Chapter 3

Girls and Mothers

“Unlike many of her female literary predecessors and contemporaries…Cather did not limit herself to telling a conventional female narrative… Having experienced dislocation, loss and resettlement unlike her contemporaries Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow could claim this [taming of the wild land] dominant subject as her own.”

Cather achieved instant critical acclaim through her portrayal of the pioneering ways and presenting strong willed women and artists. The novels mostly deal with women and their aspirations which may or may not achieve fulfillment. However, in a gallery of such strong women like Alexandra Bergson of *O Pioneers!* (1913), Thea Kronborg of *The Song Of The Lark* (1915), Antonia Shimerda of *My Antonia* (1918), Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady* (1923), Myra Henshawe of *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), the eponymous heroine of *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), Cecile Auclair of *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) and Sapphira Colbert of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), all set against a family background, the mother as a strong female presence is absent. In some novels the mother is present but shadowy and ineffectual (Mrs. Bergson of *O Pioneers!*), in some the mothering is done by the daughter (Cecile Auclair of *Shadows on the Rock*), and in some the mother is totally excluded (*A Lost Lady*). Only three protagonists (Antonia, Cecile and Sapphira) achieve motherhood and that too with certain limitations.
Since it is accepted that Cather does not tell “a conventional female narrative”, it is assumed that her narratives will exclude romance, marriage and maternity. But in a realistic novel dealing with a family set up, to erase the mother’s presence/importance does invite speculation and seems to be a problematic presentation. As Judith Arcana says in *Our Mothers’ Daughters*, “Of all the roles women are required to fill in our society, daughterhood is universal. Being born, every woman is another woman’s daughter. Should her mother die or leave her when she’s a child, she is yet raised up by the society as a ‘daughter’. Even if she becomes a mother, she remains a daughter.”

Brenda O’Daly and Maureen T. Reddy discuss, after Hirsch, how even the most careful feminist writes not from the maternal perspective but from an overtly daughter-centric perspective. But even though Cather’s fictional world, with its erasure of the fact of maternity, would fit into this categorization, the maternal which abounds in the pages raises some questions. Alexandra, Antonia, Lena, Cecile, Pauline and Nancy act as “mothers” even when their role is that of a daughter. So only maternity is excluded, not maternality or motherhood.

Judith Roof says “If heterosexual scenarios of maternity play an illusion of maternal fulfillment, many lesbian novels focus on the unfulfillability of desire – on the desire for desire.” She further observes that in lesbian novels it is usual for the lesbian protagonist not to have a mother. She explains that the absence of the mother is the lesbian’s way of denying origin. This argument does not seem entirely appropriate for Cather’s world because even if the mother is erased from the canvas as
we see in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), the daughter’s mothering and her constant references to the memory of her mother belies this sentiment. When Madam Auclair (Cecile’s mother) was ill, “she would beckon Cecile to the footstool beside her”\(^5\) and give her directions of home management, on managing her father’s diet so as to keep him both healthy and satisfied, on washing the linen and preserving the culture they had brought with them from the Old World. Feeding waifs and strays like Blinker “was one of the cares the daughter [Cecile] had inherited from her mother” (*SOR* 15). What emerges from the first few pages is “the daughter’s loyalty to the mother’s wish” (*SOR* 26). So though the mother has been removed, her memories now inspire the daughter who has become the mother.

Alexandra Bergson first appears in the novel *O Pioneers!* (1913) with her young brother Emile and a little later in a conversation with Carl she speaks of other brothers, Lou and Oscar, of her mother who “frets if the wood gets low”\(^6\) and we understand that she worries for herself and the family. “I don’t know what is to become of us Carl if father has to die” (*OP* 12). Thea Kronborg’s family tree is clearly mapped out within the first two pages of the novel when we are informed of the birth of the seventh child into the Kronborg family. The Bohemian family, the Shimerdas, is complete with father, mother and children. The first time Jim’s grandmother visits them, “a woman and a girl of fourteen ran out and looked up at us hopefully”\(^7\). In *Lucy Gayheart*, too, “it was Pauline who brought her sister up, their mother died when Lucy was six.”\(^8\)
Each of Cather’s stalwart women are very much a part of a genealogical tree, hence the concept of lack of origin is not acceptable. It is only in *A Lost Lady* that both the mother and the daughter are erased to be replaced by a seductress surrounded by naïve boys, crippled men and evil lovers. In the novel we hear of absent grandmothers, and wives of neighbours who make fleeting appearances. In most of the other novels, daughters ‘mother’ while mothers are made invisible after they deliver the child. Here the only exception is Mrs. Kronborg who is present in more than half the pages of the novel, *The Song Of The Lark*.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, not only is the family tree of Sapphira given in detail, so is Rachel’s as well as Nancy’s and Bluebell’s: all daughters, both legitimate and illegitimate, are firmly placed on the genealogical map. But everywhere the mothers fail in their duty of protecting the daughters and a surrogate helps the young and defenceless.

Roof proposes that the daughter achieves singularity only when she identifies with the mother as a mother. “Sameness cannot be recognized unless the woman has encountered the difference intrinsic to maternity – the heterosexual encounter with masculinity” (165). Judith Roof’s argument, seemingly logical, critiques the sense of fulfillment through maternity, a patriarchal discourse. In Cather, thus we see, motherhood is not written out; the absence is really of the “overly sexed” (Roof 171) mother’s maternity and not the maternal, because each daughter also subsumes the mother’s role. Thus, all that is erased is the sexuality inherent in the concept of maternity.
In this context it may be helpful to look at Nancy Chodorow’s theory of why women feel an urge to mother as discussed by Elizabeth Abel. Abel points out that Chodorow "turns [this] radical assertion of women’s centrality to each others’ psychic wholeness into an explanation of the urge to mother: through her intense relation with her child a mother re-experiences her union with her mother" (418).

O’Brien forwards the view, after Chodorow, that in Cather one does “find in the daughter’s need to reject the mother, to separate from her, and to continue to seek her love” an ambivalence which is related to the mother daughter bond. But the fading out of the mother from the family setting seems a little arbitrary and prompted not only by ambivalence alone, but seems to offer only rejection for achieving selfhood. Adrienne Rich forwards the idea that “the mother-daughter bond is patriarchal society’s great unwritten story” and Sharon O’Brien argues that Cather wrote versions of that story "over and over again in a fiction concealed as a subtext in stories ostensibly concerned with other matters" (Emerging Voice 32). O’Brien also includes Sapphira and the Slave Girl, but in that novel there is hardly any mother-daughter bond despite the numerous mothers and daughters being present, only various levels of mother-daughter conflict.

All biographers have pointed out that Cather had a ‘more conflict-ridden’ (Emerging Voice 32) bond with her mother than with other family members. According to O’Brien, “Virginia Cather seemed to pose a graver threat to the ‘real self’ Willa Cather wanted to possess – a powerful, autonomous, expressive self…yet the mother consciously or unconsciously collaborated with her daughters in
fashioning that self” (Emerging Voice 32). That she could not present this familial bond overtly and felt it necessary to either subvert it or repress it seems difficult to understand. Even till her last novel it seems that she had not resolved this psychological tug-of-war, though by then her mother had passed away. As explicated by Abel, if Chodorow’s ideas on the daughter’s experience of permeable ego boundaries and the act of defining herself relationally is accepted, as also Abel’s own position that in its “negative extreme, however, this enduring pre-Oedipal connection can intensify the opposite impulse towards a bonded separate identity” to explain Cather’s love-hate relationship with her mother (417), it still continues to perplex that in Catheriana mothers remain peripheral/marginal but daughters are definitely a part of the familial set-up along with the fathers.

It is interesting to note that Cather’s earliest memory of her infancy was one of a steamboat ride, when she was about a year old, and remembered the ‘terror’ she felt as she was carried aboard by her mother. But the same adult Cather has vivid memories of her father picking her up on his shoulders to carry her to the fields to bring the sheep in and she recounts what she feels in the poem The Swedish Mother (1911).

All time in spring, when evening come
We go bring sheep and l’il lambs home.
We go big field, way up on a hill
Ten times high like our windmill.
One time your grandpa leave me wait
While he call sheep down. By de gate
I sit still till night come dark;
Rabbits run an’ strange dogs bark.
Old owl hoot, and your modder cry.
She been so’ fraid big bear come by.
So when the young girl is picked up by the father, she feels ‘safe’ (Woodress 22). The poem is about a childhood recollection of a mother as told to her daughter, and does communicate a sense of dark foreboding with certain unmistakable sinister overtones, suffused with a sense of the fear lurking in the countryside. It also reminds one of an incident in the life of Willa Cather on one of her numerous walkabouts in Virginia. “She [Cather] remembered still another time when she was taken visiting up on Timber Ridge. She was supposed to walk home because it was all downhill, but as she was on her way a violent rainstorm came up, and she was wearing only a pair of light slippers. Providentially, Snowden Anderson, a man she hardly knew, came up from his home on the Hollow Road, riding a gray horse and wearing an old grey Confederate Army overcoat. He stopped, picked her up, sat her on the old cavalry saddle in front of him, and took her home. She remembered feeling contented and safe. Children, she thought, knew when people were honest and good” (Woodress 22). One can “divine by ear” even if it is not stated, an over-emphasis on the fact of children being good ‘judges’ of character and an unambiguous play on the word “safe” which will reverberate in the pages of her fiction later on.

One story her mother loved telling about Willa showed her early bold and unique use of language. When a cousin named Philip Frederic had come visiting,
Willa had been shifted from her crib to sleep with her grandmother, while the guest had been offered Willa’s bed. But later Willa refused to go back and would say, as her mother recounted, “my cradle is all Frederic’d up” (Woodress 23). So her refusal to obey her mother started quite young, hence O’Brien’s theory of her life at Virginia not being “engendered” is called into question. This tug-of-war of authority with her mother, or issues of separation and identification with her started very early on; so one has to assume that a process of engendering had already started.

Sharon O’Brien says “memory distorts as well as records” (Emerging Voice 46) but adds that because they are “subjective, early memories constitute important psychological and biographical evidence (Emerging Voice 46). If that be so, then it is appropriate to read into Cather’s memories some of her fictional representations.

An important event in the life of the young Cather was the appearance of William Cather with cropped hair, a phase when she masqueraded as a boy by wearing boy’s clothes and renaming herself as Willie or Will. Sharon O’Brien explains that Cather’s cropping of her hair was her way of showing defiance for the mother’s failure or rejection or coldness and estrangement during her illness (childbirth) which denotes a failure of maternal duty (Emerging Voice 102). So the “rejected daughter” was rejecting the mother, says O’Brien. In a similar fashion by rejecting the position of the mother in the entire oeuvre of her fiction, Cather was also rejecting her own mother. If we accept this then we can also read a deeper failure of the mother when she could not stop the boy who had entered her room unasked and threatened her with mutilation of the arm. This incident, which took place when she
was only five, could have left an indelible impact on the young girl’s psyche. Her later rebelliousness against engendered stereotyping of the overtly feminine could be attributed to a latent fear of possible hurt, mutilation or loss of self in a world that favoured the accepted norm of patriarchy. O’Brien forwards the idea that Cather’s mother’s social powerlessness is represented by her illness during childbirth (Emerging Voice 103). I would further extend the argument that the erasure of the mother’s potentialities/power from the pages of her novel are a response to the same feeling of powerlessness viewed in her mother’s response to the elderly judge’s fondling of her hair as also the erasure of the mother’s sexuality.

In *O Pioneers!* the first page opens with the countryside, a small boy and his sister “a tall, strong girl” wearing “a man’s ulster (OP 8) and it is made very clear right at the outset that she is going to “mother” the boy. Mrs. Bergson, the biological mother of the two, is more of a housekeeper who is intent on preserving her previous cultural heritage in a different country, than in caring for her children or her maternal role. This was a problem most immigrant women faced during the period of transition and transference from the old world. In the picture of the mother, Cather somehow prefers to present not the strong frontierswomen who showed great stamina and fortitude in the face of odds but drew probably heavily on the “theme of the weak and unfortunate women destroyed by the frontier” a theme used by Rolvaag and Garland. Hence, the conclusion that mothers, strong and nurturing, were replaced by strong and resilient daughters who kept house for their fathers (Alexandra, Cecile) or acted as counselors for the family and took domestic as well as financial decisions
(Alexandra). By gently erasing the mother after childbirth, an asexual world was created in the homestead where the daughter was the “mother”.

Alexandra Bergson, works the fields, brings the land to fruition and prospers while her neighbours, mostly male, surrender to nature, sell-up and leave. She not only wears a man’s ulster with elan but also does a man’s job which is why her father leaves the running of the farm in her capable hands instead of trusting his sons. In this respect, both Cather and Mr. Bergson were denying stereotypically gendered expectations. The inversion of the binary of the man/woman in this situation does point towards an inverted cultural expectation where Cather is “undoing” traditional gender. But although Alexandra may understand how the land will respond, how the market will respond she is unable to read the explosive situation of passion and sex forming right in front of her eyes. Marie Shabata, a girl who ‘spreads ruin around her’, on the other hand is able to discern the relationship that is growing between Alexandra and Carl. Marie, being alert to her own sexuality, is also aware of sexual developments elsewhere. Thus, one can see that there is an element of opacity in Alexandra’s awareness of self and the world. “If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie’s mind” (OP 93) thinks Emil but realizes that “her training had all been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do. Her personal life, her own realization of herself (emphasis added), was almost a subconscious existence” (OP 93). So no relationship develops between “the brown-haired”, bright-eyed, dark “brunette doll”, Marie Shabata and the “tall, strong girl” (OP 8) with red-gold braids that she covered with a scarf, Alexandra. In the colour of her hair is “underlined and undermined neat
and reassuring definitions of womanhood where representations of hair both reflected and deflected the standardization of femininity and woman’s quest for self-determination”\(^{16}\). Alexandra finally marries her friend to be ‘safe’.

Mrs. Kronborg, Thea’s mother, in *The Song of the Lark*, is first introduced in the throes of a childbirth and the doctor attending her pronounces that she is a “fine mother”\(^{17}\). She is one of the few full-bodied maternal personalities, who simultaneously experiences actual maternity, presented by Cather. She shares a lot of space with the central woman protagonist, her equally strong-willed and artistically inclined, ‘gifted’ daughter Thea. Mrs. Kronborg’s deft handling of Anna’s religiosity and Thea’s secular art and her tacit support of the latter shows her sensitivity and reveals the nature of the special bond that they share. The mother-daughter relationship was put into a startling perspective by Dr. Archie, the family doctor, a ‘friend of childhood’ when he comes to see the mother after Mr. Kronborg’s death. “The difference was one of degree rather than of kind. The daughter had a compelling enthusiasm, the mother had none. But their framework, their foundation was very much the same” (*SOL* 435). In this novel, in a rare instance, we are privy to a physical exchange between mother and daughter. It begins the morning after Thea has come from Chicago the first time. As she lay in “warm drowsiness” (*SOL* 311) her mother gazes (emphasis added) at her. “Her short sleeved nightgown had come open at the throat again, and Mrs. Kronborg noticed her chest was fuller than when she went away, her breasts rounder and firmer, and though she was so white where she was uncovered, they looked rosy through the thin muslin” (*SOL* 311). After this she persuades her daughter to sing at a funeral and when she goes to pick up the breakfast
tray she stops to put her hand on Thea’s chest. “You’re filling out nice” she says feeling about and stops Thea from trying to close the buttons in order to cover her body (SOL 312). At the end of the chapter, Thea muses that she ‘liked her mother’, the only place in Cather’s fiction, probably, where such a physical contact has led to warm feeling in the daughter and the author has shown a degree of physical intimacy between mother and daughter. Does the comfort with her body connote a sexual awakening that has happened after Chicago where she has seen so many ‘stupid faces’? The same mother is left alone to die and Thea can’t make it back to see her one last time due to professional commitments, because art is an exacting master. Thea Kronborg goes on to become a famous singer but runs away from sexual commitments and channelizes her passion towards art which Cather also believed required great sacrifices. The relationships she has are ‘safe’ ones where most of her male friends have bitter wives and “would not consider divorce” (SOL 393).

Dr. Archie’s wife, when she “was first married, she had been always in a panic for fear she would have children” (SOL 173). “She was one of those people who are stingy without motive or reason” (SOL 172) is Cather’s description of her. But we are also told that she was not always so mean spirited. Before marriage, “she was one of the ‘pretty’ girls in Lansing” (SOL 173). Her name Belle White also conveys positive energy. One wonders why she was thus transformed from being the heart and soul of a social gathering to a mean person who preferred to lock up her home and sit in milliner’s stores and listen to “travelling men’s stories” which were racy anecdotes and local gossip? While no one really questions this transformation, Thea’s warm and quick compassion for Dr. Archie does carry a hint of the cause of this transformation.
Fred’s wife “was a ripping beauty” (SOL 390), “witty and slangy” (SOL 390) with a “smouldering fire about her” (SOL 391). But after a year of marriage, Fred was “appealing to his mother for sympathy” (SOL 392) and after two years “he had learnt to detest his wife” (SOL 392) whose “wastefulness and cruelty revolted him” (SOL 392). Again a heterosexual union seems to have reduced an object of worship to a “shrew”. But Thea is never available for marriage – she does not want to “sit in the hammock” with Fred which in Moonstone parlance meant being in love with somebody (SOL 384) but “she wants to do everything else with Fred” and kisses him spontaneously. The readers are of course perplexed by the alterities that spring to mind keeping in mind Thea’s choice of art as a vocation. The relation between Fred and Thea open up myriad possibilities of a sexual nature but Cather, firmly but unambiguously, closes the door on any such development by constantly bringing Thea back to the “art necessity”.

Judith Fetterley observes that Cather gives Thea “a body in The Song of the Lark and keeps us aware of this body as a site of desire”18. In Panther Canyon, where Thea has gone with Fred to recover from Chicago, she indulges in a ritual of bathing where she constantly “un-covers” herself. In this scene of Thea bathing, Fetterley finds a coming together of sexuality and art; but seen from a different perspective, it also implies that for sexuality to be accepted, it must transcend itself into something – art and aesthetics – as Thea does in thinking of her throat as a container for song as art. “From this daily ritual of precise and loving attention to her own body she [Thea] gains insight into the connection between life, art and womanhood” (Fetterley 229). When Cather says, “What was art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to
imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself…” (SOL 369), one feels that Thea, in surrendering to the bathing ritual in Panther Canyon is actually downplaying sexuality whether hetero/homo or the moments of physical pleasure of self-erotica. Even if Cather does not make any ‘negative’ or prescriptive assault on female sexuality like Wollstonecraft, she does try to create an asexual world and the occasional ‘peeps’ into sexuality are surreptitiously channelized into other affections such as art, land and spirituality.

Antonia begins with wanting to have fun, going dancing and contravening societal (read patriarchal) ‘good’ behavior. Needless to mention she gets pregnant out of wedlock and comes home a much chastened person. There she marries Cuzak, has children and is presented as an archetypal mother.

Though *My Antonia* features many mothers and grandmothers and ends on the figure of the ‘Earth-mother’ Antonia, somewhere the emphasis is shifted on to Cuzak’s boys as if to deliberately foreground a different identity and separate the bond that existed between mother and sons at that stage. As Abel rightly points out that “one of the major contributions of object-relations theory is its emphasis on the significance of the pre-Oedipal phase of development in which the relation with the mother is primary” (417). In that case, Cather’s world is bereft of this very nurturing relationship that also nurtures the mother’s self in turn. Cather does move the spotlight away from the brilliant frame of Antonia and her sons and daughters to focus only on ‘Cuzak’s Boys’ thereby giving centrality to the identity politics of a patriarchy. So when Sharon O’Brien observes that in Antonia, Cather has moved
away from a ‘purely male construction of femininity’ ("Thing Not Named" 596) one is sceptical about it. The narrator in the novel sees her as a “rich mine of life” as she has given birth to tall and sturdy sons; and the reader wonders at the authorial/narratorial interjection “it was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight” (MA 680) of the same sons who will be identified as Cuzak’s boys a couple of pages later when the daughters are most unceremoniously banished not only from the chapter, but from the chapter title along with their mother.

Though the author categorically calls the novel impersonally as A Lost Lady, in the novel “Niel (the observer/narrator) was destined to hear once again of his long-lost lady” (ALL 172). The possessive pronoun is interesting to note especially when Cather deliberately leaves it out of the title while she showed no such hesitation in My Antonia. Does this connote an identification of the author/narrator in the earlier novel which is absent in the latter? If so, is it because Jim Burden’s (of My Antonia) gendering is not a fixed embodiment but fluid enough and suggestive enough to contain within it the author’s own lesbian leanings? Or is it that Marian Forrester, with her overtly aggressive sexuality and open indulgence in the company of young men and boys (not necessarily due to the dictates of patriarchy for family and procreation only) was something that Cather herself was unable to condone or accept?

In A Lost Lady, Niel’s mother died when he was five years old. A poor relation, who was a spinster, kept house for his widower father but obviously did not mother him. When Niel suffers a fall at a picnic with the boys, while staying with his uncle Judge Pommeroy, Mrs. Forrester mothers him by looking after his wound,
attending to his needs, offering him medical help along with soothing his fevered brow (ALL 28-29).

His first sight of Mrs. Forrester is interesting. He remembers the silk dress, puffs and ruffles but when she alights from the car in front of the Episcopal Church he sees a swirl of foaming white petticoat and a shiny black slipper. One cannot overlook the irony involved in the picture of the marred Madonna.

White is a colour that is constantly associated with Mrs. Forrester. Her bed is white, the counterpane is white but the whiteness deliberately contrasts with the blackness of her moral turpitude revealed in the various amatory relationships. Marian Forrester epitomizes the feminine ideal, but in Cather’s world-view too much femininity is never a cultural capital, as it equates with lively sexuality. In Mrs. Forrester's world at Sweet Water, there are very few girls, only “young boys, rapacious men and genteel paraplegics”. The title, thus, raises some pertinent questions. Who decides that the lady is lost in the novel of the same title? Marianne Forrester, a sexually alive woman, who not only has a husband, whom she marries under extremely romantic circumstances, continues to have an active sexual life after his death, marries again and re-locates to a distant land. Hence she is ‘lost’ to Sweetwater - or is she ‘lost’ on moral grounds too?

Two important women characters in Cather’s fiction use only their married names. “A woman’s use of a married name makes graphic her subordination as a
woman and at the same time her privilege as a presumptive heterosexual”21. In the case of Mrs. Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady*, this could be partially validated. But it has ironic overtones in the case of Mrs. Rachel Blake of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*22, as she is already a widow and the sole support of her family. Mrs. Rachel Blake too uses her married name but the similarity between the two women ends there itself. While the former, “mocked outrageously at the proprieties she observed” (*ALL* 79), Mrs. Blake, demure in her widowhood, mocked the society that permitted slavery and turned her energies to activism. Mrs. Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, of course, uses her maiden name with a kind of hyphenation of her married name. Her life initially was supposed to have been spent looking after her invalid father, Captain Dodderidge. It was only three years later, after the hunting accident that led to his eventual death, that Sapphira announced her marriage to Henry Colbert. After her marriage she moves away to Back Creek, far enough from her father’s property to hide the misalliance of Sapphira and Henry from familiar eyes. Sapphira’s tale shifts smoothly between Sapphira Dodderidge (*SSG* 22) to Mrs. Colbert (*SSG* 30). However she remains Miss Saphy to Old Jezebel, a harking back to old values, old assumptions and old affiliations. This also could be a version of the mother-daughter bond but inverted due to race and colour bringing in new elements to the equation, thereby, problematizing the issue.

In Cather’s novels, young daughters become care-givers which help to create an asexual world where the mother’s erasure helps to erase the physicality of the reproduction process without obliterating it altogether. In this, one can see not only an
erasure of “compulsory heterosexuality” but an effort at erasure of sexuality which presupposes a fear of the same.

In a household like the Auclair’s in *Shadows on the Rock*, the father-daughter live comfortably where the daughter has literally taken over from the mother. When she goes visiting and for two days has to live in a ‘normal’ [read heterosexual/patriarchal] household she is repulsed by the smell the lack of privacy and finds numerous reasons for cutting the stay short. She seems happiest in this ‘pre-lapsarian’ asexual world of her father’s house where even the mother has been erased to do away with all concepts of even familial sexual activities. When she marries Pierre, the first thought on her mind is how safe she felt with him in the house. Hence, rather than an alterity in sexuality what comes through is an avoidance of sexuality altogether and the positioning of art/land as points of transcendence seems to be strategies for circumventing any kind of sexual reflection in the Catherean world. The strategies of ‘reticence and silence’, identified as typical Catherean tools, seem to be aimed at silencing any peek into the past which may reveal some aspect more damaging than the women-for-women question which had already been brought out into the open by Radclyffe Hall’s Stephen Gordon.

Cecile’s relationship with the Reverend Mother Juschereau is also significant. She visits the Mother Superior and asks for stories and the Mother obliges. But wherever she tries to explain the message of the story, because “it is the explanation of these stories that applies them to our needs” (*SOR* 39) Cecile responds “N’expliquez pas, chere mere, je vous en supplie”.
Cecile’s character is analysed by the Reverend Mother. When she talked to her of missionaries and martyrs, she found “rapture” and “admiration” but it was not the “rapture of self-abnegation. It was something very different, - almost like the glow of \textit{worldly} pleasure” (emphasis added) \textit{(SOR 40)}. Once again we go back to the concept of “desire for desire” \textit{(Roof 167)} and see that the life of Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin, whose story so inspires Cecile, was dedicated to “the impossible and always achieving it” \textit{(SOR 42)}. So desire is fulfilled, but here it is spiritual desire, not a “worldly pleasure”.

Cecile, Reverend Mother Juschereau knows, has no vocation. By vocation of course is meant a life dedicated to the service of the Church, or to follow the life of Jeanne Le Ber, the recluse who wore “fine dresses to please her father” but “underneath it a little haircloth shirt next her tender skin” \textit{(SOR 131)} and who begged to be allowed to take the vows \textit{(SOR 132)}. But the young Cecile ‘mothers’ little Jacques, the son of Toinette Gaux. Jacques’ mother had a very colourful past, with many “sweethearts” \textit{(SOR 51)} and a missing husband who has vanished. But as a mother she is careless and negligent. Her son gets lost and wanders off in the night and she waits for daybreak to search for him. She is censured by the Count and promises to be a good mother henceforth to avoid penal action. So we see that biological essentialism does not lead too natural mothering while “memory” does.

The Count’s memory of Cecile as an infant is also significant. She had cried only once during the voyage over – when “a bird of prey swooped down and carried off a little bird that had perched on one of our [the ship’s] yardarms” \textit{(SOR 59)}.
Hence the devouring of a defenceless fledgling by a bird of prey probably does have painful memories for the adult Cather because in the poem *Swedish Mother* she also refers to a young lamb which was “hurt by som’ting big”. So sexual exploitation of the young and the vulnerable was possibly a memory from the Old Virginian days of slaves being at the mercy of their rich master’s sexualities. The brutality shown by Ivy Peters in the mutilation of the woodpecker in *A Lost Lady* is a forceful reminder that highlights the predatorial nature of the relationship between the unspoken [probably masculine] and the defenceless young [usually feminine].

“I [Ivy] held the woodpecker’s head in a vice made of his thumb and forefinger, enclosing its panting body with his palm. Quick as a flash, as if it were a practiced trick, with one of those tiny blades he slit both the eyes that glazed in the bird’s stupid little head, and instantly released it” (*ALL* 23). The mutilated woodpecker is seen to be a metaphor for Marian Forrester.” When Cather describes the flight of the ‘wounded’ woodpecker, Elz finds a similarity in the manner Marian flutters through life after the death of Captain Forrester.

O’Brien, while speaking of two of Cather’s stories, *148 Charles Street* and *A Chance Meeting*, says “perhaps because she associated them with her own imperious mother, Cather was attracted in life and fiction to autocratic, at times coldly domineering women” (*Emerging Voice* 321). Then it would be perplexing, to say the least, that her fiction does not incorporate a single autocratic mother except in her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, where the dominating mother is also wheelchair-bound thereby ironically robbing her of some of her authority. One is left wondering
whether the mother’s disability is a reflection of deep-seated ironies related to Cather’s childhood.

Mother-daughter relationships with the cross-pulls of affiliation and rejection are nowhere more acute than in Cather’s last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*; more so because in this novel the end also includes Willa Cather herself as a five year old girl, an invalid for whom the reunion of another mother-daughter duo, Aunt Till and Nancy, is stage-managed, in her room to give her first hand experience of it.

*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is the one and only novel to be set in the Antebellum South, Cather’s childhood country, a home she had left at nine to relocate to Nebraska, the place she thereafter adopts and adapts as home. Race and gender play complicated roles in this novel which literally reflects Cather’s “conflict-ridden” (*Emerging Voice* 32) relationship with her own mother and her culture.

Jonathon Goldberg while discussing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* gives a critical summary of all mother-daughter pairs and enumerates the female-female betrayal that forms such a strong core in the novel. Till lost her mother, a white servant woman, and was taken over by Sapphira, a surrogate who actually betrays her trust by trying to get her daughter Nancy raped. Nancy, instead of taking her mother into confidence turns to Rachel Blake, Sapphira’s daughter, who, in turn, helps Nancy escape from her own mother’s clutches to a life of liberty. Sapphira and Rachel are estranged both spatially and ideologically. While Sapphira, brought up on the
plantations of Virginia, bought and sold slaves, Rachel worked to free them. Even after coming home following the death of her husband, she does not come back to her maternal home, preferring to stay alone with her own daughters in a separate independent establishment. Hence theirs is a "conflict-ridden" mother-daughter relationship based on ethical and ideological parameters. Rachel only comes to live with her mother after the loss of a daughter to illness. It is ironic that one mother (Rachel) loses a child for another mother (Sapphira) to gain a child (Rachel’s return).

This is one novel where the matrilineal line predominates with the father, Henry Colbert, an outsider who mostly lives at the mill-house. The mother-daughter duo of Till and Nancy, separated through a conscious and strategic use of silence, are counterpointed by the other mother-daughter duo who help each other, Lizzie and Bluebell.

Jonathan Goldberg argues that Sapphira is about the “unspeakable that Morrison speaks of as well as the one she does not” referring to sexuality and race (40). “The novel is full of unspeakable desires – Sapphira’s desire for Nancy, Colbert’s desire for Nancy, Martin’s desire (prompted by Sapphira) for Nancy, Rachel’s lukewarm desire for her husband Blake (he is dead hence her desire is channelized into social activism), and Nancy’s desire for freedom from sexual exploitation” (Goldberg 39). Goldberg’s observations seem textually valid. Sapphira is an invalid hence cannot translate desire into a reality; Colbert’s youthful desires may have achieved fulfillment but now are repressed and channelized towards religion and books. Martin, the sexual offender, is dead before the end of the novel, in
a straight-forward moral tale of crime and punishment. Nancy’s is the only story of triumph in the novel – maybe because she escaped sexual abuse. Hence it seems entirely appropriate to assume that Cather’s world removes/pushes/erases sexuality. So it would not be entirely wrong to modify Sedgwick’s contention that Cather’s novels have “plots of lesbian desire, nurturance, betrayal, exploitation, creativity” and find that the plots of desire (lesbian or otherwise) and betrayal/exploitation go hand in hand.

In this last novel all sexual desires end in death and destruction. It seems strategic that even sexualities that end in reproduction are silenced or erased. Rachel, to be effective as a voice of change or revolt, must lose her husband and live a monastic, lonely life. Sapphira’s sexuality is damaged and impaired hence she tries to live through a voyeuristic sexuality where she wants Martin to rape Nancy. Rape, as an instrument of power, may be Sapphira’s idea of punishment for her husband’s sexual transgressions. It is very clear that Nancy takes care of the Master’s room at the mill which acts as a catalyst to Sapphira’s jealousy. Sapphira’s complicity at the near rape of Nancy raises serious questions. Her daughter helps the slave to escape while the father is shown to be a helpless pawn of the system or is it his own culpability that keeps him quiet in spite of knowing about his wife’s involvement?

If, as O’Brien states, “Cather divides nurturing and erotic power between two women” (Emerging Voice 138), then it is also true that somehow tragedy befalls the erotic and only the nurturer is allowed to stay afloat. For nurturance and creativity to be successful an asexual world has to be created where the only passion (desire) is for
‘art’ - an exacting master. So we go back to the concept that sexuality needs to be banished or channelized.

Judith Fetterley proposes the view that in *The Song of the Lark*, “Cather resolves the opposition, so frequent elsewhere in her work, between women’s sensibility and their development, inextricably connecting the artist’s passion for her art with the passion for her body and its desires” (228). But I find in the novel a channelization of the “body and its desires” away from a physical sensuality into a mode acceptable to Thea. “Art” becomes the “passion” “an open secret and perfectly safe”.

“Safe” in conjunction with sensuality and sexuality is used in Cather’s fiction a number of times. Alexandra marries Carl Linstrum, and says “when friends marry they are safe”. Cecil finds marriage to Pierre ‘safe’. Jim’s arrival makes Antonia feel safe. Thea’s Fred is married, albeit unhappily, to a wife he despises, yet in a position to avoid a sexual interaction with her. This makes Fred’s selection as friend ‘safe’. Compulsory heterosexuality, to borrow Adrienne Rich’s term, is shown to be completely negative, a fact that has led to many critics accepting it to be Cather’s “aslant” way of telling the story of her innate sexual preference as historically it was not possible for her to write “coming out” stories then. But the failure of heterosexuality is justified on the grounds of ‘safety’ and that seems to be problematic because Antonia’s heterosexuality, that leads to her bearing Cuzak’s boys, is not ‘unsafe’.
In Cather’s world of fiction, the world of “compulsory hetero-sexuality” is almost negligible and, when present, is extremely negative. Out of all the families, one positive relationship between husband and wife, maybe the only one of its’ kind, is presented between Hester and William Tavener in the story entitled *The Sentimentality of William Tavener*. A poignant, sentimental moment is evoked when Hester is shown, almost at the end of the story, putting the net around William to save his sleeping form from flies and hushing her sons so they do not wake or disturb him. Otherwise the wife/mother is presented in most novels as someone who is either “unimpressionable, energetic but incapable of enthusiasm” as Jim Burden’s wife in *My Antonia* or Dr. Archie’s “cold” wife. Fred Ottenburg is married unhappily to a wife he despises. Hence Fred, as Thea’s choice of companion, is also safe. But each of these heterosexual situations, it is interesting to note, remains “barren” or unfulfilled which makes it into a patriarchal condemnation. Even in a later novel like *Lucy Gayheart* while discussing Gordon’s marital situation a similar note is sounded when it is observed that “he [Gordon] was in the first year of a *barren* (emphasis added) marriage (barren in every sense; his wife never had a child)” (*LG* 216).

Antonia, as a young girl, full of life and vivacity, had redrawn the sexual permissible boundary of “respectable” behavior and had paid for this transgression by coming home in disgrace. But by marrying Cuzak and being “mother” to his boys, she had reclaimed her place in society. So if heterosexuality is what Cather is rejecting then one wonders what made her accept Antonia’s falling in line of “compulsory heterosexuality”. When viewed against all the barren heterosexual coupleings that Cather undoubtedly rejects, one is left wondering at this “selective” dismissal.
What is persistently underlined in Cather’s novels with a few exceptions is the fact of the mother made invisible where her sexuality (hetero or otherwise) does not break the ‘safe’ world of the daughter’s Edenic existence.

In *Lucy Gayheart*, we are presented with the figure of Lucy "as a mere white figure under the shade of the early summer trees (*LG* 4) and told that something in her "nature that was joyous" (*LG* 4). But the end of the novel shows how she dies a tragic death. The novel is about her love for Clement Sebastian who is old enough to be her father (*LG* 88) and the local hero, Harry Gordon, whose suit she initially rejects. Her relationship with her family has complex overtones. This is made manifest in her thoughts when she is on her way to Chicago. "The moment she shut the door on the baggage man, she seemed to find herself again. Out there in Haverford she has scarcely been herself at all, she had been trying to feel and behave like someone she no longer was as children go on playing the old games to please their elders, after they have ceased to be children at heart" (*LG* 27). Lucy's relationships with the two men, namely Gordon and Sebastian, are also full of ambivalences. With Sebastian in an embrace she is seeking comfort, not only sexual passion. In a similar vein when Gordon puts a cover on her for a ride she feels "warm" and cosy. The feelings are mostly familial comfort and has no element of sexuality in it.

*My Mortal Enemy* (1926)²⁸ begins with the line "I first met Myra Henshawe when I was fifteen, but I had known about her ever since I could remember anything at all." This foregrounds two issues - the importance of the age fifteen already intimated by Willa as an important milestone and the fact that memory does stretch
backwards to a distant time when one is very young. So Nellie's age cannot be purely coincidental especially as she is the narrator in this tale of love and death. Myra is an orphan brought up by her uncle. He threatens to cut her off from his wealth when she decides to marry a man of her choice. The novel then revolves around the decline in the life and time of Mrs. Henshawe as viewed by Nellie Birdseye, the narrator here. Myra's transformation from Molly Driscoll to Myra Henshawe is a tale of love and its attendant fallout. The first time Nellie meets Mrs. Henshawe, she is surprised by the genuine affection between the married couple.

"He came into the room without taking off his overcoat and went directly up to his wife, who rose and kissed him. Again I was some time in catching up with the situation; I wondered for a moment whether they might have come down from Chicago on different trains; for she was clearly glad to see him--glad not merely that he was safe and had got round on time, but because his presence gave her lively personal pleasure. I was not accustomed to that kind of feeling in people long married."

(MME Part 1 Chapter I)

But later she is exposed to a quarrel between the two and Nellie feels "fear" (MME Part 1 Chapter VI). Obviously Myra's domestic life has undergone many changes due to the change in their pecuniary condition. Part II begins ten years later. In this novel, Cather has very systematically maintained a chronological time. Here the relationship between Myra and Nellie border on the brink of a close friendship but is not allowed to develop into one by Cather.

When one re-views the end of her novels, one finds that the “desires” of the protagonists, which are not of a sexual nature, are mostly achieved, whether in O
Pioneers! where Alexandra desires a land laden with crops, or Thea an art that encompasses her very existence. So desire is transferred from the human/sexual to the philosophical/metaphysical thereby denying sexuality. If that be so, then as Roof has pointed out, fulfilled desires cannot be the end of a successful lesbian text.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. Ibid. They discuss the wording used by Adrienne Rich and point out the slippage from motherhood to include generally all women.


