Chapter 6

Conclusion

“Or was it another kind of cowardice, the fear of losing a pleasant memory...a dread of something that would throw a disenchanting light upon the past.”

(A Lost Lady\textsuperscript{1}152, emphasis added)

Cather’s fictional world is fired by two contrary and paradoxical concepts – that of memory and invention. All through her personal papers, critical articles and interviews one single idea that stands out is of memory and its paramount importance in her oeuvre.

“‘O Pioneers!’ interested me tremendously, because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbours, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it.”\textsuperscript{2}

That Cather used people from her own life is reiterated by Mildred Bennett when she discusses the play the children had put up at the Miner home when Cather was around thirteen. “Besides the parents, the guests were Dr. and Mrs. Mc Keeby,
Governor and Mrs. Garber, Mr. and Mrs. Wiener, Mr. and Mrs. Holland – all of whom were to appear later as characters in Willa’s books.”\(^3\)

This insistence on ‘memory’ alerts us to Cather’s use of memory in the presentation of her characters. All protagonists are always a composite picture of people she had known in her growing up years. Mrs. Forrester of *A Lost Lady* (1923) is the Governor Silas Garber’s wife, Antonia of *My Antonia* (1918)\(^4\) is the hired girl who worked for the Miners. About Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady*, Cather once said, “*A Lost Lady* was a beautiful ghost in my mind for twenty years before it came together as a possible subject for presentation. All the lonely emotions that one has had someday appear with bodies, and it isn’t as if one found ideas suddenly. Before this the memories of these experiences and emotions have been like a perfume” (Bennett 211).

The name of Jim Burden was chosen for the narration of *My Antonia* from the owner of Burden’s Store in Red Cloud, “but the story is Willa’s own and in many ways autobiographical. She didn’t invent or contrive,” says Bennett (201). As Cather often said “You can’t write imaginary things. To have universal appeal they must be true” (Bennett 201).

The last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)\(^5\), is the most autobiographical of all the novels. The epilogue centralizes the veracity of the account with the placement of the author-narrator as ‘I’ who witnesses the re-union of a
runaway slave and her mother. Charles Mignon discusses the changes Cather made to the last chapter on Nancy's return in the Drew typescript. "Collation of particular materials in the Drew typescript with the first edition show a number of changes Cather made in this early version of "Nancy's Return" that had not yet had a professional typing by Miss Bloom. The most striking and revealing change Cather made in the typescript at the beginning of "Nancy's Return" was a short prelude in the first person: "This concluding chapter I must relate in the first person for at this point I, myself came into the story. and saw something of the new order of life on Back Creek." This cancellation confirms Cather's decision to use the first person voice in this section." So we understand that autobiography is going to be a strong presence in this particular novel.

_One of Ours (1922)_ was ostensibly inspired by the death of a cousin in France during World War I. This is the only novel where major world events are allowed to impact and mould the plot. In _O Pioneers!,_ generalizations about economic depressions abounded; in _A Lost Lady_ the railroad and expansion figure only dimly as a background but in this novel the war-zone figures more prominently.

But the same author left a Will prohibiting the publication of her letters. "Neither my Executors nor my Trustees shall consent to, or permit, the publication in any form whatsoever of the whole, or any part of any letter or letters written by me in my lifetime, nor the use, exploitation or disposal of my other right therein." Edith Lewis and Cather together destroyed as many letters as they could access. Cather also meticulously worked out revisions of her novels and stories. Hence one finds it
difficult to balance this counter pull of reticence and self-expression that are both implicit in her writing.

Susan J. Rosowski, in *The Nebraska Lectures* (1998), speaks of the many revisions that Cather carried out in her manuscripts and typescripts. “What we realize is that her revision concerns not the details but the language connecting those details and the metaphors establishing their relationships.”

Edith Lewis recalls that “it was very interesting to read proofs with Willa Cather. After a thing was written, she had an extremely impersonal attitude toward it”. If there was “too much” of anything, she was not only ready, "she was eager to cut it";... "sometimes she would have a sudden illumination and would make some radical change.” These changes, though Lewis thinks they were always “for the better”, may have been Cather’s way of “distancing” something out of the conscious to the unconscious so that she did not lose a pleasant memory for an unpleasant one. So we understand that Cather was actually controlling the interpretation of her work.

According to Freud, observes Simon Boag, the theory of repressions can be taken to be the most important element of psychoanalytic theory. While admitting the scepticism of scientists, Holzman too has accepted the validity of this Freudian theory by naming it the “keystone of psychoanalytic theory”. According to Freud “the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance from the conscious.”
When we come to Cather and her strategy of concealment and reticence we are reminded of these opinions regarding repression because when Cather conceals, she definitely represses the truth. So in the various narrative voices that she uses, the masquerades in cross-gendering, which feminist critics like Sharon O’Brien\(^{14}\) and Judith Butler\(^{15}\) agree Cather uses to slide over the problematic question of lesbian experience, there is repression, no doubt. But what cannot be accepted beyond all reasonable doubt (emphasis added) is whether she was just repressing her sexual orientation or the sexuality of her characters altogether and the textual evidence in the previous chapters would point towards the second alternative.

Michael Billig, while referring to Freud’s case of the middle-aged woman whom Freud suspected of being in love with her son-in-law, says that everybody was involved in the situation because “all collude to avoid the sort of talk in which embarrassing issues would be raised. As such the family turns its eyes, and more importantly, its words, away from the ambivalent displays of affection.”\(^{16}\)

So, too, in Cather, we find that she emphasizes memory as much as she denies its’ importance in a very paradoxical manner. Billig gives a comprehensive definition of repression that makes it more than, what he says after Freud, a mere technical term. “Repression, thus, is not merely a description of a particular mental process on a par with a majority of today’s psychological concepts which remain restricted to the vocabulary of a few specialists. Freudian repression is an idea that has become public property... and spreads over history, society, politics and much more besides” (Billig 253).
While Freudian analysis is definitely unacceptable for the way all the traumas are referred back to an infancy when they occurred even if the remembered incident is from a later time, Cather’s blocking the entire infancy to eight years also seems to be equally unacceptable.

This is especially because Cather, even at five, was adept at narrative and imagination. Her narrative prowess becomes clear when we refer to the adroit manner in which she handles the incident of the servant-boy who had attacked her with a knife. Lewis has recounted how Cather, by calmly inventing a story of a new game, distracted him and got him to climb down (Lewis 10).

The present enquiry is helped by the work of John N. Swift and his seminal essay, ‘Cather, Freudianism and Freud’17. He points out that Elizabeth Sergeant had tried to read Freud but Cather had shown scant regard for him. But, as rightly pointed out by Swift, the very fact that she made loud allegations against practitioners of Freud shows she was aware of this school of psychology and psychoanalysis. As Swift observes that “Cather’s work seemed to me [Swift] to exemplify (original emphasis) the various processes and contents of psychic representation postulated by Freudian psychoanalysis, it also appeared to be aware of this in itself” (6 of 9).

Swift further shows, and the present enquiry accepts, that central to Cather’s artistic credo was the fact of memory and the unconscious. Cather reported that Sarah Orne Jewett had told her that “the thing that teases the mind over and over for years
and at last gets put down rightly on paper” (quoted in Swift) and “that thing” clearly also belonged to Freud’s psychoanalysis according to Swift. He further explicates that the “thing not named” could perhaps more simply be “the precious, the incommunicable past”.

It is clear that Cather’s fiction is created out of memory and repression; out of memory she foregrounds ‘good’ memories and represses the bad memories. It is quite possible to thus extend this analogy to the fact that Cather’s world is peopled by all the positive events and experiences of her life in easily recognisable forms. But the “bad” memories are kept away or repressed because there was the “dread that something would throw a disenchanting light upon the past” (ALL 152). But ‘bad’ memories cannot always be repressed, they have a tendency to come out in a covert manner, in the discourse of the ‘telling’.

“According to all accounts of her life,” observes Blanche H. Gelfant, “Cather enjoyed being in homes other than her own from the time she was a child riding her pony out to distant farms where she could visit with immigrant families whose stories enriched her vision, widened her horizons.” But what seems most intriguing is the fact that while the “attachment to her family is undeniable,” says Gelfant, “her need to distance herself” is equally and unequivocally true (75). Gelfant’s thesis is accepted because, as she posits, distance would enable “imaginative projection” while closeness would result in truth which would or could be hurtful (75). So her writing essentially deals with both “memory” and “escape from memory” and “memory”, like family, can lay a trap that can suffocate due to painful associations. Here we can use a
partial Freudian postulation that “memories” that have negative associations were something that she wanted to repress and use only the happier ones.

This brings us back to the fact that she excludes, in a very arbitrary manner, the first eight years of her life, those that she spent in Virginia, from the purview of her memory. But she obviously does not forget all the events and experiences of those years. That she remembers them, and remembers them keenly, is borne out by her many recollections that she shares with her lifelong companion and residential partner, Edith Lewis. Two of the incidents that happened to her, namely the incident where “a half-witted” (Lewis 10) boy threatens to cut off her hand with a knife and the incident with the elderly gentleman who was pushed off while he was trying to “fondle her curls” (Lewis 13).

That she was later constantly suffering from a fear of her hand becoming inactive is well documented. Sharon O’Brien gives a brief chronology of the various ‘illnesses’ that Cather suffered from and the surgeries that she underwent. From the list, we understand that Cather suffered from neuritis in November 1924; in spring 1934, she suffered from a painful inflammation of her wrist which left her hand and wrist in splints for weeks, leaving her unable to write; again in the fall of 1940 her hand gives her trouble; fall of 1941 her hand was in brace; all through 1943-44 the hand is in a brace sporadically. We know from Cather's letter to Irene Miner Weisz, quoted in O’Brien, that whenever Cather was ill she was always disgusted with herself. A stay in the hospital always made her “feel defective” ("country of the ill" 151).
It is interesting to note that as Cather was growing up she had decided to be a surgeon and had shown great interest in amputations. She often accompanied Dr. McKeeby on his rounds and narrated an incident of “how she gave the anaesthetic in the case of a boy whose leg had been badly broken in an accident, and had to be amputated” (Lewis 280). Later in life she takes up writing as a career choice. Both the professional choices revolve around the use of the hand. In later life her neuroses regarding her hand, many afflictions that led to a temporary loss of functionality, seems to raise valid questions. One cannot rule out her unconscious feeling of ‘castration’ at the loss of the use of her hand at various phases of her life and it does not seem entirely inappropriate to connect it to a deep seated trauma left behind by the incident of the “half witted boy” and the possibility of losing her writing power, that which empowers her to create her fictional worlds.

“Violence erupts in Willa Cather’s fiction. It is often unpredictable and unexpected, breaking into her narrative without warning and then subsiding without pause,” says Stephen Munroe. This violence is often ignored, he continues.

Instances of violence in Catheriana are manifold. The gruesome double-murder of Emile Bergson and Marie Shabata by Frank Shabata in *O Pioneers!*; Crazy Mary’s attacks on Lena Lingard with her corn-knife, the story of Peter and Pavel and how they fed the bride to the wolves, the double murder-suicide of Wick Cutler and his wife in *My Antonia*, the killing of the woodpecker by Ivy Peters with his kit for killing animals consisting of “tiny sharp knife blades, hooks, curved needles, a saw... a scissors” in *A Lost Lady* (*ALL* 23).
Munroe, in his essay, observes that though “elision of Cather’s violence may be common and seductive”, however “the nagging reverberations of these scenes make such readings uncomfortably incomplete” (149). Thus, it seems valid to enquire into the violence that occurs. Any explanation of this embedded violence will lead us back to the author’s lived experience because most of her “material”, she avowedly states in letters and personal papers, have been culled from her life.

It is clear from her letters, already referred to earlier, that Cather associated illness with being defective and was ashamed of it. The shame could be for many other reasons too. In early childhood, when Dr. Mc Keeby was a regular visitor, she may have faced situations that did not make it comfortable for her. If the visit of the doctor was not comfortable for her, then that could have led to a future when illness made her feel ashamed or defective. J. Gabriel Scala forwards the view, after Herman, that the abused child may develop an attachment to the abuser (141-142). In *The Song of the Lark*, Scala illustrates by referring to the scene of Dr. Archie tending to the ill Thea which may be used as a case in point. She validates this by referring to the behaviour of trauma survivors (quoted in Scala 140) and matches it with Thea’s almost detached memory of how Dr. Archie undresses her, puts bandages on her body and then covers her up (*SOL* 155). Thea felt “she was separated from her body” and this feeling, according to Scala, is common in trauma survivors.

Munroe speaks of a “psychic force that psychologists and psychoanalysts have identified as “shame-rage” – a destructive emotional pairing that forms in some
shamed individuals” (151) and this theory seems valid in explaining some of the elements of Cather's narrative strategy.

If we accept the concept of “shame-rage” then it is possible to accept that Cather, though she repressed these memories of unwanted sexualities, had developed an unconscious “rage” against it. The violent incidents that dot her otherwise serene and peaceful world are a reminder of such rage that gets expressed in a nuanced manner in various novels. That some of these violences are connected to heterosexual interactions has led critics (Sharon O’Brien and others) to conclude that Cather was expressing her incipient lesbianism in a covert manner. But these violences are not only present with reference to heterosexual engagements. They seem to be connected to any kind of sexuality. In that case we may also infer that Cather’s own memories regarding some of the experiences that she attributes to her fictional characters may have happened to her.

Michael Billig (223), while discussing Freud’s theory of repression, offers the view that “the dialectic of remembering and forgetting can be examined in relation to language and dialogic. As one matter is spoken (or written) about, so others are kept from immediate attention.” This may be extended to explain the case of Willa Cather’s paradoxical presentation of autobiography and invention.

O’Brien is of the opinion that Cather’s retractions and destruction of personal papers reveal Cather’s efforts to control the interpretation of her life by destroying or
manipulating evidence. If that be so then it is in consonance with Billig’s idea that while she speaks of some incidents, others are kept away from direct attention of her readers, to be ignored as evidence.

Blanche Gelfant’s observations seem to open up possibilities of the thrust of this present enquiry. In response to Ellen Moer’s observation in a discussion following Woodress’ paper on Cather in the International Seminar on Willa Cather in 1973, that “Cather chose to celebrate a figure who is sexually not respectable” in Antonia, Gelfant points out that “Antonia vindicates herself by becoming a true mother, breeder of men and so forth”\(^\text{23}\). She further concludes that “when Jim comes back, he is happy to note Antonia and her husband are like friends and being like friends this is a safe kind of marriage” (64). Here again we find Cather harping on an asexual relationship. Hence, Jim continues is allowed (emphasis added) to write of My Antonia.

Jim’s use of the possessive “My” needs careful attention. Judith Fetterley\(^\text{24}\) is of the opinion that the transfer of the speaking voice from an “I”, meaning Cather, to a faceless Jim helped her in overcoming the problem of presenting Antonia’s story from the female, thereby lesbian, point of view to a heterosexual paradigm. But when he names the novel “My Antonia”, he is actually repeating her father’s name for Antonia.

In Chapter XVII, Jim describes the Spring that he spends with the Shimerdas, teaching Yulka because “Antonia was busy doing other things” (MA 558). The
chapter ends with Jim Burden reminiscing ‘Whenever 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, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much, when he exclaimed, “My An-tonia!”’ (MA 560).

So, effectively, the title ‘*My Antonia*’ reflects the possessive affectionate tone of the father rather than the lesbian-lover. Hence, to believe that the masquerade of Jim as narrator, is to side-step the issue of lesbianism may not be an adequate explanation for the transference of the narrative perspective. In fact, if Jim writes his account of Antonia and echoes Mr. Shimerda’s affectionate nomenclature for her, then it seems entirely appropriate to conflate the two personas whereby Jim also stands for the ineffectual protector who could not help Antonia escape the clutches of patriarchal, and sexual, exploitation.

“In Willa Cather’s fiction, friendship nourishes and protects while romantic love leads to disillusion or death” says James Seaton. We have seen how in each novel the male friend is a source of nurture when there is no fear of sexuality being involved. This denial or avoidance of heterosexuality has validated the claim of the feminist critics like Sharon O’Brien (1987), Judith Butler (1993) and Sedgwick that Cather was projecting a lesbian alternative or espousing a different sexual orientation.
Cather’s novels seldom, if ever, deal with a happy marriage; the marriages are all fraught with cruelty or bestiality or they are between friends and hence 'safe'. Marriages, if they take place at all, are based on friendship because when “friends marry they are safe”\(^\text{27}\). But the very fact of ‘safety’ repeated manifold times, in more than one novel, foregrounds a sense of fear of sexuality and not necessarily of heterosexuality. But to infer that failed marriages are a result of her inchoate lesbianism seems to be a little presumptive.

We can refer to Cather’s opinion on the problematics of family interconnectedness. From her essay on Katherine Mansfield we come to know that Cather felt [that] “human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory” and "that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them"\(^\text{28}\). So Cather is of the opinion that within the family everybody lives a “double life” – the group life and the real life, which is secret and passionate and intense (\textit{NUF} 136).

In \textit{One of Ours} (1922), unusually for a Cather novel and for the first time, a great war that sweeps through much of the Western World is the focal point. The chief protagonist, Claude Wheeler, escapes a stultifying domestic life of father, mother and wife and finds happiness with the 'brave souls', his 'brothers' in the battlefield, in the trenches of France. But there, too, the gendering is quixotically inverted to show a feminised soldier in Claude. His (Claude's) appreciation of the Erlich family seems to stem from a comparison of them with his own where he was brought up to a 'poisonous reticence' based on fear. Blanche Gelfant's observations
seem to help this theory. Speaking of *One of Ours* she says, "A happy family is always someone else's for Claude, as it was for many other Cather characters who feel misplaced in their own homes or have no homes" (74).

Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*, according to John J. Murphy[^29] combines "the sensitive Jim Burden - Carl Linstrum type and the more violent, death-inviting Emil Bergson type" with his "blue eyes that gave him a look of shyness and weakness to the upper part of his face" and "smooth, muscular arms and legs, and strong shoulders," (Book 1 Chapter III). Claude is also awkward with women and torn by elements of attraction and a "sharp disgust for sensuality" (Book 1 Chapter IX). So Cather's portrait here is of a problematised masculinity vis-à-vis sexuality. Claude's marriage, at a later date, will end in frustration. Claude marries Enid with whom he had "played as a child by the mill-dam". What is more interesting is that Claude's serious involvement with Enid happens when he is recovering from an ailment which reminds one of Cather's friendship with Farrar when he was in a cast for a fracture and that friendship could not evolve into that 'something' which she wanted to avoid. Enid is the wrong choice. She had initially refused his proposal of marriage because she was more interested in travelling to China for missionary work, but accepts him after being persuaded by the argument that her marrying Claude was the only way to reclaim him for the church.

Here again we find Cather imputing various motivations for a marriage, mostly religious and not sexual and prepares us for the final frustration of the non-consummation of the marriage which shatters Claude but not Enid. Her cruel rejection
and her overt religiosity once again bring to the forefront the fact that Cather was constantly eschewing sexuality. By making Enid an overzealous, religious fanatic Cather is closing the door on her sexuality, too. But Claude's abhorrence of sensuality has already been embedded in the text earlier. So the reader is prepared for this non-consummation.

Being frustrated with family and marriage Claude Wheeler finds his family in the trenches in France, in the French families he visits, the Erlich family that befriends him. Cather, in her life too, spent many years with families other than her own (Gelfant 75). Her years with the McLung family are well documented. This coupled with her opinion on the "double life" everyone leads - one with the group and the other the secret one - tells us about her own ambivalence regarding her own family. In the enforced reticence of the Wheeler family may be read a forced reticence that Willa had to follow in her very genteel, aristocratic typical Southern home way back in Back creek, Virginia, which led to her outburst in front of an elderly visitor (Lewis 13).

It is true that once settled on the Divide in Nebraska, the picture that emerges of the young Willa is of a free spirit who preferred to visit her immigrant neighbours and spend hours outdoors. "Willa rode one of the Cather ponies all over the prairie. Later she drove a team" (Bennett 140). All or most of these families that she visited and talked with ultimately find a representation in her works.
Cather’s world is dotted with failed marriages or marriages that turn violent. Failed marriages abound – whether it be Dr. Archie's and Fred Ottenburg's in The Song of The Lark, Harry Gordon's and Sebastian Clement's in Lucy Gayheart, Jim Burden's and the Shimerdas' in My Antonia, Claude Wheeler in One of Ours or Professor Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor’s House. The marriages fail maybe because of "the bonds of family, duty and possession"\(^{30}\) that each character wants to escape.

In A Lost Lady when Niel goes to visit Mrs. Forrester after the night that Captain Forrester went west, he hears "a woman's soft laughter" followed by a "fat and lazy" man's laughter (ALL 86). Niel's subsequent thoughts are most interesting. "It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal. Beautiful women whose beauty meant more than it said... was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? Was that their secret?" (ALL 87)

So Marian Forrester is not contravening a moral scruple by being with another man, it was the thought of physical sexuality that repulsed Niel. Sexuality, and attendant pleasure thereby, is something coarse, to be revolted by; chaste friendships are welcome. If this be the message that Cather projects then one must delve deep to probe what caused this 'rage' against sexuality.

Adrienne Rich speaks of the idea that "women turn to women out of hatred for men is a lie", which gives credence to the compulsory heterosexuality that is imposed
on women by societal expectation and reigning patriarchy. So when we offer the idea that Cather's avoidance of sexuality is a reaction against an earlier or childhood abuse, either personally experienced or observed in someone close, we may fall into the trap of conventional patriarchy that Rich is warning us about. But in Cather's world 'women' do not turn to 'women' as such as has been seen in the pages of the novels. Feminist critics, who have appropriated Cather as a woman novelist who was lesbian, namely Sharon O'Brien, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would offer contemporary socio-historical and cultural reasons for the coverture of Cather's lesbianism. But from the preceding textual analysis we can conclude that Cather manipulates "memory" and "invention" to create her novels of Prairie life where everyone who wishes to survive, avoids/is made to avoid sexuality. There is evidenced a subtext of 'fear' against sexuality. This is foregrounded by the repeated use of the word "safe" all through the novels beginning from *O Pioneers!* to *Shadows on the Rock*.

In the last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave-Girl*, ironically the novel based in Cather's own home in the antebellum South, the home has become a menacing place fraught with overtones of terror; a home where the mother-surrogate plots the rape of the daughter and the father-surrogate either looks away or looks at her [Nancy, the slave-girl's] burgeoning femininity and blames it for whatever happens to her [Nancy].

"Love is spiritual, only passion is sexual," said Mary Grew (1892) and this seems to validate 'passionlessness' as an important characteristic. Almost three
decades later this also seems to colour much of Cather's works. But, as Cott observes, this ideology gained currency in a world that wanted to immobilise women and blunt their urge for power by making them the moral centre (233). In Cather's world this rationale would not be very effective because women were making certain inroads into an empowered identity mould. So when we look for a probable cause for this 'passionlessness', we have to look not only at an alterity in sexual preference, since that too, at best, is only inferential, but an urge to obfuscate sexuality.

John Swift shows how even though Cather took great pains to debunk the importance of Freudian psychological insight, there is reason to believe that "she was well aware of Freudianism and the American Psychoanalytic movement" (2 of 9). He goes on to explain that Cather would have been exposed to the theory because of her close relationship with Mabel Dodge Luhan, Carl Van Vechten and Floyd Dell, all residents of Greenwich Village and all of them "dabbled in and wrote on Freudian Psychoanalysis" (3 of 9). It is quite possible that Cather who was adept at concealment and suppression refused to accept the tenability of Freudian analysis to avoid being drawn into the fad of undergoing therapy, a fad that was common among the bohemian population of Greenwich Village. Any author whose strategy straddles the world of concealment and selected disclosure is silencing something. The accepted belief was her lesbianism, the love that knows no name.

Scott Herring\(^\text{33}\), however argues, and we are prone to accept, that the time and place that Willa Cather occupied, especially in and around Greenwich Village, she did not need to go to such great lengths to masquerade her sexual preference. According
to Herring, at that particular juncture in history, same-sex relationships were being slowly made visible (66-91).

While Cather constantly manipulated women's same-sex relationships, either through cross-dressing or cross-identifying, her male same-sex relationships are allowed to prosper and become visible. This is seen in the way Professor Godfrey St. Peter's relationship with Tom Outland is allowed to be visible in *The Professor's House*\(^3\). Modern readers are aware of the latent homosexuality in the way the Professor first gazes at Tom's "fine physique" but his domestic commitments and Tom's early death do not allow this relationship to evolve into a recognisable homosexual one.

In *Death Comes For the Archbishop* (1927)\(^3\) again we see how the 'friendship' of Father Vaillant and Father Latour is given visibility but the undercurrent is not allowed to grow into, what Herring calls, a "subculture of homosexuality" (68). This is critiqued by Herring when he points out that 'while "brutal suppressions" undoubtedly occurred [but] publicly identifiable homosexuals were quite conspicuous in major US metropolises such as New York City' (68).

"Contrary to Sedgwick's claims, Village lesbianism in Cather's historical moment appears to be a visible presence that was often subject to local and national attentions."\(^3\) If that be so, then the great lengths that Cather goes to conceal the unmentionable love seems quite unjustified and unexpected in a feisty author who
was willing at the tender age of five to "horrify" the cultural expectations of her very traditional Southern home.

Thus, we see that masculinities are often presented in a binary with 'manly' men connoting sexually active, aggressive and threatening, as exemplified in the figures of Frank Ellinger, Ivy Peters, Donovan; and 'effeminate' men connoting sexually inactive, soft, gentle and acceptable and worthy of the author's approbation as Jim Burden, Carl Linstrum, Niel. In her dismissal of these rapacious men the sexual preference is clearly articulated. But in the figure of Captain Forrester and Fred Ottenburg the author very categorically emasculates them to make them available for the central protagonists.

In this methodical and conscious emasculation, it is not inappropriate to read what Stephen Munroe calls the "shame-rage" pairing of emotion. Both Nancy Gobatto (2002) and J. Gabriel Scala (2007) have persuasively argued that Thea Kronborg's childhood 'friend', Dr. Archie, could have been her potential abuser and have offered the view that since The Song of the Lark is rooted in authentic memories and actual experience, it can be extended to include Cather's own childhood experience too.

Thea's experience of the incident with the medical student brings to light how she had been unethically touched by the doctor. "He had been a cheat too. He had exceeded his rights. She had no soreness in her chest, and had told him so clearly (emphasis added). All this thumping of her back, and listening to her breathing, was
done to satisfy personal curiosity" (SOL 356). So unethical touching by a medical practitioner recurs in the novel foregrounding probably an unconscious personal childhood echo. This time Thea just laughs contemptuously and is not shattered by it because "people live through such pain only once; pain comes again but it finds a tougher surface" (SOL 328).

_Sapphira and the Slave Girl_ is the other novel steeped in direct autobiographical echoes. In this tale of the run-away slave girl, set against the Southern background of her own childhood, one recognises many parallels with her life. The connection is concretised by her own appearance in the epilogue. This tale is replete with sexual exploitation and rampant abuse. Nancy Till, the slave girl, is saved by the mill-owner's widowed daughter but was being exploited by her mother. In an intriguing manner the father, Henry Colbert, is presented as a silent spectator to the engineered near-rape of Nancy by his nephew. In this silence is 'felt' a collusion because though he refuses to sell Nancy, he is impotent enough not to be able to save her.

"According to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (amended October, 1996) the term child abuse and neglect means at a minimum, any act or a failure to act (italics added) on the part of a parent or caretaker [including any employee or any staff or person providing out-of-home-care] which results in death, physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation or an act or a failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm." So in a sense any parent or parent surrogate failing to provide 'safety' to a child is harming the child and may create
future psychosocial trauma. With Cather, it is possible something had occurred. An abhorrence of sexuality thus could be a fallout of this loss of safety in childhood. In Cather's rejection of family affiliations in her world of fiction, thus, may be embedded a deep-seated rejection of a family that could not save its children.

Sexuality does not only refer to the gender of object-choice, but also to the recognition of the fact that along with other defining categories which construct identities as gender, race and ethnicity it helps in the process of identity formation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, “sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren’t well-described in terms of the gender of object choice at all” (3 of 11). In the women that Cather constructs they are never seen as sexual beings but remain either sexless ones, or better still, become sexual objects. Cather's construction of femininity and masculinity thus calls into question her accepted lesbian leanings and provides a new interpretation of the quintessential term that defines her work - 'the thing not named'.

Goldberg has noted that the 'female-female betrayal' is resolved in the embrace of Nacy and Till in Sapphira and the Slave Girl thereby absolving Cather of showing such a thing. But the very fact that the only novel that represents most fully a female-female relationship is also the one that presents the most horrific betrayal is definitely intriguing and cannot be possibly hidden under the rubric of a lesbian leaning in any way. This betrayal of the daughter by the mother, or surrogate as in this case, is very pertinent to our reading because in this final novel, when Cather could turn to the south of her childhood she was critiquing the mores of the society that she
could remember. As we have seen that Cather was both overtly, in her interviews and speeches, and covertly in her fiction, speaking of a past. "But you have a past? The darkest ones come early" (MME Part II) and we have been told by her friends how she would fly 'the less disagreeable' for the 'more agreeable'. As Sharon O' Brien posits that our concern is with Cather's experience of intimacy and its effect on her fiction (Emerging Voice 137) and in that vein this interrelation of complex intimacy that has moulded this last novel definitely points towards her 'darkest memories' of childhood.

In her essay, "The Novel Démeublé", she says "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there - that one might say is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high value to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself" (NUF 50).

So I conclude that by debunking the heterosexual plot Cather was not trying to project an "alterity" but revealing a fear of sexuality. The "thing not named" may not have been a woman to woman bond that could not be expressed in a world that had banned Hall's The Well at all. On the contrary it could have been an incident related to sexual abuse which left a deep impact on her psyche.
Thus, "the thing not named" becomes in this reading an experience of the past because "the dark ones come early" (*MME* Part II) and becomes the 'overtone divined by the ear' and 'the verbal mood'. Cather's gender and sexuality thus seem to be moulded by incidents and affiliations of the past which were to haunt her all through. Her paradoxical method of 'disclosure and concealment' become valid tools to overcome that which happened but could not be spoken about in society. As a child and a young adult she could only horrify society when she disliked attention; as an adult she created an asexual world where sexualities, hetero or homo could not threaten an individual because sexuality remained indissolubly linked to violence.

Hence it is difficult to accept the notion that Willa Cather, as in her life so in her fiction, brings in alterities in sexuality. After all the author who thought Indians should not try to protest the bondage of a foreign rule (her letter referred to earlier)\(^ 41\) has, in that postulation, clearly stated her political affiliations.

For a writer who could not accept minoritisations or alterities in politics, it would not be possible to accept the same in the personal. After all the political does become the personal.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


41. As I go to the press *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* has been published, edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis P. Stout in April 2013 (only an excerpt from the introduction is available online and it was not possible for me to access the book keeping the logistics in mind). The testamentary ban against the publication of her letters notwithstanding the editors feel that the restriction was clearly not motivated by an urge to protect a secret. Whatever the reasons, that Cather did not want readers to access them is clear from her stipulations in her Will. Also the efforts to destroy the letters cannot be totally ignored whatever the residual number still in circulation and in the possession of friends and family.