Bernice Slote in her chapter called ‘Writer in Nebraska’, in reference to Cather’s early writings, the sort of journalistic apprenticeship she worked out for a later novelistic career, makes a pertinent observation – “In the perspective of history, the world renowned novelist that Willa Cather became must be joined with the young Nebraska newspaperwoman because though Cather wanted only the ‘chosen’ to be remembered, all things are important elements that define her total achievement”.\(^1\) Hence I begin with Cather’s childhood.

“I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen… Those years determine whether one’s work will be poor and thin or rich and fine,” Cather said in an interview in 1921 to Archer Latrobe Carroll.\(^2\) This remark bolsters the view that it is important to re-live her childhood and growing up to arrive at any opinion of her life and art. The remark also seems to imply that it is entirely appropriate to assume that Cather’s fiction must abound in personal reminiscences. Though she achieved literary acclaim as a writer of the red Nebraska Plains or the rough country of the Divide, Cather’s “first personal setting was that of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia”\(^3\) yet the reference to Virginia is found only in three early short stories. The story “A Night at Greenway Court” (1896) is set at Lord Fairfax’s house a few miles to the southeast of Winchester, but though the Southern backdrop is used it is not a remarkable story.\(^4\) Another of Cather’s stories, published in the university literary magazine, while she was still in college, called “The
“Elopement of Allen Poole” deals with the murder of Allen, “a man of the south” en route to his elopement; “The Sentimentality of William Tavener”, the third short story to reflect a Southern connect, revolves around the domestic life of William and Hester Tavener, both Virginians, now settled in Nebraska whose marital estrangement is resolved by their common memories of Virginia. She [Cather] then returns to the South, the background of her own childhood, in her last novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). This omission of the place where she spent the first nine of the fifteen formative years that were supposed to be the material and emotional resource for a later creative life seems inexplicable.

All biographers, namely E. K. Brown, James Woodress and Sharon O’Brien reiterate the fact that right from her very childhood Willa Cather seemed to subvert tradition and eschew femininity. Here we can see traces of her rebellion against a typical ‘genteel’ white Southern upbringing and the Southern way of life. As a child, a game she enjoyed playing was to ride an imaginary chariot, made out of upturned chairs, while an imaginary slave ran beside her shouting “Cato, thou art but man” a direct fallout of the various books her grandmother Boak would read aloud to her.

Willa Cather’s rebellion of the polite, rigid Southern society started as early as when she was only five years old. “She [Cather] told once of an old judge who came to call at Willow Shade and who began stroking her curls and talking to her in playful platitudes one addressed to a little girl - and of how she horrified her mother by breaking out suddenly: ‘I’s a dang’ous nigger, I is’ ” (Lewis 13). Lewis’ observation on this much talked about incident from Cather’s life that ‘it was an
attempt to break through the smooth unreal convention about little [emphasis added] girls --- the only way that occurred to her at the moment” (13) seems too simplistic and somewhat coloured by the prevalent social norms.

Sharon O’ Brien offers that Cather considered childhood memories “pleasant” and adds “childhood, thus represented a time of freedom and wholeness to Cather when the self was not yet socially engendered” (Emerging Voice 97). If that be so, then Cather’s almost extreme reaction to the elderly gentleman visitor’s fondling of her hair would be inexplicable. Her reaction shows a definite rebellion against the ‘gendered’ behaviour of the male adult. Nancy Gobatto in discussing the vulnerability of a child to adult abuse, says that “children with a mother not directly protective or concerned with supervising her children can face greater risk”9. Willa’s violent and aggressive reaction alerts us to the nuanced response, probably a residual feeling from some other incident involving an adult perpetrator. Cather’s mother was constantly ill and left the children without supervision for long periods. Virginia Cather, Edith Lewis observes, “had her own absorbing life and she let her children have theirs” (6). From O’Brien we come to know of Virginia Cather’s near obsessive concern with her appearance (Emerging Voice 37). In later life Cather would gift her “jewelry (sic), delicate lingerie, and imported perfumes”, things she knew would please her mother (Emerging Voice 38). But she, herself, held this in contempt. So in her gift is a negative estimation of her mother as a stereotypical woman, one of the many that throng Cather’s fictional canvas but are seldom individualised. This we see in The Song of the Lark10 when Thea is in Chicago. Thea tells Mrs Harsanyi regarding Jessie Darcy and Mrs Priest, two singers, “I liked them at first, you know. Their clothes and
their manners were so fine, and Mrs. Priest is handsome. But now I keep wanting to tell them how stupid they are” (SOL 337). This is a telling comment on the adult Cather's response to conventional femininity as also a pointer to Cather's concepts of gender.

Cather, her biographers say, liked to be surrounded by beautiful women (hence her interest in actresses and singers). It seems that she had a thing for fragile femininity, was "a rapt admirer of female beauty" (Emerging Voice 130), but in her novels, beautiful femininity is portrayed as “stupid faces” (SOL 329). In this disjunction lies a revelation of Cather’s inherent subconscious denial of traditional femininity and her complex response to gendering.

We also know that Virginia Cather, Willa’s mother, who epitomised the typical Southern qualities of a lady, was prone to suffering from various illnesses, some connected to her numerous pregnancies and some prompted by the psychological stress of constant change and a burgeoning family (Emerging Voice 40). In fact, her mother-in-law, Caroline Cather, thought that these symptoms of illnesses were greatly exaggerated and were encouraged by the drama it aroused, and she wrote to her daughter “her mother [Mrs. Boak] and Charley has (sic) a happy time waiting on her” (Emerging Voice 38), an obvious criticism of Virginia’s behaviour.

Willa Cather’s mother was more into “fashion and dress” even as a young girl and this fastidiousness she carried on into adulthood much to her daughter’s discomfiture. Willa’s initial rejection of femininity could be a direct rejection of her
mother’s insistence on good looks and clothes. This reveals an antagonism between mother and daughter. That Cather had failed to live up to her mother’s expectation of being a ‘lady’ is made clear from what she told a college friend about her little sister, Jessica, being the only one to fulfil her mother’s desire for “one lady in the family” (*Emerging Voice* 44). Though Edith Lewis and other biographers speak of the mother giving the Cather children the space to grow individually, they also record how she was a strict disciplinarian, even going to the extent of punishing her children by “administering vigorous beatings with a rawhide whip” (*Emerging Voice* 40). The image of the incapacitated yet autocratic mother in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, according to O’Brien, may reflect Cather’s deep insight into the ‘powerlessness’ of her own situation, but the “wheelchair” that robs Sapphira of independent movement, thereby much of her authority, may also be in retaliation to or as punishment for the strictness and rigidity with which Cather’s mother brought up her children.

What O’Brien feels was Cather’s idea of “powerlessness” felt by her mother during her pregnancies (*Emerging Voice* 41) an effect of the unfairness of the “compulsory heterosexuality”11, to borrow Adrianne Rich’s term, of marital life, may, actually, have been viewed by the daughter as a period when she (emphasis added) was neglected while her mother (emphasis added) enjoyed all the attention. As has been pointed out, how her grandmother felt her mother exaggerated her illness during pregnancy and ‘Charley’ happily indulged her, it seems entirely appropriate to accept a growing resentment on the part of the daughter against a mother who could not even comb her daughter’s hair. So Willa’s cutting off her hair during Roscoe’s birth may have been a pointer that her mother ‘failed’ to come for her. Her cutting off her hair
may also be viewed as Cather's way of undercutting femininity or making a radical statement.

All her mother’s so-called “southerly” preoccupations left the young Willa free to roam the countryside, either alone or in the company of Margie when they went to visit Mrs. Anderson, the famous storyteller of Back Creek. Margie Anderson had come as nursemaid and Cather would visit Margie’s mother who “knew the histories of all the families in the region, rich or poor, and all the dramatic events that had become legends” (Brown 21). The stories that Mrs. Anderson narrated to the young Willa are quite likely to have been on similar lines to the life stories of all described in Sapphira and the Slave Girl. “Till was married off to Jefferson who was so much older, and whose incapacities were well known among darkies” (SSG 72). “But after some years a Cuban painter came along” (SSG 72). The neighbourhood talked when “black Till bore a yellow child, after two of your [Henry Colbert’s] brothers had been seen hanging around here so much. Some fixed it on Jacob, and some on Guy,” (SSG 9) says Sapphira Colbert. The little Willa, in the conclusion of the novel, remembers how her mother used to sing her to sleep with:

“Down by de cane-brake, close by the mill,
Dar lived a yaller girl, her name was Nancy Till”

(SSG 281)

Gossip abounds in Sapphira and the Slave Girl. Even the “Master” and the “Miller” are not spared. One such anecdote relates to Mr. and Mrs. Henry Colbert – of their courtship, or the lack thereof, before marriage and after. Fat Lizzie, the cook, had whispered to the neighbours on Back Creek: “Folks back home says it seem like
Missy an’ Mr. Henry wasn’t scarcely acquainted befo’ de wedding; nor very close acquainted evah since. Him bein’ kep’ so close at de mill” (SSG 25). Lizzie also told Nancy, when she was a little girl, why Sapphira had married Till to Jeff, a “capon man” (SSG 43), so that the ladies’ maid would not be “havin’ chilluns all over de place” (SSG 43) and had also repeated the gossip regarding Nancy’s complicated parentage. “Lizzie didn’t believe that talk about the painter man; she told Nancy that one of Mr Henry’s brother’s was her real father” (SSG 43).

So gossip was rife not only in well decorated parlours with Masters and Mistresses, but also the staple of kitchen room drama and among the serving hands at the Mill. If that be so, then it is quite likely that these kind of stories were narrated to Willa either during her visits to Mrs. Anderson or when she hid unnoticed under the quilts when the women came down to help during the winter in “spinning and quilting, butter making, preserving, and candlemaking” (Woodress 25). So tales of slave trading, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse were common and openly narrated with great candour because, similar to Mrs. Ringer of Sapphira and the Slave Girl, for Mrs. Anderson, “any chance bit of gossip that came her way was a godsend” (SSG 119) and formed Willa’s early repository of tales of life in the raw. To assume that these tales did not leave a mark on the impressionable young girl, hungry for information and with a lively imagination, is to miss much of the point regarding the growth of young girls.

Edith Lewis forwards a view of Cather’s life in Virginia similar to O’Brien’s. She observes, “Her [Cather’s] Virginia life was one of great richness, tranquil and
ordered and serene” (12) but immediately speaks of the episode of the judge and Willa’s extremely rude and belligerent response. The response would be obviously horrifying to all, especially to her very 'Southern' mother. So her [Lewis’] observation of serenity receives a blow from the physical behaviour of Cather at five and undercuts what would have been a picture of an idyllic childhood. If a young girl of five needs to/does act to provoke either society in general or her mother in particular against societal norms, then there is already disharmony in Eden, so to speak. What interests us now is the possible reason for Willa's extreme animosity expressed in the incident.

Woodress, in a similar vein, speaks of “life at Willow Shade” being “orderly, comfortable, and continuously interesting. It was a stable world for a child to grow up in” (25). But every childhood incident that Cather later recalled had elements of terror/fear attached to it. Though the Judge episode assumes centre stage in her very articulate rejection of contemporary social protocol, there are others equally important. As we see from biographical sketches, three very important events occur around the time she was five years old – the Judge episode, the return of Nancy Till (narrated in Sapphira and the Slave Girl) the former slave her grandmother had helped escape and her encounter with an act of actual violence against her body.

“She was playing by herself in an upstairs room at willow shade when a half-witted boy of one of the servants slipped into the room brandishing an open jack-knife. He said he was going to cut off her hand. She was terrified.”

(Woodress 27)
Nothing fatal happened because Cather somehow managed to distract the boy. She edged him towards a window, outside which was a tall tree whose branches could be touched and urged him to climb out from there. Cather by turning the attention of the boy to this new game of adventure, got him to climb down through this window and thereby saved herself. “Though the stratagem worked, the experience left a deep trauma. Throughout her life Cather had a horror of mutilation,” observes James Woodress (1987, rpt. 1989, 27). In this single incident, race, gender, class and sexuality intersect to create a gruesome narrative which would have far reaching psychological consequences. Though, through great presence of mind and imaginative narrative power she saves herself, one cannot rule out the long term psychological impact that it would leave in its wake. When in the pages of her fiction we find any near rape situation, and there are many, one is reminded of a horrific incident of a five year old girl being threatened bodily harm/injury by a servant boy in Winchester, Virginia (emphasis added).

One important incident of near rape forms the basis of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Martin Colbert is invited by Sapphira, his aunt, to visit them. That it is not a simple family invitation is made clear by the fact that Sapphira herself takes the letter of invitation, personally, to be posted. The confidentiality is clearly underscored by the fact that she, albeit in a veiled manner, commands Mrs. Bywaters, the postmistress to put “it into the mailbag yourself” (*SSG* 37). After Martin’s arrival, Sapphira sends Nancy to “pick some laurel for her” (*SSG* 167) and says so in front of Martin to make sure that “he’ll be sure to overtake” (*SSG* 168) her and ruin her.
In the other significant incident in *My Antonia*, the rape is avoided because Antonia and Jim trade sleeping quarters. So when Wick Cutter visits Antonia’s room his hand “closed softly on my [Jim’s] shoulder” (*MA* 623). Jim manages to overpower Cutter and runs to his room across the yard but the incident left him “a battered object” (*MA* 624).

In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea while standing alone on the road waiting for transport home after attending an engrossing concert which left her in a state of emotional turmoil, is solicited by a young man; on the same occasion she sees a man in an overcoat with a black fur collar, who “kept thrusting his face up near hers” (*SOL* 295) but she later realizes that “he was really quite timid, like an old beggar” (*SOL* 295) but she had managed to intimidate him into fleeing. She also avoids the “sneaking divinity student at the boarding house who tried to kiss her on the stairs” (*SOL* 341), an experience that leaves Thea with a great feeling of revulsion.

Interestingly, this thread is continued in the story of the medical student who looks after Thea at the boarding house in Chicago. “He had been a cheat, too. He had exceeded his rights. She had no soreness in her chest, and had told him so clearly. All this thumping of her back, and listening to her breathing, was done to satisfy personal curiosity. She had watched him with a contemptuous smile. She was too sick to care; if it amused him – She made him wash his hands before he touched her; he was never very clean. All the same, it wounded (emphasis added) her and made her feel that the world was a pretty disgusting (emphasis added) place” (*SOL* 356). So Thea is molested by her doctor. Though Dr. Archie’s ministrations are never alluded to in a
pejorative manner, this glancing reference almost negatively nuances and adds a new dimension to the patient/doctor relationship that Thea shared with Dr. Archie since childhood.

Two observations about Dr. McKeeby, Cather's childhood friend and mentor as also the family doctor, fill one with curiosity. "Dr. McKeeby had an individual bedside manner. When he went to visit a patient, he sat down in a chair by the bed, reached to his breast pocket to take the tip of a neatly folded handkerchief, and holding it by the corner, he would shake it out in one sweep which filled the air with a hint of delicate cologne - or was it the freshness of newly laundered garments?"  

From Bennett we learn another characteristic of Dr. McKeeby. "Other doctors might rush about in the middle of the night clad only in dressing gown and slippers, but Dr. McKeeby always took time to make himself immaculate" (111). In these two observations are embedded certain questions about the doctor himself. In the image of the elaborate gesture of shaking the handkerchief that releases sweet-smelling perfume in the room, one can detect a virtuoso performance by a magician to attract the attention of his patients. In the second observation by Bennett, one wonders at the sincerity of the doctor altogether. If a doctor, even in dire necessities, is not willing to forego his sartorial elegance or 'immaculate' appearance in order to serve the patient, then obviously the Hippocratic oath has little meaning for him. Somehow the picture is of a self-indulgent man, not a dedicated doctor at all.

Another very important childhood incident that remains in Cather’s memory is related to a “ride in a steam boat when she was not more than a year old” (Brown 19).
Brown notes that Cather clearly remembered the "terror with which she clutched her mother as she was carried out" (19).

Cather, very early in life, decided to undercut the traditional feminine role and flout the norms of femininity. James Woodress in his biography mentions that Cather was a tomboy as a teenager and that she did not just bob her hair as young women would later cut but cut it shorter than boys (70). An eyewitness account of Cather’s unorthodox dress and the notoriety it won her recalls “her boyish make up and the serious stare with which she met you seemed to say ‘Stay your distance buddy, I have your number’” (Emerging Voice 97). This immediately brings to mind a similar incident in O Pioneers! (1913). When Alexandra visits the market in the beginning of the novel, an unknown man looks at the luxurious yellow red braids and is so struck by the beauty that he keeps staring which invites Alexandra’s wrath (OP 9). The entire scene is a reaction to the male ‘gaze’ and Alexandra’s spirited reaction almost parallels the author’s own stare of “Stay your distance” or ‘I’s a dang’ous nigger, I is’.

Naming, in any traditional society, is the prerogative of patriarchy. Charles Cather, Willa’s father, in a letter to his brother George writes “We call her [referring to Willa] Willie after little sister Willella (Brown 17). This aunt was her father’s youngest sister who had died of diphtheria in childhood. Willa, of course, preferred to think that she was named after her two grandfathers, William Cather and William Lee Boak, as well as her mother’s brother William Lee Boak Jr. It was at school in Red Cloud, that she [Cather] first adopted the middle name which appears in the early
editions of her books. “When the other children gave their names at roll call, she hastily improvised herself the family name of Sibert” (Lewis 19) from Seibert, the surname her mother’s side used and connected to the young uncle who died at war at a very young age and to whom she wrote the poem the “Namesake”. The poem refers to the relationship of the shared name:

Somewhere there among the stones,  
All alike, that mark their bones,  
Lies a lad beneath the pine  
Who once bore a name like mine, -  
Flung his splendid life away  
Long before I saw the day

......

And I’ll be winner at the game  
Enough for two who bore the name.

(Woodress 18)

Willa used her own form of the name that she wrote (in her own hand) in the family Bible, having altered the original Wilella (Woodress 21). But she was always referred to as Willie by her own family members and close friends. “Before she had turned thirteen she had started signing her name as William Cather Jr. or Wm. Cather, M.D.” revealing her interest in medicine (Woodress 55). That naming is a powerful prerogative in Cather’s world is clearly brought out in Sapphira and the Slave Girl where Sapphira names her favourite granddaughter Molly instead of Mary, a name everybody used. “It was understood that this name was Mrs Colbert’s special privilege; her mother and schoolmates called her Mary” (SSG 36).
So in this respect Cather’s naming of herself is a counter to Mary Daly’s\textsuperscript{15} observation that “Women have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the World, or God,” and seems to definitely highlight her rebelliousness. Harsanyi from *The Song of the Lark* (1915) says “Every artist makes herself born” and Willa’s altering her first name in the family Bible (Ambrose 7) and addition of the middle name may have been her as yet inchoate aspiration to make the artist “Willa” born.

Willa Cather’s date of birth is also mired in some controversy. Willa Cather’s father, Charles Cather’s letter to his brother George V. Cather in Nebraska dated 22\textsuperscript{nd} January, 1874 helps in establishing her exact date of birth. “Jennie and I were at town today…the first time she has been out…we left the baby at home with its Grandma; she said it did not cry once while we were gone. ….we call her ‘Willie’ after our little sister” (Brown 17). Further corroboration comes from a letter to George Cather of February 1\textsuperscript{st} 1874 from a former school mate in Back Creek who wrote: “Charley and Jennie are getting along splendid. Charley don’t get to Church till it is half out on account of having to rock the babe to sleep…” (Brown footnote by Leon Edel 17).

The date of birth is finally confirmed from her father’s letter to her uncle, the same that also explained the source of her name. E. K. Brown’s observations bring to light the controversy surrounding it. “Cather began to give 1876 as the year of her birth when she was on the staff of McClure’s Magazine and that she did so because S. S. McClure advised her to subtract two to three years from her age” (Brown 17). That
she was officially using 1876 was seen from a press review of a book of poems *April Twilights* in 1903 under the column “Glimpses of Present-day Poets; Willa Sibert Cather’ in *Poet-lore*, Winter, 1903. “Miss Willa Sibert Cather, whose delightful volume of poems entitled *April Twilights*, was recently published, was born near Winchester, Virginia in 1876. When she was ten years old, the family moved to a ranch in south-western Nebraska, and for two years the child ran wild playing with the little herd girls and visiting the Danes and Norwegians who had settled there as farmers” (Bohlke 3). As Bernice Slote observes and is quoted by Bohlke, “it [the article] does have some valuable information on the poems” so it seems correct to assume “that Willa Cather was certainly consulted about the article” (Bohlke 3).

Cather’s prevarication and lack of clarity as regards her correct date of birth seems to figure prominently in her novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). It was necessary for Dona Isabella to be old enough to be Senorita Inez’s mother because Antonio Oliveres’ will said “the income from his estate was to be shared by “my wife Isabella Oliveres, and her daughter, Inez Oliveres”, (DCA 192) but the husband’s brothers were contesting the will as they felt that Dona Isabella was not old enough to be Inez’s mother (DCA 192). Dona Oliveres objects to admitting her real age “before everybody” (DCA 192) and has to be persuaded by Father Latour and Father Vaillant to say “that she is fifty two” (DCA 192). Ultimately, by telling the priests over dinner that “I never shall forgive you, Father Joseph, nor you either Bishop Latour, for that awful lie you made me tell in court about my age” (DCA 195) she is still concealing her real age.
As the eldest child, she was very close to her father, Charles Cather, and this is borne out by the numerous father-daughter relationships that fill the pages of her novels. Charles Cather was a typical “Southern gentleman” and a brief sketch appears in an article written during her college years. “He was a Virginian and a gentleman and for that reason he was fleeced on every side and taken on every hand”17. Edith Lewis, her lifelong companion, too recalls a ‘kind’ man who may have been “too truthful in his dealings with other men” (5). As a child, Cather would accompany her father on his rounds around Willow Shade, “riding the mounds playing with their shepherd dog” (Emerging Voice 15). In fact she had a vivid memory of being carried by her father on his shoulders “when he went to drive the sheep into the fold at evening” (Lewis 7).

Charles Cather’s acceptance of Willa’s desire to attend college, quite contrary to traditional expectations, shows his openness and indulgence for his ‘gifted’ daughter. In fact, friends recall how he would take his daughter to the Miner Brothers’ General Store in Red Cloud and hear her discuss “Shakespeare, English history, and life in Virginia” (Woodress 40). Though this incident finds a parallel in O Pioneers! as has been pointed out by Woodress (40) but Willa’s discourse on serious topics and her father’s obvious pride in her speech is quite different from Marie Tovesky’s presentation. While in Willa’s case, a positive gendering emerges where the daughter is given speech, in Marie’s case we find the focus on her feminine allure where all the men give her candies for kisses, thereby feminizing or objectifying the role of the child. Marie’s uncle is also proud; but he is proud of her essential “girlishness” because the girl has already been “girled” to borrow Judith Butler’s 18 term. But the picture of Willa’s father, whose unconventional support of his daughter’s future
ambitions helped her evolve into a world renowned writer, when juxtaposed with the picture of the mill owner in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* who fails his daughter’s activist aspirations fractures the notion of new engenderings and raises pertinent questions regarding Cather’s position vis-a-vis the father figure.

In fact O’ Brien forwards the opinion that to Cather her father “was literally and metaphorically, the good shepherd: after his death in 1928 she [Willa] contributed a stained glass window in Red Cloud’s Episcopal Church in his memory, which depicts Christ with his lambs and his shepherd’s crook” (*Emerging Voice* 15). She further points out that Cather’s father was the “source for a recurrent figure” found in Cather’s novels, that of the “sensitive man of integrity who places aesthetic, intellectual or spiritual values above commercial ones” (*Emerging Voice* 16). That may be so, but it is equally important to note that in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the father is unable help the daughter save a slave girl from sexual exploitation. In this inability is a complicity, hence the relationship between Cather and her father may have been deep and affectionate but that Cather was ambivalent about his “gendering” is also true.

Hence, in 19th century Virginia, where women lived under English Common Law, and a wife was not an independent economic or political agent: “She could not make a contract, conduct a suit, write a will or free a slave” (*Emerging Voice* 18) but nor, it seems, could some husbands do so because when Henry Colbert wanted to free some slaves, his wife persuaded him otherwise. In a reversal of roles, in Sapphira’s household, she was the “economic and political agent”, the *man* (emphasis added) of
the house yet by making her diseased and physically challenged, Cather does bring in concepts of male ‘castration’. Somehow the reader is left with the feeling that “masculinity”, not necessarily maleness, needs to be “castrated” in order to survive. The gender lines are blurred; but engendering goes on. So the mill owner has to be effete and self-effacing; Sapphira is diseased; wo/manliness and sexuality have to be curtailed to ensure survival.

The reasons behind Willa’s adoption of male attire have been variously presented by her biographers. Phyllis Robinson says “she cut her hair short because her mother was ill and could not comb her long curls, then decided that it suited her and wore it until she was halfway through the college”\(^1\)\(^9\). She further describes how Cather loved to fish and go canoeing with her brothers. The picture that emerges is of a tomboyish girl but the innate note of rebellion is seen in the choice of both attire and attitude. All these were definitely a progression towards a disapproval of contemporary femininity.

“She expressed a vast contempt for skirts and dresses, wore boys’ clothes, a derby, and carried a cane. She wrote in a friend’s album that slicing toads was her hobby, doing fancy work a real misery, and amputating limbs perfect happiness” (Woodress 55). This brings to light the non-conformity that was the essential quality of the teenaged Cather. In fact even till she reached her University she continued to sport a mannish manner. Friends later remembered her “mannish attire, short hair and independent manner. One remembered that she wore high, stiff collars, string or four-in-hand ties, and mannish white cuffs stuck out of her jacket sleeves” (Woodress 70).
While most remembered her male attire, some recall her favouring the midi blouse with full skirts, a fashion not followed by women of that day. One remembered her as the “first woman in suspenders” they also remembered how her dates were frightened off after the first day (Woodress 70). But by the time she had graduated, photographs show she had grown her hair and learned to wear skirts. Her friend Mariel Gere’s mother, Mrs. Gere, was largely instrumental in this change of attire that finally took Cather out of her mannish looks.

As already discussed an interesting phase of her early adolescence was her concern with medicine. “In her mid-teens she called herself Willa Cather, M. D., wearing her father’s Civil War visored cap (bearing his/her initial, W. C.) over cropped hair and boyish shirt and jacket”; defended "vivisection at high school” and did go as far as dissecting "frogs and even dogs and cats”20. While in Red Cloud she was close to two local doctors, Dr. McKeeby and Dr. Robert Damerell with whom she went on rounds. She told an interviewer “how I loved the long rambling buggy rides we used to take... we went over the same roads this summer [1921]. I could tell who lived at every place and all about the ailments of his family. The old country doctor and I used to talk over his cases. I was determined then to be a surgeon” (Woodress 52). On one such occasion she also helped Dr. Robert Damerell by administering chloroform to a boy whose leg was being amputated (Woodress 52), an act that shows she had immense courage and did not care for societal approbation. Her interest in science was fuelled by William Ducker who carried out experiments in a laboratory built in his own house. These were definite interests that bordered on the deviant for a young girl of Willa’s background but helps in pointing out how different she was
from the rest and how defiant of reigning patriarchal norms. Her choice of profession (medicine) also indicated this as such. Her contempt for femininity is made manifest in these choices she makes. Her graduation speech on ‘Superstition versus Investigation’ carries a brief for scientific investigation which she considers man’s “most sacred right” (Woodress 62), another anti-conventional stand which highlights her rebellion against the contemporary thoughts of the day.

This early choice of medicine as a profession seems interesting in the light of Sharon O’ Brien’s comment that “the daughter must have been aware of her mother’s respect for - as well as her dependence on - the physician who attended her” (Emerging Voice 91). It is a well known fact that doctors, especially in rural households, were probably the only unrelated males to have easy access to the domestic/internal spheres. Each household, in turn, was also extremely dependent on this visiting physician because illnesses affected both women and children - occupants of the internal/private spheres. So it is easy to accept the fact that Cather’s early choice of profession may have been prompted by her innate rejection of her mother’s Victorian/Virginian example of femininity and to take up a profession invested with authority, mostly attributed to maleness, and prestige.

In fact the incidents of illness concerning Virginia Cather were many while Cather was growing up. We have already seen how she cut her hair when her mother was ill and could not comb her curls. This was during Rosco (her brother’s) birth in 1888. But before that, in early 1884, Virginia became ill and the elderly doctor could not effect a recovery. Dr. Mc Keeby was called in and the appearance of “the capable-
looking, dignified man,” relaxed Mrs. Cather and saved her (Bennett 110). Even several years later, once again, when Cather’s mother was ill, Dr. McKeebey, enroute to Chicago, dropped in to see her and effected a “miraculous cure.” O’Brien feels these incidents may have inspired her to take up medicine in order to win her mother’s care and approval. If one accepts O’Brien’s observation that the role of the doctor connotes a potency/agency and that of the patient a submission/passivity then Cather’s assumption of the physician’s role would point towards her inherent rebellion against tradition and orthodoxy, which denied women either agency or power. So her appropriation of the ‘pen’ at a later date, instead of the scalpel, seems to be very much in consonance with this image of the rebel that we get from childhood onto adulthood. This makes it difficult to accept why she would need to deny any sexuality to her engendered protagonists, fluid though the gendering may be.

Of all the important incidents in Cather’s childhood life, most seemed to have occurred at the age of five. Though she never mentions the specific time of each incident, it would be interesting to see whether the servant boy attacking her happened prior to the incident of the judge fondling her hair and her ‘precocious’ reaction to the same. In that case, her posturing as a “dang’ous nigger” takes on an altogether different connotation and is a step forward in the race/gender intersect axis.

Some critics say that “Willa Cather was a Southerner by birth, a Midwesterner by adoption and cosmopolitan by instinct”21. They observe that she left Virginia, “too young to absorb deeply the Southern tradition” (Bloom and Bloom 3). This observation seems debatable as has been seen by the many Southern qualities that
were deeply embedded in her psyche and imagination as also the details with which she could recall events and experiences. Added to that is her own admission that the writer acquires his material in the first fifteen years of his life. Though she qualifies it to within “eight to fifteen” in a later interview, it seems to be part of her strategy of evasion and negation to avoid the unpleasant. After her dis/location to Red Cloud, Nebraska, it is true that she initially missed her old home but soon enough took to her new surroundings and embraced her new home with great intensity. In this new “love” replacing the old can be seen a rejection which may be connected to memories that she wanted to suppress and forget. In fact, it was fifty five years before she returned to the place of her birth for a visit.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


