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WILLA CATHER: MALE ROLES AND SELF DEFINITION IN *MY ÁNTONIA*,
THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE AND "NEIGHBOR ROSICKY"

by

Kristina Everton Ashton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT

WILLA CATHER: MALE ROLES AND SELF-DEFINITION IN *MY ÁNTONIA*, *THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE* AND "NEIGHBOR ROSICKY."

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Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

Master of Arts

Gender roles are a tool used by society to set acceptable boundaries and ideals upon the sexes, and during the early part of the twentieth century in America those gender boundaries began to blur. As a result of the 19th Amendment, men must have felt their decreasing importance because women were no longer solely dependent upon them, and gender roles shifted as woman began to occupy territory that was traditionally held by men. The "New Woman" entered the workforce, and refused to accept traditional female gender conventions. In response to the "New Woman, Theodore Roosevelt and other leading males sought to reinforce the ideal of the male as the protector and provider. As woman took on characteristics commonly associated with men, men now had to grapple with a changing gender identity that often left them confused and frustrated.

Willa Sibert Cather's life reflects the fluctuating gender conventions of early twentieth century America as she struggled to define her gender identity. In her youth, Cather chopped her hair and dressed like a boy. She also spent time dissecting frogs and called herself "William Cather, M.D." Cather's cross-dressing reveals her unconventional core and her desire to define herself regardless of societal expectations. Cather also had many close relationships with woman, and these close relationships have led many scholars to label her a lesbian. Cather, however, left us a mystery surrounding her gender preference because she never openly called herself a lesbian. Cather's supposed lesbianism is useful because it reveals the ambiguity of her personality. Cather is paradox because she sought for self-definition, but she also suffered from an identity crisis.

By using the shifting nature of gender roles in the America during the early decades of the twentieth century and Cather's confused and unconventional life as a backdrop, I would argue that *My Ántonia* (1918), *The Professor's House* (1925), and "Neighbor Rosicky (1932)" reveal the consequences of gender roles. Cather's novels and short story should be analyzed for her interest in exploring male reaction to prescribed gender roles which, ultimately, reveals Cather's attitude towards the existence of gender conventions. Cather advocated for a more fluid and balance way of defining male and female roles. Cather's novel *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House* reveal the consequences of gender roles because both Jim and Professor St. Peter are frustrated, fearful, unsatisfied, ambiguous, and unhappy with the roles that they have been playing. In sharp contrast to these two novels is Cather's delightful short story entitled "Neighbor

Rosicky.” In this short story Cather presents a protagonist who is whole and balanced. “Neighbor Rosicky” is Cather’s statement regarding the importance and beauty of self-definition. Ultimately, her literature can be viewed as a rejection of both male and female gender qualities which demonstrates that Cather and her fiction cannot be reduced to an identity agenda.

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Introduction

Social and Historical Context of Gender in Cather's America

Males and females throughout history have often worked within certain gender constructed parameters that have determined how they should behave and who they should be. Sylvia D. Hoffert, in her study *A History of Gender in America* states that: “gender is a social condition based on the way any particular group of people interprets anatomical characteristics. It is a label we use to reflect the meaning we attach to perceived sex differences” (2). Gender roles, then, are tools used by society to set acceptable boundaries and ideals upon the sexes.

This thesis will examine the consequences of gender role on identity in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, *The Professor's House*, and “Neighbor Rosicky.” Male roles in particular will be explored. Much has been said by scholars about the subjugation of women. However, the area of masculine studies has left much to be desired. Therefore, I would suggest that Cather's works should be analyzed for her interest in exploring male reaction to prescribed roles which ultimately reveals Cather's attitude towards the existence of gender conventions. Her masculine characters warrant careful consideration in light of the shifting cultural and social ideals with regard to gender roles and identity in the America in which she lived. Cather's male protagonists are particularly fascinating when studying the early twentieth century because it was a time in American history when both males and females questioned their identity roles. Traditional roles shifted as females began to take on characteristics generally held by males. Cather's ambiguous and

confused male protagonists reveal the problems inherent in ascribing stringent gender roles because her males struggle with understanding their identity. Cather rejected the traditional idea of separation of male and female roles, and she uses her novels and short stories as a way of combating American society and its traditional definition of gender roles. Cather, her novels, and short stories can be interpreted through several lenses such as regionalist, lesbian, or feminist, but I posit that there is yet another way to look at Cather, and that is by looking at the way she herself confuses the male gender in her novels and short stories to reveal the consequences of gender conventions. Her life and works suggest an identity crisis that is only resolved when Cather is not labeled and packaged as anything but a paradox. Cather's literature can be viewed as a rejection of both female and male gender qualities which demonstrates that Cather and her fiction cannot be reduced to an identity agenda. Ultimately, I would suggest that Cather argues for a more fluid way of defining male and female roles, and that she asserts self-definition from both the pages of her novels and the pages of her own life.

Cather's Historical Context

It is essential when studying Willa Cather and gender roles to establish a clear historical precedent to reveal the impetus for her rejection of traditional gender conventions. Male gender roles must be established in order to understand what a traditional male role is and how Cather works against it. By looking beyond Cather's time, I hope to add "muscle" to Cather studies.

Rigid Gender Ideals: The Gilded Age

During the Gilded Age of America (ca. 1850-1910) male and female roles were clearly defined and identity was dependent upon acting within these gender ideals. Ministers, writers, and politicians alike preached the doctrine of “separate spheres” which advanced the idea that the male was supposed to serve as the breadwinner who provided protection for his family. In contrast, the female was to bear and raise the children, manage the home, and cater to the desires of her husband (Hoffert 145). The writer John Ruskin states clearly the doctrine of separate spheres:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest...But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision (Ruskin, 1865).

In America, as well, the doctrine of separate spheres was preached, especially in popular magazines. *The Ladies Companion* of 1860 preached the separation of male and females: “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” (Weller 2).

As a result of gender conventions, men and women served as foils to one another, and males defined their gender characteristics in terms of what was not female. If the female was viewed as physically weak, then the male must be physically strong. If the female was emotional, dependent, and fragile, then the male must be strong, independent,

and rational. “The [Gilded Age] had tried to define manliness by encouraging men to be concerned about their character. In theory at least, they valued self-control, honor, loyalty, independence, self-sufficiency, and a sense of duty and integrity in a man” (Hoffert 334). This sense of opposition encouraged the rigid social and moral standards that are associated with the Gilded Age, and deviation from these conventions was frowned upon. Ultimately, gender boundaries helped to order the world of the Gilded Age.

A Definition of Manhood: Muscular Christianity “Onward Christian Soldiers”

During the Gilded Age, males, just like females were proscribed specific traits that they needed to possess, and the quality of their maleness was defined by how well they performed within their prescribed gender roles. One means of checking male performance was the “Muscular” or “Manly” Christian movement which was promoted by the writer and religious leader Charles Kingsley. Muscular Christianity emphasized the need for men to be both physically and spiritually fit. Kingsley’s writings emphasized the masculinity of Jesus Christ. He wrote:

Ah! Thought I, if your head had once rested on a lover’s bosom, and your heart known the mighty stay of a man’s affection, you would have learnt to go now in your sore need, not to the mother but to the Son—not to the indulgent virgin, but to the *strong man*, Christ Jesus—*stern* because loving—who does not shrink from punishing, and yet does it as a man would do it, ‘*mighty to save*’ (Hall *Letters* 211; emphasis added).

Kingsley argued that males should be stern and strong just as he envisioned Christ was. He sharply demarcated male gender identity as he clearly defined how a proper male should act. Donald Hall, in his work *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* expounds on Kingsley's philosophy:

[Charles Kingsley's] ideal is a man who fears God and can walk a thousand miles in a thousand hours—who, in the language which Mr. Kingsley has made popular, breathes God's free air on God's rich earth, and at the same time can hit a woodcock, doctor a horse, and twist a poker around his fingers (7).

Muscular Christianity revealed the ideal gender characteristics for men during the Gilded Age.

Despite Muscular Christianity's English roots, the movement spread rapidly across the Atlantic and Muscular Christians could soon be found in cities all across America. The "manly" philosophy of Kingsley was received with great enthusiasm as ministers and public figures praised Kingsley for his advocacy of true manhood (Putney 2). In a seminal 1858 *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "Saints and Their Bodies," Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister, praised the Muscular Christians for their espousal of health and manliness. He also demanded that health and manliness be the focus of America's Protestant churches, which he viewed as unhealthy and unmanly (Putney 2). Higginson and other religious leaders formed a campaign to spread Muscular Christianity in America. Soon, Muscular Christianity became a philosophy of life, advising men that true manhood meant that they must be courageous, chivalric, active, and progressive.

An offshoot of Muscular Christianity can be found in the “success manuals” that flourished during this period. These manuals were written as a way of instructing men on how they should behave and what they must do to achieve “magnificent manhood” (Hoffert 121). The “success manuals” offered their readers a way of thinking about and understanding how to be successful and warned that success was attained only when men were aggressive, determined, decisive, self-controlled, self-assertive, and self-motivated (Hoffert 122). Through these manuals, males understood the characteristics that they needed to display in order to obtain success within their gender role.

Another outcome of the Muscular Christian movement was the emphasis placed on sports and outdoor activities. Society began to celebrate manliness by glorifying traditional male traits such as competitiveness and aggressiveness. These “manly virtues” could be exhibited by participating in sports. Moreover, men did what they could to humiliate those who did not display these characteristics, particularly those who displayed behavior patterns connected with the female such as physical weakness, dependence, helplessness, and passivity (Hoffert 286). One way men felt that these “female weaknesses” could be done away with was by working out and participating in sports. Gyms were added to schools and colleges all over the country as a way of structuring physical activity for young men. The YMCA, or the Young Men’s Christian Association, which was closely associated with the Muscular Christian movement, created a place where men could go to enjoy physical activities with other young men.

Moreover, the Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910 and was another import from England (Putney 113). The Boy Scouts encouraged outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, and chopping wood to make a fire. The nineteenth century edition of

The Handbook of the Boy Scouts gives us yet another definition of what true manhood is: “Realizing that manhood, not scholarship, is the first aim of education, we have sought out those pursuits which developed the finest character, the finest physique, and which may be followed out of doors, which in a word, make for manhood” (Hoffert 286). With the ideas of Charles Kingsley, the success writers, and the Boy Scouts, the model for true manhood was set forth, and men who failed to exhibit these traits were seen as weak and unmanly, even feminine.

Theodore Roosevelt: The Strenuous Life

Theodore Roosevelt strived to portray himself as a “man’s man,” who understood that it was only by working within the prescribed gender roles that he could be successful. Theodore Roosevelt was born October 27, 1858, in New York City. Roosevelt’s father, Theodore Sr., was progressive and very much interested in the Muscular Christian movement. Kathleen Dalton, in her book *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* posits that Roosevelt’s father taught him Christian piety and social obligation (42). Dalton’s evidence is based upon events in Theodore Sr.’s life. Roosevelt’s father promoted Muscular Christianity by donating to the YMCA and preaching to the Newsboy’s Lodging House about manly fortitude (Dalton 19). Roosevelt often accompanied his father on his lectures about acceptable manliness and was taught to understand just what a male must be to have success in life. Theodore Sr. not only talked about manliness and morality, but he made sure that his children spent time participating in character building activities such as polo, tennis, and fox hunting (Dalton 19).

However, Roosevelt was not the outstanding physical specimen that his father wanted him to be. As a child, Roosevelt was sickly, weak, and scholarly, and as a result was beaten and mocked by the other boys. “Family pictures show him as a slender, pale-faced boy, costumed in infant dress, looking frail” (21). He was described as “an owlish, wistful boy; tall for his age at ten or eleven years; with a thin body and pipe stem legs” (Pringle 4). Moreover, he suffered from severe asthma during his entire childhood and as a result he was rendered practically an invalid. He spent his time traveling from one spa to the next in the company of his mother and other women. Roosevelt was not the boy that his father wanted him to be, and he soon demanded that his teenage son rid himself of his invalidism and work on building his physique. Soon, body building became an obsession to the young Roosevelt despite the fact that he still suffered from asthma (Dalton 51). “When he was old enough, the boy detested his puny body...In those days of childhood illness lies the clew of persistence, as he developed his body to outward if physiologically imperfect, strength. Any one who did less was a weakling. Any one who did less was no true patriot” (Pringle 4). Roosevelt understood that he must push himself into creating an identity that fit with the mold that his father and other leading males were promoting in order to achieve a successful life.

Later, Roosevelt sought public office, but his image was not “manly” enough to receive much support among the male voters. Observers set limits on Roosevelt’s political achievements because he did not seem to possess the manly attributes necessary for success. “The chance that Roosevelt would make himself known at Albany was remote...In addition to his origins among New Yorkers of wealth, he was a Harvard man. He wore eyeglasses on the end of a black silk cord which was *effeminate*” (Pringle 65;

emphasis added). He was also seen as a “New York dude” with a “falsetto voice” who wore a purple silk suit (Pringle 84). Roosevelt knew that he must change his image or he would never be elected to anything more than a committee. So he went to South Dakota to ride the range, he took up boxing, and spent time in the military. Roosevelt pleaded with national leaders to allow him to serve in the army during the Spanish-American War. He pushed for the charge up San Juan Hill and labeled himself and his fellow soldiers the “Rough Riders.” Roosevelt used his military exploits extensively as he campaigned for higher office. By doing this he was able to change his image from the sickly scholar to the “rough rider.” Clifford Putney in his work *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* suggests that: “Theodore Roosevelt transformed himself via boxing and barbells from a sickly housebound teenager into the rough-riding, safari-going, big stick-wielding Bull Moose of legend” (5). Roosevelt’s change in identity brought success and he became the model for true manhood toward the end of the Gilded Age. Sylvia Hoffert asserts that: “there was probably no man who had greater influence on how white manliness was defined than Theodore Roosevelt” (290).

Theodore Roosevelt’s struggle for identity has led many to suggest that he should be seen as the “classic American self-made man” (Dalton 15). Roosevelt wrote in magazines such as the *Youth Companion* and offered numerous speeches telling of his own adventures. He also offered advice on how people could live a more strenuous life. In a speech presented to the all-male Hamilton Club on April 10, 1899, entitled “The Strenuous Life,” he expounded upon the expectations necessary for true manhood.

Roosevelt contended:

I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil, and effort, of labor and strife; to preach the highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph (Roosevelt 21).

Here, Roosevelt asserted that courage and hard work are character traits that a man must have, and without them he would be unable to achieve anything during his lifetime.

Roosevelt continues his speech by telling men that they must work hard in their role as the provider for their families. “The man must be glad to do a man’s work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him” (Roosevelt 23). He went on to say: “We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort; the man who never wrongs his neighbor, who is prompt to help a friend, but who has those *virile* qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life” (22; emphasis added). Roosevelt helped to promote and enforce “virile” qualities as a means to achieve American greatness. This speech became famous and “the talk touched a nerve and inspired a generation of young men to strive to lead more vigorous lives, to serve their country and to grasp world leadership” (Dalton 186).

Roosevelt was regarded as one of the leading voices of the younger generation and was instrumental in shaping the up and coming century. In another speech given in 1900, Roosevelt spoke of the duty of the American boy. Roosevelt stated: “He must not be a coward or a weakling, a bully, a shirk, or a prig. He must work hard and play hard.

He must be clean-minded and clean-lived, and able to hold his own under all circumstances and against all comers” (Roosevelt 61). Roosevelt served as a role model to American men, and proclaimed to them throughout his presidency and through his numerous speeches on the “Gospel of the Strenuous Life,” the characteristics that men were required to manifest in order to be true “manly” men.

Oscar Wilde: Man with the Sunflower

In sharp contrast to Theodore Roosevelt stands Oscar Wilde, who represented the exact opposite of what was proper and appropriate masculinity in Gilded Age America. Sarah Burns argues in her study *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* that: “at the opposite extreme stood the notorious aesthete Oscar Wilde, whose self-manufactured image posed its own radical alternative to the *normative strictures of middle-class masculinity* (89; emphasis added). Oscar Wilde, already infamous for his ties to Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Patience*, visited America in 1882. *Patience* mocked tradition with the drooping wrists and the flamboyant attire of the aesthetes. However, crowds flocked to see Wilde on his lecture tour, hoping to catch him spouting witticism or brandishing a sunflower as he related his theories on beauty. Images connected to Wilde from George Du Maurier’s *Punch* had preceded Wilde’s trip to America. The cartoons caricatured Wilde as the typical dandy who sought only after beauty.

While in America, Wilde was ridiculed because his silk stockings and knee breeches were in sharp contrast to typical male attributes. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the aforementioned Muscular Christian, berated Wilde as effeminate and

encouraged others to avoid Wilde and his “unmanly” ideas. Higginson vehemently suggested that Wilde should have remained to fight the cause of Catholic Ireland rather than travel to America to share his questionable poetry with his many lady admirers: “Wilde, instead of staying to the right of wrongs of Ireland, chose to cross the Atlantic and ‘pose in ladies’ boudoirs [and] write prurient poems which hostesses must discreetly ignore” (Burns 95). In contrast to Wilde’s arrival in America, Wilde’s one-year tour ended without many accolades, and Wilde’s name vanished from the American press for the next ten years. However, his name and his behavior were not forgotten or forgiven by members of the clergy. “According to Thomas Beer, the ‘yellow lord of hell’s corruption’ was mentioned by clergymen in at least 900 known sermons between 1895 and 1900” (Burns 100). Oscar Wilde’s subsequent trial and sentence to imprisonment in Reading Gaol over the issue of homosexuality did much to encourage the scorn of American men. Wilde’s decadence and effeminacy represented to American men just what most males felt a male should not be.

The Battle over Identity

At the same time that Roosevelt advocated the strong, protective, and virile male, the “New Woman” emerged within the male dominated society. The “New Woman” can be defined as “single, well-educated, independent, self-sufficient, and strong-willed” (Hoffert 283). The “New Woman” lashed out against the males who for so long had defined her inferior place in society. Women began to redefine for themselves an identity that was separate from the male definition of their role. Women chose to expand their role by stepping into traditional male territory and proclaiming their right to education,

employment (even in jobs traditionally held by men), and the vote. Indicative of the changing roles of woman was the Gibson Girl created by the artist Charles Dana Gibson. The Gibson Girl was portrayed wearing a blouse and a long skirt to enable her to participate in activities such as tennis and bike riding. The idea of the New Woman is illustrated nicely in a contemporary short story written for *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine (1901) by Caroline Ticknor entitled “The Steel-Engraving Lady and the Gibson Girl.” The story tells of a meeting between the quiet, elegant, and very feminine Steel-Engraving Lady, the symbol of traditional womanhood, and the modern Gibson Girl. They converse on the issue of women’s rights, neither one coming to any real consensus about men and how women should be treated by men. The Gibson Girl argues: “We don’t require their approval. Man has been catered to for ages past, while woman was a patient, subservient slave. Today she assumes her rightful place, and *man accepts the lot assigned to him*” (303; emphasis added). The story ends with the Gibson Girl walking beside a young man as she carries her own golf clubs emphasizing her insistence on equality.

The “Woman’s Movement” was created, advocating more equal opportunities for women. Women such as Jane Harrison, Jessie Weston, and Ruth Benedict became anthropologists. Artists and dancers such as Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Mary Cassatt showered the male art world with works of their own (Gilbert and Guber 34). The actress and singer Sarah Bernhardt was an astute businesswoman who controlled her own productions. Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes advocated a woman’s right to birth control. Mabel Dodge was a symbol of the “New Woman” who married four times and participated in several affairs. She also aided in organizing the 1913 Armory Show in

New York City where prominent modern artists from Europe and America exhibited their art. Mabel Dodge said, regarding women's changing roles, that:

“Something in us wants men to be strong, mature, and superior to us so that we may admire them, thus consoled in a measure for our enslavement to them...but something else in us wants them to be inferior, and less powerful than ourselves, so that obtaining the ascendancy over them we may gain possession, not only of them, but of our souls once more”

(Rubnick 37).

Dodge voices the concern that both males and females had over the inability to define gender identity during the early years of the twentieth century.

Moreover, one can see the drastic changes being forced upon males and male identity during this time in American history as women sought to gain more political and social authority. Women banded together to achieve the right of suffrage, which ultimately became law in 1920 with the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Roosevelt's “Gospel of the Strenuous Life,” the “New Woman,” and the advent of the 19th Amendment contributed to altering the balance of power between men and women. During these years of struggle, women strove to redefine their role in society; likewise, men had to adjust and forge a new understanding of their gender identity. “Adjustments in gender roles and relations began to emerge. In the end, independence, courage, and activity were still considered to be quintessential manly virtues, and work was still central to man's identity, but by 1920 men did not have exclusive claim to those attributes and activities” (Hoffert 297). As a result of these continually shifting gender roles, men were forced to try to understand their new place in society. Men, once the sole protectors and

providers, now had to grapple with women who wanted more rights, but also women who wanted men to be men. They were forced to accept women into the workspace traditionally held by males. Men, who once had sole authorship over their gender identity and the identity of women, were now forced to try and understand some of the roles that women were assigning to them.

In Willa Cather's novel *A Lost Lady*, Marian Forrester, the eponymous heroine, exclaimed: "Don't men like women to be different from themselves? *They used to*" (Cather 112; emphasis added) This statement was made by a woman who is trying to understand where she fits into a vanishing society, and parallels the flux and confusion surrounding traditional gender roles during the early part of the twentieth century. Males, just like females, were forced to determine where they belong in a society where the boundaries of gender roles are shifting drastically. Ideals about acceptable gender conventions sprouted up all of the United States. Concurrent with the Women's movement was the "Strenuous life" philosophy of Theodore Roosevelt which can be viewed as a reaction against the New Woman who threatened the older male roles. With the introduction of the Women's Movement, males were left feeling insecurity, resentment, and anxiety. Ultimately this revealed that male identity, not just female identity, has suffered from the proscription gender ideals.

The stringent gender roles of the Gilded Age and the subsequent changing of these roles during the early decades of the twentieth century resulted in an identity crisis for men. This turmoil surrounding gender roles is the social and historical context for Cather's novels.

Willa Cather is famous for her creation of strong, multifaceted, and pioneering characters. In her novel *O Pioneers!*, she writes of a strong female heroine named Alexandra Bergson. At the opening of the novel, Alexandra is given the charge by her dying father to take care of the family homestead. Alexandra acts within a traditional masculine role, and she is very successful in the “male role;” however, there are consequences to this success. Alexandra runs a flourishing farm, but her home life is in disarray. The disorder of her home parallels the disorder that she feels within herself. “If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra’s big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare” (*O Pioneers!* 32). She has spent all of her life dealing with the responsibilities of a farmer, and so she has not been able to focus on what is inside herself. Some of the aspects of Alexandra’s character have been well-developed and organized like her farm, but others, like her needs as a woman, have been left wanting. To fill this void, Alexandra hires young girls to work in her kitchen. She hires them because she enjoys their laughter, flirtations, and silliness. She enjoys it because this was an aspect missing from her own life. By acting within the conventions of the male role, Alexandra has lost much of what it means to truly be herself. Ultimately, she is blind to love and marries an old friend to cure her loneliness. Cather published *O Pioneers!* in 1913, and within this early novel, Cather reveals one of her basic themes—the consequences of gender roles on identity.

Much of Cather’s writing was published during the first three decades of the twentieth century, and they parallel the crisis that men experienced as a consequence of these changing roles. Cather succeeds as a writer because she captures in her novels the

spirit of the early twentieth century. As evidenced by her own life and her novels, Cather was intently aware of the flux of gender roles and the consequent creation of a split and ambiguous male identity. The novels of Willa Cather reveal the identity crisis that she had over gender conventions and her desire for self-definition. Cather's characters are frustrated, unsatisfied, ambiguous, often androgynous, and unhappy with the roles that they have been playing. I would argue that Cather's novels respond to the shifting nature of gender roles in early twentieth century America because she creates characters that are often stymied in their desire for true identity. This thesis will analyze selected works of Willa Cather and incidents in her own life in order to demonstrate the overriding theme of the consequences of gender roles on identity. Chapter One will consider the life of Willa Cather, and demonstrate Cather's own sexual and gender ambiguity and her rejection of typical gender roles and her strong desire for self-definition. Chapter Two explores *My Ántonia* which is a perfect novel to serve as an introduction to male gender roles in Cather's novels because of Jim's prominent role, and the way in which the novel's ambiguity expresses the confusing nature of gender roles during Cather's lifetime. Jim's fear of women throughout the novel also parallels the fear of the female found during the turn of the century. Chapter Three continues to develop the theme of the consequences of gender roles in the novel *The Professor's House* which exposes the fracturing of St. Peter's identity that has come as a result of playing within a gender role. St. Peter's identity splits as he struggles to move into the new role assigned to him. Lastly, Chapter Four will discuss the balanced identity of Anton Rosicky in the short story "Neighbor Rosicky." Rosicky is both a nurturer and a provider, and he is whole because he works above gender conventions to define his identity.

Chapter One

Willa Cather: Willa or Willie?

Willa Cather is a paradox. She has been labeled by some scholars as the “Midwestern Mother” whose novels celebrate the heart and soul of Nebraska. She has also been labeled a feminist, a lesbian, and even an anti-feminist. She is also seen by some scholars as modern, but old-fashioned by others. This ambivalence with regards to her identity lies at the core of the life of Willa Cather. She defies being labeled and packaged because she sought throughout her whole life for sole authorship over her identity. This chapter will focus on the life of Cather, and seek to demonstrate her rejection of traditional gender roles and her desire for an unconventional identity. I will concentrate in this chapter on the personal life of Cather, focusing specifically on events in her life that suggest her ambiguous character and her desire for self-definition. In addition, I will look at her supposed feminism and lesbianism to reveal that Cather often pushed the boundaries of gender conventions. Cather did not want to be forced by others to play one role or another, but wanted simply to determine her own destiny. Ultimately, she wanted to be understood as simply a writer who was not playing the role of the female writer or the lesbian writer, but just the writer.

Willa Cather was born during the Gilded Age of America to Charles and Virginia Boak Cather in 1873. The Gilded Age rigidly defined male and female roles, and encouraged members of society to work within those conventions. Willa Cather throughout her life chose to explore and challenge her socially constructed position, and her childhood and adolescence parallel the flux of gender roles in America.

Even as a young girl, Cather wanted to defy the social makeup of her community by acting against typical social conventions. Edith Lewis, a friend and close companion of Cather's, recounts a story of Cather's defiance in her biography *Willa Cather Living*. Lewis tells the story of Cather's unusual behavior toward a judge who was visiting the Cather family. During his visit, the judge apparently was speaking to Willa and addressing her with the platitudes normally attributed to little girls, when suddenly Willa exclaimed "I'se a dang'ous nigger, I is." Lewis argues, and I would concur, that this was an early attempt by Cather to break through the social conventions placed on little girls (13). By acting out against a well-respected male in the community and calling herself a "dangerous nigger" in a white, male-dominated society, Cather reveals her desire to avoid a strict identity construction. Even as a young girl, she was unafraid to act unconventionally toward the very conventional. Cather was also very individual and independent, even as a young girl. Lewis writes of another story she remembers Cather telling her: "I remember her telling once, when someone offered to help her, how when she was a very little child and her parents would try to assist her in something, she would protest passionately 'Self-alone, Self-alone!'" (175). Willa Cather strove to accomplish things on her own and in her own way.

Willa Cather's family was originally from Virginia, and it was not until she was eight years old that her parents left Virginia to farm the uncultivated lands of Nebraska. Cather recognized this move as a drastic change for her—a move from Southern gentility to the Midwestern frontier. In the first few years after her family's move to Nebraska, she was given a lot of freedom as a result of her mother's illness. She spent this time

visiting the other homesteads on horseback and greatly enjoyed listening to the stories of the Bohemians, Danes, and Norwegians (Lewis 14). During this time, she did not attend school, but was educated about different cultures and ideas through her discussions with the immigrants. These meetings flavored her later writings because she often wrote of these immigrants as strong individuals who struggled, like Cather, to find their own identity in America's social construct.

Cather sought to find her own mode of expression. When her father's farm failures continued to pile up the family moved into town. In Red Cloud, Cather began attending the local school. Here she chose to improvise a new middle name for herself—Sibert. When the roll was called she answered to the name Willa Sibert Cather. This improvisation was an example of Cather's determination to create her own individual identity. Cather enjoyed challenging public opinion and during her adolescence she chose to reject the conventions typically held by her society, creating an identity foreign to her own gender role. She decided to cut off her hair and began dressing like a boy. She also began, much to the horror of Red Cloud residents, dissecting frogs and signing her name "William Cather, MD (Lee 38). In his biography entitled, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, E. K. Brown recounts an observation made by a Red Cloud resident concerning Cather:

In her high-school days she wore her hair shingled, shorter than many of the boys. Her clothes and hats were also boyish: a starched shirt, a tie, and a hat almost like a boy's. She did not care to be called Willa; many of her friends used Willie, but to this she preferred Will or Bill; and it gave her a

particular satisfaction when a perceptive, appreciative person would call her Dr. Will (48).

Moreover, the rebellious Cather participated in other activities that defied public opinion; she chose to read controversial novels such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Because she wanted to be a doctor, she often accompanied the town doctors on their visits to their patients, and sometimes she was given the chance to assist in operations and healing (Lewis 27). She also preferred the company of older men over people her own age, especially, Mr. Ducker. Mr. Ducker was seen in Red Cloud society, especially by the businessmen, as a "dreamer" and a failure that made a meager living working in a store owned by his brothers. However, his real love was studying the Classics of Antiquity. Cather spent a lot of her time studying with Ducker and chatting with him about topics ranging from Latin and Greek to evolution and Christianity (Lewis 21-22). While the whole town chose to call Mr. Ducker "Uncle Billy Ducker," Cather called him Mr. Ducker out of respect (Lewis 21). Cather's friendship with Ducker lasted until his death and she remained forever grateful for his instruction on the Greek and Roman Classics. Her relationship to Mr. Ducker is a perfect example of Cather's respect and devotion to a man who, despite being deemed a failure for not properly supporting his family by Red Cloud society standards, was a person who spent his life doing what he loved and not what was expected.

Ultimately, Cather's childhood behavior demonstrates that she had no desire to act within the patterns that society had prepared for her. In her novel, *My Ántonia*, Cather mocks some of the conventions of the society in which she was raised. "The

Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in brand-new little houses with the best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used” (Cather). Cather’s fictional town of Black Hawk can be compared to Cather’s own Red Cloud with all its superficiality and conventionality. In spite of the sneers and muted mutterings of her neighbors, Cather’s defiance toward her social surroundings as she was growing up reveals her desire pursue own identity.

Willa Cather’s Youth: “An Appointment to Meet the Rest of Herself”

Cather’s youth has often been compared to her novel *The Song of a Lark*, which Edith Lewis called Cather’s most autobiographical novel. The novel tells of a young girl named Thea who has a special musical talent. Thea’s character is similar to Cather’s in that she grew up in the small town of Moonstone, Colorado. Thea similarly enjoyed the company of the older generation as seen in her relationship with the character of Dr. Archie. Thea dreamt of making her mark on the world, and as she left to study piano in Chicago she felt that she was finally heading to her appointed destiny. As she was riding out of town she thought to herself, “It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her, and she was moving to meet it” (*The Song of a Lark*). Thea eventually did make that appointment, and after much struggle she became a famous opera singer just as Cather became a famous writer.

Cather often refuted the notion that Thea was really her, but in typical Cather fashion she once mentioned that she choose singing as a career for Thea because it would be more understandable than writing to the people of Red Cloud. Moreover, Cather, like

Thea, felt that the feminine gender conventions of marriage and family suppressed an understanding of self and limited her from reaching her potential. Parallels to Thea can also be drawn to Olive Fermstad who was both a friend of Cather's and a famous opera singer. Cather usually insisted that Thea was based on Olive Fermstad.

Willa Cather was able to leave Red Cloud when she went to college in Lincoln, Nebraska. In college she continued to defy conventions with her short, shingled haircut (when the convention prescribed long hair) and her boyish clothing (Lewis 38). William Westermann a fellow student with Cather described her non-conformity:

While the preparatory class in Greek was waiting for the instructor to begin the first lesson the door opened and a head appeared with short hair and a straw hat; a deep masculine voice inquired whether this was where the class in elementary Greek was meeting, a boy nodded that it was; and as the newcomer opened the door wide it revealed a girl's figure, and the entire class burst into laughter. Willa Cather, unruffled, quietly took her place (Brown 50).

Westermann, gets at the core of Cather who is ultimately "unruffled" by societal codes and conventions and preferred instead to construct her own identity. Throughout her life she seemed to be saying to herself and others—Willa or Willie, does it really matter? However, here Cather is a paradox. She does seem unruffled by societal conventions, but she also, as witnessed by her cross-dressing, seems to struggle deeply with her gender identity. Her confusion parallels the confusion that her society felt over the issue of gender conventions.

Later in college, Cather chose to relinquish the male attire and even let her hair grow long, but she continued to defy constructed conventions. Cather's literature professor, Lucius A. Sherman, taught a very conventional method of interpreting literature that Cather thought was far too formulaic. She chose to go against his ideas by creating her own type of literary criticism that did not deal with counting the number of lines in the work and adding them together to find its meaning. After, Sherman's class, Cather began to write literary and dramatic criticism for local newspapers (Lewis 35-36). Subsequently, throughout her own literature Cather sought to create characters and plots that were not conventional.

After college, Cather moved to Pittsburgh to work as an editor in a local family-centered magazine. Working at the magazine was difficult for Cather because she knew that journalism was not what she wanted to be doing the rest of her life. Frustrated with editing, Cather accepted a teaching position at a Pittsburgh high school. Teaching enabled her three months of freedom in the summer to write and also did not "erode or restrict her talents" (Lewis 42).

Cather the Writer: "Hitting the Home Pasture"

Eventually, she received a position as an editor at McClure's magazine in New York City. Cather practically ran the publication for the next ten years. Her time at McClure's was a satisfying time for Cather because she was able to travel extensively. On one of her many business trips to Boston, Cather met Sarah Orne Jewett, a regionalist

writer from Maine. Though Jewett only lived for another year, she greatly impacted Cather's writing and life. In a letter to Cather, Jewett wrote:

Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody else's way- you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't try to write the kind of story that this or that magazine wants- write the truth, and let them take it or leave it (Bohlke 11).

This statement came at a time in Cather's life when she was struggling to find exactly the type of voice she wanted to communicate in her writing. Many of her early stories reflected the voice of Henry James, and it was not until *O Pioneers!* (1913) that she really felt that she had written in her own style about things that she really cared about. Cather had this to say after the completion of *O Pioneers!*, which she called her second first novel. "This was the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half read and half imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture and found that I was Yance Soregeson (farmer) and not Henry James" (Stout 137). Jewett's letter encouraged Cather to seek to find her own voice, something that Cather had been trying to do her whole life. Moreover, Jewett's statement also reflected what Cather really sought to do in her writing and in her own life—be herself and not conform to what everyone else felt she should do and be.

Cather's tenure at McClure's magazine ended when she was able to support herself solely through her writing. Cather continued to live in New York City until her death, even if she found retreat in Maine, the American Southwest, and her hometown of

Red Cloud. Cather's novels, especially the novels following *Alexander's Bridge*, brought success and eventually fame.

In her later years, Cather became increasingly concerned about her privacy and about preserving her identity from those that would manipulate it to fit their own purposes. This determination to preserve her individual identity is demonstrated in Cather's desire to protect her early work from publication. In college, Cather had worked as the chief editor on the school paper, the *Hesperian*. As chief editor she also contributed several of her own themes and essays to the paper (Lewis 32). Later in life, she looked back on these essays as rhetorical, emotional, and overwritten, and was upset when publishers proposed to collect and publish these works, particularly because they were so early and were not protected by copyright. She saw this merely as an attempt by others to exploit her name for their own personal interest (Lewis 33). In response to a letter from a probing professor, Cather compared herself to an apple-grower who had picked only the good apples and then carefully placed them into a packing box to be shipped to the market. However, later a neighbor came by and picked up the defective apples and placed them too in the boxes to be shipped to the market. Now when the shipment arrived the bad apples along with the good apples were viewed by the public. At the end of the letter, she stated, that everyone should have the right to supervise his or her own work (33). Cather wanted to maintain control over how she was viewed by the public, and did not want to be identified by others through her early work. While others thought that her early work expressed her later growth, she alone wanted to determine her identity as a person and as an author.

As her death drew near, Cather asked that all of her correspondences be destroyed. Thankfully, that request was not heeded and many of her letters have been preserved and can be viewed in libraries all over the country. However, Cather's passionate desire for privacy did lead to the copywriting of all of her correspondences. As a result, her letters which reveal many of her thoughts about her writing and about life cannot be stated outright, but must be paraphrased. Her request for privacy, I believe came from a desire to design her own identity regardless of societal and gender boundaries. Cather knew that her various letters would lead to speculation about who she was, and she wanted to have sole authority over her own identity.

Cather's final act in creating her own identity came when the wrong date of birth was carved on her headstone. Throughout her life, Cather had insisted that she had been born in 1876 which was not true because she was really born in 1873. To the public and even to friends she had insisted untruthfully that she was three years younger than she really was. When biographies had appeared as introductions to her text she adamantly insisted that dates be changed and items left out that pointed toward her real date of birth. That Cather wanted to be viewed as younger than she really was in reality is just another example of Cather's desire to determine for herself the way others viewed her.

Cather: The Feminist or Not?

Much has been written about Cather as a feminist. Feminist studies on Cather point to her acquisition of the male role through her cross-dressing and male narrators as a rejection of the power of males. Cather was also a very prominent woman whose

success parallels the success of the women's movement. She can also be looked at as a "New Woman" who never married and found satisfaction in supporting herself and others. In fact Cather was seen as a "New Woman" by Jeanette Barbour the author of "A Woman Editor," and was listed as one of Pittsburgh's "Pioneers in Women's Progress." Barbour declared, "She [Willa Cather] is carrying on her editorial work here and is such a *thoroughly up-to-date woman*. Certainly she should be mentioned among *pioneers in woman's advancement*" (Bohlke 3; emphasis added). Barbour went on to praise Cather's abilities: "to edit a new magazine requires plenty of 'grit'—a quality so valuable in a business woman as in a business man" (3). Cather's picture in the magazine article was placed next to sketches by Charles Dana Gibson's Gibson Girl. Barbour sings Cather's praises as a successful woman editor. Later, when she became an award winning novelist the critic H.L. Menken called her one of the "great American writers," putting her on par with novelists like Henry James. Menken exclaimed: "There is no other American author of her sex, now in view; whose future promises so much" (Bohlke 30).

Because Cather was a popular and well-known woman, she could have used her clout to aid in the women's movement by becoming a prominent feminist. However, while evidence does suggest that Cather did dislike the traditional conventions placed on women, she was not a feminist who wanted to be involved with a movement. That she remained silent and chose not to be an activist for the women's movement, I posit, is significant in understanding Cather and her novel. Cather was a strong, "up-to-date" woman who found monetary success through her own talents and was able to provide for herself and for others, but she did not want to be part of a movement and to be pigeon-

holed as one of the suffragists or a feminist. Instead, she used her abilities to create and to determine for herself her own identity. Moreover, Cather's novels point to the turmoil of her age surrounding roles, but they do not promote feminism; they simply suggest the danger inherent in being forced to play any type of role, male or female. She saw role playing as dangerous because of the confusion she experienced in her own life because she chose not to act within traditional gender conventions.

Additionally, Cather usually had nothing but negative things to say about other female writers. She stated: "sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it" (Robinson 56). Cather felt that female novelists liked to instruct and she saw this as a flaw in their work (Gerber 139). Cather always referred to female writers as "they" because she wanted to disassociate herself from them. The trouble she saw with female writers was that "they" wrote too much about their feelings in a frilly and conventional manner. "They" were successful, she felt, only because they chose to write in the manner that was expected of them. That "they" were conventional and not individual bothered Cather, and she rewarded them with stinging rebukes (Robinson 57). To Cather, seeking an individual identity was always most important.

Cather: The Lesbian

There is substantial evidence that points to Cather being a lesbian. Many point to her appropriation of the male role in the form of her cross-dressing as a way of acting out her lesbian desires. I would argue, however, that this appropriation should be viewed as a

method Cather used to understand and defy gender roles. Her stint at cross-dressing also reveals that Cather struggled to define her identity amidst stringently imposed gender conventions.

Most theories regarding Cather's lesbianism are based on her relationships with other women. Some of the best evidence comes from letters that she wrote to Louise Pound. Louise Pound was a friend of Cather's during her college years, and her letters hint at an unconventional relationship. During much of her stay in Lincoln, Cather was very much interested in Pound and her letters express a desire of wanting to make the "traditional goodbye of lovers." She also wanted to be called "love" by Louise (Stout 3). The letters also reveal that Cather obsessed so much about Louise that her other friends soon tired of it. It seems that her relationship with Louise ended unhappily and Cather was depressed for awhile. Later, there is evidence to suggest that Cather had a relationship with Isabelle McClung while living in Pittsburgh. When Isabelle later married Jan Hambourg, whom Cather disliked, there is evidence that Cather fell into depression. Also, Cather lived with Edith Lewis for most of her adult life. These unusually strong relationships with woman have lead many to call Cather a lesbian.

While evidence of her lesbianism does come from her relationships, many scholars also point to Cather novels, and the way in which they were written. Many of her novels depict males and females that are confused about their gender identity. Hermione Lee's study, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*, argues that Cather uses male narrators as a way to "speak from her own sexual identity and express her own emotions for women" (153).

Ultimately, it can be argued that she uses male characters as a way of masking her lesbian feelings.

Much can be suggested about Cather and her lesbianism, and much of the evidence is concrete; however, I would argue that Cather should not be placed under the lesbian banner because she would not have wanted to be defined as such. She never called herself a lesbian, a significant omission. Cather has left us a mystery about her gender preference. Her likely lesbianism should be explored when seeking to understand her novels, but it should not be the ultimate way in which her novels are interpreted, or to define who she was.

Conclusion

Cather's life expresses a rejection of constructed gender roles. Using the pseudonym "Helen Delay," Cather cautioned against the "hateful distinction" between "boy books" and "girl books" (Lindermann 86). Cather's caution reveals her to us, in that she did not like distinctions that pre-packaged people by giving them roles and expectations based on their gender. Her life itself represents a desire for self-definition; from her stint at cross-dressing to her refusal to acknowledge her true birth date to her command at the end of her life that all her correspondences be burned, Cather reveals a woman who worked against convention and sought to write her own story.

Cather can also be viewed as a woman who was confused about her identity through her cross-dressing and her reported lesbianism. That her personal character is often ambiguous and hard to pinpoint parallels the shifting nature of the gender values in

the America in which she lived. Cather has also been called a feminist because her life reflected the life of the “New Woman.” She chose not to marry and provided for herself and others. However, Cather cannot be labeled a feminist; in fact, she wrote scathing reports about other women writers and never joined the suffrage movement. Moreover, the evidence pointing to Cather’s lesbianism is significant because it reveals her overall desire for independence from traditional roles. That she never called herself a lesbian is also significant because her lesbianism is not the sole defining factor in her unconventional behavior. It also reveals that Willa Cather struggled with her identity as evidenced by her cross-dressing and also seen in the ambiguous and androgynous nature of the characters in her novels. Cather was unconventional and she desired to design her own identity regardless of societal and gender boundaries.

Significantly Cather mentioned this to her close friend Edith Lewis: “You can not always tell just where a writer stops being himself and begins to attitudinize in a story, but when you finish it, you have a feeling that he was trying to fool himself. I think a writer ought to get into his copy as he really is, in his everyday clothes” (Bohlke 5). This quote is significant because it profoundly expresses the core of Willa Cather—her need to be herself and her need to be viewed as simply a writer.

While making the point that she doggedly wanted to determine her own identity, it can also be seen that Cather struggled to do so. Her cross-dressing and her lesbianism are just some examples of the struggle that Cather had finding her own identity. Her life parallels the gender conundrum that was felt by her generation as she struggled with the question of gender. I would argue that she so adamantly sought to determine her own

identity because she felt so strongly the confusion and pain that comes from not wanting to act within a typical gender role. Ultimately, Cather's ambiguous feelings toward gender are best expressed in her novels where her characters are also ambiguous and often androgynous.

Chapter Two

My Ántonia: Ambivalence, Identity Crisis, and Losing Manhood

The novels of Willa Cather reveal the identity crisis that she had over gender conventions and her desire for self-definition. Cather's characters are often frustrated, unsatisfied, ambiguous, often androgynous, and unhappy with the roles that they have been playing. I would also argue that Cather's novels respond to the shifting nature of gender roles in early twentieth century America because she creates characters that are often stymied in their desire for true identity. Chapter Two will discuss gender identity in Willa Cather's early novel *My Ántonia* (1918). *My Ántonia* expresses the fear of the female through the character of Jim Burden; Jim's fear points to Cather's America and the fear that males had toward the females who were stepping into their territory. In addition, both Jim and Ántonia's characters suggest a mixing of male and female gender roles, much like Cather's adolescent cross-dressing. Chapter Two will also develop the consequences of gender roles through the death of Ántonia's father, Mr. Shimerda because his death comes as a result of his role as the provider.

Fearful Jim: Losing Manhood

The character of Jim Burden suggests the confusion and ambiguity surrounding gender roles. Jim serves as the narrator of the novel, and has often been described as the character that is most closely tied with Cather. Throughout the novel, Jim struggles with his identity. He is unsure, unhappy, and sometimes effeminate. I would posit that Jim's character reveals Cather's and society's confusion with gender roles. *My Ántonia*

suggests that Jim, even more than *Ántonia*, is the principal character struggling with his identity and the role that he must play. More importantly, however, Cather describes Jim's struggle with his identity through his interaction with the female characters of the novel. Jim's character, suggests a "mixing" of male and female qualities. But the novel also suggests a desire by Jim to express his manliness. Jim is insecure and ambiguous about his male identity and he tries to combat this insecurity by separating himself from the females that he fears.

This fear of women expressed in the novel can be tied to Cather's America. Through this fear, Cather is expressing the spirit of her own age. Cather was born in an era when males and females were clearly defined opposites, but during her lifetime women began taking on many of the behavioral characteristic commonly ascribed to men. With the entrance of the "New Women," men became confused about their own identity. Men could no longer define themselves as opposites of women, and they feared women because they saw them as the culprits of their confusion. The novelist Henry James reveals the sentiment of men toward women during this period in his novel *The Bostonians*. James' character Basil Ransom laments that:

The whole generation is womanized, the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age; an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity; of the feeblest and flattest and most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality...that is what I want to preserve, or rather as

I may say recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt (311).

James is a male writer who is speaking about the fear of his age on behalf of males. Basil Ransom also states that he fears the idea of a women's movement, "I don't like it, but I greatly fear it" (218). Not only is this fear of the female seen in James' work, but it is also found in Cather's *My Ántonia* through the character of Jim Burden. Jim's fear of women stems from the fact that women are entering into the male territory and appropriating male gender characteristics which cause confusion in Jim's already insecure identity.

To illustrate this fear, I will discuss four separate episodes found within the novel that I argue express the male fear over the flux of gender roles. The first episode deals with Jim as a young boy, and it reveals Jim's desire to maintain his perceived male superiority. Chapter Four of *My Ántonia* deals with Jim's adventure with a snake. Cather begins the chapter with Jim commenting about the superior attitude that Ántonia has towards him. "Much as I liked Ántonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. 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, and I resented her protecting manner*" (*My Ántonia* 24; emphasis added). This passage is significant because according to Jim, just because he was a male, meant that he should be seen as the superior one. Luckily for Jim, their adventure with the snake gave him the opportunity to prove his manhood to Ántonia. Ántonia and Jim were playing in some gravel beds when they unexpectedly came across a large snake sunning itself on a rock. Jim surprised himself by fighting the snake instead of fleeing. "If my back had been against the wall, I couldn't have felt more

cornered. I saw his coils tighten—now he would spring, spring his length, I remembered. I ran up and drove at his head with my spade, struck him fairly across the neck” (25). Jim was able to kill the snake and protect *Ántonia*. *Ántonia* praised him for his bravery: “I never know you was so brave...you is just like big mans; you wait for him lift his head and then you go for him. Ain’t you feel scared a bit? Now we take that snake home and show everybody. Nobody ain’t seen in this kawn-tree so big a snake like you kill” (25). Jim goes on to say that this was an opportunity that he had been looking for because it was a chance for him to prove his manhood to *Ántonia*. The story began to spread and the snake was bigger and bigger each time even though Jim admits to himself that it was really just an old snake. But for Jim it was just what his confidence needed and he states, “Before the autumn was over she began to treat me more like an equal and to defer to me in other things than reading lessons” (24). This episode suggests that Jim was worried about functioning within the male constructed gender role because he felt that he should serve as the protector and also that *Ántonia* should look to him for advice. Jim needed to prove himself to *Ántonia*. He also needed to prove to himself that he could take his rightful place as the male within their relationship; this adventure with the snake gave him just that opportunity. “That was enough for *Ántonia*. She liked me better from that time on, and she never took a supercilious air with me again. I had killed a big snake—I was now a big fellow” (27). Jim’s desire to assert his manliness parallels the male desire to assert his dominance over the women now stepping into his territory.

The second episode that reveals Jim’s insecurity, and also his desire to assert his manliness, occurs when he is asked to stay at the Cutters in *Ántonia*’s place. *Ántonia* worked as a hired girl at the Cutters, and was worried about Cutter’s intentions toward

her. The moneylender, Wick Cutter, was known in Blackhawk as stingy towards his customers and over friendly to young girls. Jim's description of Wick expresses his strong dislike of the man:

I detested his pink bald head, and his yellow whiskers, always soft and glistening. It was said he brushed them every night, as a woman does her hair. His white teeth looked factory-made. His skin was red and rough, as if from perpetual sunburn; he often went away to hot springs to take mud baths. He was notoriously dissolute with women (102).

Wick's wife needed to go to Omaha for the weekend, and as a result of Wick's infidelity she forced him to go with her. Although it seemed that Wick had left with his wife, *Ántonia* still feared his intentions and pleaded with Jim to stay the night at the Cutters in her place. "I liked my own room, and didn't like the Cutter's house under any circumstances, but Tony looked troubled and I consented to try this arrangement" (119). Jim was bothered by this idea, but he recognized *Ántonia*'s need and slept in her place at the Cutters. During the third night of his stay, however, Cutter crept back into his own house and up to *Ántonia*'s room. "A hand closed softly on my shoulder, and at the same moment I felt something hairy and cologne-scented brushing my face. If the room had suddenly been flooded with electric light, I couldn't have seen more clearly the detestable bearded countenance that I knew was bending over me" (120). Jim grabbed Cutter's beard to try and fend off his advances, but the shocked Cutter wrapped his hands around Jim's neck and began choking him. Jim and Cutter fought for a time, until Jim was able to free himself from Cutter and escape through the window. Jim's struggle with Cutter left him with a broken nose and a swollen eye.

However, more damaging than his physical pain was the psychological pain that this incident caused Jim. Oddly, Jim was furious at *Ántonia* instead of feeling relieved that he had faced Cutter over her. “I heard *Ántonia* sobbing outside my door, but I asked grandmother to send her away. I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I *hated* her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness” (121; emphasis added). This passage, I would argue, is significant because it reveals the ambiguity of Jim’s character. He is incensed at *Ántonia* because he was forced to defend himself in her place, but he had also volunteered to help her with the likelihood of Cutter’s advances in mind. It is almost as though Jim did not want to defend *Ántonia* and be bruised and beat up himself. But he did not want to shirk from what he knew was his male duty to defend and protect her honor. Jim was beaten severely by Cutter and was ashamed of it; he had not been able to defend himself from a man that he claimed brushed his whiskers like a woman. It is interesting to note that Jim does not want others, and especially men, to find out about this incident. He begged his grandmother not to send for his grandfather because he did not want his grandfather to see him in such a weak position. He also did not want visitors because he knew that the story would spread. “If the story once got abroad, I would never hear the last of it. I could well imagine what the old men down at the drugstore would do with such a theme” (121). Jim understood that he must serve in the male role as the protector, and was deeply upset when a woman forced him to look silly acting within that role.

This episode also suggests the autobiographical tie of Jim’s character to Cather because this passage hints at homosexual feelings. It is possible, I would suggest, that Jim reacts so strongly to Wick Cutter because of his fear of a relationship with another man.

It might be that Jim has been struggling with homosexual desires and that he dislikes the idea of spending the night at the Cutter's because it might put him in a position to deal with his unconventional feelings. This small passage is interesting because it can be tied so closely with Cather's likely lesbian feelings. Cather's feelings toward other women must have been something that caused her to struggle with her own identity, just as Jim struggled with Cutter. Cather's ultimate goal was to define herself despite societal conventions, but that does not mean that she did not struggle with her lesbian desires in light of what society felt were proper sexual feelings. This passage, I posit, suggests Cather's struggle with her alleged lesbian desires.

The third episode comes in the form of a dream; and I would argue, it is the best episode in revealing Jim's fear of women. This example deals with Lena Lingard who can be described as *My Ántonia's* "New Woman." Lena states: "Why, I'm not going to marry anybody" (138). This passage illustrates that Lena is a perfect example of the "New Woman" because she chose not to marry and also found success in the male arena of business. In one passage in the novel, Jim described Lena's sensual and almost seductive quality when he danced with her:

Lena moved without exertion, rather indolently, and her hand often accented the rhythm softly on her partner's shoulder. She smiled if one spoke to her, but seldom answered. The music seemed to put her into a soft, waking dream, and her violet-colored eyes looked sleepily and confidently at one from under her long lashes. When she sighed she exhaled a heavy perfume of sachet powder (108).

To Jim, and to most men, Lena is irresistible. That she is able to exert power over men through her beauty and her body makes Jim fearful.

Jim has a dream about Lena many times, and I believe that it is crucial to understanding one of Cather's main themes—the consequences of gender conventions.

Jim describes his dream:

I was in a harvest-field full of shock, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, 'Now they are all going, and I can kiss you as much as I like'' (109).

Jim's dream about Lena reveals his fear of women, and though he claims that it was flattering, there is an undercurrent of apprehension found in the dream. He dreams of Lena coming toward him holding a reaping hook which has been viewed as an implement associated with death, but he does not hide from her because she comes to kiss him. Jim mentions that he enjoyed the dream and wished that he could have this dream about Antonia. This oddly dark scene exposes Jim's fear of women, especially women like Lena who are choosing to step outside of set gender boundaries (Gelfant 115).

Ultimately, Jim is fearful of women because they might subvert male authority and identity. Jim might also be fearful of Lena because she comes to him wanting to have a relationship with him when he might really just want a relationship with a man.

Moreover, later in the novel, Jim has entered into a relationship of sorts with Lena, but ends it when Professor Cleric reminds him that this association can only have a

negative effect on him. This insistence on the part of the professor is worthy of note because not only does it show Jim's fear of women, but it also reveals Cleric's. Gaston Cleric was a young scholar who Jim befriended while studying at the University in Lincoln. Jim felt that his relationship with Cleric was one of the happiest times in his life because he was introduced to the world of ideas. However, his scholarly ambitions are slowed when he begins spending all of his time with the enthralling Lena. "All of this time, of course, I was drifting. Lena had broken up my serious mood. I wasn't interested in my classes" (*My Ántonia* 137). Lena is able to take Jim away from his studies and away from Cleric. Cleric discovers Jim's attraction to Lena, and he advises him to stop seeing her. He even goes so far as to suggest that Jim leave Lincoln to study somewhere else. Cleric argues that: "You won't do anything here now. You should either quit school and go to work, or change your college and begin again in earnest. You won't recover yourself while you are playing about with this handsome Norwegian" (138). Cleric characterizes Lena as the beautiful *femme fatale*. Eventually, Jim is given an opportunity to transfer to Harvard with Cleric. He accepts the transfer with some sadness, but he realizes that he will continue to drift under Lena's spell. Jim left Lincoln because he understood that Lena was a threat to his desire to play the role of the scholar with Cleric.

Moreover, I posit that there might also be a sexual battle of sorts going on between Cleric and Lena. At Lena's arrival, Jim begins to spend more and more time with her and less time with Cleric and his studies. Cleric's desire for Jim leads him to point out the dangerous nature of Lena, and ultimately Cleric wins when Jim goes to Harvard with him.

A final episode that suggests fear of the female is a disturbing and startling story told by two Russians named Peter and Pavel. *Ántonia's* father was good friends with the Russians, and one day Mr. Shimerda, along with Jim and *Ántonia*, went over to visit the sick Pavel. While at the house, Pavel confessed a terrible incident in his life to Mr. Shimerda, and *Ántonia* translated the story for Jim. *Ántonia* told Jim that when Peter and Pavel were living in Russia, they were invited to a wedding. As close friends of the groom, they were asked to ride with the wedding party after the wedding. As they were riding away, wolves came out of the woods and began chasing their sleigh. In order to lighten the load and speed up the sleigh, they threw the bride out. Because of this, they were able to escape the murderous wolves. I posit that this story is significant because without the female they were able to escape.

This is yet another example in the novel of the fear of the females. The story can be interpreted, for Jim, to mean that without the females the men might survive, but with the females, manliness and conventions cannot survive. The story greatly impacted Jim and he often saw himself in the same situation. "We did not tell Pavel's secret to any one, but guarded it jealously...and the wedding party had been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure. At night, before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses" (32). It is important that Jim often sees himself in the same situation as Russians, just as he often finds himself fearing the females and seeking to find a way to rid himself of the females.

All four of these episodes illustrate Jim's fear of having his male identity consumed by females. They also reveal his fear of not living up to his manly role.

Ántonia's Mixing, Androgyny, and Ambivalence

An example of “mixing” of male and female qualities comes in the form of the novel’s title character Ántonia. Jessica Rabin in her study *Surviving the Crossing* argues that: “Ántonia’s identity, like Cather’s is not explainable in terms of our traditional categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ ‘male’ and ‘female;’ our binary categories begin to collapse” (Rabin 36). Ántonia is roughly based on Cather’s Bohemian neighbor Annie Sadilek who she greatly admired (Bohlke 44). In the novel, she fused her own memories with others and presented Ántonia from a male point of view by using Jim Burden as the narrator. This was the first of many novels where Cather looked at the characters from a male perspective. At the beginning of the novel, Cather fuses her own memories of Ántonia with Jim’s in a discussion that she had with him on a train.

I told him I had always felt that other people—he himself, for one—knew her much better than I. I was ready, however, to make an agreement with him; I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her...My own story was never written of her, but the following narrative is Jim’s manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me (*My Ántonia* 3).

Through Jim’s description of Ántonia and also Ántonia’s own description of herself, we see that Cather is mixing and confusing gender qualities. Cather often writes of circumstances in her novel that dramatically change the construction of her character’s identity. With the death of her father, Ántonia is forced to work on the family farm for her family to survive, and this shift in her role sparks a change in her identity. Ántonia now wears some of her father’s belongings to suggest that she has indeed moved into a

role that her father was supposed to play. “She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap” (60). Cather’s wording here is interesting because she suggests through the wearing of the boots that *Ántonia* has now assumed the role that her father was supposed to play when he wore the boots. Jim described the change that he saw in her because she wore the boots:

Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength. I knew too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it. I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered (*My Ántonia* 62).

Jim’s description of *Ántonia* reveals that she has taken on “manly” characteristics.

Ántonia can be described as an androgynous character because she has both male and female gender qualities. Jim reveals his disgust with *Ántonia*’s new identity after he spending the evening with her family. Jim states: “Everything was disagreeable to me. *Ántonia* ate so noisily now, *like a man*, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached” (*My Ántonia* 62; emphasis added). During the meal, he is reminded of something that his grandmother had said to him with regards to *Ántonia*: “Heavy field work’ll spoil that girl. She’ll lose all of her nice ways and get rough ones” (*My Ántonia* 62). For Jim, who is very upset over *Ántonia*’s behavior, she has already lost all of her feminine qualities. *Ántonia*’s appropriation of the male character is disagreeable to Jim and his society as a whole because she is working

outside of her constructed gender role. Jim finds *Ántonia*'s "manly" behavior irritating because she is a woman; therefore, he believes that she should act like one.

Moreover, Cather's characters often express confusion and dissatisfaction with their circumstances which, I argue, is due to the construction of gender roles. For example, *Ántonia*'s "mixing" of gender qualities have left her feeling some dissatisfaction. After her father's suicide, *Ántonia* is expected by her family to spend all of her time working in the fields. *Ántonia* boasts that she can plough more in one day than a man, and she also seeks to compete with the other field hands. "Jim, you ask Jake how much he ploughed to-day. I don't want that Jake get more done in one day than me. I want we have very much corn this fall" (61). *Ántonia* also brags that: "I can work like a man now" (61). *Ántonia*'s boasting reveals that she is proud of her ability to work within a male role; however, her work in the field does have consequences and the reader gets a sense that she is experiencing some dissatisfaction within her new role. There is one episode in the novel that reveals this dissatisfaction. Jim has come into the fields to ask *Ántonia* if she can attend a term of school. *Ántonia*, after boasting in her manly strength, claims that school is for little boys. It should be emphasized that she did not state that school was for "little girls." Here *Ántonia* is seeking to distinguish herself from Jim, and reveals that because she has been working in the field as a man that she now feels that she has gained some authority over Jim. Her place is in the field while Jim is the "little boy" who belongs in school. It is revealed later, however, that *Ántonia* is irritated by Jim's questions and she begins to cry. "Before we reached the stable, I felt something tense in her silence, and glancing up I saw that she was crying. She turned her face from me and looked off at the red streak of dying light, over the dark prairie" (61). *Ántonia*'s

appropriation of her father's boots has caused her to miss out on many things, and she begs Jim to come by and tell her what he has learned in school. Cather's androgynous *Ántonia*, suggests both a "mixing" of gender qualities and also the dissatisfaction that comes from constructed gender roles.

Identity Crisis: Consequences of Gender Roles

Cather's *My Ántonia* not only expresses the fear and confusion surrounding gender roles, but it also suggests the consequences of gender roles, which are best illustrated through the character of *Ántonia*'s father, Mr. Shimerda. Mr. Shimerda had moved his family from Bohemia (present day Czech Republic) because his wife insisted that he could better provide for his family in America. In Bohemia, Mr. Shimerda had been a good musician and a tapestry maker and his family had a good name. Upon arriving in America, Mr. Shimerda had enough money to support his family, but the new language and the new country left him vulnerable to swindlers and by the time his family arrived in Nebraska they were destitute. Mr. Shimerda was forced to beg the Burdens for financial assistance. He was often seen wandering around trying to hunt food for his poor family. Mr. Shimerda's homesickness and his inability to provide for his family caused him to become depressed, and Jim recognized Mr. Shimerda as a man that had lost his purpose in life. Jim described Mr. Shimerda's melancholy: "His face was ruggedly formed, but it looked like ashes—like something from which all the warmth and light had died out" (15). *Ántonia* also saw the change in her father and told Jim that he was sick and that he didn't play his beautiful music anymore. Eventually, Mr. Shimerda was so depressed that he committed suicide. It is interesting that he shaved and made sure that

everything was neatly in order, so as to keep some dignity in his situation, before he shot himself.

Mr. Shimerda's suicide expresses the consequences of gender roles. He was unable to provide for his family and so he felt useless. This lack of purpose led him to take his own life. His role as the provider was usurped by his inability to transition to life in a new country, and so he determined that death was a better alternative than failure. Mr. Shimerda was forced to leave his homeland and ultimately his way of life to please his wife and provide for his family. Mr. Shimerda's role and the conventions that he had to follow in the role of the father resulted in his demise.

My Ántonia deals with fearful and ambiguous characters who express to the reader the confusion and consequences of gender roles. At the end of the novel, Cather expresses her own desire that each individual determine his or her own destiny by acting according to his or her own wishes and not society's conventions. As the novel opens, we are presented with the unhappy character of Jim Burden. We learn from the introduction that Jim was a struggling attorney until he had the great fortune, at least at the time, of advancing his position through marriage. Jim was able to find success professionally, but his choice to marry to enhance his professional position has resulted in a lot of dissatisfaction. He is now married to a woman that he does not love and who does not love him. In an earlier edition of *My Ántonia*, Cather devoted several pages to discussing Jim's wife, but she later cut the introduction to a mere three pages. From what is left of the introduction, the reader still understands that Jim's wife is a dislikable person. Jim's unhappy home life has led him to spend a lot of time traveling the country for what can be assumed as happiness.

Ántonia's situation at the end of the novel lies in sharp contrast to Jim's dissatisfaction. Ántonia was jilted in love but made the best of it and eventually married a fellow Bohemian. Ántonia delighted in her children and in working the family farm. When Jim goes out to visit her, he describes her as: "a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled" (157). It is interesting that Jim described her as flat chested because it hints at the idea of Ántonia's androgyny. Her femininity is downplayed because she has found satisfaction in life, not by working within the male and female gender constructs, but through determining her own life. Jim is impressed by Ántonia because of the "full vigor of her personality" (157). Ántonia, unlike Jim, was able to find deep satisfaction in life. Phillip L. Gerber argues in his study *Willa Cather* that it is important to compare Ántonia to Jim. Jim is childless and unhappy in his marriage while Ántonia has found joy in her marriage. Gerber argues that Jim must feel some jealousy towards Ántonia because she found satisfaction in her identity (Gerber 87). Ultimately, Cather's *My Ántonia* is about the consequences of gender roles and finding an identity despite the confusion nature of gender conventions.

Conclusion

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* deals with gender identity. The characters in the novel are often fearful, ambiguous, and androgynous and express to the reader the confusion and consequences of gender roles. With the death of her father, Ántonia is forced to work on the farm, and this shift in her role sparks a change in her identity. In her youth, Ántonia struggled with trying to find a place in the male world of farm labor. Her struggled to find happiness in this world eventually led her to the city. In the city she goes

to dances, dresses up, falls in love, and bears a child out of wedlock. *Ántonia* finds her strength and her identity when she chooses to love the child and be undeterred when others look down on her mistakes. As a result, she moves back to the country and finds true happiness and a strong identity in her marriage to Kusak. Described as flat-chested, the androgynous *Ántonia* finds happiness on her farm and in a world beyond social conventions. *Ántonia*'s contentment at the end of the novel suggests Cather's desire that people find happiness outside of gender conventions. In contrast to *Ántonia*, the character of Jim Burden exemplifies the confusion that gender conventions bring. The novel reveals Jim as a character who is struggling with his identity and the role that he must play. It is revealed in the scene where Jim defeats the snake that he is unsure about his own identity because *Ántonia* has too often displayed male qualities. He feels relief when he is able to prove to *Ántonia* that he can protect her from the snake. He also fears Lena Lingard, who serves as a model of the "New Woman," because she is stepping into male territory and as a result creates more confusion for an already confused Jim. Jim's fear of women parallels the tension and confusion found in Cather's America. The fearful Jim is never able to find complete satisfaction in his life as expressed by the bad relationship that he has with his wife. This lack of satisfaction might come because he chose to marry instead of acting upon his homosexual identity. He, unlike *Ántonia*, was never able to step above conventions to find his true identity. This inability to step outside of convention is a consequence of gender roles. The consequences of gender roles are expressed throughout the novel; Jim is fearful and unhappy and Mr. Shimerda commits suicide. Ultimately, Cather's *My Ántonia* is about gender roles and finding an identity despite the confusing nature of gender conventions.

Chapter Three

The Split Space: Dissatisfaction in *The Professor's House*

Willa Cather published *The Professor's House* in 1925, just five years after the 19th Amendment was written into law giving women the right to vote for the first time. The novel tells the story of Professor Godfrey St. Peter and his family. It is interesting that Cather chose as her protagonist, a male Godfrey St. Peter, similar to her use of Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*. St. Peter's feelings of disinterest and dissatisfaction and his subsequent apathetic reaction relate closely to the feelings and reactions of the early twentieth century males as understood by Willa Cather. St. Peter's attitude toward change and his inability to move into the next role required of him reveal the confusion that males felt as they were forced to share traditional male role conventions with females. Men of the early twentieth century felt the inevitability of gender role change and were faced with the knowledge that the balance of power was shifting between men and women due to the enactment of the 19th Amendment. As a result of the 19th Amendment, men must have felt their decreasing importance because women were no longer solely dependent upon them. This decline in importance is expressed powerfully through St. Peter's feelings of irrelevance in the eyes of his wife and family. This chapter will continue to focus on the consequences of gender roles by exposing the "fracturing" of St. Peter's identity that has come as a result of playing within an untenable gender role. St. Peter has been acting in the role of the husband and father, but as the novel opens his roles are changing. The St. Peters have just purchased a new house with the money that he earned from the success of his research on Spanish Explorers, and as the novel opens

they are in the process of moving into the new house. His open refusal to move completely from the old house to the new house reveals his desire to remain in his past roles. The entire novel deals with fracturing and splitting; however, I will develop two key “splits” in which Cather’s novel reveals the consequences of gender roles, and their parallel to the gender conundrum of Cather’s America. The first “split” deals with St. Peter’s inability to move into the next stage of his life. The second “split” to be discussed is a more extreme fracturing that reveals the extent of St. Peter’s desire to remain in the past and his feelings of irrelevance. This extreme dissatisfaction leads to an attempted suicide because, ultimately, he prefers his youth as the “Kansas Boy” as seen by the life of Tom Outland to his new role as the contented but, in his own eyes, irrelevant old man.

A Mid-life Crisis?

The Professor’s House is Willa Cather’s seventh novel and was composed in stages over a period of ten years (TPH 389). The first stage began with her visit to the ruins of Mesa Verde, Colorado in 1915 where she discovered the material for her section on Tom Outland. Later she learned of Richard Wetherill, who discovered the Mesa Verde ruins, and sought to write a fictional version of his story. Lewis remarks that it was Cather’s time spent in France that gave her the idea to frame the Tom Outland story with a story about a Professor (390). After the story was written, Cather first published it serially before Alfred Knopf published it in its entirety in 1925.

Most scholars have understood St. Peter’s dissatisfaction in *The Professor’s House* as a mid-life crisis. David Daiches, in his essay “The Claims of History,” argues that the novel is essentially about “a middle-aged professor wrestling with his own

sensitivities on the one hand and his family responsibilities on the other” (31; emphasis added). I posit that Daiches is right in examining the novel in term of opposites: St. Peter’s own desires and those of his family; however, I believe that the novel is more than just a study of St. Peter’s conflicting desires, but that it is a study of his fractured role identity. I argue that the novel can be studied as an illustration of fractured role identity by exploring the time period in which Cather wrote the novel. Contemporary twentieth century events such as the rise of the Woman’s Movement and the 19th Amendment brought overwhelming change to the lives of women and also men in America and that change resulted in the shifting of gender conventions. This change is manifested in the storyline of *The Professor’s House* because the novel deals with change and specifically with a man who is unable to change. St. Peter’s inability to change, as evidenced by his inability to move to his new house, results in a fractured role identity. St. Peter’s role is shifting from the strong provider to the retired professor and this change results in a fissured identity which leads to dissatisfaction and attempted suicide. This fractured role identity, I argue, moves beyond Daiches’s idea of conflicting desires, and points to gender not middle age as the central issue of the novel. St. Peter has also moved well beyond middle age into retirement, and so the novel should be looked at not as a mid-life crisis, but as a man struggling to remain in past identity roles.

Moreover, typically Cather’s novel are set in the past, however, significantly, *The Professor’s House* appears to be set in Cather’s America as evidenced by the mention of WWI. The contemporary setting of the novel emphasizes my point that the novel is about gender role issues that are connected in some way with contemporary events, specifically the 19th Amendment.

The 1920s: The Crisis of Masculinity

1920 was a banner year for participants in the Women's Movement because suffrage was finally achieved. With the introduction of the 19th Amendment, women were now given equal power at the ballot box. The 19th Amendment was a signifier that women were well on their way towards achieving a greater equality with men. But in order to achieve equality they had to assume some characteristics conventionally held by the males. Women, who in the past had relied on the decisions of men, could now make up their own minds as to political leaders and policies. More equality meant great changes in the domestic and political arenas for women, but it also meant great changes for men. Men who for so long had served as the guardians for women, governing female lives through the vote, now had to move over and allow women to step into their territory. Typically held roles for males changed as they were forced to work within newly defined gender boundaries.

It is not unrealistic to argue that attacks on the male identity in the early twentieth century eroded male sense of self worth and male understanding of his place in society, creating a fracturing of identity. Men were forced to change their way of thinking about themselves just as they were forced to change their way of thinking about women. Tom Pendergast in his study *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1920* focuses on the changes that occurred in male identity during the 1920s. Pendergast documents how the editorials, articles, and advertisements in middle-class men's magazines were altered in the 1920s. The magazines changed from promoting masculine characteristics such as hard work and a strong sense of character to

characteristics focusing on the men's appearance (1). This change in popular magazines reveals the shifting conventions that men found in their society. The traditional male characteristics were supplanted by other ideas such as consumerism. Ultimately, with the advent of the 19th Amendment men were forced to change how they defined themselves and move to creating a new gender role construct. Cather also struggled with finding and asserting her own gender identity. Although she does not state that *The Professor's House* is a direct result of the shift in gender roles in the early twentieth century, I argue that due to the fragmentation of St. Peter and his situation there is enough evidence to make this connection. Also St. Peter's increasing feelings of irrelevance in the eyes of his family suggest the trouble males had with their declining power in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The Professor's House: The Fragmentation of St. Peter's Identity

The first "fracturing" that is evident in the novel occurs when St. Peter refuses to give up his old house. As the novel opens, St. Peter and his family have just completed a move to a bigger and more luxurious house. The new house was purchased following the completion and successful publication of St. Peter's definitive work on Spanish Explorers. In contrast to the new house, the old house is described as inconvenient, with "the stairs that were too steep, the halls that were too cramped, and the awkward oak mantels with thick round posts crowned by bumptious wooden balls, over green tiled fire-places" (*The Professor's House* 11).

Cather's figurative language is also significant because not only do the words describe the house, but they also describe Professor St. Peter. He, like the old house,

feels dismantled and dissatisfied. Despite the inconveniences, St. Peter is not yet ready to move into the new house and continues paying rent and working in the old house.

Moreover, the second sentence in the novel is crucial because it reveals his dissatisfaction with the move: “Professor St. Peter was alone in the *dismantled* house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters” (11; emphasis added). This refusal to give up the old house reveals St. Peter’s struggle to accept the new role he must play in his life. Each house represents a role: the old house symbolizing his old life and role as the provider and scholar; while the new house serves as a symbol of his decline into old age and irrelevancy.

I would argue that Cather’s dissatisfied and dismantled professor, who is unable to move into a new role/house, parallels what was going on at that time in American history. St. Peter’s refusal to move to the new house also reveals what men, contemporary to Cather, must have felt when they were being forced to move from their old role as the strong provider to some new and unknown identity role that they must share with women. The old house represents the traditional roles that males played in, while the new house represents the roles men had to play in a post-19th Amendment world. Arguably men experience confusion and dissatisfaction, just as Cather’s professor did. Cather is able to tap into to the confusing shift of society regarding gender with the simple comparison of a man’s inability to move into a new house.

The Old House and the Old Role

The old house serves as a symbol of St. Peter’s role as the father and husband. This was the home where he found joy watching his daughters grow up and sharing a

deep love with his wife. St. Peter's attachment to the old house is expressed in an episode in which Rosamond, his daughter, asks if she might have a study built in the backyard of his new house. St. Peter replies that while that is a nice gesture, he desires to stay, out of habit, in his old study. St. Peter chooses to continue working in the study of his old house, and stays away from the new house. He states: "For the present I'll plod here. It's absurd, but it suits me. Habit is such a big part of work" (*The Professor's House* 60). Jessica Rabin in her study *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather* argues that: "The Professor wants to control his surrounding and the 'women' in his life to maintain a past that is no longer viable" (57). Rabin's use of the word "viable" is significant because it points to the fact that St. Peter no longer feels like the strong and productive guardian of his family and home. He longs to remain in the old role/house because there he felt viable and important and now he feels like he is slipping into irrelevancy. The old house was the place where he felt the most comfortable, and the place where he most understood who he was—the head of the household.

The old house also serves as a symbol of the satisfaction that came to St. Peter in the role of the provider. While living in the old house St. Peter found great comfort and satisfaction in his place of work. St. Peter's study was located in the attic and was split into the family sewing room and a study that he had created for himself. He chose to share space in the sewing room because he needed to get away from his family in order to get something accomplished. It is interesting to note that in his old house a traditional study had been built on the main floor; however, St. Peter had decided to create his study in the attic sewing room. "Downstairs, off the back parlour, he had a show study, with roomy shelves where his library was housed, and a proper desk at which he wrote letters.

But it was a sham” (emphasis added; 22). That Cather uses such strong language is important because it reveals the dual nature of St. Peter’s identity. St. Peter’s dual nature connects to the changing roles of men because, just like during the early part of the twentieth century, St. Peter is struggling to find his identity amid fluctuating male role requirements.

The first “fracturing” deals, specifically, with St. Peter’s “split personality.” St. Peter “had managed for years to live two lives, both of them very intense” (29). He wanted to be the husband, father, and the professor.

Two evenings of the week he spent with his wife and daughters, and one evening he and his wife went out to dinner, or to the theatre or a concert. That left him only four. He had Saturdays and Sundays, or course, and on those two days he worked like a miner under a landslide...he was earning his living during the day; carrying full university work and feeding himself out to hundreds of students in lectures and consultations. But that was another life (29).

Moreover, Cather’s description of the sewing room is littered with references of splits and shams. Contained in the sewing room/study there is a desk, a couch, and also forms for the family seamstress, Augusta, to work with. The sewing forms are significant because they point to yet another split that Cather creates in the story. When referring to the sewing forms in the sewing room Cather writes:

“Though this figure looked ample and billowy (as if you might lay your head upon its deep-breathing softness and rest safe forever), if you touched it you suffered a severe shock no matter how many times you had

touched it before...you could never believe that contact with it would be as bad as it was" (18-19).

The sewing figure appears to be inviting to touch, but is not. This figure is a sham, which reinforces St. Peter's fractured identity. St. Peter's *sham* reveals his confusion and struggle over working within conventions. Cather's strong language reveals that she feels that working within conventions is a sham, and this is expressed through the unconventional nature of her life.

The division of the upstairs room into the study and the sewing room reveals the comfort St. Peter has always found in his role as the father and the provider. The work in the study is the way that he has provided for his family, and the sewing done there by Augusta that produced clothing for his wife and daughters represents one outward way in which he has provided for his family. As a result of the move, Augusta plans to transfer her sewing forms and move them to the new house. St. Peter does not want Augusta to move the forms because they represent to him the old role that he was comfortable in. Here in the study, he has found a balance working among the female forms, and he frets that a move might throw off this balance and also who he is. He was comfortable playing the role of the father, husband, and professor because in those roles he could clearly define who he was and a move would signal that he must change how he defines himself.

Moving would, however, change the roles he had been playing because ultimately, the old house was where he had spent long years, days, and hours working on his best-selling research on Spanish Explorers. While living in the old house, St. Peter would come home to his family and his research after spending long hours at the university, and it was in this old house that he experienced joy in writing. This joy is

illustrated in a conversation that he had with his wife. St. Peter's reluctance to move, prompted his wife to ask him if he wanted to spend the book money on something other than a house. To this St. Peter responds:

Nothing, my dear, nothing. If with that cheque I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you'd never have got your house. But one couldn't get that for twenty thousand dollars. The great pleasures don't come cheap. There is nothing else, thank you (*The Professor's House* 34).

St. Peter's response reveals, I argue, his desire to remain in the past because the past was where he found his authority and importance. He had found joy in working within the old role as the scholar struggling to support his family, and now with the completion of his work and its subsequent royalties, he no longer needed to struggle to provide for his family. The income received from his book helped his family to become more solvent which is suggested by the move to the bigger and more modern house. The money also encourages his family to push for St. Peter's retirement which throws into question St. Peter's understanding of his place in society and in his family. St. Peter resists moving into the new house because in the old house he knew exactly who he was—the provider for his family. St. Peter's identity has become fractured because the role that he had been playing in, the role that society told him to play in, has now changed and he is supposed to move on to the next role that society feels he should play. That St. Peter is unable to move reveals the consequences of gender roles. He had worked so long in creating an identity out of the role society told him to play that when it came time to move to the next role he could not.

Moreover, the old house also has become a symbol of escape for St. Peter, escape from the role he has chosen to play. In his youth St. Peter had accepted the traditional role as the husband, father, and provider, but he sometimes needed an escape from the role he had chosen to play. St. Peter built a French-style garden in the back of his old home, and it had always been a place where he “worked off his discontent” (15). When the pressure of his life got to be too much for St. Peter, he would escape to his garden. When he tired of working within the role of husband and father, he escaped for just awhile to simply work in the role of the gardener. “His walled-in garden had been the comfort of his life...He started to make it soon after the birth of his first daughter, when his wife began to be unreasonable about his spending so much time at the lake and on the tennis court.” (14). Gender conventions provide a rubric for the individual to follow in order to create a gender identity. At times the expectations of the role, come in conflict with the desire of the individual, just as they did in the life of St. Peter. He did not wish for the cessation of his role as husband and provider, but he did need to escape when his own desires conflicted with those of his gender role conventions. “In both Tom Outland and the professor, Miss Cather is exploring certain phases of sensibility, aspects of character which in some degree and at some time are found to come in conflict with the demands of the conventional world” (Daiches 31). In the old house, St. Peter was able to find harmony between his own desires and those of his family’s when he escaped for a time into the garden. The walled-in garden of the old house was yet another reminder of St. Peter’s past roles and past desires.

The New House and the New Role

In contrast, the new house represents the summation of his career as a successful scholar and also serves as a catalyst to his move into the new role of the contented and, in his mind, irrelevant old man. With the move to the new house, St. Peter is expected to relax and to move into retirement. He is not ready to make this change and so he chooses to remain mostly in the old house. Moving to the new house also encourages immense change in the life of St. Peter, especially in his role relationships as husband and professor. His role relationships change in ways that he is not ready for.

The first role relationship that changes is his relationship with his wife. While living in the old house, St. Peter's wife, Lillian, had been his confidante, friend, and lover. She had been the person to whom St. Peter shared his disappointments and his joys. She also seemed to him to be someone who had a good perspective on life and served as his escape from the dull politics of college life. However, in the new house, Lillian becomes a person almost foreign to St. Peter. He describes her as "hardened," and she seeks to "to get the most out of occasions and people" (*The Professor's House* 158). He had seen these characteristics in his wife before, but with the move to the new house they had become more pronounced. Lillian had changed in the eyes of St. Peter because she was able to move into the next stage of life while he was unable to do so. The dismantling of their close relationship is best seen in an episode in which St. Peter and his wife attend the opera. The event at the opera seems to be the culmination of St. Peter's emotional separation from his wife. Going to the opera was something that the St. Peters' had often done, especially when they were first married. During the opera, they reminisce about their past love and relationship. It seems that for a brief moment all of the walls

that they had built up around their relationship were torn down, and they were able to see, really see, each other again. “It had been long since he had seen her face so relaxed and reflective and undetermined” (92). In the mood of reminiscing about the past, St. Peter remarks: “My dear, it’s been a mistake, our having a family and writing histories and getting middle-aged. We should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young” (92). They both acknowledge at this point that living life had put a wedge between them, and they also know that they cannot go back. That night after the opera, St. Peter dreams of being shipwrecked on a deserted island, but his wife was not with him. The dream is significant because it suggests that St. Peter has not only moved houses, but that he has moved away from his wife and his role as the confiding husband and lover.

The new house serves also as a symbol of St. Peter’s new role as the elderly husband, who has ceased to be his wife’s lover. At the opera, St. Peter remarks that one thing that has separated him from his wife is her ability to adapt to new situations. “But you’re so occupied with the future, you adapt yourself so readily” (93). One way that Lillian is able to adapt is through her relationship with her sons-in-law. She begins to pamper her sons-in-laws and spends more and more time with them. She becomes, in a sense, their confidante; they go to her for advice, and she throws parties to enhance their social standing. They in turn, especially Louie, provide the attention and admiration that she needs in her advancing years. St. Peter’s emotional withdrawal due to his inability to move into the role as the contented old man leaves a vacuum that is filled by his sons-in-law. St. Peter remarks: “*Beaux-fils*, apparently, were meant by Providence to take the husband’s place when the husbands ceased to be lovers” (158). St. Peter has lost the role

that he used to play as the lover of his wife. Because Lillian was able to adjust to new circumstances, St. Peter moves away from her in his own inability to accept change. St. Peter's identity fractures because of his shifting role; conversely, Lillian is able to adapt to the new situation and "go on living" (93).

Because his sons-in-law act within the role that St. Peter once played with his wife, he begins to feel irrelevant which leads to an extreme sense of dissatisfaction. In his life St. Peter had played the following roles in his life: lover, husband, father, scholar, and provider, and now he is supposed to move into his new role as the old man. But St. Peter struggles to accept the new role he must play in his life. I would posit that St. Peter's denial of his new role is tied closely to the males of the early twentieth century who were also being forced to move into a new role. The new house with its modern bathrooms and large up-to-date rooms symbolizes the modern man who was forced to alter and change his identity to fit in with modern American culture.

Consequences of Gender Roles

Playing within a gender role has consequences. St. Peter has spent his entire life playing within a gender role that he felt was prescribed by society. As a father, husband, and professor he found joy and escape, and so when the time came for him to move into the next stage of his life he was not ready to do so because his identity had been so closely tied to playing within a gender role. Society, in the form of his family, told him that he was now expected to retire, but that retirement signaled to St. Peter decline into old age and irrelevancy. I would emphasize that St. Peter's confusion surrounding his identity is evidenced by his refusal to move completely into the new house and his

insistence upon dreaming about the past. St. Peter sees his life as fractured and the entire novel looks at a man who does not want to move into the future, but instead spends his time thinking about his daughters when they were young, his friendship with Tom Outland, the joy he had writing his work on Spanish Explorers, his once passionate relationship with his wife, and his youth as the boy from Kansas. St. Peter mourns the loss of his past role and his secure identity. St. Peter does not want to move into the role as the retired professor. His identity is fractured because he longs for both his life before adulthood and his time spent in his old role.

A major consequence evident in *The Professor's House* is dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction can be found in the character of St. Peter. One episode in the novel clearly reveals St. Peter's melancholy towards life. St. Peter visits a doctor because he feels tired all the time and has lost all of his desire to work. The doctor tells him that he seems perfectly healthy for his age. However, St. Peter is not satisfied with the diagnosis and instinctively feels like he will not live much longer. He is discontented with the diagnosis because he was hoping that there would be something physically wrong with him that would explain his feelings of apathy. However, it is not his physical health that is in danger, but his mental health that has been eroded by the expectation that he move into a new identity role.

The move to the new house seems to accelerate his decline into old age. As the novel opens, the reader understands that St. Peter is not only moving into a new house, but that he is also moving to old age. He even describes himself as suffering from "feeling a diminution of ardour" (13). He is so unhappy about his new circumstances that he begins to see his life as a series of events that were out of his control. He exclaims:

“His career, his wife, his family, were not his life, but a chain of events which had happened to him” (264). St. Peter exhibits all the qualities of a man moving into retirement. His life’s work seems to be finished, his wife spends her time doting on her sons-in-law, and he finds less satisfaction in his work and his life. This crisis is significant because it reveals the dire consequences of gender role conventions.

Role expectations have caused the identity of St. Peter to split between the old and the new and he cannot find satisfaction. The fracturing of his identity becomes so intense that he experiences what he describes as a: “Falling out, for him, seemed to mean falling out of *all domestic and social relations*, out of his place in the human family, indeed” (emphasis added; 275). Cather’s use of the phrase “falling out” is significant because it suggests St. Peter’s idea that he is becoming increasingly irrelevant to his family, and his desire to remain in the old house/role is so strong that he almost lets himself die there. In the old sewing/study room there is a heater that when not attended can cause suffocation. One day while in the room, St. Peter falls asleep and awakes to find the room filled with smoke, but he decides to do nothing about it because he prefers death to moving into the next expected stage of his life.

However, St. Peter’s suicidal desire is not fulfilled and Augusta finds him and pulls him out. The novel ends with St. Peter realizing that his family is returning home and now he must try to at least outwardly play in his new role. Sadly he realizes that “he was not the same man,” and he knows that he will never be the same. He vows to try and greet his family, but he hints that they will never understand how he is feeling. The ending of the novel is depressing and leaves nothing but a feeling of pity. It is clear that he still prefers death over life within his new role. The reader understands that St. Peter is

dissatisfied and that the energetic and adventurous professor hinted at throughout the novel is no more. With his attempted suicide his identity has become so fractured that he can no longer find satisfaction at the old house. His time at the old house after the family had moved creates a second fracturing of the professor's identity. St. Peter's suicidal desires express the darker side of gender conventions. St. Peter seems to desire anything even death over his current situation in life. This longing for the past leads to the second fracturing of St. Peter's identity.

The Second Fracturing

The second "fracturing" can be found in the story of the young Tom Outland. This "fracturing" can be studied in two different ways. The first is his desire to go back to his youth as the "Kansas Boy." The story of Tom Outland is important because it suggests what St. Peter has ultimately come to desire—his youth before society and its conventions took hold and before those conventions lead to his dissatisfaction and feelings of uselessness. Doris Grumbach touches on the extent of his dissatisfaction, "his late and blinding realization that the life he had been leading, the life of father, husband is no longer bearable and that death is preferable to living any longer in the stifling, elaborately furnished and false (for him) house of women and marriage" (Rabin 64). Grumbach is right in suggesting that St. Peter's life had lead him to the point of suicide, and this desire for the past before marriage is significant because it points to how far St. Peter's identity has split. Tom's life was filled with adventure and discovery. He had spent his childhood in the West with cowboys, railroad men, and priests. While riding the range with his friend Roddy, Tom discovered an ancient dwelling in the cliffs of a

mesa. He then became an archeologist combing through the ancient artifacts. After a falling out with Roddy, Tom made his way to St. Peter's doorstep. St. Peter took him in and helped him obtain a position at the University. He was a smart young man who was interested in science. This interest eventually led him to discover the Outland Vacuum, but before he could benefit from his discovery he joined the cause of the allies and went to France to fight in WWI. Eventually, Tom was killed in battle.

The fact that Tom died young is crucial to understanding why St. Peter finally comes to long for a life similar to that of Tom's. Tom's early death prevented him from playing a typical male role. He was able to avoid the expectations and consequences that come with marriage, money, and a career. These are the things that to St. Peter ultimately lead to his feelings of irrelevancy and dissatisfaction and his required move to a new stage in life. Throughout the entire novel, Cather gives an expose on the consequences of money, especially the money that was gained through the Outland Patent. Rosamond was engaged to Tom and so she was deeded all of his possessions along with all of his ideas. As time went on, she married Louie Marcellus who took the ideas for Tom's vacuum and patented them. The patent made Louie and Rosamond very wealthy, and with that wealth brought envy on the part of Kathleen (St. Peter's youngest daughter) and Dr. Crane (Tom's old science professor who had helped Tom develop his ideas). Rosamond also becomes a stingy person who refuses to share and who flaunts her wealth in front of others. Rosamond is described by Mrs. Crane, when she comes to get her husband's share of the patent profits, as lacking generosity. She states that she sees "Rosamond riding about in a limousine and building country houses" (*The Professor's House* 136), while her husband is forced to work late hours and work in a shabby office.

The Cranes then threaten to sue the Marcellus' for their share of the profits. St. Peter remarks that Tom would have sided with Mark Antony, after viewing the result of his invention, that "My fortunes have corrupted honest men" (149). Because of Tom's early death, he was able to avoid the corruption that can come with money. He was also able to avoid marriage, and particularly marriage to Rosamond who becomes ungenerous to others. I would argue that St. Peter recognizes that Tom was even able to avoid success by his death, and St. Peter's success served as the catalyst for his identity crisis.

St. Peter's current life, as described in the first and last sections, contrasts sharply with the life that he now desires. Because his life has led him to success and retirement, St. Peter desires a life similar to that of Tom's. While his wife is off in Europe with their daughter, Rosamond, St. Peter determines to write a story based on the life of Tom Outland. However, he spends little time writing and more time daydreaming about his own youth in Kansas. St. Peter had spent his youth in Kansas and now he longs for a return to who he was in the beginning before scholarship and marriage had modified him. "Tom Outland had not come back again through the garden door (as he had so often done in dreams!), but another boy had: the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley—the original, *unmodified* Godfrey St. Peter" (emphasis added; 263). This is where the final fracturing of St. Peter's identity occurs. He was unable to bring Tom back to life, but Tom's story begins to represent what he could have been if he had remained the "Kansas Boy."

Finally, St. Peter begins to see his life as fractured or split into different selves. The first self is that of his youth in Kansas and the second self is brought on by gender conventions responsibilities such as: marriage, money, children, and a career. Tom

Outland is seen as the “Kansas Boy” of St. Peter’s youth because his early death prohibited him from playing a conventional male role. St. Peter longs to be that youth again and live a life, like Tom’s, before expectations and responsibilities.

Tom Outland’s life also reveals another wish that St. Peter longed for. Contained within the “Tom Outland’s Story” is a description of an all-male utopia which parallels some of the desires of men during the early part of the twentieth century. An all-male utopia should be defined here as a society that is ruled by and only inhabited by men. This utopia is presented in the novel through the characters of Tom, Roddy, and Henry. After Tom discovered the cliff city on the mesa, he invited Roddy to also explore the area. After their work was done on the range they determined to go to the ancient ruins and excavate. They invited Henry up to do the cooking and the housekeeping. Tom describes this situation as ideal. They would spend their days exploring the ruins, while Henry cooked fine meals and kept up their living situation. They appeared to be a happy family without women, and they are also removed from the outside world. One day while exploring the ruins they discovered one of the original inhabitants of the city. It is important to note that the first inhabitant that they came across was the dried body of a woman. She looked to have died in a violent way and “her mouth was open as if she were screaming, and her face, through all those years, had kept a look of terrible agony” (213). Henry called her “Mother Eve.” I posit that it is significant that her name is Mother Eve and she is dead because it reinforces the idea of an all-male utopia.

Cather’s use of the utopia is not unusual, but her creation of an all-male utopia is significant because she seems to be suggesting that Tom (and St. Peter) would have felt more comfortable in a society without women. This idea of an all-male utopia contrasts

sharply with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland*. *Herland*, published in 1915, tells the story of a female utopia located somewhere in South America. Cather just like Gilman expresses the views of unconventional male and female roles, gender identity, and a sense of community through her use of the utopia. Cather's utopian society, where only the males Tom, Roddy, and Henry reside, suggests that Cather must have felt that men longed to have a place away of their own. The all-male utopia described by Cather is a place where the males can find their own identity without the consequences of being compared to women.

The second way this fracturing can be studied I would suggest is by exploring the manner in which Cather wrote the novel itself. The story of Tom Outland is interesting because Cather has physically fractured the story of the professor by placing the "Tom Outland's Story" right in the middle of the novel. Cather "splits" the professor's story to reinforce to the reader St. Peter's fractured self. The first section of the novel deals with St. Peter's refusal to completely move into the new house, and the third sections follows in that same, though extreme, vein. The second section, however, deals specifically with Tom Outland and his adventures in the West previous to his meeting Professor St. Peter. This story could stand as a story by itself with its own plot, characters, and adventure. In fact it has often been anthologized separately. The two sections that deal specifically with St. Peter express little action while the story of Tom Outland is filled with adventure and discovery.

The disjunction is also evident in the point of view of the speaker. In the sections "The Family" and "The Professor," Cather used third person. Using an aloof and distant narrator to tell the story of the unhappy professor is effective because it helps to express

the apathy of St. Peter. In contrast, Tom Outland's story is written in the first person. The use of the first person enhances the personal adventures of Tom Outland, and the reader is able to really picture the discovery that Tom and Roddy make in the cliff of the Mesa Verde.

Moreover, Cather uses descriptive language in the story of Tom Outland to create yet another split with the story of St. Peter. St Peter's story is set mostly inside the two houses. Cather uses words like "dismantled," "wobbly," and "dissatisfaction" to describe the setting of the first and third chapters. The description of the houses contrasts with the magical, refreshing, and open-aired world of Tom Outland. Notice how Tom describes the mesa:

The mesa was our only neighbor, and the closer we got to it, the more tantalizing it was. It was no longer a blur, featureless lump, as it had been from the distance. Its sky-line was like the profile of a big beast lying down...from the top rim to the river then wound back into the solid cube so that it was invisible at a distance, like a mouse track winding into a big cheese...I got up at day break and went down to the river to get water, our camp would be cold and grey, but the mesa top would be red with sunrise, and all the slim cedars along the rocks would be gold—metallic, like tarnished gold-foil (*The Professor's House* 190).

The world of Tom Outland is described as tantalizing and inviting to the reader. The colorful and beautiful language Cather used in Tom's story is yet another tool used to emphasize the split nature of the story and the split nature of Professor St. Peter. This

split is significant because it demonstrates that Cather saw the destructive nature of gender role in her own society.

Conclusion

The Professor's House is a crucial novel when studying the consequences of gender roles because it depicts the fractured identity of a man who has been forced to move from one gender convention to the other. St. Peter's desire to remain in his house suggests that men wanted to remain in the house of old conventions and roles. With the advent of the 19th Amendment the balance of power between men and women shifted and men lost some of the importance that they once held in society. This shift of power and inevitable move to irrelevancy is expressed in the apathetic reaction of St. Peter who mourns the loss of his usefulness to his family and specifically his wife. Cather goes beyond the professor's desire to remain in his old role, when she splits his personality between the old professor and the "Kansas Boy." This split is seen in the inclusion of "Tom Outland's Story," and in St. Peter's falling out with mankind. St. Peter's fractured identity becomes so extreme that he longs for death over moving into the next role he is expected to play. By using a male voice, Cather is able to suggest the dissatisfaction that occurred as women began moving more and more into male territory. While women sought for a voice, men sought to preserve their voice and this was not done without confusion and conflict. Cather shows clearly through the fissured St. Peter the dangerous consequences of gender roles on identity.

Chapter Four

Obscure Destinies: Satisfaction, Death, and Authenticity in “Neighbor Rosicky”

“Neighbor Rosicky” has seldom been the focus of scholarship, but I suggest that it warrants examination because not only does Anton Rosicky serve as a good study for the male gender role, but the story also reveals Cather’s own satisfaction with those individuals who define themselves above gender role proscriptions. Also this short story deals again with a common Cather theme—the consequences of gender roles. The consequences to be discussed include Rosicky’s death because of his work as the provider and Rudolph’s dissatisfaction with farm life. The short story also expresses the idea that happiness for Cather comes only when a person is left to determine his or her own destiny as demonstrated through the contentment of Anton Rosicky.

“Neighbor Rosicky: The City or the Country?”

“Neighbor Rosicky” was published in 1932 in a collection of short stories entitled *Obscure Destinies*. The short stories in the collection focus on memories from Cather’s childhood and adolescence in Nebraska. Although it was published in 1932, “Neighbor Rosicky” was completed in New York in 1928, and first appeared serially in the *Woman’s Home Companion*. E.K. Brown, Cather’s first biographer, often said the story was written in response to the illness and subsequent death of Cather’s father, Charles Cather (Meyering 148). Rosicky’s heart attack and death mirror Charles Cather’s illness and death. Cather’s relationship with her father was a good one, and she loved his tender

and sensitive manner. She took his death very hard and the way in which she portrays Anton Rosicky in the story is likely a tender tribute to her father.

“Neighbor Rosicky” is a delightful story that tells of a man growing old surrounded by his family. As his death draws near, Rosicky spends time reviewing his life. He thinks about the time spent in his homeland of Bohemia, and also his subsequent struggles as a poor, starving tailor in Cheapside, London. He also thinks about his time spent working in New York City. He had loved the city with his bachelor apartment and the opportunity to see an opera every night if he wished. But something had drawn him to the country: “It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground. You lived in an unnatural world, the fish in the aquarium, who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea” (“Neighbor Rosicky” 970). So he began reading Czech newspapers that advertised the new farming communities in the West, and determined that he needed to move there to seek a new life. Rosicky’s life was empty in many ways, and he felt that moving to the country might cure his anxiety. Rosicky ultimately moves to the country, meets his wife, has a family, and finds satisfaction working the land until the end of his life. In his old age, Rosicky does not long for the city, but he does not shun it either. He is satisfied that in his lifetime he was able to feel the joy of living in both the city and the country.

That, in a nutshell, is the way that most scholars have interpreted Cather’s short story—nature pulling Rosicky to the land. That reading is sound because it gets at the heart of something that Cather struggled with all of her life—Nebraska v. New York. Cather loved Nebraska, but even after achieving solvency she never moved back. She

stayed in New York, with only occasional visits to the country, for the rest of her life. She was drawn back to Nebraska, the Southwest, and also the rugged coast of Quebec, but she never could get herself to stay for good.

Here Cather is a puzzle. She praises the country, but she writes most of her novels in the city, and her most charming writing is done when it is set in the country. Cather understood, like her character Rosicky, the pull of the country, but as she remembered her past it would be with a sense of aversion and also love of country life. Cather was always trying to find what would bring her the most satisfaction even though it often created a sense of confusion and ambiguity of self. While the novel has been studied for its city/country split, I argue that there is something much deeper going on in the story that is often overlooked that deals with Cather's ambiguity, the consequences of gender roles, and also the need to determine one's own destiny.

Anton Rosicky: The Provider

Rosicky is an excellent example of a male who has fulfilled his manly role throughout his life. Once again, Cather presents her readers with a male protagonist. Rosicky was not a farmer in his youth, but a tailor. He was skilled as a tailor, but saw the chance for happiness and opportunity working a farm. He felt that farming was the best way to provide for his family, and so he chose to work the land and teach his boys to find satisfaction working on the farm.

More importantly, as the provider he uses his body as the instrument for income. His work on the farm enables him to provide for his family. "Rosicky's body depicts more than his own emotional nature; it is the outward sign of the corporeal work he does.

His brown hands, for example signify the act of farming with both its suntanned appearance and its similarity to the dirt in which he works” (Marquies 190). Marquis is right in suggesting the importance of hands in the story. Rosicky’s brown hands symbolize the hard work that he does for his family on the farm; these especially express his role as a provider. Ultimately, working on a farm is hard work and it takes a toll on Rosicky’s body. As the story opens, Rosicky has been experiencing heart problems and the doctor tells him: “You are sixty-five years old, and you’ve always *worked* hard, and your heart’s tired (“Neighbor Rosicky” emphasis added; 962).

His work with his hands to provide for his family has weakened his heart and the doctor tells him that he must slow down: “You’ve got to be careful from now on, and you can’t do heavy work any more. You’ve got five boys at home to do it for you” (962). However, Rosicky does not really desire to stop doing his regular activities: “It ain’t no place fur a man. I don’t like no old man hanging round the kitchen too much” (963). Rosicky’s wife, Mary, learns from the doctor about her husband’s condition and makes sure that he does not do any hard labor. This slows him down a little, but in the end he is unable to stop himself from going out into the fields when he feels like something is not being done right.

In instance in the story reveals his insistence. He keeps telling his sons not to let the thistle get in the alfalfa field, but they don’t listen to him. So he goes out to the alfalfa field to rake out the thistles. “He behaved with guilty caution, rather enjoyed stealing a march on Doctor Ed” (980). While out working his breath becomes short and he feels a pain in his chest. He is able to recover that evening from his heart attack, but the damage was done to his heart, and the next day he experiences another heart attack that kills him.

It is interesting to note that his death comes as a result of an attempt to continue to act within his role as the provider for his family. He knew that if the thistle spread throughout the alfalfa that it would be lost, and his years of experience taught him that alfalfa was a nice crop to have. It is by acting as the provider as prescribed by his male gender role that Rosicky has been weakened and eventually dies.

Anton Rosicky: The Nurturer

That Rosicky's death is tied to his role as the provider shows that Cather is still working with the theme of the consequences of gender roles. However, Rosicky's story is much different than the fearful Jim and the withdrawn Professor St. Peter because Anton Rosicky is a character who is satisfied and whole. Despite Rosicky's death, the story is a joyful celebration of his life. By acting within the male role as the provider he has developed a strong sense of character. However, Rosicky has acted not only in the typical male role of the provider, but he has also been a nurturer. His outward work, as represented by his calloused brown hands, reveals the tenderness of his inward self. When, Rosicky's wife, Mary, looks at his body she sees that "there wasn't anything brutal in the short, broad-backed man with the three-cornered eyes and the forehead that went on to the top of his skull" (968). Rosicky has been able to move fluidly between gender conventions to discover a self that is beyond gender roles and rules. This fluidity is best seen in Rosicky's work as a tailor. "Having been a tailor in his youth, he couldn't bear to see a woman patching at his clothes, or at the boys'. He liked tailoring, and always patched all the overalls and jackets and work shirts. Occasionally he made over a pair of pants one of the older boys had outgrown for the little fellows" (969). He accepts

tasks around the house that are commonly associated with womanly roles, such as nurturing the children and patching up the clothes. He enjoys patching up a shirt as much as he enjoys working on his farm, and that enjoyment is the reason that he performs these tasks. Rosicky finds harmony and wholeness by acting as both a nurturer and provider. He is a strong character because he acts on his own desires and not those proscribed by the male gender.

There are several examples in the short story that reveal Rosicky as not just a good provider, but also a nurturer. The first deals with the way that Rosicky treats his family. Rosicky had always sought to not only provide for the needs of his family, but also their wants. Whenever he went to town to buy food for his family or the animals, he would always come home with an extra toy or treat for his family. As a result of purchasing unnecessary items, the Rosickys are not as solvent as they could be, but they are happier because they have been nurtured by their father. Rosicky's concern for his family went beyond providing for them, and he sought for them to be happy and to have fun. This desire for their happiness is illustrated in a delightful story that Mary relates to the children about their father. Mary tells of the time that the summer had been so hot that crops had been roasted by the sun. Instead of moaning about what had happened, Rosicky planned a picnic for his family. Mary said: "An' we enjoyed ourselves that year, poor as we was, an' our neighbours wasn't a bit better off for bein' miserable. Some of em grieved till they got poor digestions and couldn't relish what they did have" (976). That summer Rosicky's crops had failed, which limited his ability to provide for his family, but instead of bemoaning his fate he chose to look to his family's welfare through a role other than the provider—he was the tender nurturer of his family.

Rosicky's attention to not just provide for the needs of his family, but also their wants reveals him to be someone who does not mold himself into assigned roles. He instead attends to his individual needs and the needs of his family in whatever manner he feels best. While the neighbors cursed the ground over the burnt crops and worried themselves to indigestion, Rosicky provided for his family by showing them love. He did not spend all of his time trying to help a ruined crop, but instead he planned activities that he knew would be enjoyable to his family. As a result of Rosicky's defiance of typical attitudes and his insistence on going his own way in life, he knows who he was and was satisfied in the love of his family.

Another example that reveals Rosicky as a nurturer is the way in which he treats his daughter-in-law, Polly. Polly, a young girl from that city, had recently married Rosicky's son Rudolph, and she is having trouble adjusting to the move to the country. Rosicky understands her struggle and tenderly seeks to help her to transition into the next phase of her life. At first she does not seem to want to have anything to do with the family, and she is very formal with Rosicky. Rosicky understands that she never has the chance to go out to the city anymore and so he offers to give Rudolph and Polly the car for the weekend so they might go out on a date. When she complains that she has to clean up the house and do the dishes, he tells her that he would be happy to do it while she is out. He saw a need and he tried to fix it, even if it meant taking over her womanly duties. Rosicky's kind qualities enable him to create a strong bond with Polly, and it is Polly who spends hours trying to make him feel comfortable after his first heart attack. Polly recognized that "it was as if Rosicky had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for color. It was quiet, unobtrusive; it was merely

there” (981). Rosicky is able to love people in a special way and make them feel comfortable. Rosicky moves beyond his role as the male provider to nurturer and care for his family.

Polly’s understanding of her father-in-law increases as she holds his hand until she is sure he will survive after his first heart attack. As she sat holding his hand, she noticed something about his hands, and what she notices is crucial, I argue, to understanding Rosicky’s character. Polly notices in his hands his ability to love:

You felt it in his hands, too. After he dropped off to sleep she sat holding his warm, broad, flexible brown hand, She had never seen another in the least like it. She wondered if it wasn’t a kind of gypsy hand, it was so alive and quick and light in its communication,--very strange in a farmer.

Nearly all the farmers she knew had huge lumps of fist, like heavy mallets or they were knotty and bony and uncomfortable-looking, with stiff fingers. But Rosicky’s was like quicksilver, flexible, muscular, about the color of a pale cigar, with deep, deep creases across the palm. It wasn’t nervous, it wasn’t a stupid lump; it was a warm brown human hand (981).

This passage is crucial because the entire short story deals with hands. Earlier in the story Rosicky’s brown hands are discussed which suggest his tie to the land as the hardworking provider for his family. His hands are also tied to his death because the hard work with his hands ultimately leads to his death. And finally, as illustrated by the above passage, his hands reveal him as a nurturer because they represent love. The passage also suggests that Rosicky’s hands are different than the hands of other farmers that Polly has known. She describes a typical farmer’s hand as “heavy,” “stiff” and “uncomfortable” while

Rosicky's are described as "warm" and "alive." The description of Rosicky's hands suggest who is he—someone who is kind and comfortable with who he is. The other farmers' hands are described as only the instruments that they use to provide for their families while Rosicky's "muscular" and "warm" hands suggest both his ability to work as the provider and his ability to work as the nurturer for his family. Rosicky's hands tell the story of his life; ultimately, Rosicky's warm and calloused hands are who he is—he is both the provider and the nurturer.

That Rosicky is content with who he is reveals, I would argue, the desire that Cather had for self-definition. She uses Rosicky as a model for the person that she wanted to be because he was someone that moved above gender conventions. Cather's desire to move above gender conventions is illustrated in her aforementioned stint at cross-dressing.

Opposition and Satisfaction: Healthy Relationships

Cather tries to express in her short story the need for individual freedom in determining identity. Gender conventions rely on differences and opposition, and it is how an individual works between and through these differences that brings satisfaction. In her novel *The Professor's House*, Cather used the technique of contrasting opposites like the old and new house of the female/male space in the sewing/study room. This technique is effective because it suggests the dismantling or the splitting of St. Peter's personality. In "Neighbor Rosicky," Cather also effectively uses the technique of connecting or contrasting opposites; however, she uses this technique to express a sense of wholeness and harmony. The following examples are opposites from the story: city

and country, old age and youth, single life and married life, summer and winter, and male and female (Meyering 152). The opposite that I would like to develop is the contrast between the male and the female in the story which is best illustrated in the harmonious marriage of Rosicky and Mary. "Neighbor Rosicky" is a story that deals with family relationships and marriage, just as *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House* deal with family relationships. However, the marriage relationship in this short story is much different than the troubled relationships of the other novels. In the novels, St. Peter's and Jim's marriage relationships are described as waning and unfulfilling, and the male characters in the novels feel a great discontent in their marriages. In contrast to the novels, the relationship described between Rosicky and Mary in the short story is an example of perfect harmony. At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that Rosicky has a wonderful wife. Doctor Burleigh remarks at Rosicky's check-up when he is encouraging him to slow down: "Sit around the house and help Mary. If I had a good wife like yours, I'd want to stay around the house" (963). The doctor recognizes that they have a fluid and harmonious relationship. Their relationship is whole and strong because they recognized their individual differences and worked through them. Some of those differences are that Mary is from the country and Rosicky grew up in the city; she is outspoken and he is gentle and kind. Mary's reflection of their relationship reveals their differences:

He was fifteen years older than Mary, but she hardly ever thought about it before. He was her man, and the kind of man she liked, she was rough, and he was gentle,--city-bred, as she always said. They had been shipmates on a rough voyage and had stood by each other in trying times.

Life had gone well for them because at bottom, they had the same ideas about life (968).

Mary then defines what she meant when she said that they had the “same ideas about life.” She says: “They had been at one accord not to hurry through life, not to be always skimping and saving. They saw their neighbors buy more land and feed more stock than they did, *without discontent*” (emphasis added; 968-9). Living life “without discontent” was the key to their marriage. They chose to be satisfied with who they were and accept their differences. Rosicky grew up in the city, and so Mary recognized his love for the city. But Rosicky also knew the value and importance of the land. Moreover, Rosicky worked on the farm, but he also patched the clothes, and Mary accepted it; Mary cooked, but she worked with the boys to make sure that Rosicky did not burden his heart, and Rosicky accepted it. Their relationship was a harmonious one because they understood that they did not need to work within the typical male and female conventions of society, But instead they worked with each other to fulfill his and her personal needs.

Moreover, Rosicky and Mary try to encourage their children to have relationships without discontent. Rosicky, especially, shows the need to work with opposites in his treatment of his daughter-in-law Polly. “Rosicky himself, however, is the primary unifying force in the story, even touching the discord in the lives of his son and daughter-in-law” (Meyering 152). Rosicky describes his son Rudolph as the “discontented one” (979). Rudolph has just recently married Polly who is from the city. Rosicky recognizes that they are both trying to overcome changes in their lives and he seeks to aid them. Rudolph is struggling with owning his own farm, and wants to give up the land to work at a job where he knows he can make money. It is obvious that Rudolph is feeling

discontent because he feels that he is not successfully providing for his new bride. Polly, in turn, is struggling with living out in the country all of the time. Rosicky wants them to have a harmonious relationship and so he decides to help them. His offer of the car for the weekend helps Polly to get back to the city, but he also encourages Rudolph to stay on the land because he feels that that is where he will find the most satisfaction. Rosicky encourages the couple to find a happy medium between their differences, and at the end of the story the couple's relationship has become a satisfying one. Rosicky understands that opposition exists in a marriage, but he also understands the need to move between the opposing points in order to find satisfaction in life, just as the American men of the early twentieth century needed to find a harmony between the old conventions and the new role convention in order to create a new identity.

A Happy Conclusion

In the satisfied character of Anton Rosicky, I would argue that Cather expresses the respect she has for those people who seek to define themselves outside the boundaries of gender conventions. The story is tender and charming, and there is no doubt that his story is a tribute to males like Rosicky. The story is delightful, but it is not sentimental because its undercurrents focus on the idea of the heroic nature of self-determination. Rosicky is a strong male provider, but he is also a nurturer and this combination results in a satisfied self. He sought for what has made him happy, and more importantly what has made others happy, instead of what society tells him he should do to be happy. Rosicky is a man who has come to terms with who he is. He has worked hard to discover who he is and how he fits into society. He tried living in the city, but ultimately found his

joy in living in the country. Rosicky dies as a result of his hard work, but one gets the sense that his legacy will live on in the new grandchild that his daughter-in-law Polly is carrying. "Neighbor Rosicky" is a very different story than *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House* because the protagonist is happy and whole. Cather has merged the past and the present to create a character that is complete and whole with a strong sense of self that creates a strong family life.

Concluding Statement

Willa Cather's fiction demonstrates an understanding and interest in revealing the consequences of gender roles. Therefore, it is important to study Cather by making a connection between her novels and the tension and turmoil that existed because of the changing roles for men in America. President Theodore Roosevelt stood as an example to males of the "man's man" who wielded the big stick and marched powerfully into battle. Roosevelt encouraged men to be strong and courageous, and not to be weak and feminine. During the Gilded Age in American history, social conventions encouraged men to be the protectors and providers, and men understood that success in life came from acting within these conventions. However, the "New Woman" stepped onto the stage and advocated women's right to independence and equality. Gender conventions provided men and women a rubric to follow that helped them to understand their place in society. But woman began to display gender characteristics commonly associated with men, making the early twentieth century in America a time of confusion concerning gender roles. The confusion came because men no longer understood exactly what their prescribed gender conventions were. Woman, who once served as foils to men, now wanted to be seen as equals. The flux of gender role brought angst to the early twentieth century American male because as woman grasped power men lost sole authority over politics, culture, and the like. Cather did not directly state in her own writing the events of her time, but I would suggest that due to the time period in which she lived and the shifting ambiguous nature of her characters and plots, connections can be made to her contemporary society and the confusion surrounding gender roles.

Willa Cather, her novels, and her short stories should be studied as a rejection of prescribed roles. Her request that all of her correspondence be destroyed came from her desire for privacy, and they also I argue came from a desire to design her own identity regardless of societal and gender boundaries. Her youthful stint at cross-dressing also reveals her ambiguity toward prescribed gender roles and conventions. The America, in which Cather grew up, helped to fuel the fire of Cather's confusion surrounding gender roles and her desire to define her own identity.

Her novels too, deal with identity and self-determination as they expose, through her ambiguous characters, the consequences of gender roles. In *My Ántonia*, Jim is fearful of ambitious women like Lena Lingard because they present a threat to the prescribed gender order. Moreover, Jim's character is often described as androgynous which points strongly to his confusion over gender roles. *The Professor's House* reveals that a major consequence of gender expectation is that of lack of satisfaction. As a result of doing just what he should within the male role, St. Peter is not yet ready to move into the next role defined for him by society. His desire to remain in the old house parallels his desire to remain in the old familiar gender role. His desire for the past remains so strong that his identity fractures and he longs for a release from responsibilities and role playing. These two novels, *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House* put into words the rise of woman and the subsequent male confusion over gender roles in Cather's America. Finally, in the short story "Neighbor Rosicky," Cather presents her answer to her readers regarding gender roles through her character Anton Rosicky. Rosicky is both whole and satisfied because he is able to perform within the typical male role of a provider, but he has also acted within the more feminine role of nurturer. He, serving as the model

character, is able to move beyond traditional gender boundaries toward love and satisfaction. Ultimately, I would argue that Cather reveals in the first two novels that working within typical gender conventions creates problems for the individual, but through the happiness of Rosicky she stresses the need of every individual to look past gender roles to a more basic understanding of self. The “Neighbor Rosicky” reveals to the reader the true Cather who sought through her literature to find self-definition.

Likewise, Cather did not want to be forced by others to play one role or another, but simply wanted to determine her own destiny. After Cather’s death, Edith Lewis, probably her closest companion gave this tribute to Cather:

She was a generous, impulsive, downright, and very emotional person...She was completely free in her thinking; all her ideas were her own, and she expressed them with an impetuous honesty very refreshing in that rather inhibited society...she was fearless in matters of social convention (Lewis x-xiv).

Ultimately, Cather’s entire life and works were spent trying to carve out her own identity and to live and act within a role that she created for herself.

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