



Willa Cather's Women: Quiet Feminism in Literature

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FACULTY APPROVAL

Willa Cather's Women: Quiet Feminism in Literature


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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss author Willa Cather and more specifically, the women she wrote in four of her stories. In a time when feminism in the United States was in the early stages politically, the women discussed in this paper exhibited extraordinary characteristics. Online research involving Cather's work, as well as the timelines of women's rights, interviews with history experts, and the study of Willa Cather's writing did not reveal what I expected. I found no written evidence that Cather was an overt feminist. I did find that she was often dismissive and scornful of women who hid their capability and intelligence. Four of Cather's novels were chosen, two with accomplished, strong women as lead characters and two with male protagonists that featured women as supporting characters; all of Cather's women, whether in main or secondary role, refused to compromise their principles to accommodate social attitudes and gender norms. I believe that it is likely Cather, a strong independent woman in her own right, was writing her life. I also believe, based on my own educational experience, combined with the consumption of news, media and political discourse, the contributions of women in our country, if not the world, are not well-celebrated and are under-represented.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

An American Literature reading assignment was the impetus for this thesis project. Willa Cather's "Neighbor Rosicky," in *Norton's Anthology of American Literature*, charmed me from the first reading. As a fan of historical fiction and a lifelong farm girl, this story was easy reading and a favorite from the class. The reading of "Neighbor Rosicky," made me question gender norms in the period when this, and Cather's other stories, were written. Further reading of this author's work reinforced my questions about strong, independent, assertive women and their capability to function in the critically sexist society in which Cather existed and wrote in. I wondered if Cather was a feminist who used her platform to reinforce her feminist ideals or if she was simply acknowledging the contributions, strength and participation of women that were so underrepresented.

"Neighbor Rosicky," a short story originally written in 1930 for *The Women's Home Companion*, features protagonist Anton Rosicky. This character was unusual compared to the others I had read in this genre. An immigrant, Rosicky had characteristics that I found traditionally female, especially for a farmer in the period the story was set in. He was sensitive and nurturing to his family members as opposed to his American born wife, even serving as the family tailor. "Neighbor Rosicky" was my first exposure to Willa Cather's writing, and although busy with

school--I typically don't do much pleasure reading during semesters--I ordered *O Pioneers!* and read it quickly.

Anton Rosicky made me curious; *O Pioneers!* protagonist Alexandra Bergson told me that there was more to Willa Cather than I had imagined. My feminist nature caused me to notice the unusual, for the times, gender roles that Cather wrote in these two stories. After reading some of her other work, I had a few questions. From where did Cather draw her inspiration for these characters? In a time where overt feminism was embryonic, were the strong women Cather wrote a political statement or merely life as she knew it?

A favorite reading genre for me are the stories of strong women, but still I was surprised by Cather's representations of women, given the time these stories are set in. After some thought and research, I realized that it was possible that I wasn't truly aware of the extent of the contributions made by women in our country. History classes, when I went to school, didn't spend much time discussing women like Eleanor Roosevelt or Margaret Sanger and there were definitely no discussions about the contributions of immigrant women like Hedy Lamar or Madeleine Albright. The reading I did about pioneer women as a student were stories like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books, which I knew were based on real events, but were written with very traditional gender roles. The *Little House* stories featured a father who was the leader and strength in the family while the women were always in supporting roles. Never was I exposed to stories such as Elizabeth Sihler's *Against Odds: A Personal Narrative of Life in Horse Heaven*, the story

of a single woman who claimed farmland near my home in Prosser, Washington. Sihler, under a program where the government urged women to make land claims, settled her land over several years, endured hardships such as no water well, and trips to town by foot, some twelve miles over the Horse Heaven Hills. Her home was built in stages and only as she was able to earn the money to do it.

David Porter, writing for the University of Nebraska Press, quoted Cather who said:

Then I had the good fortune to meet Sarah Orne Jewett who had read all of my early stories and had very clear and definite opinions about them and about where my work fell short. She said, "Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that." "Don't try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants--write the truth and let them take it or leave it. (10)

My research, combined with Jewett's advice to Cather, convinced me that the contributions of women in our country are under-represented. I also believe Cather did just as Jewett advised her to and her stories accurately reflect the lives of the remarkable, strong women who lived in the early 20th century.

Women like Cather's Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg were more visible and successful, but still are not widely celebrated. The supporting contributions of women such as Antonia Shimerda are barely mentioned, and a female like Enid Royce Wheeler who championed political causes and "abandoned" her husband tend to be totally dismissed. Cather's portrayal of each of these women is from different perspectives, but still shows each to be powerful in their own circumstance.

The women that Willa Cather wrote in these stories challenged my assumptions and expectations for women of the time. The characters of Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, *Á*ntonia Shimerda, and Enid Royce Wheeler made me initially think that Cather must have been an outspoken supporter of women's rights. It was a surprise to find no written evidence of this kind of activity; rather I found an educated, self-supporting, well-traveled woman, living her own life on her own terms.

Chapter II.

Terms and Delimitations

According to Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout who compiled the book *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Cather “made a will that clearly forbade all publications of her letters” (Jewell vi). The authors state that there are many theories, one being the desire to “conceal a secret” that might reveal “an indiscretion or uncontrolled passion” (Jewell vi). The last of her remaining relatives have passed away; selections of letters and more detailed biographies have since been published. In *Willa Double Lives*, Cather is described as having a “sexual alienation from conventional femininity” (Lee 10). Lee claims that a letter to one of Cather’s nieces “shows a vigorous rearguard action being fought against lesbian interpretations of Cather’s life and work” (Lee 10). Biographies written about Cather’s life include details about close friendships with women, including her long-time companion, Edith Lewis. There are characters in her stories who seem to avoid intimate, physical relationships and whether those characters reflect Cather herself is speculative. A review of available private correspondence revealed only platonic relationships with no intimate overtones. It is not known if those types of letters existed, or if they have been destroyed. For the purposes of this paper, Willa Cather’s sexuality is not relevant and will not be discussed.

The word Bohemian, today, is used to describe a way of life that is considered *artsy*, informal and/or somewhat rebellious. Merriam Webster’s online dictionary

shows that the term has its roots in the 15th century and was used to describe people that were “living an unconventional lifestyle, usually in a colony with others” (Bohemian Definition & Meaning). It is possible, currently, that the word can be considered pejorative. Cather used the word Bohemian to describe people that have immigrated from Europe from the former Czechoslovakia, Poland, German, or Scandinavian countries. I don’t believe Cather used the word as a slur, but rather as a reflection of the language of the times. After researching the word, however, I chose to not refer to the immigrants in the stories as Bohemians as Cather did.

There are many references in this paper to expected gender roles for the period that these stories are set in. Emmeline Gros writes that “if Willa Cather was influenced by the landscapes that she experienced during her childhood, she was also very much affected by the social and historical context in which she grew up (par 9). She goes on to say that in 1873, when Cather was born, the era “rigidly defined male and female roles” and encouraged society to “work within those conventions” (par 9). Gros writes that Cather’s choice of locale, the Midwest, “is in itself a heavily gendered space, on where male and female roles are clearly defined” (par 8). These traditional ideas were my assumptions at the beginning of my research. I found that women had more capability legally than I had believed, although societal pressure was very rigid.

Chapter III.

Literature Review

Who Was Willa Cather?

Willela Cather was born in Winchester, Virginia, on December 7, 1873. She was the eldest of her parent's seven children (*Pioneers* ix). A move to Red Cloud Nebraska, a "virtual wilderness" according to Dorothy Van Ghent "was undoubtedly the determinative event of Willa Cather's life" (6). Van Ghent claims that the change from the lush valley in Virginia where Cather had lived to the wild prairie was somewhat traumatic to young Willa and was responsible for the opening of "her sensibility to primordial images and relationships" that Van Ghent claims to be the "most powerful forces in her art" (6). Cather's father ran an office, dealing with farm loans and mortgages, and Van Ghent claims that their home was like that of the Kronborgs in *The Song of the Lark*. Young Willa learned Greek and Latin from her grandmother at first and then continued her studies with a local storekeeper (Van Ghent 6).

According to Van Ghent, the "aridity and drabness" of Red Cloud affected Cather by creating a "decisive pattern in the girl's emotional nature" and claims that the "traumatic pattern" shows up in Cather's stories, appearing as a desperate impulse of escape from a voracious mediocrity" (6). Cather's response was, in opposition to societal norms, cutting her hair short, dressing as a young boy, and setting "up a laboratory for zoological experiments" (6) which caused a scandal. She also could be found eavesdropping on the conversations of the men in town. This behavior would

have been atypical for young girls in the late 1800s, and we see many of the same atypical tendencies in Cather's characters.

Van Ghent quotes Cather who said often that "the only part of her life which made a lasting impression on her imagination and emotion was what happened before she was twenty" (7). Cather's "deprived adolescence in the sterile little midwestern town," Van Ghent believes, led young Willa to "substitute strained personal emotion and belief for creative intuition" (8).

Cather attended the state university in Lincoln, Nebraska, and supported herself by writing for the *State Journal* (Van Ghent 7). Between the ages of 23 to 33, she worked as a newspaperwoman, and "read copy, edited telegraphic news, and wrote dramatic criticism" (Van Ghent 7). Cather also taught English and Latin in Pittsburgh (Van Ghent 7). In 1906, after her first visit to Europe, Cather published her first collection of verses and took a job in New York City writing for *McClure's Magazine*, eventually becoming their editor (*Pioneers* x). Her work on *O Pioneers!* began in 1911 and the book was published in 1913. Her book *One of Ours* won a Pulitzer in 1923.

Cather's Leading Women

O Pioneers! and *The Song of the Lark* each feature strong women as the leading character. Both Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg subtly operate outside of expected gender norms for the time the stories were set in. Cather, while portraying these women as confident and assertive, does not write them as demonstratively feminist. Rather, both characters conduct their lives certainly, amid a very conservative, traditional atmosphere, echoing the life of the author.

Alexandra Bergson

The story of Alexandra Bergson is one of Cather's most famous works. Dedicated to Sarah Orne Jewett, friend and inspiration, *O Pioneers!* is the story of a Nebraska farm family. The Bergsons were Scandinavian immigrants, mimicking the inhabitants of Red Cloud where Cather was raised. Alexandra, unquestionably the leader among the Bergson children, is trusted by her father John to oversee the farm after his death. John Bergson instructed his daughter on his deathbed: "Tell the boys to come here, daughter. I want to speak to them" and told her "Alexandra, you will have to do the best you can for your brothers. Everything will come on you" (*Pioneers* 16). He instructed Alexandra's brothers saying, "I want you to keep the land together and to be guided by your sister" (*Pioneers* 16). John Bergson also directed his sons "Alexandra must not work in the fields any more[sic]" suggesting that although Alexandra was to manage the affairs of the farm, it was not appropriate for her to toil in the fields (*Pioneers* 16). It is important to remember that, at the time of the writing of *O Pioneers!* in 1906, women could not vote and had only been given partial control over property and wages in 1900 ("Timeline"), making John Bergson's wishes extraordinary.

Alexandra takes an assertive, but understated leadership role in the farm. She is confident and willing to explore new methods to improve her craft. In one instance she takes advice from farmhand Ivar on how to better raise her pigs, overruling her brothers' opinions (*Pioneers* 26). In a more significant decision, Alexandra proposes mortgaging the farm to buy more acreage. Acknowledging the risk, she has a carefully laid out plan to enlarge the farm and increase the family's fortunes. Her strategy is

successful and ultimately benefits the whole family. Alexandra's ability to function and prosper in the male dominated industry of farming in the early 20th century seemed improbable. This aspect of the story caused me to turn to an expert in American History.

Dr. Blake Slonecker, Chair of Humanities and a historian at Heritage University, affirms that women did indeed have basic property ownership rights, although acknowledging that there were likely "difficulties related to their freedom to utilize that property as they saw fit" (Slonecker). Alexandra would hold on to those rights if she was single, according to Slonecker. "Married women, on the other hand, were subject to coverture laws that shifted their property, earnings, and freedom of choice to their husbands" (Slonecker). Dr. Slonecker confirms Alexandra's ability to operate in the business world regarding mortgage and banking functions but also acknowledges the possible challenges. A woman's legal ability to function in the business world of the time may have been less of a challenge than that of the social attitudes of the men Alexandra was forced to deal with.

Brothers Oscar and Lou, though seemingly supportive of their sister's leadership, still maintain traditional ideas. However, when a childhood relationship is rekindled between Alexandra and her longtime friend Carl, the brothers are fearful that a marriage between the two could change the ultimate outcome of the property owned by Alexandra herself. After her brothers had married, Alexandra had divided the property between the siblings and the brothers had claimed that they "were satisfied" (*Pioneers* 85). Attempting to justify their concern, Lou and Oscar reveal their true feelings about

the property, claiming that since it had come from the original homestead, they had rights. Lou tells his brother, "This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business" and that "She liked to run things, and we humored her" (*Pioneers* 85). Oscar confirms his brother's thought, saying "The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title" (*Pioneers* 86). After the discussion is ended and the brothers are dismissed, their concern is that Alexandra was offended about a discussion of her age, rather than her unacknowledged skill and success in running the farm. Lou tells Oscar, "I'm afraid that hurt her feelings; and the worse thing we can do is to make her sore at us. She'd marry him out of contrariness" (*Pioneers* 87). Despite Alexandra's legal ability to own her land and operate in the business community, not to mention her success, the prevailing societal attitude was that the men "did the real work" (*Pioneers* 86), and Cather confirms the idea in this detail of the story.

Reginald Dyck reinforces the Bergson brothers' attitudes towards Alexandra and her property ownership. Dyck states that it was unusual for women to assume traditionally male roles and that "Alexandra's career as an unmarried farm owner and manager would have been a historical anomaly" (163).

Women working in agriculture has never been unusual; what is unusual, even today, are women like Alexandra who manage, let alone own farm property. Reginald Dyck confirms that women "accepted new positions temporarily" (163), meaning that when times were hard or additional labor was needed, the women in the family were expected to fill the void. He goes on to say that "in almost every case, the primary focus of women's lives [married or single] was domestic" (163), echoing the remarks of Dr.

Graham Warder concerning the proper “sphere” (par 5) for women, which was in the private home. Challenging these social expectations was cause to be “seen as odd and deviant” (Dyck 163). A woman like supporting character Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!*, did not have the same advantages as Alexandra Bergson in terms of social status, financial well-being, or family support. Reginald Dyck says that the “structure and organization [of rural families] channeled the flow of goods and services in a manner that isolated and weakened rural women” (163), and this was certainly true of Marie Shabata: she had no other option than reliance on a man.

Alexandra’s youngest brother Emil develops a friendly relationship, with the married Marie Shabata. Her marriage is troubled, if not abusive, and eventually the attraction between Marie and Emil, combined with husband Frank Shabata’s jealous insecurity comes to a tragic end. Finding Emil’s horse at the Shabata home, along with the couple in each other’s arms in the orchard, Frank, shoots and kills them both (*Pioneers* 138). Even though Frank “knew he was to blame” (*Pioneers* 140) for Marie’s unhappiness, he questioned, “Why had Marie made him do this thing; why had she brought this upon him?” (*Pioneers* 140). Frank Shabata’s tortured question seems to shift the blame for the difficult marriage, along with the murder of two people squarely on Marie’s shoulders; not even Emil is given any responsibility in the tragedy. I am curious if the author believed, as Alexandra Bergson did, that the murder was justified or if the story only documents the attitudes of the day. I found no references to marital infidelity, or the consequences of unfaithfulness in Cather’s private correspondence or the books about her. Given the strict gender roles as explained in Chapter 2, I tend to

believe that Cather wrote Alexandra's reaction to this tragedy as a reflection of the societal expectations of the day.

Alexandra, while mourning her brother, believed Frank Shabata "had been less in the wrong than any of them, and he was paying the heaviest penalty" (*Pioneers* 149). We can see the traditional nature of the times in Alexandra's attitude toward Marie, "the mere fact that she was Shabata's wife," and of her brother Emil, "only bad boys ran after married women" (*Pioneers* 149). Alexandra went so far as to visit Frank in the State Penitentiary telling him, "I understand how you did it. I don't feel hard toward you. They were more to blame than you" (*Pioneers* 154). Confirming the attitudes of the times, Alexandra promises to help Frank gain a pardon. Although Alexandra does hold her brother partially responsible for the tragedy, the notion that an infidelity would justify the murder of two people speaks to the very conservative, traditional period that this story is set in.

This facet of *O Pioneers!* shows the complexity of Alexandra Bergson. Though a strong, capable, quietly independent woman, operating in the traditionally male dominated world of farming, Alexandra puts the blame on the shoulders of the dead couple. When questioned about the possible outcome of a murder in the case of infidelity, Dr. Blake Slonecker surmised that "a wife's infidelity into the mid- and late 20th century would be considered a legitimate reason for domestic violence by policing agencies and even courts." He added that it could be possible for a man to escape "prosecution for murder" for this reason, although he does not know of any Nebraska statutes that "would have formally granted protection on those grounds" (Slonecker).

O Pioneers!, Willa Cather's second published novel clearly speaks to the times it was written and published in. Nebraska granted married women full property rights in 1881 (Slonecker) and by 1900 all states had legislations that granted married women some control over their own property and money (*Timeline*). Women were still living in a society run and dominated by men though, the Supreme Court having declared in 1873 that women were prohibited from practicing law or voting. The court declared that women were "persons" but "a special category of non-voting citizens" (*Timeline*).

Dorothy Van Ghent states that *O Pioneers!*, written by Cather at age 39, was written "when the essential nature of her gift began to realize itself" (9). Van Ghent continues, saying that "behind the late start were the years of discipline, in which she had been learning how to handle what she knew, and learning what it was that she knew" (9). We see what Cather knew, in this story. The Bergsons were immigrants, as were many of the locals in Red Cloud. The story is centered around agriculture and was set in Nebraska. Cather's father worked with farmers in his office where young Willa frequently visited. Alexandra was a strong, independent woman as was the educated, self-supported, well-traveled Cather. However, Alexandra's attitudes toward her brother's relationship and its ultimate outcome with Marie Shabata is reflective of the atmosphere and the attitudes of the times that Cather was living in.

Quoting Cather, writing of her experience with *O Pioneers!*, Van Ghent points out that the characters, settings, and experiences of Cather's work were inspired by Willa Cather's own life. Cather herself wrote of her experience writing *O Pioneers!*, "When a writer begins to work with his own material, he realizes that no matter what his literary

excursions may have been, he has been working with it from the beginning--by living it" (15). Cather added "In working with this material he finds that he need have little to do with literary devices; he comes to depend more and more on something else--the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day" (Van Ghent 16).

Thea Kronborg

The Song of the Lark, Cather's next novel and the second in the series known as The Prairie Trilogy, was written published in 1915. "*The Song of the Lark* is a ponderously bulky novel that suffers from autobiographic compulsion," writes Dorothy Van Ghent (18). Modeled after Swedish opera singer, Olive Fremstad, Van Ghent quotes Elizabeth Sergeant saying that Cather, "was deeply--by her own account--identified with her character [Thea Kronborg], who had many of her traits and had undergone many of her own experiences" (18). Van Ghent goes on to say, "Like Alexandra's, Thea Kronborg's nature had been formed close to the land" (20).

The story of the Kronborg family, living in the small town of Moonstone, Colorado, along with many Swedish immigrants is much like the lives of the Cathers. Willa and her family lived in a house that was similar to that of the Kronborgs (Van Ghent 6). Cather seems to write her opinion regarding women and society early in this story. Mrs. Kronborg, the mother of protagonist Thea, is described as "active, practical, unruffled; good-humoured [sic], but determined" (*Lark* 10). Doctor Archie, the town's physician, and family friend deems her "Exactly the sort of woman to take care of a flighty preacher" referring to Father, Peter Kronborg (*Lark* 11). Cather's portrayal of

this supporting character is subtle, but progressive; she is credited with adding property of her own to the marital union “one fourth of her father’s broad acres in Nebraska--but this she kept in her own name” (*Lark* 11). Mrs. Kronborg was a dutiful wife, filling traditional roles such as ironing her preacher husband’s shirts. She was tolerant of him assigning names for the children and directing the children in matters of patriotism and morality but she “had no confidence in his administration of worldly affairs” (*Lark* 11). Seeming to give some credit to the more forward-thinking men of the time, Cather writes that Peter Kronborg, in fact “believed, and he was right in believing, that the sovereign State of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her” (*Lark* 11). Although Peter Kronborg doesn’t ever give voice to his liberal ideas, he respects Mrs. Kronborg and defers to her often, even publicly.

Thea Kronborg studied music, specifically piano, from an early age. Rival character, Lily Fisher vied with Thea when it came to church piano and voice performances. However, Thea’s attitude seems to show Cather’s own opinion of some women. “Lily Fisher was pretty, and she was willing to be just as big a fool as people wanted her to be. Very well; Thea Kronborg wasn’t. She would rather be hated than be stupid, any day” (*Lark* 59). In *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Cather writes to Helen Louise Stevens Stowell, “Bah! Some women are like a wet sponge, just let a man squeeze them once and all the sense they ever had runs off” (*Jewell* 12). Cather had many women friends, but she clearly had no patience for women who hid their intelligence and capabilities.

After Thea's music teacher quietly left town due to illness, Thea left school to take over his pupils, assuming "eight one-hour pupils and ten half-hour pupils" (*Lark* 96) with more expected during the summer break. Although she was generous with her wages, adding to the family's income, she "liked the personal independence which was accorded to her as a wage earner" (*Lark* 97). Thea's ambitious nature was clear early on. Her music teacher, once provoked her, suggesting that rather than learning German so she could sing well, she might rather "marry some *Jacob* here and keep house for him" (*Lark* 70). Thea responded by questioning the ability to receive the quality of musical education she wished for without leaving for a bigger city (*Lark* 70). This detail forecasts Thea's ambitions and courage.

Ray Kennedy, Thea's admirer enabled her long-time ambition to go away and study music (*Lark* 138). The would-be suitor named Thea as his beneficiary in a deathbed conversation. Ray confided to Doctor Archie that it was his wish for the money to be spent on Thea's musical education. After his tragic passing, Thea received Ray's gift and traveled to Chicago to begin her studies. Reinforcing the quiet strength and authority of Thea's mother, Reverend Kronborg would not grant permission for Thea's study in another town until he had discussed and gained approval from the matriarch (*Lark* 138). I would question if Thea's ambition for further musical education would have been indulged had Ray survived and become Thea's husband, as he had hoped.

The Song of the Lark, second in the Prairie Trilogy, is a strong indicator that Cather used her own life and experience to influence her writing. "It was this little town,

seemingly so insignificant, so commonplace, so meagre in imaginative material, that became for Willa Cather a rich, almost exhaustless mine of experience" (Lewis 18). In her book *Willa Cather Living, A Personal Record*, Edith Lewis speaks of Red Cloud and Cather's use of the people she grew up around in her stories. Much like Cather's other works, the people and situations paralleled Cather's own life. Dr. Archie is a secondary, but prominent character in *The Song of the Lark*, who embodied from real life the "two leading doctors of the town, Dr. Damerell and Dr. McKeebie" (Lewis 27). In *Lark* Thea's long-time mentor, Dr. Archie was partial to Thea from the time she was a small child. She was allowed to accompany him on his rounds, much like young Cather accompanied Doctors McKeeby and Damerell in "their long drives about the country to visit their patients; and she learned from them how administer anaesthetics [sic]" (Lewis 27).

Edith Lewis makes the comparison between Thea Kronberg and Cather, "For Willa Cather, as for Thea Kronberg, it was a slow and painful process, quoting *The Song of the Lark*, "Every artist makes himself born" (Lewis 28). Lewis states that of all the characters in Cather's stories, none is as imaginary as Thea Kronberg as a young child. She goes on to say that "while the physical personality is entirely different, the person who most resembled the young *Thea Kronberg* in thought, in feeling, in spiritual development, is Willa Cather herself" (Lewis 39).

Cather's next book, *My Ántonia*, the third of the Prairie Trilogy, does not feature a female as the lead character, nor is a woman the narrator. However, Cather, in

character *Ántonia* Shimerda demonstrates Cather's tendency to write strong female characters, even as supporting characters.

Cather's Supporting Women

Willa Cather wrote *My Ántonia* and *One of Ours* with male protagonists and *Ántonia* is narrated by the male main character. *Ántonia* Shabata and Enid Royce Wheeler are both supporting characters but in contrast to their secondary role in the stories, both women make a strong statement as self-assured, determined women. Like Cather's leading women, both women conducted their lives much like Cather did, honoring their own convictions confidently and un-swayed by the social conventions of the time.

Ántonia Shabata

My Ántonia had its beginnings as a short story called "Peter" that Cather wrote for a Boston Magazine; it was later incorporated in *My Ántonia* (*Ántonia* x). *Ántonia* is a character based on Cather's childhood friend, Annie Pavelka, who she encounters again in 1915 (*Antonia* xi). Published in 1918, the story received much acclaim, journalist H.L. Mencken calling it "the greatest piece of fiction written by a woman in America" (*Ántonia* xi). Gordon Tapper, who wrote the introduction in the Barnes and Noble Classics version of *My Ántonia*, claims that critics were looking for something different than a "genteel tradition of high culture ruled by European canons of taste and subject matter" (*Ántonia* xiv) and that Cather's early work was popular because "their protagonists tend to fuse the qualities of the pioneer and the puritan" (*Ántonia* xiv). Perhaps Cather's popularity could be attributed to readers who were themselves the

quiet, uncelebrated foundations of their families, while maintaining the sense of propriety that society demanded.

Character Jim Burden is the narrator of *My Ántonia*. This story is told by Jim as a middle-aged man, looking back on his youth on the prairies of Nebraska. As with the other two books in the trilogy, the characters in this story are immigrants from what is now known as the Czech Republic. Orphaned, Jim travels from Virginia to the Nebraska prairie to live with his grandparents. In this detail, even a male character mimics an element of Cather's life. Ántonia Shimerda, the daughter of immigrants, was an early childhood friend of Jim's. Despite a language barrier, she was an outgoing girl. Ántonia at first meeting approached Jim "and held out her hand coaxingly. In a moment we were running up the steep drawside together" (*Ántonia* 21). Jim became Ántonia's English tutor and Ántonia "had opinions about everything and she was soon able to make them known" (*Ántonia* 24).

A statement by Dr. Graham Warder, that men were considered superior to women, is echoed in an interaction between Jim and Ántonia. Cather writes that Jim, although very fond of Ántonia, resented "a superior tone" that she used when interacting with him. Jim acknowledges that "she was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl" (*Antonia* 31). An encounter with a snake, in which Jim takes charge and kills the snake, changes the dynamic between the two. As was Jim's wish, "she began to treat me more like an equal and to defer to me in other things than reading lessons" (*Ántonia* 31).

Jim's grandparents left the farm and moved to town to give Jim a better chance at a quality education. *Ántonia* had no such luxury; she became live-in, hired help in the kitchen of a family in town. In fact, several girls from the country served families in town and collectively became known as the "hired girls" (*Ántonia* 120). These girls, having no opportunity to earn a living other than in service were counted on to help clear their family farms from debt. Once again, Cather acknowledges the women who were counted upon, if not expected, to contribute to the welfare of the family though they have no rights or standing. Cather makes a broad comparison of female characters Alexandra Bergson and *Ántonia* Shimerda, both women relied upon for the benefit of the family. But unlike Alexandra Bergson, who oversaw her own fate, *Ántonia*'s brother, Ambrosch argued for his sister's wages to be paid to him directly, leaving decisions pertaining to *Ántonia*'s "needs" to him, even disputing the necessity of shoes (*Ántonia* 94).

Cather wrote two women, Alexandra and *Ántonia* as women who needed to support their family farms. Alexandra had the fortune to be placed in a leadership position, enabling her to eventually own and operate her own farm. *Ántonia* worked in the fields as a child and then was sent to work outside the home to provide financial support for her family. Douglas Werden writes in his article for the *Great Plains Quarterly*, that the "traditional role of American women on the farm is as 'farm women' --that is, women living on a farm but not involved in farming activities, except when they are needed" (202). Werden describes Cather's work in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* as "not primarily about homesteading pioneers, but rather about two women who are

pioneers in crossing socially constructed gender barriers” (199). I am struck by the notion of a “woman’s place” in society when it comes to farming or any other traditionally male role and how easily and acceptable it was for that line to be crossed when there was a need for financial support or labor.

Ántonia, like so many women of the time, quietly and without complaint did what was necessary to support her family and their farm. Refusing to lose her sense of self in the role of family supporter and domestic help, she took advantage of the move by embracing the social opportunities that being in town offered. The Saturday night dances in Nighthawk were a favorite for her, and she went often enough that she was considered “the best dancer of them all” (*Ántonia* 124). Ántonia’s life continues with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. At hearing of Ántonia’s exile at the family farm due to her circumstance, childhood friend and narrator Jim expresses his disappointment saying, “I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity” (*Ántonia* 179). He speaks of forgiveness again saying, “I could forgive her, I told myself, if she hadn’t thrown herself away on such a cheap sort of fellow” (*Ántonia* 182). It should be noted that Jim does not seem to hold responsible Larry Donovan, the man who fathered Ántonia’s baby and abandoned them both, it is only Ántonia who “needs” Jim’s forgiveness.

Emelie Paulsson wrote in her English Literature Bachelor’s thesis that “Ántonia both adheres to and fails to conform to the accepted gender norms and roles of the nineteenth-century” (1). She cites Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman” (1), suggesting that a woman’s identity is “created through a “stylized repetition of acts” (1). Paulsson’s essay discusses Cather’s use of a male

narrator as well, saying this style allows the reader to experience what a woman experiences; “that it is natural for a woman to see the world and other women from the dominant male perspective since that is what the majority of the literature reflects” (5). Paulsson’s assertion is demonstrated by Jim’s offense at *Ántonia*’s forward nature early in the story and his discussion of conditional “forgiveness” of his friend for her life decisions that are of no consequence to him.

Cather wrote another strong, independent woman who chose to defy social convention in a time when social propriety for women was seemingly paramount. *Ántonia* was in very different circumstances than Alexandra Bergson or Thea Kronborg. Both Alexandra and Thea attain success in their lives. Both are strong, independent women but, as far as Cather tells us, push the gender boundaries while staying carefully within society’s moral restraints. Unlike Alexandra who seemed to fall into line with social standards in areas of sexual morality, *Ántonia* is unapologetic about her out-of-wedlock baby and refuses to be shamed. Willa Cather, in this third book of the *Prairie Trilogy*, features another woman character who demonstrates her strength and independence in but in a very different way.

Emmeline Gros writes for *HAL Open Science* that “If Willa Cather was influenced by the landscapes that she experienced during her childhood, she was also very much affected by the social and historical context in which she grew up” (par. 13). To enforce the attitudes of the times, Gros cites of a passage in the *Ladies Companion* from 1860 that said that “a really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority, and therefore is grateful for support” (par. 14).

Enid Royce Wheeler

One of Ours, Cather's 1923 Pulitzer Prize winning war story, for me, seemed an unlikely source for this paper. However, upon reading, I found two very different, but extremely resolute women written into this story. Protagonist Claude Wheeler's mother Evangeline Wheeler, and his wife Enid Royce Wheeler, are not main characters in this writing but play important roles in the story. As with many of her other works, inspirations from Cather's own life and personality add depth and truth to this story. According to Edith Lewis, Cather's cousin, Grosvenor served and was killed in the Battle of Cantigny "the first American Offensive" (Lewis 117) of World War I. Lewis claims that the death inspired Cather to write *One of Ours*. In another similarity, household help, Mahailey, came to the Midwest from Virginia, much like Cather's own family. Like many of her other stories, immigrants, referred to as "from the old country" (*One of Ours* 10), populate the story.

The story begins with Claude as a child, living with his parents and brothers on his father's farm. Evangeline Wheeler, who came from Vermont to serve as the high school principal (*One of Ours* 8), nonetheless shows herself to be a very traditional woman and her husband treats her that way. The dynamic is set early in the book with husband Nat Wheeler leaving home, "He said nothing to his wife; it was her business to guess whether or not he would be home for dinner. She and Mahailey could have a good time scrubbing and sweeping all day, with no men around to bother them" (*One of Ours* 7). It is clear in this story that Nat Wheeler does not feel obligated to be

considerate of his wife, not to mention his assumption that his wife's idea of entertainment would be cleaning.

Mrs. Wheeler's traditional nature is shown when her husband spitefully chops down Claude's beloved cherry tree. Acknowledging that the tree was not considered to be jointly owned, but was in fact the property of her husband, she cried at her son's anguish "it's your father's tree. He has a perfect right to cut it down if he wants to" (*One of Ours* 18). Cather writes that Evangeline Wheeler "accepted everything about her husband as part of his rugged masculinity, and of that she was proud, in her quiet way" (*One of Ours* 17). I find it perplexing that Nat Wheeler's treatment of his wife could be considered masculine and attractive rather than emotionally abusive. Equally confounding is the acceptance of this dynamic by an educated woman. I wonder if Cather's portrayal of this unequal partnership was deliberate, to establish an expectation of how a marital relationship of the time would look. A comparison of the elder Wheelers, to the marriage that Claude would have with his future wife Enid, is a stark contrast and might have been designed to illustrate the changing attitudes that women were starting to exhibit politically.

Nat Wheeler's chauvinism is reinforced when he explains at the dinner table how he had helped a friend, as well as himself, by purchasing the ailing man's property and livestock. Evangeline questioned "why they bought more land, when they already had so much they could not farm half of it" (*One of Ours* 33). His answer was dismissive and patronizing, "Just like a woman, Evangeline, just like a woman!" Her concerned comment "I don't see what is to become of this place" was answered with "Not

necessary for you to see Evangeline" (*One of Ours* 34), making it clear that that he was not to be questioned, he considered the farm his separate property and she should accept her place in the relationship.

Despite Claude's frequent frustration with his father's callous behavior, he displays the same feeling about women and their proper role in marital relationships. This attitude reveals itself when a bond develops with childhood friend Enid Royce. The people of Frankfort considered all the Royce women strange (*One of Ours* 56) and considered Enid's appearance, "very pretty--in itself a humanizing attribute" (*One of Ours* 56). While Enid is concerned that Claude has become a "free thinker" and is possibly an atheist (*One of Ours* 58), Claude is of the belief that "Women ought to be religious; faith was the natural fragrance of their minds" and that "A woman who didn't have holy thoughts about mysterious things far away would be prosaic and commonplace, like a man" (*One of Ours* 58).

Again, Dr. Graham Warder's statement in an article for the Social Welfare History Project confirms these attitudes. He wrote that "In colonial America, men were considered superior to women--in all ways, even in terms of morality" (Warder par. 4). However, he suggests that women and men occupied "separate spheres," and the women occupied the "world of privacy, family and morality" as opposed to the public world the men dwelt in (Warder par. 5). According to Warder, Catherine Beecher, the daughter of a prominent minister and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote that women "In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and

support of a clergyman, in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence" (Warder par. 6).

Enid Royce certainly felt morally superior to Claude, and she brazenly exhibited another area of superiority by driving them both out of a storm after a shopping trip to town. Claude noticed the storm coming and told Enid it would be safer to stay in town, but she did not bow to his wishes, insisting they drive home. A skid off the side of the road reinforced Claude's opinion that it was too dangerous to keep going, and he suggested a stay with friends along the road. Again, Enid asserted herself and suggested that she, herself, take over the driving. Claude was reluctant, but Enid was "amiable but inflexible" (*One of Ours* 61). "He was chafed by her stubbornness, but he had to admire her resourcefulness in handling the car" (*One of Ours* 61). Enid shows no hesitation in challenging Claude's notions regarding male superiority in this case, even for fear that it might damage the relationship. To his credit, Claude freely admits to his parents upon their arrival "It was Enid who got us home," and "She's a dreadfully foolhardy girl, and somebody ought to shake her, but she's a fine driver" (*One of Ours* 61). Angus Fletcher writes in "Willa Cather and the Upside-Down Politics of Feminism" that *One of Ours*, written about two years after the Nineteenth Amendment "appeared at a time when women no longer needed to worry about attenuating male fears" (Fletcher 125). Enid's actions demonstrate total disregard for Claude's male ego as well as her own determination to be independent and self-sufficient.

Enid continues to display her progressive ideas, calling on Claude after a farming accident. Unheard of for the times, she visits him in his bedroom. Claude

“would have never believed that with her severe notions of decorum, [she] would come into his room and sit with him” (*One of Ours* 64). This detail once again, is contrary to Enid’s pious nature and demonstrates her free thinking and lack of concern with convention.

Claude’s expresses his hope that Enid’s focus on her “missionary motives” (*One of Ours* 67) will change when asking her father for permission to marry. He agrees with Mr. Royce’s opinion that they “don’t do a woman any good.” Claude tells him “I want to help her get rid of them” (*One of Ours* 67). Mr. Royce expresses his skepticism, telling Claude “You’ll find out that nearly everything you believe about life--about marriage, especially--is lies” (*One of Ours* 67). It occurs to me that Mr. Royce, by this statement, is frustrated by his daughter’s-- and possibly other women’s lack of conformation to the roles that society has observed in his lifetime.

Claude does have concerns before the marriage, noticing that Enid “seemed more interested in the house than in him” (*One of Ours* 77). He eased his concerns though, by telling himself that “Everything would be all right when they were married” and “Marriage reduced all women to a common denominator, changed a cool, self-satisfied girl into a loving and generous one. It was quite right that Enid should be unconscious now of everything that she was to be when she was his wife” (*One of Ours* 77). Claude had used his father and mother’s relationship as a model, and he couldn’t have been more mistaken.

Claude and Enid’s wedding night set the tone for the rest of their marriage. Enid asked him to stay elsewhere on their first night as a married couple. Claude, at first,

experienced a “storm of disappointment and humiliation” which soon abated but he could not forget the “peculiarly casual, indifferent, uninterested tone of his wife’s voice” (*One of Ours* 85). He reflected that it “was the tone in which people make commonplace remarks about common things” (*One of Ours* 85). Enid’s only thought at his refusal of her help in tidying himself after spending a long night in the smoking car was that “She had often heard that men were cross before breakfast” (*One of Ours* 87).

Pearl James’ article, “The Enid Problem: Dangerous Modernity in *One of Ours*” writes that author D.H. Lawrence described World War I as a “war between the sexes rather than a war between nations” and that women were destructively malevolent toward men (par. 1). Of course, James considers Lawrence a misogynist, but claims that Cather uses a misogynistic “structure,” and that *One of Ours* blames Claude’s issues on “female action and independence called up by the war effort” (par 3). James cites Sinclair Lewis’s term “The Enid Problem,” blaming Claude’s issues on Enid’s denying him their marriage bed on their wedding night, thus making Enid “unsympathetic” (par 7) as opposed to being honest about Claude’s “ambivalent sexuality” (par. 6). *One of Ours* is very understated in the intimate aspects of Claude’s and Enid’s marriage, but James suggests that the marriage is sexless and that the shirts that Enid irons for Claude satisfy him but are no substitute for his more “primal desires,” (par. 27) and that she treats him more like a “brother or son” (par. 27). Willa Cather chose to write the relationship between Claude and Enid as a symbiotic companionship rather than intimate. Like Alexandra Bergson, Enid Royce Wheeler is suggested to be a woman who does not seek intimacy from a man. Grace Wetzel, in an article for *The Great Plains*

Quarterly, writes that Cather wrote a “depiction of the new model for marriage--one based on camaraderie, not passion” (Wetzel 278). Wetzel quotes Rachel DuPlessis’s explanation that a more romantic theme to a story would “muffle the main female character” (Wetzel 278). This seems to be true in both cases. Both women find fulfillment in the causes they are devoted to.

Only a year and a half old, Claude and Enid’s marriage comes to an end when she is notified that her sister, a missionary in China, has fallen ill. Enid, who “never questioned the rightness of her own decisions” (*One of Ours* 95) suggests that Claude stay with his mother while she travels to tend to her sister, implying that Claude should not be expected to care for himself. Enid’s departure for China marks the end of her involvement in the story. It is interesting to me that Cather chose to end this relationship so abruptly. This detail appears to be the unstated “reason” that Claude chose to enlist as a soldier in World War I. He ultimately loses his life, confirming Pearl James’ claim that Enid, a woman, is to blame for Claude’s demise.

Cather acknowledges both the traditional and modern aspects of the period’s women in this story, and I would agree with Pearl James’ notion that Enid is portrayed as Claude’s problem. While I didn’t find Enid a particularly likeable, or admirable character, I chafe at the notion that a woman living according to her own standards is to blame for the “problems” of a man and ultimately the choice that he made for himself. Claude Wheeler appears to be a somewhat passive and insecure man. He did not have a close connection with his father. His mother, although loving, is traditional and did not protect Claude from his father’s rough treatment. Despite his upbringing, Enid’s

physical rejection and ultimate abandonment became the convenient scapegoat for him to enlist when searching for his purpose in life.

Summary

Willa Cather's *One of Ours*, along with her Prairie Trilogy, all portray the very conservative, conventional ideas of the time. *O Pioneers!* uses Alexandra Bergson's brothers to express the notion that women should have no property rights of their own, despite the property being titled as such. Alexandra receives no credit for the success of the farm, though she managed the business affairs of the properties after her father's death. Excelling in the traditionally male role of farmer/farm manager, Alexandra acknowledges the times in her conservative view at the murder of her beloved brother and family friend Marie Shabata.

The Song of the Lark features Thea Kronborg's mother as filling a very traditional role, caring for her husband and family, seeing to domestic chores and keeping up appearances as a minister's wife. There is no question that had Ray Kennedy lived and convinced Thea to marry him, he would have assumed that Thea would fill the same traditional roles as her mother. It would have been expected that her personal ambitions be, if not forgotten, certainly take a backseat to a more conventional role.

Ántonia Shabata is a very different woman than Alexandra Bergson or Thea Kronborg. A poor, first generation immigrant, Ántonia's story is told by narrator Jim Burden. Jim, although very fond of Ántonia, fully expects that she acknowledge his superior position--not in terms of education or even class, rather he feels that he is superior to her because she is a woman. Later in the story Jim feels that Ántonia

somehow needs his forgiveness for becoming involved with a man who abandons her when she becomes pregnant without the benefit of marriage.

Claude Wheeler, *One of Ours* protagonist, despite watching the chauvinistic treatment of his mother by his father, and finding his father harsh himself, is of the opinion that his Enid would, once married, become less interested in her missionary and activist activities and fill the more suitable role of a wife. Enid seems to confirm some of these ideas by suggesting that Claude move in with his mother when she leaves for China to care for her sick sister. She did in fact care for the home and Claude in most ways, although she did not give up her political activism.

Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Antonia Shabata and Enid Royce Wheeler, to be sure, all exhibit behaviors that acknowledge the conventions of the times. Each, though, were in my opinion remarkable, especially for the years the stories were set in. Alexandra Bergson received her property through inheritance. This idea is confirmed by Brett Dillahunt, History teacher at Prosser High School. Property was often passed down, even to women, as a means of keeping assets in the family line (Dillahunt). Remarkably, Alexandra was the heir trusted by her father to manage the farm, and shows herself to be confident, forward thinking, and ultimately unaffected by the shortsighted thinking of her brothers.

Thea Kronborg asserted her independence as a child. She followed Dr. Archie on his medical visits, insisted on an unoccupied space in the Kronborg home for her own bedroom space, gave music lessons contributing to the family income, dreamed of studying music outside of Moonstone, Colorado, not to mention traveling to Chicago to

pursue her goals while supporting herself by singing at funerals. It should not be discounted that Thea changed her focus from piano to voice while in Chicago in an impressive demonstration of confidence.

Ántonia Shimerda, a poor immigrant, demonstrates a decidedly different version of an independent woman. Her circumstances were quite different than the others, but she exhibited the same kind of confidence and independence. After a young man took liberties, Ántonia's employer was concerned for her reputation and asked her to stop attending the local dances that she so loved. A blunt refusal cost Ántonia her job (*Ántonia* 126). Ántonia's brother Ambrosch, at the birth of her child asked the midwife to "put it out in the rain barrel" (*Ántonia* 190), but Ántonia "loved it from the first as dearly as if she'd had a ring on her finger" (*Ántonia* 190). Ántonia eventually marries and her husband apparently accepts her child and raises it as his own.

One of Ours, Willa Cather's Pulitzer winner, has embedded a very independent, unconventional woman in Enid Royce Wheeler. The pious Enid had to be convinced to marry protagonist Claude. She set the tone for their relationship early and despite Claude's beliefs about women, Enid did not settle into a conventional role as Claude's wife. She eliminated a physical relationship in her marriage, and while she cared for Claude in most traditional ways, she did not hesitate to leave home for an extended time to care her sister, something that a woman even today might hesitate to do.

Willa Cather, in each of the discussed stories, told of women who operated out of societies norms for the time. Both main and supporting characters caught my attention with their strength and quiet acceptance of the work that needed to be done; not one of

these women questioned themselves or worried about how society might react to the life choices they made. Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, both lead characters in their stories, were portrayed as the bold women that they were, and though I noticed their progressive behavior, it seemed fitting. However, I had to reflect on the characters of *Ántonia Shabata* and *Enid Royce Wheeler* before I realized that though they were supporting characters, they were no less intrepid. Cather wrote these books with a firm eye on the conventions of the times but featured remarkable women who were subtly ahead of their times.

Chapter IV.

Perspective and Research Methods

My perspective in this paper is that of a feminist. This approach is a natural inclination for me, one I try to not habitually indulge in my reading and writing; I want to remain objective, mindful of the times and don't want to become single-minded.

Ann Dobie writes that a feminist critic, among other approaches, examines "the cultural contexts in which works were produced" (114). In a case where the writing implies that women are inferior, a feminist critic works "to abolish limiting stereotypes of women" (114). It is my belief Willa Cather addressed stereotypes by portraying these women as quietly feminist. Each of the characters discussed conducted her life outside of gender norms, without calling attention to their remarkable lives. The women featured in this paper jumped out as extraordinary to me, and it seemed fair to research the author for her possible motivations.

With an eye on what I considered to be gender norms for the time that the stories were set in, this paper was written using four of the novels written by Willa Cather. Cather's books take place in the early 20th century in the years before women had the right to vote and many years before business and banks were required to treat them as equals. Admittedly, many of my early opinions were assumptions.

Online research included the Heritage University library database, looking for scholarly articles that discussed Willa Cather herself, as well as her work. I also searched the web for information regarding Cather, expecting to find evidence of

feminist activities. In addition, I interviewed two American history teachers; one is a professor at Heritage, the other teaches history at our local high school. Finally, the curator of our local museum was helpful and directed me toward a book written by a woman who settled a piece of land, by herself, on the Horse Heaven Hills, just a few miles from my home.

Through reading and interviews, I discovered that women had more legal rights than I had believed. Those rights, though, were often given to benefit men. As an example, land could be bequeathed to a female heir, as a means of keeping the property in the family upon the death of a patriarch. The land then, although titled to the woman, could forcefully and legally be ceded to a husband once she married. There were no equal rights laws, so though a woman owned a farm, business and banks were not required to do business with them. It's my belief that Willa Cather was a storyteller at heart; still, she wrote characters and settings that were inspired by the real people and places she encountered in her life. In this way, she was able to indulge her calling while honoring the advice from her mentor to: "Don't try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants--write the truth and let them take it or leave it" (Van Ghent 10).

Chapter V.

Findings and Conclusions

Willa Cather and her stories have experienced a renaissance recently. A Google search will tell you that she is famous for her depiction of pioneer life on the American Plains. It was disappointing that I didn't find a mention of the remarkable women that she wrote. Successful farm owner and businesswoman Alexandra Bergson operated in and was respected by the male dominated farming industry while increasing her own fortunes as well as those of her family. Thea Kronborg, the beneficiary of a would-be suitor, took her inheritance and moved to Chicago to study piano. Working to provide her own room and board while studying, Thea changed course in her studies and worked to become a successful opera singer. Antonia Shimerda, a supporting character in the male narrated *My Antonia*, is an immigrant to America, learns English, and works to help support her family both on the farm and in town when the farm falters. This character shows herself to be strong willed and unbowed by convention, refusing to live by her employer's standards even at the cost of her job. An out of wedlock pregnancy shows Antonia's grit; she refuses to be shamed and finds a happy, although not prosperous, relationship where her child is accepted. Enid Royce Wheeler, though fond of Claude, lives her own life. She alone decides that her marriage to protagonist Claude will be chaste, refuses to cut back on her temperance activities and leaves her husband to travel to China to care for an ill sister. These women all lived in an era where women didn't have many legal rights, and the social restrictions were perhaps

even more binding. Yet Cather wrote each of them as quietly determined to follow their own path, quietly crashing through implied restraints.

As mentioned at the beginning of this writing, Cather's characters challenged the gender expectations of the times, and I initially guessed that she was an overt feminist. My research, looking for this type of activism, did not reveal any obvious suffrage activity. Much of Cather's correspondence was either destroyed or at her request kept private; the prevailing opinion is that it was an attempt to hide a lesbian lifestyle. My research did not show any documentation that Cather was involved in any suffrage activity, and I don't consider Cather's sexuality relevant in this paper.

Willa Cather was able to reflect the convention of the times and at the same time write strong women that were independent and not bound by society's pressure. We know by Willa Cather's writing and the correspondence that has survived that she was educated, well-traveled and self-assured. It is my belief that Willa Cather, rather than espousing a feminist credo, was writing her own life, a life that would not be bound by societies expectations for women. She wrote stories that not only acknowledged the times but her own autonomy.

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