Chapter 4

Boys, Men and Friends

If mothers have been erased out of the pages of her novels, the opposite is true for depictions of fathers and daughters. “Willa loved her father, a Southern gentleman, refined almost to the point of delicacy,” observes Mildred R. Bennett. A description of a “Southern Gentleman” in Journal, may be read as a picture of her own father. “He was a Virginian and a gentleman and for that reason he was fleeced on every side and taken in on every hand. He kept a little store downtown where he sold very little and was paid for less.”

Cather’s references to her own father are always full of an indulgence for a somewhat simple and weak yet lovable person. The close bond between Willa and her father, especially during her childhood is commented on by most biographers. O’Brien says “as the oldest child she was his companion accompanying him on his rounds.”

One of her early memories of her father was the time she spent rounding up the sheep in the evening. Her father was quiet, unlike her Uncle George and hated the limelight. In Bennett we are given the story of his one brush with fame which left him disillusioned and devastated. “Mr. Cather was put on a Committee to investigate whether or not the county treasurer had been accepting interest on county funds” (Bennett 24). This slowly spiralled into a local ‘feud’ where Charles Cather (then alderman) and Dr. Mc Keeby, the Mayor, were ranged on one side and the opposition was not averse to mud-slinging of the worst kind which pained Willa’s father very
much. During this feud, Willa spent a lot of time in her father’s office. Her father called her “Daughter” in a formal yet affectionate manner and could never reconcile himself to her celebrity status. It is related how after Sinclair Lewis’ announcement that “the United States knows Nebraska because of Willa Cather” he wrote her “a loving letter in which he paid tribute to her genius and her success” (Bennett 26).

Even after Willa grew up and would come home for her vacations she depended on her father for companionship. The close relationship is further borne out by one incident during a summer picnic that Willa went on with her two friends, Carrie Miner and Mary Miner, and her father. On the way back it had become dark and Charles Cather was at the wheel. He requested Mary to sit next to him as he could not see very well but did not want to tell Willa because then she would have walked home rather than inconvenience him (Bennett 27). His death was something that she could not accept easily and it needed a lot of help from friends, who rallied around her talking about the fullness of his life that ultimately helped to calm her down and to gradually accept his death.

In Cather’s own life, as biographers relate, her father occupied a much more affirmative position than her mother. Right from her childhood, her memories of time spent with her father are happy memories and these account for the many father-daughter relationships that are scattered through the pages of her novels. However, a mature and adult closeness is absent.
The filial bond between Willa and her father is the sort of closeness that is shared by Alexandra Bergson and her father in *O Pioneers!* (1913). Mr. Bergson leaves the running of the household and the agrarian property to Alexandra because “before Alexandra was twelve years old she had begun to be of help to him, and as she grew older he had come to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgement” (*OP* 15). The “boys” in *O Pioneers!* are entrusted to the care of their elder sister, Alexandra, by their father because John Bergson had felt they lacked “the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days” (*OP* 15). In this evaluation is an engendering that sustains traditional binaries albeit with fluid gendering. So the boys are more like girls in their thoughts which are not pragmatic or driven by sound economic sense. A very subtle textuality appears in the way the father addresses Alexandra as “dotter” reminiscent of Cather’s own father’s affectionate nomenclature for Willa, while the sons are clubbed under the rubric of the generic term “boys” encoding a sense of youthfulness as also a lack of maturity. These “boys” remain boys even under the care of Alexandra and do not grow up to be men in spite of fathering their own children. So Alexandra takes important decisions even after the brothers are established with their families in their own homesteads. But Alexandra does not have children of her own and continues to ‘parent /mother’ her brothers and their children ignoring her own sexuality. She finally marries her childhood friend, Carl Linstrum, “a boy whose mouth was too sensitive for a boy‟s” (*OP* 10). In this description itself, Cather has begun to methodically re-structure masculinist expectations. In this kind of restructuring, feminist critics find her destabilization of expected heterosexuality and find it as an illustration of her male-as-mask-masquerade to present same-sex liaisons. But it seems to tie up more with the idea that the Cather men who will
ultimately win the approbation of the author are systematically presented as effeminate men. Alexandra, who can work in the farm like a man, needs to call Carl to help her get her brother’s kitten from the pole (OP 8) while she puts the muffler on her brother. Yet Carl is definitely presented as less masculine and thereby ‘safe’ for Alexandra.

Frank Shabata, Marie’s husband, ends up in prison after the gruesome double murder. The murder is a response to sexual jealousy. Emile, Alexandra’s soft and gentle brother, has a violent and tragic end as a result of a tempestuous love affair. But since Carl is not threateningly ‘male’ he comes back to marry Alexandra because when “friends marry they are safe” (OP 141).

The scene with Marie and Emile, before they both have a violent end, seems interesting as it highlights the sexual tension already brewing between the two. Emile says “I can’t play with you like a little boy anymore” (OP 72) and when Emile decides to grow up (emphasis added), Cather decides to end his life. Little boys are approved of in their asexuality, but dawning sexuality makes them unfit for the Catherian world.

Brown observes that her novels are full of boys and girls and these adolescents are devoted to young children. Alexandra looks after her young brothers; Cecile Auclaire, who is an only child, adopts a waif whose mother fails as a nurturer and looks after him, but “there is very little sense or feeling of what it means to be a
young child" (Brown 4). In this absence it will not be presumptive to note an avoidance. "The years up to fifteen," Cather had announced⁸ were the most active material for later creative expression. But she had immediately qualified the range to "eight to fifteen"⁹ thereby excluding the first eight years. The first eight years were the ones she had spent in Virginia: a break from there had apparently devastated her (Lewis). In this exclusion of the first eight years, especially her Virginia years, one can note an intriguing gap in an author who constantly harped on the importance of 'memory' in her novels. After all according to her [Cather], "life began for me [Cather] when I ceased to admire and began to remember"."¹⁰

Most of Willa Cather’s women-protagonists, starting with Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg are singularly androgynized; they are presented as “heroic” and “un-feminine”; less “woman” and more “artist”. Interestingly enough, the boys and the men are presented in a reverse-engendered state as effete, soft and possibly more “wo/manly”. Rajyashree Khushu in her unpublished doctoral dissertation observes that the weak men are unfit to marry the heroic heroines.¹¹

This may seem to be an oversimplification of the complex presentation of the stalwart women/artists and the ‘little’ men who surround them. But this seemingly simple narrative is what catapulted Willa Cather into the mainstream of the great American literary tradition which did not often acknowledge other turn-of-the-century women writers like Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow.
It is true that in Cather's cross-gendering, critics like Christopher Nealon and Judith Butler (1993) have read Cather's unspoken lesbianism but that does not explain fully the almost methodical manner in which Cather's masculinities and femininities are fractured to reveal a world where sexualities are constantly ignored.

Though Cather appropriated the man's dress and name as a teenager, it did not preclude the presence of boys and men in her life altogether. A "boy" who left an indelible impression on Cather during her visit to her brother Douglass, who worked at Santa Fe for the railroad, gives a new insight into Cather's orientation. Initially, when Douglass had to leave with the construction crew for a couple of days, she was bored but excitement came in the form of four Mexicans who came to sing to her. The singer in the group, called Julio, impressed Cather and "her letters for the next several months were filled with Julio" (Woodress 6). Cather's tryst with this Mexican is later commented upon by Elsie Sergeant, her long-time friend and the recipient of these adulatory letters regarding Julio of the Southwest. "He was too beautiful to be true and utterly different from anyone she ever had met" (Woodress 6). Though Julio took up a lot of her attention during her stay and later, and is written about in her letters, no full portrait is found in her novels, a fact her biographers have drawn attention to (Woodress 7). He is neither seen in the novels or mentioned anywhere else. This definitely seems odd in a writer who espouses the pre-eminence of memory in her created work. The boy who captured her imagination is, for some reason, banished from her fiction. In fact she does recreate the Mexican dance sequence in *The Song of the Lark*, as noted by her biographer Woodress (6), but does not let Julio have a place in her repertoire. Once again we are faced with a complex response to a
masculinity which refuses to be either fractured or diluted so it is evaded. Later she escapes from Julio's magnetism by indulging in jocularity about how people would take him away from her to be an artist's model.

Cather’s life during her Pittsburgh phase was pleasant and full of social activities. Woodress says, “her social life in Pittsburgh involved friends of both sexes” (124). Though there is no evidence of a heterosexual romantic entanglement before Pittsburgh, it is known that she was close to Charles Moore, the nephew of Charles Cather’s employer, in Lincoln, who had presented her with a gold snake ring which she wore all her life. During her Pittsburgh years, Cather had also received a proposal which she had turned down as she was not in love. “Eight months later there was another applicant for matrimony: Preston Farrar, who taught at Allegheny High School. She dated him in the fall, and by January the affair had gotten serious. She wrote to Mariel Gere that she was seeing him "only in plaster these days because he had broken his leg playing football several months before”, and she continues to explain why she could not marry him because “his friendship was so warm and comfortable that she did not want to change it for the other article in which the personal equation would be sure to make trouble” (emphasis added) (Woodress 124). Woodress’ opinion that Cather gave up on matrimony because "she was married to her art and sublimated her sexual impulses in her work” (125) is also true for her characters in her novels.

In 1898, she met Ethelbert Nevin, a renowned music composer and a twin artistic soul. Their friendship was deep enough for Nevin to have dedicated a love
song to her while Cather wrote three poems in his memory. After his death in 1901, she also “wrote to the editor of the *Ladies Home Journal* asking him to return to her the photographs of Nevin she had supplied for her article” (Woodress 133). Nevin, of course, had a wife, Anne Nevin, who looked after their business interests and two children and is presented in a negative sketch by Cather. This may have been the prototype of the “wrong” marriages that fill pages of her novels where all the women are cold and cruel and do not share the art-sentiment with their husbands as illustrated in the “barren” marriages of Doctor Archie, Fred Ottenburg in *Song of the Lark* (1915) and Clement Sebastian of *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), to name only a few.

Though *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912) with Alexander Bartley as hero, was her first novel, she always dismissed it, saying:

“My first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, was very like what painters call a studio picture… The impressions I tried to communicate on paper were genuine, but they were very shallow. Soon after the book was published I went for six months to Arizona and New Mexico. The longer I stayed in a country I really did care about, and among people who were a part of the country, the more unnecessary and superficial a book like *Alexander’s Bridge* seemed to me”\(^\text{14}\).

Alexander Bartley, an engineer/artist builds a bridge, which collapses, taking him down with it to be almost buried alive. Alexander’s major emotional crisis, apart from his professional commitment to the building project, centres around two women – his wife and his mistress. In outline, the binary of these two women seem to be constructed on the conventional binary found in Cather’s women – the cold and cruel wife and the artist as both Muse and Mistress. This design is repeated in later novels
after Alexander’s Bridge even where the central protagonist is a heroic figure of a woman as in The Song of the Lark and My Antonia and the men are only ‘friends’.

In The Song of the Lark (1915), Thea has effectively four men as ‘friends’. Her first encounter with conscious sexuality occurs when she is pursued by Ray Kennedy who wants to marry her. Ray Kennedy, was “a big fellow, with a square, open American face, a rock chin” (SOL 182) and was “an aggressive idealist, a free thinker and like most railroad men, deeply sentimental” (SOL 182). But, as her father had predicted even before she was fifteen, “Thea is not the marrying kind…she’s too peppery and too fond of having her own way. Then she’s always got to be ahead in everything. That kind makes good church-workers and missionaries and school teachers, but they don’t make good wives” (SOL 223). Thea’s relationship with Ray is a straightforward mainstream heterosexual engagement, that is cut short by the accident that kills him, which also seems too neat and raises a question. The only person in a position to introduce Thea to a physicality is dead before he can awaken her. On the other hand, it’s his (emphasis added) legacy that affords Thea many opportunities for developing her musical career later on.

But her awareness of her sexuality per se may be traced back to her earlier interaction with Wunsch, her music teacher. Professor Wunsch was “old and poor” (SOL 160) but “a good teacher” according to Mrs. Kronborg, Thea’s mother. The local doctor, Dr. Archie, who will play a very important role in the growth of Thea as an artist, however, has reservations about him because of his alcoholism but immediately retracts the subtle criticism on facing vehement opposition from Thea
herself. It is interesting to note that just after a music lesson Wunsch is left introspecting, “It was long since he had wished anything or desired anything beyond the necessities of the body. Now that he was tempted to hope for another, he felt alarmed and shook his head” *(SOL 170)*. He continues thinking that Thea reminded him of “a thin glass full of sweet-smelling sparkling Moselle wine” *(SOL 170)* and seems aware of the youthful energy and the “rapid fluorescence in young blood” and is immediately “ashamed” *(SOL 170)* of such thoughts, so the teacher-student relationship is definitely more complex than it appears, and not restricted to the straight and narrow only.

That Wunsch was much more than just a music teacher is borne out by another incident. On her thirteenth birthday, Thea spends a great deal of time, what she feels is special time, with him discussing music and life. Certain incidents take place that heighten her awareness of Wunsch which makes her comment “it spoils things to ask questions” *(SOL 206)*. She had already realized that there was “something about her that was different” *(SOL 206)*. She identifies it is as a “warm sureness” *(SOL 207)*, a definitive affirmation of dawning sexuality. This further denotes the sexual nature of ‘the thing’. We use biological parameters to gauge the location of the physicality. This seems to be a very tactile image, reminding one of puberty and menstruation. That “something” was “under her cheek” or “over her breast” *(SOL 207)*. The chapter ends with mention of a secret between Wunsch and Thea, “together they had lifted a lid, pulled out a drawer and looked at something. They hid it away and never spoke of what they had seen but neither of them forgot it” *(SOL 207)*. The sexual tone can hardly be missed and one moment of secret contact between the teacher and the taught
cannot be ruled out. But all through *The Song of the Lark* passion is always reserved for the art instinct and never for anything sexual. Once again we are faced with the sublimation of sexuality and not acceptance of the same.

Ironically Thea’s interactions with Wunsch are interspersed between her exchanges with Dr. Archie, another ‘friend of childhood’. The first patient-doctor interaction is when she is diagnosed with pneumonia. While Dr. Archie was dressing her after covering her with lotion, he begins by thinking of Thea as the daughter he never had but immediately the reflections he indulges in somehow undercut the familial filial feelings.

“As he lifted and undressed Thea, he thought to himself what a beautiful thing a little girl’s body was – like a flower. It was so neatly and delicately fashioned, so soft and so milky white... He looked intently at her wide, flushed face, freckled nose, fierce little mouth and her delicate tender chin – the one soft touch in her hard little Scandinavian face, as if some fairy godmother had caressed her there and left a cryptic promise. Her brows were usually drawn together defiantly, but never when she was with Doctor Archie. Her affection for him was prettier than most of the things that went to make up the doctor’s life in Moonstone.”

*(SOL 156)*

This was hardly the most appropriate reflection of a father for a daughter and undoubtedly in contravention of the oath of “safety” that bound patient and doctor. Dr. Archie is based, in some ways, on Dr. McKeeby as has been pointed out by her biographers (Lewis, Woodress). J. Gabriel Scala has argued persuasively that the closeness between Dr. Archie and Thea could very well have been something that
Cather and Dr. McKeeby shared and that Cather may not have been very comfortable with the relationship as shades of discomfort pour out from some of Thea's reactions to the doctor's physical closeness.

In *My Antonia* (1918)\(^7\), Deborah G. Lambert\(^8\) reads Cather's betrayal of female independence and female sexuality in fiction and connects it to Cather's own feeling of inadequacy regarding her sexual orientation. Lambert also connects it to the betrayal Cather felt when Isabella McLung, her friend for a long time, suddenly married Jan Hambourg, the violinist, at about the same time that this novel was being written. Jim's (the narrator of *My Antonia*) masculinity is actually a pseudo-masculinity or femininity masquerading as masculinity feels Lambert. When Cather reminiscences about Annie Sadilek, the original for Antonia, that "Annie fascinated me" she finds a thinly-veiled lesbian relationship (Lambert 683).

But if Annie fascinated Cather, so did Julio, her almost-paramour of the Southwest whom she had met on holiday at Santa Fe, and the letters to Elsie Sergeant are testimony to this fascination she had felt quite intensely for some time. But she did not project him on to her fictional world. On the other hand, she does chronicle her fascination for the exotic tale of the 'hired' girl's fall from grace because Annie does cross the line between pure and passionless autonomy, that Alexandra had exemplified, to passionate sexuality that does not sublimate itself into anything else initially. Once again sexuality is on the dock. Julio is not written about because she wanted him at the 'young lad' state and not allow him to be tarnished by expressed sexuality. So she keeps Julio's memory intact and does not share it with her readers.
Her phrase "fascinated by Annie", thus, may not necessarily be the expression of an inchoate lesbianism, as read by Lambert. If we are to accept her 'reticence' on lesbianism as part of her strategy to avoid social criticism then we also should be alert to her nuanced avoidance of the mention of Julio in the pages of her novels.

Again in the displacement of the narrator with Jim, from the “I”, who wanted to tell the story, to Jim, who would ultimately tell the story, Butler envisages what she calls a 'redoubling' (149) whereby she [Cather] only appears to give away the text and does not in reality do so. So the masculinity of Jim becomes suspect as per Butler's reading. But Jim's effeminate masculinity is what makes the author allow him to 'possess' Antonia (in the introduction he adds the possessive pronoun in the title with great flourish), because she sees no threat in him. Had he been endowed with the Wick Cutter-like masculinity then the author would have found ways of castrating him or erasing him out of the pages of the novel. Jim has a wife in the background which allows him to articulate his desire “I would have loved to have you as a wife, mother, sister or sweetheart… whatever a woman can be to a man” since he will not need to fulfill this desire. Jim’s advantage as a narrator is the very fact that he will spend his nights with Cuzak's boys and not be a threat to Antonia's daughters. In this 'safety' lies his acceptability.

Jim’s “disgustingness” at his attempted rape by Wick Cutter according to Fetterley is a clear indication of the masquerade that is his masculinity. But it is also possible to read into his reaction, which Fetterley feels echoes a woman’s, the revulsion of a man at being groped by another man; hence, instead of the pain/fear of
the near-rape situation which would have been the expected reaction of a woman, Jim finds it repugnant and/or disgusting. The choice of lexis for denoting the feeling must be taken into account before any meaning can be attributed to the situation. Any non-consensual physical intimacy is “disgusting” even for a male. Though ‘rape’ as a word is usually associated with the physical abuse of a woman, a non-consensual act would be also ‘rape’ for a man. Cather’s “inability to speak directly” (Fetterley 45) has been used to explain the many silent nuances of her fiction. But it need not necessarily be the ‘love that has no name’. Fetterley argues persuasively that *My Antonia* is replete with gender ambiguity which points towards Cather’s lesbianism. It is equally true to say that the gender ambiguity is more an *emasculating* of the *masculine* (emphasis added) rather than just gender ambiguity. When Alexandra dresses/behaves as a man the gender ambiguity is not a weakness.

The novel *A Lost Lady* (1923)\(^{20}\) is usually read as an elegy for a historical time of western expansion now taken over by a competitive, economic and callous world of crass materialism. Initially standing tall as a mountain, astride the old world of “gentlemen only” is Captain Forrester, one of the central male protagonists of the novel, whose residence at Sweet Water, is the background for the story of loss that is going to be witnessed by Niel Herbert, the central consciousness/narrator, whose moral stand reflects a traditionalism belied by his youth. He also seems to feel a kinship with Captain Forrester’s “gentlemanly” qualities – qualities that are soon going to be neither valid nor aspirational.
Cather, in this novel, celebrates an idealized view of frontier life where gracious hostesses run to meet visiting guests and hosts cut the meat perfectly at the dinner table. An ideal partner, in looks, deportment and discourse, Mrs. Marian Forrester, is the right person to occupy the hostess’ chair. She is “white” and “graceful”; organizes the best parties and entertains the neighbourhood perfectly so that the people of Sweet Water look forward to her visits every year.

Susan Rosowski and Kari A. Ronning\textsuperscript{21} draw attention to the beginning of the novel, \textit{A Lost Lady}. The opening sentence of \textit{A Lost Lady} reads, “Thirty or forty years ago in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer than they were then, there was a house well-known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere” and they observe that, ”Cather dated the beginning of her new story between 1883 and 1893”, a time that coincides with the transformation of the world from the old world order, as Cather saw it, to a world of crass commercialisation. Careful reconstruction of her biography would point to the fact that this was the time that the Cathers had moved to Red Cloud; it is not wrong to assume that the Cathers would have been on informal terms with Silas Garber and his wife, the originals for Captain and Mrs. Forrester. Edith Lewis recalls “her [Cather’s] memories of Mrs. Garber, and of the Garbers, were among the strongest, most enduring impressions of her childhood; a whole ambiance of thought and feeling surrounded them, and she could not transfer them to an artificial climate”. So Lewis continues, Cather wrote “of things just as she remembered them” (124-25). Cather chose her lost lady from the live models of the new country, from the new place itself.
In *A Lost Lady*, Seth Clabough identifies two kinds of masculinities that Cather projects. The first, and obvious one, is the pioneer-masculinity epitomized by Captain Forrester. Captain Forrester has all the qualities of glory, goodness and nobility that Cather appreciates in this by-gone world that she projects. The other masculinity, that of Ivy Peters, emerges as a fallout of the earlier masculinity but is also in opposition to it – the masculinity of “petty economies”, a distinctive kind of masculinity (Clabough 726). But this masculinity is cruel, rapacious and threatening.

I would add another, third kind of masculinity to it, that of Niel Herbert’s, an effeminate masculinity or an alternative masculinity. The novel is filled with boys and men with Mrs. Forrester being the only important woman character. The other women, neighbours’ wives and guests with daughters, just flit in and out without too much of an impact, fleshing out the main story of Marian Forrester and her exile from Eden. This effeminate masculinity has been read by scholars as a masquerade (Butler 143-66) and a pointer that actually they are not men but women, a way of expressing Cather's alternative sexuality. But all these feminine-masculinities seem to be emasculated masculinities. While Captain Forrester, through his accident and consequent paralysis is naturally emasculated and thus unavailable to sexuality, Niel, through his effeminacy provides a counterpoint to the threatening masculinity of Ivy Peters.

Among the group of boys, also, Cather divides them into various masculinities where Niel is pitted against Ivy Peters and his “kit” that kills pretty birds signifying the rapaciousness involved even in this boyhood caper of a summer afternoon picnic.
The other boys are only onlookers to this combat but are on Niel’s side not because they want to save the bird but because they are worried Mrs. Forrester will punish them by forbidding them entry into this Edenic world. So the masculinity, in their case, is circumscribed by class hierarchy, so gender and sexuality are operating in an unequal world.

The entire novel is dotted with incidents that project traditional heterosexual metaphors. Captain Forrester finds Mrs. Forrester most “captivating” the day he sees her being chased by a bull (ALL 13). The metaphor of the sex roles of “chased” and “chaser” and “hare” and “bull” are unambiguous. If Niel, the boy/narrator, was “a handsome boy of twelve”, then Ivy Peters’ face “was red and the flesh looked hard, as if it were swollen from bee stings or from an encounter with poison ivy” (ALL 21-22). If Captain Forrester was like a “mountain”, noble and stately, then Frank Ellinger, Mrs. Forrester’s lover, was “a bachelor of forty, six feet two, with long straight legs, fine shoulders, and a figure that still permitted his white waistcoat to button” (ALL 45). So the contrasts are clear and not ambivalent. Sexuality is going to be separated from masculinity too. Sexuality is threatening, hence the only men who indulge are coarse and cruel; Captain Forrester had to be saved, so is emasculated through paralysis. Hence, now he is deemed “safe” to carry on with his graciousness. Crass materialism along with sexuality coalesce and cohere in the figures of Frank and Ivy and, in certain ways, in the central figure of Mrs. Forrester too, “because she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widows of all these great men and die” (ALL 169); she wanted to live life (emphasis added) “on any terms” (ALL 170). Niel remains a ‘lad’ all through; since he lacks Ivy's qualities he is not a danger to anybody. So he is 'safe' and so is Mrs. Forrester from him.
Jim calls his story *My Antonia*. Is it because Antonia reverts to the patriarchal fold, marries Cuzak and brings up a brood of boys? Niel could very well have called his story *My Lost Lady* but his disillusionment with Marian’s active sexuality does not prompt him to want to possess her. Marian continues to live life on her terms and so is forsaken by the lads of her younger years and she dies, just as she had lived in the beginning, *a lost lady*.

A change occurs in *The Professor’s House* (1925) where the Professor’s dilemma is between the cold and unsympathetic wife, a figure that remains the same, but instead of the woman/artist as Muse and Mistress we are presented with a man/historiographer as Muse and object of affection in Tom Outland. In fact in Cather’s novels of the 20’s, namely *One of Ours* (1922), *The Professor’s House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) we find that all the central figures are men and the story revolves around their successes and failures, fulfillments and frustrations. It is as if, after the great efflorescence of the heroines who had achieved selfhood and agency in three novels published one after another – *O Pioneers!* in 1913, *The Song of the Lark* in 1915 and *My Antonia* in 1918 - a balanced trio of *heroes* are presented next in the presentation of Claude Wheeler, Professor Godfrey St. Peter and the clergyman, Archbishop Latour. But again in the presentation, Cather subtly interchanges the engendering of the protagonists; the heroines are constantly unconventional and unfeminine while the heroes are thus moulded to effortlessly occupy the “soft” space vacated by them while the major conflict of life and art/aspiration remains the same. *A Lost Lady*, the other novel of this period remains an
elegy for lost worlds, hence is equally about Niel, the narrative perspective, as well as Marian Forrester.

John P. Anders is of the opinion that Cather, “in her novels of this [1920’s] period” indulges in “an intense exploration of male friendships. While Cather was averse to showing female bonding, her avoidance of “queer” politics did not extend to male-male bonds. In his persuasively argued thesis, Anders points out how Cather would expect a gay reading of her work when she showed male bonding and “that when Cather celebrates male friendship she implicitly acknowledges its connotations as well” (1). If we accept this reading then it becomes even more difficult to accept her so-called ‘reticence’ about close sororal bonds for fear of being ‘found out’.

In fact it seems more pertinent to view this liberality vis-à-vis male bonding to a traditional gendering where ‘boys’ and ‘lads’ have a positive connotation while “feminine” and “girly” are negatively interpreted. “Fairy found Lucy frightfully stuffy and girly-girly.” Here the contrast between Fairy Blair, “the yellow haired girl” who was not “girly-girly” as a contrast to the eponymous heroine, Lucy Gayheart, who suffers a tragic end by drowning may act as a comment on Cather’s presentation of gendered identities as far as femininity is concerned.

Tom Outland, the ‘boy’, who helps Professor Godfrey St. Peter “liberate” himself from the laws of society, of property and of heterosexuality dies in a war before he can grow up and be spoilt. In fact it is only after Tom Outland’s story of his
adventures on the Messa, that the professor goes back to another boy, the “original boy not modified by sex” says Gilbert and Gubar (208). In this also there is denial of sexuality, not just an alterity in orientation; Tom’s outrage at the sale of a dried mummy which he considered more important that ‘a living woman’ is a denial of the ‘materiality’ of the female body. The use of the metaphor of 'mother Eve' for the woman is also replete with denial of agency because Eve is not a figure of independence but of dependence. Eve projects object rather than subject. Professor St. Peter’s attachment to his woman’s figures/dummies is another instance of denial of life thereby denial of erotica altogether. The only female forms that he is willing to be surrounded by are dead/dummies and Augusta, the seamstress, and they are not sources of the erotic, hence safe (emphasis added).

Father Latour in Death Comes for the Archbishop is introduced as “a horseman followed by a pack mule” and ends on a description of his boyhood “friend who had made this long pilgrimage with him and shared his dangers” (DCA 22) where we are introduced to the very world of boyish memories. When Father Vaillant writes to his sister about the temper of his parish, again a metaphor replete with memories of “boys only” schools is revealed: “under one master the lads tried to excel one another in mischief and disobedience; under another they vie with each other in acts of loyalty” (DCA 117). Pam Fox Kuhlken describes the genesis of the novel by referring to how Cather visited the mission in Santa Fe and found the Statue of the missionary and the history of Bishop Lamy "and the rest is legend". In an intriguing comparison Kuhlken writes that "Lamy is also kindred to the author herself" in her isolation and solitariness; "Latour is celibate akin to Cather's unwed heart" (367-385).
Cather’s world is full of strong-willed, powerful women and “effeminate” boys and men. This has led critics to believe in her ‘queer poetics’. While it is true that her men are seldom heroes, masculinities are also differently constructed in her world. It is interesting to note that those men who marry the central women protagonists are all friends whose presence makes it all safe. Even in *Shadows on the Rock*, a much later novel, Cecile and Pierre marry, and “the last thought before she sank into forgetfulness was of a friend, devoted and fearless, here in the house with them.”28 Later, it is reported that she has four sons, all “future Canadians’ but the question of sexuality is firmly evaded. Earlier when the father had asked Pierre to take care of Cecile when they were going on a trip, Pierre’s response seems ironical as he says, “As you would yourself, monsieur” (SOR 186).

When boyfriends replicate the father, one wonders what happens to the sexual tension. More interestingly, this seems to be an oblique suggestion of the complicity of the father in the abuse of a daughter or his helplessness at not being able to save her. This is the problem central to the Colbert household in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Cather’s last novel, located in the South of her own childhood.

Henry Colbert, the mill owner, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*29, is no doubt close to his daughter and granddaughters. This is made manifest in the way Rachel, his daughter, turns to him for help in trying to save the slave-girl, Nancy Till. But again in this picture of a meek and ineffective gentleman one can read a criticism of masculinity itself, an oblique criticism of a father who cannot save a daughter. This criticism becomes viable because the father is presented as a sexual being, hence does
not win the author’s approbation. In the Colbert household though “Henry liked the
teacher Fairhead but Sapphy did not so he was not invited to the dining table” (SSG
82). Sapphira, on the other hand, is free to invite Martin, the family rake. Henry
‘surrenders’ meekly to his imperious, strong-willed and cruel wife and retires to his
secluded world of the mill-house and his Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. In this escape
is a failure to act because when he becomes aware of the way his wife was
manipulating Martin to exploit Nancy’s youthfulness, he remains a mute spectator,
blaming Nancy for her obvious femininity. Again, in this we can read a collusion on
the part of Henry Colbert, in Nancy’s sexual exploitation. Though he is a deeply
religious man, an affectionate father and a kind and generous employer, he is unable
to stand up for her rights. One feels that in this re-creation of the father, in a novel that
is unambiguously set in the antebellum South of Cather’s childhood, she may have
unconsciously put in her critique of the Southern gentleman who cannot act to save
his daughter, or in this case, a surrogate. The end of the novel shows a family re-
union but, interestingly enough, the father is quietly erased out of the frame. In this
erasure/silencing of the father in the final novel, may be read Cather’s comment on
masculinity because Henry Colbert in his young days was not unlike Martin and the
“gaze” that he turns towards Nancy is not always fatherly or protective.

Fathers in the Cather world are in a similar vein projected as mild-mannered
and gentle whether it is Alexandra’s, Thea’s, Cecile’s or Rachel’s. The bond between
Cecile, who keeps house for her father, and Euclide Auclair is close, no doubt, but
there is something missing in him as she observes “for the first time she realized that
her father loved Pierre for the same reason he had loved the Count; both had qualities
he did not have himself, but which he admired in other men” (SOR 265-66). This observation foregrounds Cather’s idea of conventional masculinities replete with stock qualities of manliness with the underlying qualification that Auclaire did not possess them but yearned for them.

Father surrogates are also ambivalently projected. Marie Toevesky (OP 10) comes to the market place perched on her uncle’s shoulders and his friends surround her, give her candies in exchange of kisses, “his cronies formed a circle about him, admiring and teasing the little girl, who took their jokes with great good nature” (OP 10). Alexandra is repulsed by this picture of Marie’s extreme femininity but the readers obviously discern elements of childhood exploitation and Cather’s obvious revulsion, which mirrors Alexandra’s repugnance.

Jim, Carl, Niel are all young lads who do not actually grow up. Idealistic young lads die young as Tom Outland and Claude Wheeler. Dr. Archie, as has been shown by Nancy Gobatto in her essay, may have been an adult who had betrayed the trust of young Thea. Henry Colbert is as guilty as Martin in the exploitation of Nancy not only by his “silence’ but also by his “covert’ gaze which notices Nancy’s burgeoning physicality and in effect condones Martin’s near rape.

So it seems obvious that the strong women choose ‘friends’ as partners for safety. Hence, it is easy to read a conflation of violence and sexuality in Cather’s world. Loretta Wasserman dismisses the absence of the erotic in Cather’s fiction. Her
logic is that the absence of “overt” lovemaking is acceptable and not a cause for concern as she believes “the method of realism is not the only method of portraying the erotic” (348). Nevertheless, keeping in mind contemporary psychological findings we cannot really ignore this “erotic” altogether. If we do so then we are guilty of the same fault that Nancy Cott analyses in her extremely perceptive essay on the “passionlessness” of Victorian American women. Then Cather’s world becomes a deliberately constructed world of “passionlessness” where the only passion is for art, literature, spirituality and an aesthetic ideal and never the erotic.

As we perceive, in her novels as well as in her life she prefers “friends” and not “lovers” and hence her preference for Farrar in the cast, after a fracture, where the sexual cannot intrude into the world of friends. Her relationship with Nevin, too, was out of bounds and though he carried her shopping and gifted her perfect flowers, a wife and children, created a barrier that would not let both cross the line even if they so desired. In Thea and Fred’s relationship this is replayed, once again, to make Fred unavailable to Thea.

Fred Ottenburg’s is a complicated friendship with Thea. Fred is too perfect. To be the perfect partner for Thea, Fred is made out to be both an art/music connoisseur as well as a sportsman. But the problem arises when Cather writes that he [Fred] was the first man in his mother’s life “who altogether pleased her” (SOL 354), again an oblique reference to a failed marriage and a close mother-son bond. Fred’s sexuality is never in any doubt; Thea’s reaction to Fred’s physical overture at Panther Canyon brings out the few overt sexual encounters in Cather’s novels; but even in this
relationship the “threat” that is sex is not entirely ignored because when rebuffed, Fred retreats but only momentarily because “he gave her up then” and would “attack when his lance was brighter” (SOL 359). When he does kiss her Fred tells Thea, “I want you to tell me why you flew at me like that! You weren’t playing; you looked as if you’d like to murder me” (SOL 374). This extreme reaction to a “pass” that she [Thea] knew she “deserved” takes us back to the five year old Willa who tried to frighten an elderly Judge by saying “I’s a dangous nigger, I is.”

Fred and Dr. Archie are both “interested” in Thea’s flowering as an artist and both “invest” in her musical career. But Thea feels "I shall feel freer on Dr. Archie’s [money]" (SOL 404) and adds, “he is almost like my father” (SOL 404). Cather’s comment is intriguing because she writes “she added irrelevantly” (SOL 404). One wonders whether Thea was trying to add a note of propriety on taking money from Dr. Archie by making him out to be a father-figure, a guardian, rather than an unethical donor. Thea’s weekend with Fred weighs heavily on her. A very perceptive remark she makes on Dr. Archie when she tells Fred that “I see that I’ve always, even when I was little shielded him” (SOL 412). So we realize that Dr. Archie needed shielding. It is also interesting to note that when Dr. Archie sets off to meet Thea at New York, the tailor tells him “You must have a date there, doctor; you behave like a bridegroom” (SOL 403). So Thea’s sexual experience expectation notwithstanding, her passion and desire are all channelized into one big master ‘art’.

That when Cather writes male-centered fiction replete with male friendships she is not deterred by possible homosexual interpretations is accepted by John P.
Anders (1999). But in a similar vein she is averse to writing of sororal bonds say all critics and they point out that Cather did not want to be ‘found out’. This double-standard seems to be too simplistic to be accepted without analysis. If *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is about the friendship between Father Latour and Father Vaillant, then the spiritual/religious background of the story of the Catholic Church in the Southwest gave her the most appropriate backdrop against which an almost asexual narrative would be played out. So it is not only the gender of the bond, she selects the backdrop with an eye on the constitution of an asexual world.

About the novel Cather writes “The longer I stayed in the Southwest, the more I felt that the story of the Catholic Church in that country was the most interesting of all its stories”33. It is, once again, extremely intriguing to see that she chooses, deliberately so, a story of the Catholic Church where any kind of sexuality is always a menacing kind, that which gives pain and should be avoided. The story of Magdalena thus assumes grave implications in *Death Comes For the Archbishop* when Father Vaillant says – “No, no! She has had enough of the stories of the world. Here she is safe and happy” (*DCA* 210). So an interesting combination is perceived in the cloister of the Convent of the Sisters where Magdalena has found refuge in the service of the kitchen. Magdalena is thus saved from the sexuality of the outside world to the celibacy of the Cloister to be “safe and happy” – a choice that Alexandra makes in the outside world in her marriage with long-time friend, Carl Linstrum, and a choice that is echoed by Cecile in her marriage with Pierre, who promises to love her like her father.
In *Lucy Gayheart*, we have another variation of the simple and naive father, a figure that recurs over and over again in the pages of Willa Cather.

"Though Jacob Gayheart was a good watchmaker, he wasn't a good manager. Born of Bavarian parents in the German Colony of Belleville, Illinois, he had learned his trade under his father. He came to Haverford young and married an American wife who brought him a half-section of good farmland. After her death he borrowed money to buy another and now both were mortgaged."

*LG 6*

This description reminds us forcefully of the other father whose naivete made him a soft target for commercial transactions, the prototype of the 'Southern Gentleman'. Lucy and her father share a close bond. When he goes to see her off at the station we are privy to a soft moment between father and daughter. "He put his arm around her and as he kissed her he murmured in her ear, 'She's a nice girl, my Lucy!'" (*LG 16*). But immediately after this, Lucy shows relief at going away. So one wonders whether the relationship is simple and loving or complex and ambivalent. Moreover when Lucy is with Sebastian she feels more comforted rather than excited. Susan Rosowski shows how even when locked in an embrace with Sebastian, "what Lucy seeks with Sebastian is not a lover but attachment and her comfort in his embraces seems that of a child, even a foetus, to its mother." Two things get foregrounded by this observation. First that adolescence is projected in a covert manner. Cather refuses to delve into the psyche of an adolescent girl by merely emphasizing her need of comfort unrelated to blossoming sexuality. Second, the posture of the foetus reveals a different bond.
In *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) we are introduced to a run-away couple. But unlike Emile and Marie in *The Song of the Lark*, Myra and Oswald set up home and are happy. Oswald's description again is a complex masculinization. He had a "face with outstanding bones and languid, friendly eyes - that perplexing combination of something hard and something soft" (*MME* Part I Chapter 1). We are reminded of Claude Wheeler who had a similar combination of constructed masculinity. Though Oswald's devotion to his wife is beyond doubt, one wonders why he accepts the gift from another woman and asks Lydia, the cousin, to lie and bail him out. His confession to Lydia, itself, is a complex play on their interrelated relationships. A straightforward lesbian explanation does not really work in this situation.

Lastly, by bringing in ambivalences in the presentation of the father-daughter bond in the last novel by Cather, it is entirely appropriate that certain pertinent questions will be raised in the mind of the reader.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


35. Cather, Willa. *My Mortal Enemy*. 1926. gutenburg.net.au, Project Gutenburg of Australia, April 2005. Web. 23 May 2007. All further references are from this and the novel will be referred to as *MME* in parenthesis.