Chapter 1

Introduction

“Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”

Adrienne Rich, When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision, 1971

In a similar vein my project of re-viewing Willa Cather began at a point where I came across a letter to Sigrid Undset (1882-1949, a Norwegian writer). Due to a clause in Cather’s will, her letters cannot be reproduced verbatim but Janis P. Stout’s paraphrase reads as follows - “Miss Lewis (Edith) was lunching with some advanced Hindus and heard them speak absurdly, boasting and exulting about India’s independence from England as an escape from despotism. When thousands die of famine and there is no Wavell (Viceroy of India, 1943-47) to supervise rescue squads in Calcutta they may change their tune.” The tone of the letter unequivocally points towards Willa Cather’s pro-coloniser stance and her belief in the rightness of the colonial power equation. Somehow this did not match the earlier picture of the rebel – novelist that I had formed during my initial forays into Catheriana. Her early novels - O Pioneers! (1913), The Song Of the Lark (1915), My Antonia (1918), One of Ours (1922) and A Lost Lady (1923) - “sing America” and bring in a breath of fresh air. But this letter so undercuts that rebel image of the girl who had “cropped hair and boyish shirt and jacket” and had refused to buckle under the protocol of femininity that was de rigueur in those days that my attention was drawn to this contradiction.
Though it is customary for critics to accept her conservative and traditional politics, for me it is difficult to accommodate the figure of a woman who was supposed to be sympathetic to the cause of change, if not radically pushing for it, with her very obvious reactionary politics.

The title of my dissertation is “Re-viewing Willa Cather’s Novels” and I will be critiquing her presentation of gender and sexuality in my re-readings of her novels. The 're-viewing' will focus on 'gender' and 'sexuality' in her novels and will be the perspective from where the critique takes place.

When I began my enquiry, it had seemed that Willa Cather was writing stories different from her contemporaries like Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow due to the dislocation her life had suffered at the tender age of nine when her father, Charles Cather, had transported his family from their first home at Back Creek, Virginia, to the Divide, Nebraska, and later to Red Cloud to join the rest of the family who had shifted earlier in search of better opportunities. But delving deep into the entire spectrum of Catheriana, I found that locational rupture may not have been the reason for her stories because, as Edith Lewis suggests, Cather did take to the new country. Lewis says that in her [Cather's] novels one finds “the joyous awakening to a new and beautiful country and a thrilling new kind of life” (14). Cather, herself, says that, “O Pioneers! interested me tremendously, because it had to do with a kind of country I loved” (1931).
My purpose, thus, is to look with fresh eyes at Willa Cather’s fiction from the perspective of gender and sexuality as these are contested sites especially with reference to her writing. I refer to Judith Butler’s observation “it is not easy to know how to read gender or sexuality in Willa Cather’s fiction”. Butler herself says “Cather has appeared not to place herself in a legible relation to women or to lesbianism” (Bodies That Matter 143). It is acknowledged by all critics that Cather has really not expressed her affiliation to any particular sexuality in any overt manner, yet they also accept a feminist/lesbian appropriation readily. Willa Cather’s famous articulation of “the thing not named” being the basis of her aesthetic principle has been variously interpreted. Sharon O’Brien has argued persuasively that the “thing not named” is Cather’s lesbianism. Judith Fetterley, too, while discussing My Antonia, defines the nature of Cather’s situation as an American writer “who is a lesbian writer”.

Gender, originally a classificatory term according to the dictionary meaning available, in the post-feminist era has become a very important tool of analysis. Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one first drew attention to the sex/gender debate that has been the focus of much of cultural and feminist enquiry. In the Technologies of Gender, Teresa De Lauretis following Foucault, says that gender, like sexuality, is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings but a set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations. In Anglo-American feminist discourse, says Elaine Showalter, gender has been used to stand for social, cultural and psychological meaning imposed upon sexual identities. Gender, thus, has a different meaning,
according to her from the term "sex which refers to biological identity as male/female or sexuality which is the totality of an individual’s sexual orientation, preference or behavior” (1). This analysis will use this concept of the terms as forwarded by Elaine Showalter. Though Judith Butler has raised objections to concepts of “true sex, discrete gender and specific sexuality” (14), yet at this point, it would be valid to accept Joan Scott’s observation that the category of gender is a means of organizing "cultural understandings of sexual difference” (15). Charlotte Hooper in *Manly States* (16) argues that “theoretical approaches to gender identity” tend to revolve around “three dimensions of analysis namely (1) physical embodiment, (2) institutions and (3) discourse or gendered construction of language”. Though different critics lay more emphasis on one or the other, she points out that it is more important to trace out the complex interactions between these multiple factors when reading gender. This reading will keep it in sight when critiquing Cather’s gendered creations and their sexualities.

Showalter observes that since the 1980s gender has become an important category of analysis (1). She quotes K.K. Ruthven who says that “gender has become a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse”. In the case of Cather, this category takes on greater importance as she uses stalwart women protagonists like Alexandra and Antonia who can “work like a man’s” as well as not very 'manly' men like Claude Wheeler who are far more comfortable when set up in a domestic scenario even in the battlefield.

‘As a matter of historical fact “lesbian [and gay male] love” did become quite visible as itself during the first third of the twentieth century and was remarked upon
by gossip columnists, sexologists, sociologists, vice reformers, socialists, detectives, policemen, tourists, poets, novelists, polemicists, literary critics, and myriad others in modern US public spheres’ writes Scott Herring in his essay on Catherian Friendship17. He quotes Edna St. Vincent Millay, Caroline F. Ware and Chauncey to show the visibility of both homosexuality and lesbian love in the Village (68). This would contradict other critics such as O’Brien, Stout and Sedgwick who have constantly spoken of Cather’s milieu which through “brutal suppression” did not allow any visibility to lesbian love thereby forcing the author to resort to an art of “disclosure and concealment”.

My submission is that Willa Cather did not avoid the depiction of a heterosexual relationship to keep secret her incipient lesbianism as the lesbian critics would have all believe and would like to look into her presentation and re-presentation of events, incidents and identity construction to find her reason for side-stepping the issue of sexuality altogether.

Willa Cather (1873-1947), a noted American writer started her novelistic career quite late in life (she was almost forty) after having spent a considerable number of years in journalistic apprenticeship and high school teaching. Journalism and teaching gave her avenues of earning money during the 1890s when her family was going through a rough patch with failure of crops and general poverty facing the people on the Divide.
“When I was in College and immediately after graduation I did newspaperwork,”¹⁸ she told Ethel M. Hocket in an interview. After she had worked on Lincoln newspapers – The Journal and the Courier - she went to Pittsburgh where she worked on the Home Monthly, a periodical, for many years. That she was not creatively happy in this phase is clearly borne out by her letter to Muriel Gere, a childhood friend, that the “magazine is trashy but [she] is doing her job as instructed”¹⁹.

Her novels of farm life and Bohemian settlers dealing with independent robust women-pioneers and artists not only brought her instant artistic acclaim but also catapulted her into mainstream American Literature.

That Cather enjoys a near iconic position in American Literature is borne out by the fact that Laura Bush, former First lady of the United States, had featured her work as part of a White House Symposium on the literary legacy of women in the American West in September 2002²⁰.

"The twenty years on either side of the turn of the twentieth century were a period of fundamental change and expansion in the roles and opportunities open to American women,” observes Jean V. Matthews²¹. In the course of the preceding century and as part of the on-going demand for suffrage women had achieved a lot of personal liberty and this was evident in the situation women found themselves at the turn of the century. The so called New Woman had arrived. “As a type, the New
Woman was young, well-educated, probably a college graduate, independent of spirit, highly competent and physically strong and fearless” (Matthews 13) was the way she was perceived by society. In dress, manner and behavior they were different from their earlier mid-nineteenth century counterparts. In effect Willa Cather’s pioneers and women artists at one level seem to be prototypes of this new generation of women who inherited and cultivated land, as in the case of Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* or charted a successful musical career away from home like Thea in *The Song of the Lark*. But they do not ask or seek answers to what Elsie Clews Parson in her 1914 *Journal of a Feminist* says [was] ”the most important psychological problem of how are women to live with men, not without men like the ruthless fighters of institutional freedom and not in the old way through men”\(^2\). This also raises the problem of those women who wanted to live outside the family circle in an independent manner and not end up as “And Rheta, wife of the above”\(^3\) as also the patriarchal bias on “compulsory heterosexuality”\(^4\).

“In the period immediately before the First World War, the Women’s movement was deeply divided over the issue of sexuality… One camp advocated the joys and necessity of hetero-sexual intercourse in or out of marriage” says Sheila Jeffreys\(^5\). The other camp forwarded a view of sexual non-cooperation with the men (Jeffreys 100). In the 19\(^{th}\) century, women’s same-sex friendships were not stigmatized as deviant. But with the writings of sexologists like Havelock Ellis and a concatenation of social changes and economic aspects, by the early 20\(^{th}\) century such friendships were discouraged through the label of ‘deviance’.
It is believed that Cather, initially, to gain freedom as an artist had rejected all women writers as predecessors. Her aspiration to be taken seriously had made her identify with the acknowledged masters of the craft (usually male). Elizabeth Ammons, in her seminal work on the turn of the century writers, has also shown how writers like Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Mary Austin and Ellen Glasgow “sought to create a public image of independence not bound by historical assumptions based on race, class or gender.” But the very fact of either elision or suppression of categories of gender, emphasizes its importance in the oeuvre of the writer. This is essentially true of Cather’s fictional projections. Elizabeth Ammons discusses how male heterosexual treachery haunts the pages of Cather’s fictional world, and that male sexual violence abounds in her novels. “There is the double murder in *O Pioneers!*, the attempted rape in *My Antonia*, the sadism of Ivy Peters [*A Lost Lady*] or the imagined murder of ‘Eve’ in *The Professor’s House*”, she observes. But, as critics have shown that it would be very naïve to accept her male narrators uncritically similarly to notice the abhorrence of male sexual aggression as reflecting a nascent as yet inchoate lesbianism would also tantamount to a simple reading especially when the author has scrupulously avoided any categorical announcement of sexual preference and all reading is essentially inferential. Though popular imagination associates Cather with an asexual world, Ammons foregrounds the heterosexual violence and lesbian critics deconstruct this aspect to highlight Cather’s sexual orientation.

Critical reception of Cather has veered from the adulatory patriarchal appreciation of her presentation of strong pioneer women and artists of epic
proportions to complimenting her on being appropriated as a lesbian writer. Cather was, of course, accused of relying on myths of the land because she could not produce heterosexual narratives. "Her women, for example, always stand in the mother or daughter relation to men; they are never truly lovers" (Trilling). As a rebuttal of Trilling’s criticism of Cather’s “personal failure of her talent” that her characters are never in a dramatic situation with each other or that her novels are not organized around the marriage plot, Christopher Nealon offers the view that through “the atavism of the backward” and through her refusal of the marriage plot Cather assembled a lesbian society in which “feeling and not family would be the basis of affiliation”.

To extend Trilling’s observation and Nealon’s riposte, it is true that her plots do not end in marriage, and even if they do as in *O Pioneers!*, it is not a consummation of the sexual drives of the people concerned but an “asexual” bond not a heterosexual coupling at all. When Alexandra says “when friends marry they are safe” - hardly the utterance of a newly-wed woman anticipating a sexual fulfillment. Friendship and safety together paint an asexual world of comfort. So when critics say that Cather was sublimating the heterosexual world to undercut her dissatisfaction with it and to project an idyllic lesbian world, I would put forth the idea that Cather was obfuscating all sexuality. Nancy Sahli defines the early twentieth century meaning of the term lesbianism by quoting Blanche Cook who speaks of lesbians as “women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently”. This is not really accepting of the sexuality of the women concerned. It is more in consonance
with the patriarchal concept of “womanhood” where the task of femininity is to “nurture”, “support” and create a “living environment” where some men (in this context some women) can “work creatively” while other women provide the same.

In fact in Cather’s world the containment of sexuality of the woman within the family, which is otherwise traditionally accepted, is also negated which has prompted feminist lesbian critics to argue that it is reflective of the innate/inherent lesbianism of the author. Her married women also avoid passion in personal life and all passion is either channeled into land (Alexandra) or art (Thea) or transformed to spirituality (Myra).

It is possible to read a different perspective on the issue of reticence/eschewal of normative sexuality. At this juncture it would be fruitful to delve into Cather’s own aesthetic principles. She has said that “Art should simplify. That, indeed, is very nearly, the whole of the higher artistic process, finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole – so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader’s consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page” (On Writing 102). Though feminist critics have argued persuasively that “the thing not named” in the page is Cather’s latent lesbianism, I find, in her re-presentations and representations, an avoidance of sexuality altogether which points at an abhorrence of sexuality of all kinds not of a different sexuality at all.
In an interview in 1921 Cather said, the “years from eight to fifteen are the formative period in a writer’s life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material. He may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age”\(^{31}\). Memory forms the basic stanchion for all the tapestry of Cather’s world and she re-iterates this point time and again. In interviews and essays she points out to the veracity of the experience narrated or the likely identity of the real life person who forms the background/basis of some fictional character (Thea was loosely modeled on Olive Framstead, G. E. McKeefy appears as Dr. Archie, Prof. Schindelmeisser, Mrs. Garber as Mrs. Forrester of A Lost Lady). Phyllis Robinson refers to Cather’s letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher where she mentions that “she always fled the less agreeable for the more agreeable”\(^{32}\). Does that mean that when Cather ‘memories’ incidents and people from the past as material for her fictional creations she also ‘re-memories’ them? The term is used after Toni Morrison who says "re-memories are stories that happen when you lose sight of things and memory others”\(^{33}\).

At this juncture it seems appropriate to look at the world of fiction by women at the turn of the century. The general change in the writings of women occurred with the publication of Kate Chopin's The Awakening in 1899. Elaine Showalter terms this book as that which went beyond any precursor "in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation"\(^{34}\). But though she credits Chopin with being the first among her contemporaries, she also draws out the influence of her predecessors. It is seen that the 1870s and 1880s were the 'epoch' of the single woman. Sheila Jeffreys also speaks of this fact and attributes it to the increase in the number of
women who had independent means of income with the increase in opportunities of higher education and employment (111). These new women writers had begun to chart a new territory by sometimes bypassing the model of the romance narrative and speculating instead on the conflict between motherhood and creativity.

As far as the reading public was concerned, especially the women, *The Awakening* was rejected by a majority, for being too radical in some respects. What the reading public could not accept was Edna Pontelliere's choice of death by drowning rather than living life on terms dictated by reigning patriarchy.

The women writers who achieved fame at about this time were Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather. It is interesting to note that these three authors were contemporaries growing up in the late 1800s and commencing their careers almost simultaneously. In fact it was Willa Cather who started writing novels very late in life after having served a long apprenticeship in a journalistic career. Edith Wharton published her *The House Of Mirth* in 1905 while Ellen Glasgow published her first novel in 1897 after which she carried on a long writing career till the 1940s. Willa Cather published her first novel in 1912 and continued till 1940 when she published her last novel called *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

Speaking of Edith Wharton's work Josephine Laurie Jessup says "For the space of twenty novels she attempts to show woman preeminent, man trailing at heel". In most of her novels, presented through male narrators, we have complex
women who live, love and go through life with great fortitude. In *The House of Mirth* (1905) we have Lawrence Selden as the male protagonist, a practicing lawyer, who after an affair, has decided to live a bachelor's life. Lily Bart, who is described as the "unwise virgin"\(^{38}\), a penniless unmarried heroine tries to lead an honest life without recourse to entrapment and seduction available in contemporary society. But tragedy dogs her footsteps and she is ultimately compelled to choose an inglorious exit from this world. Selden is unable to save her and is left to mourn her death. This could be Wharton's criticism of contemporary society where women who are independent or are striving for autonomy are made to suffer. *The Age of Innocence* (1920)\(^{39}\), Wharton's Pulitzer Prize winning book, shows us another of her drawing room portraiture.

Ellen Glasgow in her novel *Barren Ground* (1925)\(^{40}\) uses the title ironically. The story revolves around Dorinda Oakley who faces poverty and sexual betrayal yet manages to survive everything. In the process she loses her child through an 'accident' but it is Jayson Greylocks's wife who wanders about the countryside in a mad fit mourning the loss of children she had never had.

Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* (1925)\(^{41}\) is also about a strong woman Kate Clephane who runs away from her husband and child. Kate's running away with a lover, leaving behind a three year old daughter, Anne, was definitely breaking new ground in the patriarchal mould. That Kate had elected passion and sexual fulfillment over motherhood makes her into a very modern woman by the social standards of those historical times. The resolution of the novel works out a compromise by
showing a mother-daughter bond evolving in spite of the love triangle that is at the heart of the novel's centre. The end shows Kate living alone but not dispirited.

It is interesting to note that Wharton, Glasgow and Cather do take up certain modern and radical stands. But Cather moves away from the urban setting and her imitations of James, on the advice of her mentor and predecessor, Sarah Orne Jewett, to write of the material that she knew best - the Nebraska Prairie.

Cather writes of women and agency, heroic and artistic women, and extols the ability of their hands which have “wrung many a chicken’s neck and warmed many a boy’s jacket for him in their time… of the cows they had milked, the butter they had made, the gardens they had planted, the children and grandchildren they had tended, the brooms they had worn out and mountains of food they had cooked”\[^1\]. The hands are just tools for work and never for tactile sensations. In the long list of activities that may be performed by a person's hands no mention is made of the other aspects of the same. Touch for pleasure, for caressing or embracing is systematically evaded and kept out of the purview of the hand's performativity. This is where the problem surfaces. Sexuality is denied to these women.

E. K. Brown rightly points out that her qualitative statement of creativity between the age of eight to fifteen, while minimising the experience of adulthood, does dismiss the experiences of early childhood. “The traces of her early years in Virginia are few and faint” (Brown 3). Very little of what it feels to be a little child is
found except in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) where Willa, aged five, appears on page.

Edith Lewis reminisces that “her [Cather’s] Virginia life was one of great richness, tranquil and ordered and serene.” Yet she also says, in almost the same breath, that “even as a little girl she felt something smothering in the polite, rigid social conventions of that Southern society – something factitious and unreal – if one fell in with those sentimental attitudes, those euphemisms that went with good manners, one lost all touch with reality, with truth of experience” (Lewis xviii). This obviously points to a sort of judgement on the society of that time by another Willa Cather recorded by Lewis – her friend of four decades who would have caught the nuance of criticism from the reminiscences of her friend as also picked up vibes from her during their joint visit to Winchester, Virginia.

So it is possible that she was erasing from memory the less agreeable in the past of her Virginia childhood or the early years on the Divide and Red Cloud and remembering that which could be named but the pain and anguish of those experiences would forever remain on the pages through suppression, and concealment to be heard by the very intent.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


Nebraska Press, 2002. 7. Print. Interestingly the rest of the letter mentions Dorothy’s (Canfield) approval of the doctor (Dr. Tyndale) who wants to marry Cather. However the letter ends cheerily that “social life is going well with none of the old problems (short hair, Dr. Tyndale, bohemianism) to mess her up”.


