone-wolf profession in the whole category.

One of my sons, home from the University for vacation, is at this moment across the hall in his room engaged in the throes of evolving a story. Brought up in the writing atmosphere of our home, he expects no help but maternal encouragement. If he has not gained anything from his mother about actual construction, he has learned how to do his work diligently, to rely upon himself, and to take those frequent and sickening doses of rejection slips with something approaching equanimity.

"Where do you get your ideas?" the correspondent queries.

Another young person interviewing me once, asked: "When you are writing one story and another just clamors to be told at the same time, what do you do?" With compassion I eyed her and with patience I answered: "Oh, but they never clamor. If I had two ideas at the same time or ever a few weeks apart, I would think it too good to be true."

Fresh ideas do not flock to a writer's head (not to *this* head) like birds to a martin house. One has to labor very hard to catch them. No doubt there are writers who see themes and plots so clearly that they do not have to put the strain on themselves which some of us do. A few times,

but so few that they are almost negligible, I have visioned the skeleton of a story in its entirety or have been haunted by some theme which would not down. For those few times I have thanked the gods and hastily sketched the outlines of the stories. But for the most part I have worked hard, walking the floor at times as one would in physical pain, trying to get hold of an idea which would only elude me. Because I know so well in what labor most stories are written, I discount the sincerity of nine out of ten people who say they want to become a writer more than anything in the world. What they want is the satisfaction of seeing their stuff in print, the checks, and that bit of prestige which curiously attaches itself to anyone associated with the business. But they would not want to pay the price,—to spend hours of writing only to tear the story to pieces, or to bear all the early disappointments so familiar to those of us who have come up the hard and slippery way.

Back to the question,—how may we get story ideas when they refuse to present themselves to us as well-defined plots? *By putting intensive thought upon a small idea which, in its tiny form and limited feeling, has not enough substance for a story.*

Personally, I have found that whenever I am emotionally disturbed, there is the germ of a story in that disturbance,—but *only a germ*. Which means, given the cause of that disturbance for a beginning idea, I must work on it, change it, add to it, until the final story may be very far removed from the original nucleus.

If I am moved to laughter over the naive actions of an adolescent, a funny experience of a friend, an item in the newspaper, there is reason to believe that I can draw a smile from my readers with any of those episodes from which to plan. If I feel a suspicious moisture in my left eye over some small happening, there is reason to think I may be able to draw a surreptitious tear from some reader's eye with that bit of an anecdote upon which to work. And *work* is the word, not just a passive attitude, hoping that the story will inspirationally write itself.

Now, a concrete example: I open a newspaper from my old home town and see the headlines: OLD BUILDING TO BE RAZED. WORK BEGINS JUNE FIRST. And, because the editor is an alumnus of the school in question, there is a sentimental third line: GOOD-BYE TO OLD CENTRAL.

I am emotionally disturbed. It brings back a flood of youthful memories and a certain tender regret that the old building is to stand there among the trees no more. After June, the only thing remaining of the rambling brick building will be the memory of it in the minds and hearts of hundreds of men and women. And then, with an eye to business, I begin to wonder how I can work out a story from that uncomplicated emotion of regret at knowing the old building is to be torn down. For the tearing down of a condemned building is not a story nor the son of a story. It

is only an incident. And a story must be more than an incident. It must have people in it, real people with hopes and fears. It must have life and color and movement. It must give forth odors and sounds. And something must happen, something to hold the interest or stir the blood, to bring that laughter or that tear.

So I begin the process of fumbling in the dark, putting out tentacles, as it were, from that center of my emotion.

I reason: If I am disturbed, countless other old students will be moved, too. Old teachers, also. I begin to recall some of those instructors, especially those who gave so much of themselves to their students. I'll do the story of a teacher—one who saw the opening of the college and lived through its growth—who will be there at the end of the old building as she was at the beginning. And now I have left the world of reality and slipped into the world of fancy, for my teacher is not to be any particular one but a fictitious person whose characteristics shall embody something from them all. Soon I have named her so that she may seem more real to me. I decide on "Miss Bishop," and some old-fashioned first name,—Ella. That suits her, for living in the seventies,—“Ella Bishop.”

This Ella Bishop is becoming very real, so that I understand how lonely and sad she is in her old age without much to show in a material way for all her good works. A new president of the college will ask her to resign. If she is to be pictured as sad and lonely and hurt over the loss of her position, she ought at some time in the story to be quite the opposite, for the greatest characteristic of drama is contrast. And all contrast has a touch of the dramatic in it. The contrasting activities of "Dr. Jekyll" and "Mr. Hyde"—of "Faust" and "Mephistopheles"—of "Jesus" and "Judas"—these are the things of which drama is made. I ponder over the question of what can be done for contrast. The old students must rally to her. They must give her one exalted hour, one evening of adulation. It shall be in the old building itself, the night before it is to be torn down. A satisfactory climax: The alumni coming back to pay her homage—the old building's last appearance—and Ella Bishop's supreme moment after despair.

Perhaps I have not yet written a word, only visualized a woman and a situation. But the climax is there, a point toward which I can now work. I go back to pick up the threads of her life. Why did she never marry? Was her life always as barren as it must appear to the modern student? All this to be worked out, and research to be done for the accuracy of a midwestern college background in its evolution. (This latter, a very exacting phase of story writing, but not under discussion here.)

By this time I am writing,—much of the climax first so that later I may work toward it. Ella Bishop has grown as



familiar to me as my next door neighbor. To live the lives of his characters, crawling into their very skins, is the writer's prerogative, almost his duty. He must be an actor,—an actor who plays all the parts.

Enough of detailed description. *Miss Bishop* went on the best seller list several years ago and on the screen this year through a fine interpretation of the actress, Martha Scott,—a story and a photoplay which had their beginnings in a very small germ, the momentary emotion caused by reading a headline: OLD BUILDING TO BE RAZED.

I hope this has not sounded pedantic. There are other ways to develop a story. This one is mine. And while there is very little which an older writer can do to help a beginner (for each one must "gae his ain gait," as my Scotch mother used to say) there is always the chance that the telling of a personal experience or the explaining of an individual method will find its interested young reader.

#### Bess Streeter Aldrich (essay date November 1950)

SOURCE: Aldrich, Bess Streeter. "Working Backward." *Writer* 63 (November 1950): 350-53.

[In the following essay, Aldrich uses her story "Journey into Christmas" to show how she builds a story and characters.]

A number of years ago I wrote an article for *The Writer* titled "The Story Germ." Several young writers were kind enough to tell me it was helpful to them. In that article I stressed the point that plots for stories seldom come to one in their entirety, but that, given some small situation or dramatic moment or distinctive human trait, one can work out a story based on that little happening or emotional period or outstanding characteristic.

With the editor asking for another article I can think of nothing more practical than to follow that lead with a detailed account of how one can work backward in developing a short story. Any similarity between this article and the former will harm no one, for those who read the other, written so long ago, no doubt have become sure-fire authors by this time or have given up the literary ghost.

People who have had no experience in writing often hold the idea that turning out a story must be the easiest thing in the world. A story reads smoothly. The people in it seem natural. Events move forward in regular and interesting sequence. It comes to a surprising or satisfactory climax. And there you are. Nothing could be easier. Or so they think. But they do not know with what knitting of brows, chewing of pencils and discarding of wordage that easily read story is constructed. For more often than not, it is the outgrowth of some little happening, too small in itself to constitute a whole story, which has become one after intensive work.

Over many years of writing I have evolved two methods for the development of short stories. For a character story—one which stresses the person rather than the plot—I begin by getting mentally acquainted with that fictitious character, dwelling on his appearance, traits, mental processes and emotional reactions, until he takes upon himself the semblance of such reality that automatically he moves into action. In this way *The Man Who Caught the Weather* was constructed; a story which was rejected by twenty-eight magazines before it was purchased by the old *Century Magazine*. It was chosen for the O. Henry Award volume of that year, has been used in several anthologies, syndicated, resold to a British magazine and read on various radio story hours. I insert that item for the benefit of young writers who lose their courage over a second or third rejection and who, like the ship wrecked brother, "hearing, may take heart again."

The second method—which is the line this little article is taking—is the constructing of a story from some dramatic incident or interesting contrast between two settings or ideas, and working backward from that point. With fine disregard for the law of gravity, I start with the capstone of the structure, slip another stone under it, and another one under that, until solid ground is reached.

Naturally the story which I shall use as an illustration should be read in its entirety if a detailed analysis is to be understood. It was in the 1948 Christmas number of *The Saturday Evening Post* and titled "Star across the Tracks." Also it is to be found in my book *Journey into Christmas*, a compilation of short stories. Bearing down heavily on the Christmas atmosphere, it has the simplest of plots, but even so, it entailed a great deal of planning, for the little plot grew out of a mere setting upon which this backward method was used.

Very briefly, the story is this: An old day laborer is the yard man for three families who live in a fine residential district of a midwestern city in which there is a city-wide contest for the best outdoor Christmas decorations. The old man assists his three families in putting up their elaborate decorations, but wins the first prize himself with a simple nativity scene at his own little home across the tracks.

The origin of the story was this: On a Christmas night we were taking one of my sons to his train after his holiday visit with us. Our city had gone in extensively for outdoor decorations and as we drove from our suburban section we passed any number of elaborately decorated yards. There were lights in brilliant landscaping effects, picturesque Santa Clauses, and life-sized reindeer, expansive and expensive. At the station we found the train had changed time, and there would be quite a wait, but not long enough to drive back home. It was a mild evening, in contrast to some of our midwestern holiday weather, and we drove leisurely through a section of town beyond the station where the Christmas touch was evident, if on a less extravagant scale. Then we came to it: a hayfilled manger,

evidently made from packing-boxes, by the side of a small cottage, a white-robed figure bending over it and lighted with a single faint glow.

The son, who was a young newspaperman, said: "There's a story for you, Mother. That's right up your alley . . . elaborate decorations up town and this little manger scene here across the tracks."

Now any incident which brings laughter or tears, or which calls forth one's sympathy, anger, admiration, in fact, anything which touches the emotions has the germ of a story in it. The sight of the crude manger and the white paste-board figure here by the little house, far away from those brilliantly lighted ones, touched us all. And I knew, as my son had suggested, there was a story in it waiting to be developed if it could be worked out.

But a story is more than a scene and more than the contrast between two settings. There is nothing static about it. Something must happen. Characters must come to life. People must live and move across the pages of the magazine so that the reader lives and moves with them. A few days later I was starting the mental machinery by which a story could be evolved from the small germ of that little manger across the tracks. *And working backward.*

In other words, the climax was to be that the simple scene by the cottage would win a citywide first prize away from all that uptown splurge. But as almost all stories change from fact into fancy, even though based on reality, instead of the mere manger of boxes, I find myself visualizing a shed with open front to the street, a cow and team of horses munching on the hay, pigeons fluttering on the roof, a star overhead, and the Babe and Mother in that stable setting. (Immediately I am thinking this is a bit incongruous in a city which prohibits stock in its limits, so make a note to state casually, early in the story, that this is the only section where stock can be kept.)

Now, the people who live there—in the story, of course—who are they? What do they do? Some old man and his wife, hard working and obviously with a religious trend. Almost at once I have named them: *Mr. Harm Kurtz* and his wife. Pa Kurtz and Mamma. For fictitious characters immediately named come more readily to life. The rest of the family, if any, stays vague, for I may want to create characters to fit the story needs.

Mr. Kurtz will be a day laborer. Why not connect him in some way with one of those big highly decorated homes? At once he becomes the yard man for three of the well-to-do families, and they are named, too, so they will begin to seem real: the Scotts, the Dillinghams and the Porters. I see them in their homes with Pa Kurtz helping to put up all those brilliant lights, then see Pa going home to his small house across the tracks on an unpaved street, telling the day's happenings to Mamma and fixing up his own shed, with its cow and horses, for the nativity scene. But something there doesn't ring true,—the incongruity of Pa

Kurtz, tired to death of the whole thing, coming home and entering into the decorative contest. No, it will be Mamma with the religious bent who arranges the stable scene.

And here is a knotty problem: our midwestern climate so cold at times, and a shed for stock standing open toward the street? One can't state an incongruity and let it go at that, if one's stories are to ring true. Each step must be the natural outgrowth of that which has gone before. So for some reason the one side of the shed has to come off temporarily. Why not have Pa Kurtz yank off the boards in anger? Mamma has chided him for the old shed looking so decrepit. She is expecting Christmas company and her pride will be hurt. Immediately, I am creating a daughter coming home with her little boys, and Mamma is saying: "Just as plain as I'm standing here I can remember your telling Carrie you'd have the new lumber on that old shed by next time she comes." At that, Pa flares up with: "I'll have that new lumber on by the time Carrie comes if it's the last thing I do." And he begins yanking off the siding, exposing the manger, the cow, the horses, the hay. That problem over, I'm trying to think what can be used for the Mother Mary. A mannikin from a store would be just right, but one doesn't simply go into a house and bring out a mannikin.

I digress here to say that nothing is so irritating in a story as the parenthetical statement. As a judge for one of the monthly reading club's books, I recently read a submitted manuscript which was rather good, had it not been for that amateurish dragging in by the hair of the head, so to speak, of properties and people which never had been presented to the reader until the moment they became useful. So, to have a mannikin handily in the house, I create another daughter, Lillie, who works in a department store, and immediately the store belongs to one of those well-to-do families, thus making the little plot more compact.

In order that it will not escape me, I write that part at once, even though the story is not under construction. "Lillie was a whiz with the needle. She made her own dresses at home and tried them on Maisie the mannikin. That was one of the store's moronic-looking models which had lost an arm and sundry other features and Lillie had asked for it when she found they were going to discard it. Now she hung her own skirts on Maisie to get their length. That was about all the good the mannikin did her, for Lillie's circumference was fully three times that of the model."

So, early in the story I plant the mannikin and when the time comes for Mamma to want something for the figure of the Madonna, there is no incongruous break.

There must be a star above the shed, and because Pa is only a grouchy onlooker, not entering into the decorative scheme at all, I create a son, Ernie, who is a mechanic. Lillie says to him: "Mamma wants you to fix a star up over the stable. Mrs. Dillingham gave an old one to Pa." I am writing this also before starting the real construction of

the story: "Ernie had been a fixer ever since he was a little boy. Not for his looks had the River City Body and Fender Wreck Company hired Ernie Kurtz. So, after his warmed over supper, he got his tools and a coil of wire and fixed the yellow bauble high over the stable, the wire and the slim rod almost invisible, so that it seemed a star hung there by itself."

And now I have the causes and effects of several movements in the story to come: Pa home from helping with all those elaborate decorations . . . Mamma chiding him about the dilapidated shed . . . his yanking off the boards in anger . . . Mamma seeing how like the Bethlehem scene the old stable looks . . . going into the house to get Lillie's mannikin, draping it with sheets into the form of the Mother Mary, saying: "I ain't doin' this for show like Pa's families he's been helpin'. I'm doin' it for Carrie's little boys. Something they can see when they drive in . . . something they'll never forget, like's not, as long as they live."

This much will suffice to show the working backward method sometimes used by writers. By working that way I have created a substantial reason for every stone which is going into the structure. Now I can begin to work from the first, putting in the atmospheric descriptive matter, conversation, all the human touches a story needs: the arrival of the children for Christmas . . . the drive up through the fine residential sections of town . . . the family's utter enjoyment of the elaborate lighting effects there, with no thought that their own scene is more effective . . . their wagering among themselves as to which of the big houses will get the prize . . . hearing over the radio the next day that their own has won it . . . the hundreds of cars driving down the little unpaved street on Christmas night . . . the open shed . . . the horses pulling at the hay . . . the cow gazing moodily into space . . . the pigeons on the ridge-pole in a long feathery group . . . white Mary bending over the manger . . . and overhead the star.

And then to end on some substantial Christmas thought. With Mamma asking Pa why he can't get to sleep and his saying: "Keep thinkin' of everything. All that prize money comin' to us. Attention from so many folks. Children all home. Folks I work for all here and not a bit mad. You'd think I'd feel good. But I don't. Somethin' hangs over me. Like they'd been somebody real out there in the shed all this time. Like we'd been leavin' 'em stay out there when we ought to had 'em come in. Fool notion . . . but keeps botherin' me."

And then Mamma gave her answer. Comforting, too, just as he knew it would be. "I got the same feelin'. I guess people's been like that ever since it happened. Their consciences always hurtin' 'em a little because there wasn't no room for Him in the inn."

This resumé of the constructing of a story plot has been written for beginning writers, as experienced ones will have worked out their own methods. There is little enough

one can do to assist another in the writing line, for it is a lone wolf business if ever there was one. But sometimes a frank personal experience from one who has been at work in it for a long time will strike a helpful note. I know, for thirty-five years ago I was a beginner, avidly searching for all the helps in constructing, and advice for short cuts I could read. Occasionally I ran across some of the helps. But never a short cut could I find.

#### Abigail Ann Martin (essay date 1992)

SOURCE: Martin, Abigail Ann. "Bess Streeter Aldrich." In *Bess Streeter Aldrich*, pp. 5-41. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1992.

[In the following essay, Martin provides a critical discussion of Aldrich's major works.]

"Nebraska," wrote Bess Streeter Aldrich, "is only the state of my adoption, but I am sure that I feel all the loyalty for it which the native-born bears . . . while I am not a native Nebraskan, the blood of the midwestern pioneer runs in my veins and I come rightly by my love for the Nebraska pioneer and admiration for the courage and fortitude which he displayed in the early days of the state's history . . ." (Introduction to *The Rim of the Prairie*).

Certainly both love and admiration are apparent in Aldrich's finest work, *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928). This novel alone is enough to give her a place among distinguished writers of the American West. Her feeling for—and appreciation of—the Midwest shine out in much of her other fiction, but primarily it is for *Lantern* that she is to be honored. Few other writers have presented so detailed and vivid a picture of pioneer life.

Born on 17 February 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa, she was the daughter of James Wareham and Mary Anderson Streeter. Her childhood as the youngest of a large and lively family was a happy one, and during her impressionable years she was imbued with the values and mores of small-town life, values and mores which greatly influenced her writing. From her numerous aunts and uncles she often heard tales of life in pioneering days, for both her parents had, in their youth, come to Iowa from "the East." Her parental grandfather, Zimri Streeter, had been a member of the Iowa Territorial Legislature, his salty character making him a prominent figure among his colleagues.

Educated in the public schools of Cedar Falls, she went on to Iowa State Teachers College in the same town, graduating in 1901. For five years she taught primary grades in Boone and Marshalltown, Iowa, and in Salt Lake City, Utah, and for a short time she was assistant supervisor of the primary training school at Iowa State Teachers College.

In September 1907 she married Charles S. Aldrich, banker and attorney of Tipton, Iowa, where the couple lived until

after the birth of their first child, Mary Eleanor, in 1909, when the family moved to Elmwood, Nebraska. Here Aldrich's husband became cashier of the American Exchange Bank, and here the three Aldrich sons were born: James, Charles, and Robert. Here too Charles Aldrich, husband and father, died suddenly on 5 May 1925. And here Aldrich's literary career began in earnest.

She had been writing from an early age. At fourteen she sold a children's story to the Chicago *Record* and received a five-dollar camera as a prize. At seventeen, hearing that the Baltimore *News* was paying five dollars for stories, she wrote a love story, received the five dollars, and promptly spent it for a black chiffon parasol!

For some years she had been producing articles for teachers' magazines, stories for young children, and a goodly number of short stories for the *American Magazine* and *The Ladies Home Journal*. Her story "**The Little House Next Door**" won a prize of \$175 offered in 1911 by the latter magazine. Two collections of magazine stories had been published as well as a novel, *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925).

All this success had been pleasant, of course, but not economically necessary. Her husband's death gave her the impetus to make money, and producing fiction thus became her life work.

This work flourished in the midst of her growing children and their activities, interrupted often by household tasks and emergencies. She is quoted as answering a query about housekeeping: "Three huge meals three times a day for a girl and three boys with the largest appetites in the world. I could take a prize for patching at the county fair" (Marble 10).

Again, she remarks, "I have written with three babies tumbling over my feet, with a house of paperdolls under my desk and their five-year-old owner demonstrating a cyclone with them, with one eye on a cooking meal and the other on the story in hand, with grammar grade boys making kites and bows and arrows around me" (Marble 5).

Beginning under such conditions—and persisting—Aldrich in the end produced 160 short stories and seven novels. Some of this fiction has been serialized, syndicated, sold in England, and translated into Dutch, Danish, Hungarian, Swedish, Spanish, and French. All of her books have been published in Braille.

Aldrich's novels and stories obviously grew out of her background, her environment, her circumstances. And because they all bear the decided impress of her Midwestern life they are worth examining and evaluating. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of her fiction have regional overtones.

Near the end of her first novel, *The Rim of the Prairie*, she describes the way one of the characters writes of the

Midwest. Here she seems to be expressing her own credo: "Warner Field writes of the mid-west. He does not credit it with having in its air either the crispness of the mountains or the salt tang of the sea . . . nor will he discredit the sorcery of the odors of loam and sod and subsoil, of dewy clover, and ripening corn and the honey-sweetness of lavender alfalfa. He does not pretend that it is idyllic . . . nor will he speak of it as bleak and uninteresting. He does not assert that it has attained to great heights of culture and art . . . nor will he sell it for thirty pieces of silver. But in some way Warner Field catches in his writings the gleam of the soul of the wide prairie, dim and deep and mysterious. For here, as everywhere, drama ebbs and flows like the billowing of the seas of yellow wheat" (351-52).

In the wider perspective of history, Bess Streeter Aldrich will be remembered for her pioneer fiction—four novels and several short stories that tell of the settling of the Midwest. Actually, her first real prominence as a writer came with the publication of *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928). Those critics are unperceptive who say it was something of an anomaly, this novel about struggling "dirt farmers" that was published in the roaring twenties when flaming youth, bootlegging, and a kind of shrill prosperity dominated the scene. They overlook society's always undiminished interest in its beginnings, in its own local (or national) development.

This interest Aldrich exploited in ways both innocent and clever. It was innocent because, as she said somewhere, she simply wanted to honor the pioneer women who, as her own mother had, had come to a raw country, lived through appalling hardships and poverty, and had never lost their buoyancy of spirit or their sense of values.

On the other hand she was clever. She was careful to research her material meticulously, making use of bona fide records, papers, anecdotes. As a result the novel is richly detailed and true.

On the very first page of *Lantern* the reader is caught up in the story and senses its authenticity. More, the book is infused with Aldrich's warm admiration for the pioneers who, because of almost unbelievable labor, and in the face of devastating frustrations, disappointments, and suffering, settled one of the richest and most productive states of the union.

Her admiration is not only, or even principally, for their strength and perseverance; it is for their unflinching courage. The note is struck in Joyce Kilmer's verse from which the novel's title is taken:

Because the road was steep and long,  
And through a dark and lonely land,  
God set upon my lips a song  
And put a lantern in my hand.

The central figure in the book is Abbie Deal, born Mackenzie, whom the reader meets at the age of eight, just coming to Iowa from the East with her widowed mother