

APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING SUBJECTIVITY AND IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A PSYCHOANALYTIC
READING OF WILLA CATHER'S WORKS

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AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE:
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INTRODUCTION

Reflected in the works of many contemporaneous authors, The United States witnessed remarkable changes at the turn of the twentieth century, some of which stemmed from the suffragette movement that ultimately led to women receiving the right to vote in 1920. The evolution of the women's movement in various forms, the development of feminist theory, and the consequent rejection of social conformity continued to progress throughout the decades of the first half of the Twentieth Century. One of the outstanding authors of this time period, Willa Cather (1873 – 1947), found a voice that enabled her to reach out to the wider community while working as a journalist. Her life spanned the period when a predominantly rural agricultural society was dramatically transformed into an urban industrial era that drew an unprecedented number of multinational immigrants to the great industrial cities of Pittsburgh, Akron, Cleveland, and Detroit, and even to faraway Nebraska, where they struggled to survive on the treeless prairie. These are the lives reflected in Cather's compositions.

Scholarly readings of Cather's work demonstrate various critical perspectives, including lesbian theory, feminist theory, and various American studies perspectives. For example, in her study, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, Joan Acocella (2000), provides detailed readings of and responses to Cather criticism from a variety of sources across time to justify the positions of Cather's audiences (both readers and scholars)

relative to her works. “It is a reminder to readers and scholars that if the truths of literature are mutable, so are the abilities of academics to find or focus on them” (np). Acocel’s collection devalues neither the criticism nor Cather’s work; nevertheless, it advocates the reception of Cather’s works in ways that are based on their own merit and not through a kaleidoscope of varying waves of emerging criticism.

Janis P. Stout’s collected essays affirm Cather as a modernist author. Focusing on the presentation of material objects, Stout reads Cather from cultural and modernist perspectives. In introducing her collection she writes: “words have been attended to and studied for so long, and have been so privileged above material objects in the hierarchy of what is worthy of attention, that the more recent interest in objects, not merely as illustrations of meaning but as coequal conveyers of meaning, is a significant corrective” (216). Reflecting on the objects in her life as well as in her fiction presents a tangible means by which to better understand Cather.

To establish the place of modern culture in Cather’s work, Homestead and Reynolds (2011) assembled a collection of essays in two sections: the representation of art and visual arts in Cather’s works, and, more interestingly, the presentation of different types of places in Cather’s modern world. In the latter section, the different places and landscapes presented in Cather’s fiction parallels her development and argue against classifying her as a regionalist because of her successful ability to represent various cultures and settings.

The critical works cited above reinforce the belief that it is important to continually rethink Cather from new perspectives. In my undergraduate program majoring in English in Saudi Arabia, there was no mention of Cather in class discussion, nor had students from

other regions of my country studied Cather. Rather, I first encountered her work in graduate school. Consequently, I decided to write the following chapters in hopes of bringing Cather to a new audience in Saudi universities, and to enable students to encounter the issues, both universal and significant, in her work. In point of fact, Cather scholars have previously attempted to expand Cather's audience by offering multiple readings and relating them to modern day life. For example, in 2014, while preparing the 2017 seminar, "Beyond Nebraska: Cather's Pittsburgh," a group of Cather's scholars engaged in a walking tour which resulted in exploring a building in downtown Pittsburgh related to Cather's famous short story "Paul's Case" (Bintrim 10). And in 2016, Charles A. Peek likewise issued another call to consider Cather from a broader perspective to allow her readers to pick up on Cather's international themes. Similarly, my intention in the following chapters is to present Cather's works in a context of international and universal ideas.

My first chapter stems from a reading of "abjection theory" as applied to the 1918 novel of *My Antonia*. Julia Kristeva presents abjection as "the one that is not me," as everything that exists outside the boundary of myself that represents a threat to the "I." Moreover, she stipulates that to achieve a complete identity, there are two choices: either to consider the external threat as "abject," located outside the scope of meaning for me, or to identify with the threat and thus "abject oneself." My chapter on "abjection" therefore provides a response to the essentially representative readings of *My Antonia* which discuss the presentation of the unwed mother. In 2003, Fisher-Wirth discussed Julia Kristeva's ideas about abjection and applies them to the presentation of Antonia's body, specifically to giving birth outside the bonds of marriage, reinforcing the idea of a monstrous feminine

body on the mind of the reader. Keeping all this in mind, my reading of *Antonia* developed in this chapter will further the understanding of her presentation as “abject” in the first place and show how Antonia managed to achieve her independence and whole subjectivity coping with numerous threats imposed upon her character and her body.

The second part of this chapter will be devoted to exploring variations on the meaning of abjection experienced by other characters in the novel, such as Jim Burden, Yulka Shimerda, Mr. Shimerda, and Wick Cutter. Each of these characters experienced a type of abjection as they strived to shape their identities to suit their surroundings. The abjection enacted in those characters’ experiences reflects a type of horror and disgust which emphasizes Kristeva’s ideas of “abjection” as an experience of “struggle to achieve existence.” The last part of the chapter discusses the representation and reinterpretation of *My Antonia* in a film adaptation produced in 1995, directed by Joseph Sargent. My discussion of this film will focus on how the ideas of abjection are transferred into the visual medium. In addition, this part will include a review of how the pleasure developed as an experience of watching this movie helps to lessen or remove the horror that is the actual result and product of “abjection of the body” in the novel.

My second chapter centers on a reading of Cather’s last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Though set before the Civil War, in this novel Cather is negotiating the power allowed to women during her own time and which still influences our contemporary world. This chapter is constructed to focus on power and control in women’s relationships. A close reading of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* reveals that each female character practices a type of power that is framed in the shape of a circle enclosed upon them. In other words, all the female characters practice their privilege of power in a restricted place and sphere.

Sapphira, Jezebel, Tell, Rachel, Nancy, and the young unnamed narrator in the last part of the book are presented to show how each of these strong women chose to practice her rights of power.

Moreover, this chapter draws a distinction between power and authority in words as well as practice. The discussion of this difference will illuminate the understanding of the power discourse in the novel. This part will also give a reading to the muted authority or power of male characters, such as Mr. Henry Colbert and Martin Colbert. As created by Cather, these two characters are not allowed to practice their power either, according to law (as in the case of Mr. Henry Colbert) or according to the privilege expressed through masculine traits (as in Martin's case). By probing the types of powers allowed to different genders, this chapter provides insight into understanding the type of power presented in the novel as a whole.

This chapter also notes the types of "enforcement" used by various characters to practice their power and maintain control over other characters of the same gender or another genders. The discussion of cross-gender uses of power will focus on Mrs. Sapphira Colbert and Mr. Henry Colbert's relationship, along with the relationship between Martin Colbert and Nancy Tell.

The third and final chapter is devoted to understanding Cather and her career through the presentation of the short story, "Paul's Case" (1905) and the novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). The first part presents an understanding of Cather and "Paul's Case" as parallel works by applying the mimetic theory and its triangular desire as developed by Rene Girard. In this theory, Girard claims that all our desires are similarly

evoked by a “mediator” which we invariably consider as a “rival” to compete with in order to satisfy our desires. My main argument is that by depicting a failed artist, Cather unconsciously informed us as readers about her own lack of a mediator to enable her to achieve a successful position in the literary world. Later, inspired by Sarah Orne Jewett and attempts to explore the work of renowned authors like Hawthorne, Cather manages to restore the missed component of the triangular desire.

The second part of the chapter tackles Cather’s successful self-positioning as achieved by the creation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which stands as a turning point in her writing career by focusing on the inclusion of international themes and the presentation of different faiths and cultures as the source of her success and a greater level of maturity in her compositions. The argument in this section illustrates how Cather’s depiction changed and developed after restoring the components of “triangular” desire. As this novel is rich in international themes of religion, tenderness, and cultures appreciation, it reflects on how those themes were initiated in Cather’s early works, but flourished and developed later, and gradually.

CHAPTER I

STRIVING FOR SUBJECTIVITY AND PERFORMING OF “ABJECTION” IN *MY ANTONIA*

An underlying theme in most of Willa Cather's works has been to ensure the existence of their independent identities, such as many of the pioneer characters that dwell in her fictional world. Almost every single story composed by Cather is a good example to discuss how its characters are trying to seek their unique and complete existence in life by attempting to understand who they are and what they want to be. *My Antonia* stands out clearly among Cather's works as the novel that includes the most complicated characters who struggle with ensuring their independent identities, whether gender or social identities. The discussion of identity meaning and its construction is a challenging topic over the time. Therefore, this chapter aims to address *My Antonia* from

a different cultural perspective that stems from the Islamic-Arabic ¹ discussion of identity and abjection theory.

The fundamental reason for choosing these two perspectives from which to read the novel is to add to the field of understanding identities, as well as to reflect on the variation of meanings of abjection available for every single personality. The identity or the "I," in the Islamic perspective, is not an imitation of something else because every new born baby ² is born in a stage of "primitiveness." Simply, all babies are like blank (white) sheet of paper, and as they continue in life, they construct and develop the meaning of their selves and personalities. Also, the soul of every single newborn has an equal amount of good and evil; there being no one who is completely wicked or virtuous. With this ideology in mind, the human being's course of life is a continuum. All beings develop a completely unique meaning for their identities based on their values, rituals, beliefs, so on. In other words, as human are classified into different categories based on gender, social class, nationality, age, and as they grow within a given society their internal being – their conscience- is developed unconsciously which is reflected in their decisions making and views of issues. Unsurprisingly, in one household, various views are expressed regarding one issue, and commonly it is clear children contrast with their parents on some issues, and vice versa. For instance, the meaning of hygiene can be interpreted in various ways by different people. While some people see it as the complete

¹ As an Arabic Muslim I choose to discuss *My Antonia* from this perspective; the views of Identities followed in this discussion are based on the ones given in the holy Qur'an and Prophet Mohamed's sayings.

² The new-born baby refers to all the new-born ones from all over the world, not necessarily Muslims.

cleanliness from the eternal or external, other may relate it only to the external looking of things.

During the course of life, people are instructed from various institutions in their daily life either formally or informally; however, the impact of these instructions cannot be similar to everyone receiving them. As they grow older, they start to obtain “circle frames” around themselves and start to identify themselves as safe when everything *inside* the circle is settled and undisturbed. In a similar way, when anything they locate or identify as *outside* the scope of their meaning is attempting to emerge or enter into their “circle frames”, it is perceived as a threat to their identities. The best way to understand the person's experience of life is through looking at the comprehensive idea of “abjection.” The definition of abjection used here is the one developed by Julia Kristeva as articulated in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982). The “abject” is presented as the one that is “not me” (2). In other words, it is defined as everything that exists outside the boundary of myself and which is a threat to the “I.” In order to achieve one’s specific individual identity or “I,” there are two choices: either to consider the external threat as “abjected,” (located outside the scope of personal meaning for the “I”), or to identify *with* the threat and “abject” oneself by modifying one’s own identity.³ However, this threat or *Other* is very necessary for the “I” to recognize its existence. Based on the different ideologies explained above, I argue that our sense of the meaning of our identity may be understood as shaped in a form of a “circle” around the “I.” This “frame” is built by the accumulation of earlier experiences in life, and it helps the “I” to evaluate and judge what must be *inside* the circumscribed frame, and what maybe opposed and forsaken –

³ As the “abjection” serves as a threat to the identity, it is always a source of horror and disgust.

“abjected”- as exists *outside* the borders of the circle. However, those “circles” which enclose our identities are not equal for everyone. Some people are *strict* and conservative with their constructed meaning of the "I," while others are much more *lenient* and flexible taking into consideration and probably accepting modifications to the "I." Thus, the two different types of frames reflect how communities or institutions deal with varied issues like the presentation of gender, crimes, law, and so forth.

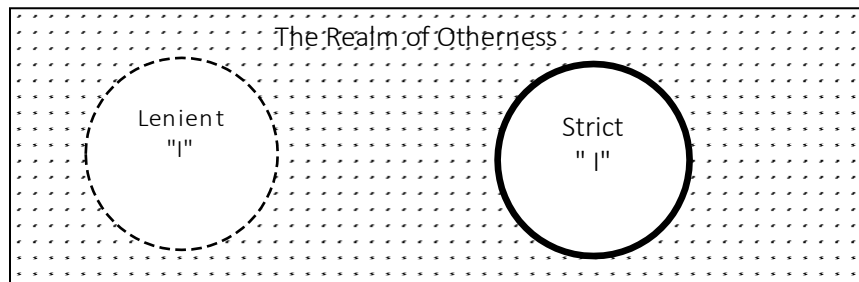


Figure 1

Within my working definition of “abjection,” *My Antonia* presents a struggle to interpret the identities of the two main characters: Jim Burden as an American born white male and Antonia Shimerda as a darker-skinned Bohemian immigrant female. This struggle can be explained based on the idea of “abjection” and striving to achieve subjectivity within the frontier community. Interestingly, the “circled frames” of identities in this novel are implicit on the early chapters when Antonia offers Jim “her *circled ring*” until the final pages where Jim similarly recognizes “what a little *circle*” man's experience is” (Cather 179).

Actually, the novel has been discussed by other critics as a work to which Kristeva's abjection theory may be applied. One of the representative discussions is “‘Clean as a Cow That Calves’, *My Antonia*, *Plainsong*, and the Semiotics of Birth,” by Ann Fisher-Wirth (2003). In this article, Fisher-Wirth links “abjection” and the maternal body (the feminine) as a source of procreation that “horrifies and fascinates” (187) along

with what Kristeva developed as the "clean and proper body" (qtd. 187). The maternal condition discussed in the novel centers on the birth of Antonia's daughter outside the bonds of marriage. Fisher-Wirth persuasively explains how Antonia exemplifies "abjection" and challenges the social order by returning unwed and pregnant to Black Hawk. In a similar way, she notes how the procreation experienced by Antonia positions her liminal to the non-meaning realm where the boundaries between human and nonhuman dissolve. However, *lenient* Antonia does not become fixed in this position as she manages to regain a position of respectability in the social order, described in "Cuzak's Boys" as "a rich mine of life" (171). This positive evaluation of *lenient* character of Antonia does not occur until she gets married and bears legitimate children and becomes clear in the way Jim sought news of Antonia. Jim, who presents a *strict model of identity*, does not reunite directly with his *lenient* Antonia. Before he goes to meet her, he prefers to hear about Antonia's from the Widow Steavens. Consequently, this is something that deserves to be considered. Why does Jim need a mediator to hear the complete story? Does he need to judge her by the standard of others? Which frame of "abject" does he have, one similar to Mrs. Steaven's or an independent one?

In addition to Fisher-Wirth's reading of abjection in the text of *My Antonia*, there are also some points in the text of the novel where the discussion of "abjection" is still applicable. Along with the "proper and clean body" as a source of constructing a sense of the identity, there are places where the experience of reading the novel- with its repeated bloody suicides- imposes horror and disgust which in turn lead into the domain of "abjection."

Focusing on Jim and Antonia and their gender performances, the reading of “abjection” and identity is applicable in the way each is presented throughout the text as they strive to achieve their subjectivities to suit the frontier's social order. Constructed in the early twentieth century, the novel reflects the roles ascribed for each gender. However, at this time, a predominately agricultural economy began its great shift to the industrial era and consequently influenced gender performance and its expectations. Similarly, the great flood of immigrants of various nationalities which exposed American communities to varied cultures enlarged the frames of gender expectations. As well, it allowed for some exceptions that enabled the immigrants to fit into the social order as it then existed and consequently improve their ways of life. Antonia is an immigrant female; her main purpose is to ensure a living for her poor family. She develops a kind of *a lenient identity* as she accepts working in a male's job, then moves to work as house servant; and later returns as unwed and pregnant to Black Hawk. Jim, in other hand, his *strict frame of identity* presents him as devoted to his study and familial expectations. Nevertheless, both Jim and Antonia diverge from their community's expectations and transcend the borders of performance of both male and female. In so doing, they are conscious of their performance, yet they attempt to locate their identities as independents.

Through its depiction of Jim and Antonia, Cather's text describes these two characters as unsatisfied with their current situation, thus allowing us as readers to see how Jim and Antonia experience a change in the status of their respective genders. For example, in the snake scene in chapter VII of Book One, the young adolescent Jim moved from childhood into a brave manhood by killing the big old rattlesnake which had

“not much fight in him” (32). Though Jim is privileged by this accomplishment, I argue he experienced a type of “self-abjection”. As Kristeva puts it:

During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects (3).

The snake killing scene is a good example to reflect on how the horror experience leads into an unconscious reaction to secure the identity and stay safe inside the circled frame of the "I." By killing the snake, Jim is not only moving from adolescence into manhood, but he is also assigning defeating the snake to idealism. Kristeva explains: “To each ego its object, to each superego its abject” (2). By revealing the nature of the snake as an old and has no much fight indicates the fakeness of Jim’s masculinity. Readers and characters know that Jim is privileged by killing the snake because of its weakness. However, Jim recognizes his accomplishment as a contribution to his *strict frame of identity*. Reading this scene from a traditional Judeo-Cristian perspective, the inclusion of a male figure, a female figure, and a snake brings to mind the Eden myth. Since the snake is used as a symbol for temptation, by killing the snake Jim is in a sense making himself superior to all mankind and a successful protector of the female, Antonia. He moves from the ego desires to satisfy his superego and be more ideal than Adam. Interestingly, reading from this perspective challenges human beliefs about temptation, and as well it foreshadows the relationship between Jim and Antonia at the end of the novel as they never will be together even though they had stepped into the same road of destiny.

Antonia undergoes another form of “self-abjection.” Throughout the novel, Antonia is always presented as the successful female figure who serves as a threat to Jim’s masculinity. As Jim explains, “Much as I liked Antonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner” (29). Jim’s description of Antonia is based primarily on his understanding of her character. Yet, since Antonia discovers that her character and behavior are not totally appealing to the community, she experiences a situation of “abjection” through her conformity to the social order.

Antonia is conscious that in her gender performance; she is behaving both as a female and as a male by accepting to work outdoors. This becomes fascinating when we read Antonia’s gender performance and her social conformity through the lens of Kristeva’s explanation of sublimation:

Sublimation, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the prenominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the symptom, the object permeates me, I become object. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. (11)

Antonia sublimates through her modification of her identity as she accepts to work as a house servant in the town of Black Hawk. She moves herself from the male hard-work of the field into an indoor lady-like job. The sublimation here, following Kristeva, stands as an unconscious defense mechanism of diverting or modifying into a higher or socially more acceptable status. After Mr. Shimerda’s death, Antonia devotes herself to her family and lives for their sake. She asserts, “I can work like mans now” (66). Then, Jim

explains how her working “like mans” had altered Antonia’s behavior as she, “ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached” (67). Another description of her new masculine behaviors states she “gather(s) on her upper lip like a little mustache” and asks Jim to feel her muscles (77). Then, Antonia discusses what she perceives as Mrs. Burden (Jim’s grandmother) opinion of her behavior and assures him she does not care. By adapting these masculine traits, exceeding the limits of what is expected of a female, she becomes a *lenient* “abject.” With the emergence of the various waves of feminism, there was a greater consciousness of gender performances along with the appeal to social conformity. Thus, such behavior on the part of a female character might be considered as not in compliance with what the symbolic order expects of Antonia. Antonia’s performance as masculine makes her to exist outside the realm of the meaning of a proper lady, and as a threat to the womanhood identity.

However, when she visits Jim in Black Hawk as she starts her job as a house assistance at the Harlings’, Antonia performs the sublimation technique to suit the social order. She tells Jim, “Maybe I be the kind of girl you like better, now I come to town” (82). Now, by moving from the country side into the town and obtaining an indoor job as a “hired girls,” Antonia is experiencing what Kristeva describes as a sublimation in order to maintain an acceptable position in relation to her surroundings. The *lenient identity* of Antonia fluctuates between male’s gender performance and a female’s one; however, she manages to sublimate and confirm the social norms.

The presence of sublimation as a way to resist “abjection” indicates the existence of narcissism, which also stands as a self-centered mechanism to substitute for a failure

of confusing oneself with otherness which results in an attempt to gain domination over or possession of the otherness. This technique clearly occurs in the novel and is experienced by the narrator, Jim. As Kristeva explains, “Narcissism then appears as a regression to a position set back from the other, a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven” (14). The more Antonia moves toward returning back to her feminine character, the more Jim recognizes her as his childhood friend, the one he knows as the Bohemian Antonia. And this is seen more than once in the text of *My Antonia*. At the end of Book 1, during a conversation, Jim asks Antonia to be herself all the time:

“Why are n’t you always nice like this, Tony?”

“How nice?”

“Why, just like this; like yourself. Why do you al the time try to be like Ambrosch?” (Cather 76).

By making use of this sad and regressive tone, Cather invests Jim with a type of narcissism which appears even more clearly again later in the second book. In other words, through this reproachful tone directed toward the current character of Antonia, Jim experiences narcissistic urges to the extent to exert control over Antonia by blaming her for being someone else and asking her to be herself again. Again Jim is feeling nostalgia for the time when Antonia first appeared. His expression of emotion moved Antonia to reminiscence about her dead father and the old country.

John Murphy argues there is narcissism in Jim’s acquiring of Antonia as a symbol of his initial experience in the country (155). During the picnic with the hired girls at the river while listening to Antonia’s feelings of homesickness, Jim reflects on Antonia’s

situation, “Antonia seemed to me that day exactly like the little girl who used to come to our house with Mr. Shimerda” (119). Clearly, the experience of narcissism had already appeared at the beginning of the work. In the novel’s introduction, Cather presents an anonymous narrator who purports to be offering Jim Burden’s own manuscript to the reader, rather than a fictive work of the imagination. The narrator informs the reader how both of them were preoccupied by discussions about Antonia whom they had known well in Nebraska. However, after writing down his memories of Antonia, Jim leaves behind this unedited and as yet untitled manuscript, but at the last moment, he writes on the legal portfolio “My Antonia” before finally entrusting it into the hands of this friend.

Regarding this choice of title, John Murphy argues that the inscription “is a sad testimony to the unfulfilled potential of Jim Burden and the American West” (156). Though they are both well acquainted with Antonia, Jim chooses to possess Antonia and seek to make her belong to him. Ironically, though they both treasured their memories of Antonia, this anonymous author of the introduction is not found or identified within the main body of the work, which makes it clear that Jim still longs for Antonia, his Antonia and his past. Thus, Jim’s experience of narcissism locates Antonia in his memory and circulates her in his brain, and it is confirmed by what is mentioned in the novel about the character of Antonia is “pretty much all that her name recalls to me (Jim)” (Cather 8).

Along with sublimation and narcissism as devices to cope with the experience of “abjection”, the text of *My Antonia* presents the most horrifying scenes of “abjection” as it presents the idea of suicide. The suicidal activities committed in this novel are worthy of discussion to emphasize the Islamic cultural perspective of this chapter. This novel presents three different stories of suicide committed by people from different

backgrounds who have different motives to end their lives. Interestingly, the reader is informed of the suicides of Mr. Shimerda, the homeless character, and Wick Cutter by a double narration. The stories originate with some characters then Jim includes them as part of his narrative. All these stories become a source of disgust and horror to both the readers and characters in the novel.

Thinking of suicide in Islam and other religions, it is traditionally wicked, evil, and condemned. Here Cather presses for considerations of questions like: What is the self or the soul? Or what is the life of a human being? Essentially in the Islamic perspective, the human being is only a decaying corpse without the soul. The soul is a light unidentifiable presence living creatures are privileged to possess as it is inspired by God into their bodies⁴. As it is inspired into bodies, it is presented to human beings as an act of trust, which means they have no right to strip it out of its location or end it. Even though this soul is preserved after the death of the body, it must not be disturbed by hurting the body or ending one's life because it occupies the body as the air in an empty container. According to the Qur'an, as a natural law, every single being unconsciously strives to rescue others from danger, and it must be the same about their lives. Yes, death is fundamental; however, it is dutiful to ask for debits in the due season but not to hasten them. Kristeva referred to crimes including suicide as a form of "abjection." She writes:

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject...there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles...(4).

⁴It is inspired by God because the only owner of it is God.

The argument here is that any crime that threatens the meaning of life and leads to its termination is “abject” and refused in the realm of the identity. Any crime that confronts life with death leads to the collapse of meaning; thus, it must be rejected and expelled.

Based on these views, the suicides mentioned in *My Antonia* need to be discussed and analyzed. For what purpose did Cather present the three different occurrences of suicide? For example, are they mentioned as marginalized stories to fill in the plot? Why did Cather choose a good person (Mr. Shimerda), a person of vice (Wick Cutter), and an unknown person who possess only "an old penknife," "a wishbone of a chicken," and an old piece of poetry by Samuel Woodworth. One probable answer is as Joan Acocella explained regarding the worse fate of the "hobo" as he "throws himself into the threshing machine" is given in the text "laconically" which stripped the suicide of its meaning as the terrors of life leads the human soul to face a great emptiness (5-6). The fact that someone is killing himself to escape a desperate fate, exile, or any type of loss is completely horrifying. As the soul is an eternal creature that does not end by killing the physical body, then what do people get by destroying their bodies? Is the soul going to be freed from the miserable fate which causes suicide?

Mr. Shimerda commits his suicide due to the homesickness and the improbable, desperate fate he leads his family to; Wick Cutter commits suicide and kills his wife due to greediness and to prevent her from inheriting his estate; the homeless man commits suicide for unknown reasons. Since the soul belongs only to God, the crime of suicide must unquestionably denounced and considered as an act of “abjection” and be rejected, and so far, there must be no differentiations between people who commit such crimes because they must all be labeled as unfaithful to the privilege entrusted to them of being

alive and able to build up the world. In the Islamic culture, the only reason for sending people to the earth from Heaven is to build it up in the best way they can and be God's attestation on it to achieve justice. To support this point of view, I argue that as Cather presents this trilogy of suicide, it seems to me that she is attempting to argue that all of them must be judged in a similar way. The trilogy is laid out in the text of the novel in a line with two ends which are mediated by a neutral point. In other words, the trilogy as presented at the first edge is the nice Mr. Shimerda, on the second edge is the wicked Wick Cutter, and in between those two edges the hobo's suicide.

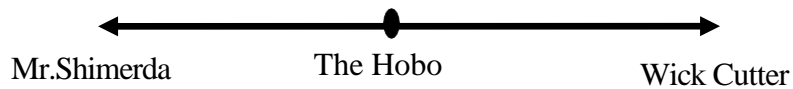


Figure 2

Completing the “circle” of the trilogy results in considering the story of suicide objectively as being away from any edge that might end its existence, which seems to manifest a balanced view and judgment of suicide. The hobo suicide considers the most horrifying and condemned one in the novel as it stays far from the edges; therefore, suicide needs to be viewed generally as condemned and “abject.”

The ultimate result of suicide is the existence of the corpse which also presents a great threat to the recognition of identity. As described by Kristeva, "If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3). In the text of the novel, representations of the corpse appear every time suicide is mentioned. Classified to be “abject,” those representations evoke the feeling of horror and fears in us as readers and as well compels other characters to confront them with

horror. In describing Mr. Shimerda's funeral, Jim, relates his reaction and that of Yulka Shimerda which exemplify a striving to secure their identities through enacting disgust and fear upon encountering the corpse. In other words, their reaction triggered upon seeing the dead body laid out at their feet is merely an attempt to separate themselves from the threat of being outside the realm of life and to ensure their existence as living beings.

The reactions of those characters are completely different: Jim takes the role of a voyeur who gives more details about the weather, the coffin and the attendants, while Yulka recoils from the scene. As Yulka is commanded by her mother to pay her respects to the dead father, she "hung back... knelt down, shut her eyes, and put out her hand a little way, but she drew it back and began to cry wildly. She was afraid to touch the bandage" (Cather 63). All those shunning reactions symbolize the horror and fears experienced by the little girl to avoid joining or accepting the "abject," i.e. the corpse. Jim, however, chooses to observe and give the reader more details about the coffin and its occupant rather than telling about his feeling. By neglecting to tell about his emotions, Jim is holding himself back to resist conscious consideration of death. Yet, Jim's feelings of fear will unfold later when he says, "I was afraid to look at Antonia" (63). Actually, he is afraid to look at Antonia because he does not want to see how horribly her father's death affected her. In other words, he is afraid to encounter sobs, tears, and other bodily phenomena which might threaten him and emerge from his own body and thus lead him to the realm of "abjection." More precisely, Jim's experience is as Kristeva describes it:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a

living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver (3).

Thus, Jim and Yulka experience a type of horror that leads them to recognize their status of being alive outside the place where their meaning of life is threatened by death.

In a similar way, the discussion of the cadaver in the other presentations of suicide is not less horrifying than the first one. In the hobo's suicide, his body is torn into pieces as soon as he falls into the threshing machine. Nina Harling's crying and fearful reaction corresponds to Yulka's. Thirdly, the news of Wick Cutter's death is received by cheers from Cuzak's children, though it is the most horrifying act of suicide. Wick Cutter, for me, presents the most fearful way of committing suicide as he talks to the terrified neighbors "...with his throat torn open, bleeding on a roll of sheets he had placed beside his head" (Cather 174) and asks them to witness that he had survived his wife to ensure the complete right of inheritance.

Amid all those experiences⁵ of horror and disgust evoked upon encountering the "abjected" which serve as a significant counter to understanding the identities, as well as the challenged circled frames, it is important to think about the media presentation of this novel through its adaptation. Is the horror and disgust made clear through the medium? Does the adaptation of *My Antonia* reflect the experience of "abjection"? One of the famous adaptations of this novel is the 1995 film, "My Antonia," directed by Joseph Sargent and starring Jason Robards, Eva Marie Saint, and Neil Patrick Harris. As is the case with most other adaptations of renowned works of fiction, this film has presented the

⁵ The experiences refer to the discussed earlier situations where abjection is experienced.

novel as a dramatic romantic story with some variation from the main plot. This film constructs a shade of horror, but it was not enough to represent the complicated experience of abjection. The film's depiction of Jim's reaction to his parents' deaths⁶ is portrayed as he is sitting by their bedside squeezing himself towards the corner of the room.

Other than this, the presentation of "abjection" in this film might be pursued through the depiction of the emergence of life and the birth myth. Even though the text of the novel is occupied by emerging of life images, the adaptation presents only two of them: one during Burden's first visit to the Shimerda's dugout, and the second during their second visit as they entered the Shimerda's cave and see the hole where Antonia and her sister sleep. However, even these presentations fail to convey the complete and comprehensive way of "abjection." Citing this failure, I argue that abjection as a critical theory must be studied and presented in the adaptation in a similar way it is presented in the text. The film does not portray any of the suicide crimes, nor the "*self-abject*" experience discussed earlier in the paper.

If "abjection" theory were carried out seriously in the film, it would result in a horror film that would draw the media's attention⁷. The best way to understand the emergence and birth like experiences presented in the main body of *My Antonia* is to compare it with what Barbara Creed discusses as the presentation of monstrous feminine which is evoked by presenting the Earth Mother. As a critic of the horror genre, Creed

⁶ This is not presented in the main text of the novel; it is added in the film in an attempt to make a full record of Jim's life.

⁷ Unfortunately, I was not able to find a critical or scholarly works which discussed this film. My research resulted on a single review of it, which does not pay any attention to the abjection or the horror themes of the novel.

links the monstrous feminine with the abjection theory of Kristeva. Also, Creed assigns the horror of the monstrous to the ability of feminine procreation ability which evokes terror in the male spectator. Representations of Mother Nature or featuring a simulation of the female body evokes fears or challenges the perspective of the audience or characters in the works, and it presents a source of the procreation process. In *My Antonia*, for example, in the snake scene in chapter VII, of Book One, Jim says that Antonia and he "were in the prairie examining a big hole with two entrances" (Cather 30) out of which emerges a huge rattle snake. The result of this emergence evokes in both the characters and the reader the feeling of horror which ends by Jim's killing the snake. Previous to this scene, there is another representation of the monstrous feminine in Jim's grandmother's garden. His grandmother is telling Jim: "Don't be scared if you see anything look out of that hole in the bank over there. That's a badger hole" (16). Also, throughout the novel, the Shimerdas' residence is described as a hole which is assimilated near to the end of the novel with the Cuzak's fruit cave. In a most horrifying image, the threshing machine swallowed the hobo's body as womb. And mostly the presentation of those types of holes or womb-like images are associated with the monstrous feminine. Emergence out of the hole represents an emergence to life which sometimes is threatened by death, and the holes are representations of the maternal womb which is the source of life and procreation. If those scenes had been dramatized in the adaptation, the experience of horror and "abjection" would be manifest.

Those holes and vagina-like images enforce what I argued at the beginning of the chapter. As those images are similar in shape to the ring offered to Jim by Antonia and the little "circle" of man's experience, they similarly stand for the "circled frames" that

enclose around the sense of one's identity. As I explained earlier, the "circled frames" that encompass identities are either *strict* or *lenient*. The film presents how Antonia acquires a *lenient frame* as she tells Jim about a belief in Bohemia, which is not mentioned in the novel. The belief is "Life is circle; every one you love is in your circle" then she joined her circled fingers to Jim's and assures him that he is "in her circle forever." As Antonia accepted Jim into her circle, she reflects on the openness of her identity and the acceptance to seek the adventures and challenges to suit the security of her identity. However, Jim's recognition that he has crossed the same road as Antonia, the road that brings them together through reminisces of their past, is similar to the circular roundabout roads at the head of Mr. Shimerda's grave. Ann Fisher-Wirth offers the best description to fit Jim and Antonia's relationship: "Their paths have been diverging and will continue to diverge: Jim's, toward success within the law, until he becomes, as it were, the exemplar and practitioner of the "Law of the Father" (emphasis is mine); Antonia's, increasingly back toward the realm of the material, the maternal" (43). Jim has framed his sense of identity in a *strict* form which imprisons him at an earlier stage of his life. This prison, he frames for his identity also locked Antonia and her name in his memories in a narcissistic way.

CHAPTER II

POWER DISCOURSE AND THE FEMININE PRACTICE OF POWER IN *SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL*

Will Cather's last novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, published in 1940, presents a story set more than a century before Cather's own time. Reading the novel reveals a conflict typical of American society before the American Civil War: the struggles between owner and slave reflecting the power imbalance between white and black as presented through the characters. As suggested by the title, the body of the novel features female characters. The names of female characters appear as titles for six of the nine books within the novel (six books of the novel's text are devoted to female characters). Early in the novel, the characters are presented as bound to each other either by the laws of the institution of marriage or of slavery setting forth a dominant theme of the novel, the issue of power. The thorough reading of this particular novel reveals a controversial attempt to understand the outlined features of *Power* practiced by the characters of the book. The characters (particularly the female characters) participate in a fascinating way to reflect how each of them has a complete power to manage their personal life and to

ensure unique identities from others. As laid in an unbalanced social setting where characters belong to different social classes with varied privileges, the *Power* as a social practice is confused with common reading of the novel as racially subversive. However, the reading of the novel as work that discusses *Power* as social practice is clarified by focusing on the practice of power by one gender than the other. Therefore, this chapter is determined to be focused on the female characters and their interactions with each other as a source to comprehend the idea of power.

Throughout the novel, there are some instances which allude to the fact that one race (e.g. Sapphira as white aristocratic) is dominating the other (e.g. Nancy as mixed race, lower-class slave). For example, in the second chapter of the first book, Mrs. Blake's early arrival to visit her mother reveals the abuse in the Miller house based on the struggle for power and control. Arriving earlier than expected, "she heard her mother's voice in anger... "Take it down this minute! You know how to do it right... Now you've hurt me, Stubborn!" Then came a smacking sound three times: the wooden back of a hairbrush striking someone's cheek or arm" (12). It is Mrs. Colbert, Mrs. Blake's mother, the owner of the Back Creek miller's plantation abusing her slave girl Nancy Til. Prior to this incident, the reader has learned the mistress, Mrs. Colbert, wanted to sell this slave, but her husband's refusal forced her to "find some other way" (9). Such occurrence might direct the reader's to perceive the work as historical manifestation of anti-racist. Nevertheless, a depiction of a novel, set a century ago from its depiction time, is a mere attempt to promote a discussion of controversial topics in all times, in this case, it is a discussion of power.

The above scene of physical abuse and the attempt to get rid of this young slave girl, among other abusive scenes throughout the novel, reflects the nature of the interpersonal relationships among some characters. Interaction, especially among female characters, raises questions if these are the types of relationships that arise out of a power imbalance. In addition to Sapphira, Rachel (Mrs. Blake), and Nancy (the slave girl), there are other female characters whose presence in the novel exposes the power norms, such as with Jezebel (Nancy's great grandmother), Till (Nancy's mother), and the young unnamed narrator in the last part of the book (supposedly Mrs. Blake grandchild). Throughout the text of the novel, those characters are seen in a matriarchal environment in which they compete to practice their privileges of power and control in their lives.

Though nominally set before the Civil War, here Cather is negotiating the power allowed to women among her contemporaries whose ramifications extend to the present time. This paper (my second chapter) is constructed to focus on power and control in relationships among the female characters in Cather's last novel. A close reading of this novel reveals that each female character practices a type of power that is framed in the shape of a circle enclosed upon them. In other words, all the female characters practice their privilege of power in a restricted space and sphere. Sapphira, Jezebel, Till, Rachel, Nancy, and the young unnamed narrator appearing in the last part show how each of these strong female characters are able to assert their respective privileges of power, which will then illuminate our understanding of the social practice of power in everyday life. Though mainly concerned with the presentation of the practice of power among women, it also sheds light on the common practice of power between women and men.

My discussion of power in this chapter stems from Michael Karlberg's proposed idea on 2005. In an attempt to understand the concept of power in Western societies, he suggests we view the practice of power in communities as "a capacity" not as "a domination." He starts by presenting the conceptualizing of power in the mid and late the twentieth century by theorists who viewed it as "a practice of domination" in which the powerful controls and influence the less powerful one. However, Karlberg argues such a view is insufficient to understand the practice of power in social context. Therefore, he visualizes power as "a practice of capacity," which includes two major subcategories: mutualistic power relations and adversarial power relation, both of which are then divided into power equality and power inequality reflecting the balance of power among the participants. The inequality in the mutualistic subcategory according to Karlberg "results in the "assisted empowerment" of the less powerful agent(s) by the more powerful agent(s)" (10). Thus, Karlberg's conceptualization of power allows to view the power as cooperative practice in which both members participate in power relation.

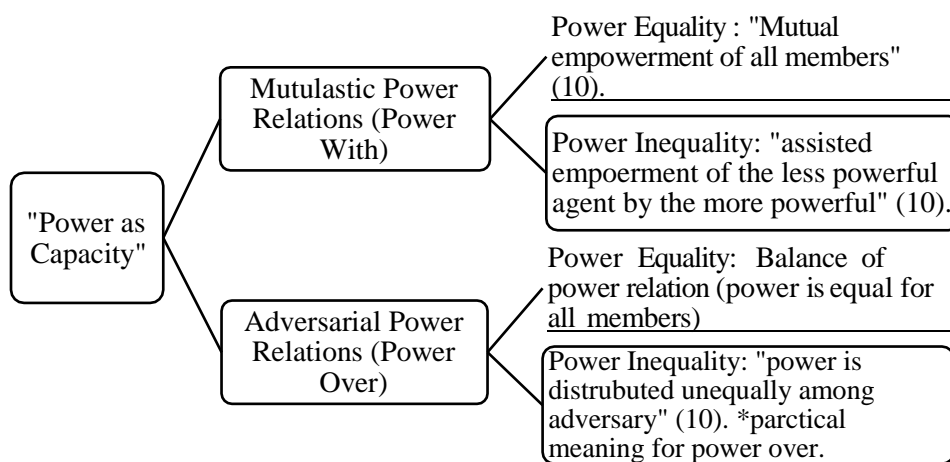
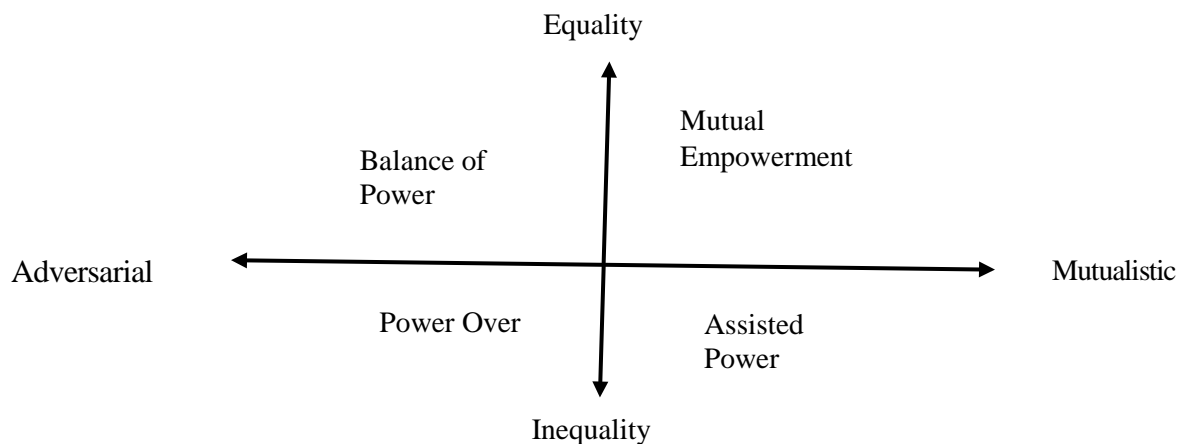


Figure 1: A Summary of Karlberg's Visualization of Power

It is not a passive interaction which presents the more powerful as the dominant. Throughout my discussion, in this chapter, I prefer to use the word “power” rather than “authority.” Though most would argue those words are synonymous, they evoke different emotive connotations, and the presentation in this novel clarifies the distinction between “power” and “authority.”⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary presents several definitions for each of those words which revolve around imposing an influence on a dependent or a follower. In a social context, power is defined as “the potential to get people to do things the way you want them done- a social energy waiting to be used, to be transformed into influence” (qtd. in Ott et al 385). The scene alluded to above indicates the sense of rivalry or competition among these characters while simultaneously revealing much of the direction and the balance of power and domination among them.

Reading Kalberg’s idea illuminates to view the practice of power in Sapphira and the Slave girl in a different way. My proposal in understanding this novel is to locate the characters’ practice of power in the center of the axes that Kalberg presents as a sphere where the power fluctuates (see Kalberg’s figure below (12)):



⁸ The difference between “power” and “authority,” in my point of view, is understood through the way of the practice development. Power is initiated from inside the person, while the latter is a privilege bestowed on people from an external source as law.

My intention of centering the character's in the middle of the figure, is to present a view to what Kalberg might not locate or visualize in his idea of power in the social context. I argue the characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are practicing a form of power which can be articulated as a *Beneficial Practice* in which every members are aware of their social position, yet they can practice a form of power that benefits others. The concept herein agrees with what Salancik and Pfeffer articulate "The amount of power an individual has at any one time depends, not only on the activities he or she controls, but also on the existence of other persons or means by which the activities can be achieved and on those who determine what ends are desired and, hence, on what activities are desired and critical for the organization" (Ott et al 421). The *Beneficial Practice* acknowledges every components of power relations, not just the directions of the power; therefore, it results in recognizing the power as unit not only as a practice or an activity.

For instance, Sapphira's attempt to ruin Nancy motivates the latter to seek prospects for a better life in Canada. This interesting detail about the female practice of power in this novel is an implicit and overlooked element by critics. All of their interactions carry a type of reaction toward each other or themselves. Even though their relationships reflect a pattern of abuse, they still practice their power in a domain where they do not overlap with the common practice of power, reflecting Karlberg's insight and interpretation. In other words, the characters' domain of power is at a domestic level and they do not interfere with the externally dominant social power system. Yet, the social (and political) restrictions imposed on their practice of power assist each of them to move forward in a more cooperative way to reflect a coherent power system. One of the

popular claims about *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as put forward by Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that the female characters in this novel are likely to become victims of male sexuality (226); however, this chapter will present them instead as powerful characters. For a better understanding of the pattern of power performed by the female characters in the novel is to divide them into a couple of matriarchal systems: Sapphira's and Jezebel's.

On the top of Sapphira's matriarchal system sits Sapphira Doddridge Colbert, proud of her English mother, who is married to Henry Colbert, four years younger than she and of a lower social station. To avoid the awkwardness of her new social position as well as her friend's humiliation, Mrs. Colbert chooses to move to the place she has inherited in Back Creek after her marriage. She is a tough mother who does not appreciate her youngest, the only one of her children mentioned in the novel, Mrs. Rachel Blake. "She could see nothing in this girl likely to be attractive to young men." (132). "Mrs. Colbert had been heartily glad to get her married and out of the house at seventeen"⁹(15). Also, Mrs. Colbert has a long history of slave ownership, represented by the multiple generations (from seniors to children) of the slaves she has on her plantation. Her ownership of slaves and living independently on her property while her husband works and remains at the mill empowers her over all the characters around her. Also, her slaves' compliance adds to her power and raises her to a superior position over them. Sapphira's dropsy does not hinder her from

9. In the novel, there is a variation of Mrs. Rachel Blake's age when she married. In Book one, it says she is seventeen when she married. "Mrs. Colbert had been heartily glad to get her married and out of the house at seventeen" (15). The second mention of her age is on Book four, "Rachel was sixteen years old when Michael Blake rode through Frederick County soliciting votes" (131). In couple weeks from his first visit, he returns back to the Miller's house to propose to Rachel.

exercising the power and control of her position as well as others around her. According to Wolff, “her principal aesthetic amusement is to manipulate the world like a living drama. Thus, the threat of seduction and rape enacted by Martin Colbert’s visit becomes “almost as good as a play” for the hostess who staged it” (222). Like a director sitting in her wheel chair, Sapphira controls her Back Creek plantation, and uses other characters including her slaves to carry out and achieve her wishes, which she is unable to perform due to her physical disability.

Next, and in contrast to Mrs. Colbert, there is her youngest daughter, Mrs. Rachel Blake. She is a strong female character who holds beliefs which contrast with those of her mother and surprisingly with others around her. She is a skilled nurse reflecting Cather’s own interest in medicine, according to Nancy Chinn. This empowers her and makes her popular in the Back Creek community. In fact, Rachel is the one called first for sick people to decide if the country doctor is needed or not. Chinn argues this makes Rachel superior to the male physicians, especially Dr. Brush, who has a poor medical practice (73). As she ends her marginalized position in her parents’ house, she is shocked by the death of her husband and the eleven year-old child. Concerning slavery she says, “It is the owning that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant” (137). Mrs. Blake’s position as a symbol of mercy and freedom to most of the characters in the novel not only demonstrates her opposition to her mother’s patriarchal order, but also enhances her power by establishing close relations with people from various social classes. Her move to Washington at age 16, thus bearing her children away from the support of her family, and later the deaths of her husband and eldest child contribute to the maintenance of her strong and powerful character. In other words, after the death of her

child and husband and return to the Back Creek, Mrs. Blake is able to stand by herself and accepts the life of the poor than seeking support from her parents.

Like her mother, she believes her husband is “a rescuer and a saviour” (134) who delivered her from the source of her unhappiness at her parents’ house. During her return to Back Creek, she has her two daughters, Mary and Betty, who also develop into good, powerful characters through their reaction to diphtheria’s infection. Their lives were as poor as most of the creatures around them. Their struggle with diphtheria reflected their power. Mary, Sapphira’s favorite, survived the disease, but her sister encountered death with ease and calm as she “just slipped away without a struggle, like she was dropping off to sleep” (265). She gave up her life to death without resistance, but she died as if entering into a form of sleep like a daily practice with no struggle or pain. She joined the dead with ease as she had had enough of life and waited for her moment of death.

In contrast, Mary is stronger and resembles her mother and grandmother in terms of power. She challenged the doctor’s order of starving the patient to survive diphtheria. She “emerged from the stairway and drifted across the indoor duskiess of the room” “She reached the table, sank down on a wooden chair, and lifted the bowl of broth in her two hands” and “she drank slowly” (259). Mary’s course of action is striking enough to make Fairhead “unable to move or to make a sound” (259). She does not only resist the established medical practice, but also is able to rescue herself from death and overcome her disease. Her survival is significant for the plot as she happens to be the mother of the five year-old narrator who emerges at the end of the book. This young narrator is no less powerful than its (his/her) ancestors because s/he controls the entire book from the beginning. The appearance of this narrator, however, is delayed until book nine while

assigning a powerful position for him/her. According to Sharon Hoover, the emergence of the young narrator at the end of the book is a call for power by Cather who uses the mirror-text as a way to join the story as an author and a character at the same time (239). That means by adding Cather as a narrator (in autobiographical sense), the author is proving her position as a witness and responsibility of the narrative. I argue this emergence is significant for the validity of the narration; it informs the readers that Cather is responsible for the retelling of the story, not the ungendered “over five year-old” sick child. Her appearance at last challenges Sapphira’s power as well as Nancy’s freedom. There was not enough detail about these main and minor characters’ fates until the narrator is revealed as responsible for depicting their ends. With reference to the narrator’s existence in the scene, the reader knows about Nancy’s return to her original town, as well as about the deaths of Sapphira, Mr. Colbert, and Martin Colbert. The delay in revealing the true identity affords the narrator a strong motive to compete with Sapphira who set the stages and plots to control her dependent followers, while Nancy managed to destroy Sapphira’s plots to manipulate others.

Another matriarchal order is presented through Jezebel’s family. Unlike the previous order, the characters belonging to this order never carried a father/ male name. They are always referred to as their mothers’ daughters, as in the case of Nancy Till. On the surface, they are presented as belonging to the category of slaves who are controlled by Sapphira. However, their strong position in the novel is reflected in their names contributing to the titles of two books (Book II: Nancy and Till; Book III: Old Jezebel). Through the narration of those two books, significant information unfolds about those characters and their struggles which reflects their powerful position in the novel.

First of all, Jezebel, the great-grandmother of this matriarchal order, is presented as a strong slave who exhibits the power of both a wild and a domestic creature. The “*Old Jezebel*” section tells “the prescient story of an African woman who was able to preserve both her selfhood and her African American racial identity—even as a slave” (Romines 409). Her distinguishing African physical appearance and her strength to defeat the slave hunters empower her. Once captured by the slave ship the *Albert Horn*, she had lost everything that connects her to her original place and her African life. Her family and village were destroyed, and she was robbed even of her original name which the sailor replaced with the biblical name Jezebel. Jezebel is a source of fear and eagerness for the crew of the *Albert Horn*. The skipper “thought he would like to see a girl who could stand up against two men and the cat” (Cather 93) after she had defeated the mate and bit him. After Jezebel is put in a bridle and brought to the skipper, he thought of her as having the “worth of three women, -- as much as the best of the men” (93). This opinion is based on the skipper’s respect for “a well-shaped creature” (94). She is initially sold to a Dutch farmer who thought of her as “too strong for even a Dutch farmer’s household, so he lodged her in a haymow over the cow barn” (94) in which she learned the basic skills necessary for working on a dairy farm before she is owned by Sapphira’s family. In addition to those natural physical traits which make her superior to other captives on the *Albert Horn*, she never retrieved her original (African) name or language. The only thing readers know about her past is that she is from Guinea and was 18 when brought to the United States.

The narrator claims she lost track of time because of the different system she used to track it, though Jezebel never mentions this. She retained a strong wit until her last

days. A noteworthy part of Jezebel's story is that she has children and a large number of grandchildren all of whom belong to her and carry her name. The absence of a male figure for all of Jezebel's children and grandchildren has empowered her and is a sign of her superior and distinguished position among the various maternal figures in the novel.

In contrast to Sapphira and Rachel, whose names are adjoined first to their father's names and later to their husbands', the characters descended from Jezebel's matriarchal order all belong to her only, and this reflects her status as a natural source of birth and procreation.

The second strong female character in this order is Till who is similar to her grandmother. As a child, Till is tortured by witnessing her mother's death. While dressing for a New Year's party, Till "saw her mother's finery catch fire from a candle; saw her, in flames, run screaming out into the winter wind" (70). Till gives birth to an illegitimate child, Nancy, whose father is neither revealed in the story nor mentioned by Till. After her mother's death, Till is adopted by Mrs. Matchem, the housekeeper at Chestnut Hill, from whom she learned all the proper manners to become a lady's maid. Since fifteen years of age, she has been in the service of Sapphira.

As a devoted servant "with perfect dignity" (72), Till accepted her mistress's arrangement for her marriage to the incapacitated Jefferson. Even though Till is the one who retells these stories to the young narrator, she does not reveal her emotional feelings or provide details about her illegitimate child, or her unfair marriage. The narrator relates, "How much it hurt her pride no one ever knew" (72). As an unconscious technique which she used to cope with the trauma of her mother's death, Till used silence again as a way to deal with the struggles in her life. Till withholds information about her past life as an

effective technique both to empower herself and force the rumors about her to remain unproven. In other words, while Till is the one who has related the history of the Back Creek miller house to the young narrator, she never reveals any information about her personal life. For example, she does not disclose who Nancy's father was, express her feelings about Nancy's treatment by Sapphira, or describe her emotions when her daughter fled.

The last and strongest character in this matriarch order is Nancy Till. Nancy belongs and at the same time does not belong to this order. She belongs as she is the daughter of Jezebel's granddaughter, yet she does not belong because her physical traits do not obviously categorize her as either slave or owner. She is a mixed race child with a yellow face and bright white teeth. She is a slender and beautiful girl compared to her African American ancestors as well as to other slave girls on the miller's farm. Reading Nancy's character from a modern perspective, Traci B. Abbott argues Nancy "disproves traditional southern stereotypes of black female sexuality and asserts the modern notion that black women have the right to control their sexual destiny" (27). Nancy's power is imposed in the novel as she is presented as the trigger for the first disagreement between Mr. Colbert and Mrs. Colbert in the first chapter. Mr. Colbert's refusal to sign for Nancy's trade triggers Mrs. Colbert's hatred as well as her desire to get rid of Nancy in any way possible.

Interestingly, Cynthia Griffin Wolff views Nancy as a reflection of Willa Cather and believes Nancy's artistic way of dealing with beauty (particularly flowers) is the main cause for her struggle because it "stirs the miller's feelings and inspires Sapphira's jealous rage" (222). However, Wolff's reading of Nancy hints at her power to

manipulate others' view of her. Through her innocence and young naiveté, Nancy imposes a form of inequality in a mutualistic power relation. Mrs. Colbert views Nancy as a competitor, as she believes the servants' rumors about Nancy's affection toward Mr. Colbert. Also, her competition with Mrs. Colbert is reflected in the novel's title even though it refers to her not by name but as "the Slave Girl." As a devoted servant to the farm of the miller, she attends to her duties as is expected of her; however, when she feels her service to Martin Colbert has become a threat to her safety, she chooses to amuse herself by picking cherries rather than doing her usual work. Another aspect of her power appears in her willingness to abandon her people and town to protect herself from Martin Colbert's advances towards her. Her ultimate power is depicted through her thoughts of committing suicide to end Mrs. Colbert and Martin Colbert's plot against her. She tells Mrs. Blake that she is "goin' to throw" herself "into the millpawnd" (216). After fleeing, during twenty-five years Nancy maintains a good and well-established life with her husband and children.

These brief details presented above about the characters from the matriarchal orders show some similarities among them as well as referring to their practices of power. All the female characters undergo a departure from their original place of origin into another one to secure their success in life. Sapphira is moved from Winchester to Back Creek as she married Mr. Colbert to protect her honor and dignity; Rachel who sees her husband as "a rescuer and a saviour" (Cather 134) moved from Back Creek to Washington and back with her daughters to Back Creek again to restart her life as a skilled medical practitioner. Jezebel is forced to move from her African land into a slave plantation in Virginia where she is sold to different families until she ends up in

Dodderidge's service. As a well-trained slave, Till is sold and moved from Winchester to Back Creek. Alone, Nancy Till flees her people and community to start a successful life in Canada relying on the domestic skills she learned in Back Creek.

All these movements of female characters throughout the novel reflect the existence of threats (either in the form of abuse or trauma) to them in their initial locations from which they escape or move away seeking better protection and securing their power over themselves to maintain their independence. In addition to those movements necessitated by fears of harm and abuse, they develop some techniques (either positive or negative) to cope with their lives. Surveying the techniques used by the above mentioned characters to prove their power, there is physical abuse (like Sapphira's hitting Nancy with the wooden hairbrush), silence (like Jezebel's silence about her past and Till's silence about her mother's death, Shappira's abuse, and Nancy's flight), resistance or stepping over one's duty (like Mrs. Blake's plot to secure Nancy's freedom), and threat (like Nancy's telling Mrs. Blake that she will commit suicide if she does not help her). Even though these mechanisms and enforcements are typical in abusive relationships to cause the other side's compliance to abuse, these characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* use the same techniques to enforce their power.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl offers a new pattern of power which is a typical practice in every society, either Western or Eastern. Even though the practice of power proposed by this novel has been popular everywhere during different times, this practice is overlooked and underestimated in attempting to understand the typical practice of power in communities. Michael Karlberg suggests understanding power as a cooperative form of practice which he subcategorizes into mutualistic power relations and adversarial

power relations. Again, reading this novel from a different cultural perspective, I would like to argue that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* presents a practice of power that I call a *Beneficial Practice* in which every member is aware of their social position, yet they can practice a form of power that benefits others. The female characters in the various matriarch orders in this novel experience their power in relation to each other; however, they gain benefits from this practice by avoiding threats and controlling in implicit ways. They do not attempt to destroy the ultimate power of each other, yet they find out that each of them can practice their power with respect to the hierarchical system as well as others' practice of power. This reading of the novel proves the possibility of proposing a community compounded of different systems of coherent practices of power, all them at the same level of importance, to achieve justice and peace. In other words, in any hierarchical situation, all members (those located at the top of the hierarchy and those at the bottom) have the right to practice their power (not their privileged authority) with a recognition that they make an equal and balanced effort to achieve overall power and move their societies forward. However, the members must understand that their practice must not overlap or step over others who possess a different position in the hierarchy.

As this reading indorses the idea of the power circulation among members, it is a possible to view power as an action of give and take system; there is no obsolete power for one member than the other. One question asked in response to this proposal of power practice is whether it reflects bias according to gender because the paper is focusing on studying female characters in Cather's last novel. It may seem the chapter provides a feminist perspective to understand the interaction among the characters; however, the best answer is that the *Beneficial Practice* of power is not limited to one gender or the

other, but in the case of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, there is a mutation of masculine power which is reduced to authoritative privileges that have been bestowed upon them by the then common social practices. In other words, the *Beneficial Practice* of power is not limited to one gender; however, the masculine practice of power on the novel is on hold. It seems the author does not provide the male characters with roles that help them to practice their power in a *Beneficial* form rather than the dominant one.

Even though the masculine practice of power is muted, the novel presents a view of the masculine characters (particularly Mr. Colbert and Martin Colbert) as ambassador figures. In a political system, the ambassador is privileged by attending their government's offices in foreign countries, but they have no power to make decisions without the approval of their original countries. This pattern applies to Mr. Colbert as he tells his wife, "You're the master here, and I'm the miller. And that's how I like it to be" (Cather 50). He steps aside from his position of power and asks to be looked at as a worker (a business attendant), leaving his wife in charge. In this case, he performs as an ambassador for the Mill Farm in the community of Back Creek, but Sapphira is the official side to make rules and control the entire system of their plantation. Also, Mr. Colbert assumes the role of ambassador when he participates in facilitating Mrs. Blake's plot to transfer Nancy to Canada. He tells his daughter to come and snatch the needed money from his jacket instead of ending Nancy's struggle by interfering in Sapphira's and Martin Colbert's seduction plot.

In a similar way, Martin Colbert who is viewed as an ambassador for the entire masculine order loses the privilege bestowed upon him by Sapphira and is unable to seduce Nancy even though he has a long history of staining his reputation by fooling

young ladies. He is introduced, in the novel, for the mere purpose of the unfolding seduction plot which Sapphira masterminds, but he loses his prey which seems to rob him of his masculinity. His advances towards Nancy put to end by both Nancy's flight and Mrs. Blake's participation to facilitate the flight. Ironically, he ends as a monument for the war. Even though the male's power is muted in this novel, it operates in the form of *Beneficial Practice*. As depicted in a patriarchal society, they have rights to control the novel's action; however, Cather assigned them roles and positions which limited the patriarchal characters into a bystanders or secondary position who cooperate with the opposite gender use of power.

Similar to the female characters, none of them steps forward to obtain dominant power over others. All (female and male / owners and slaves) exercise their power at levels that do not overlap with each other; however, they help each other to move forward by using their specific techniques without discussing their authoritative privileges out loud with others.

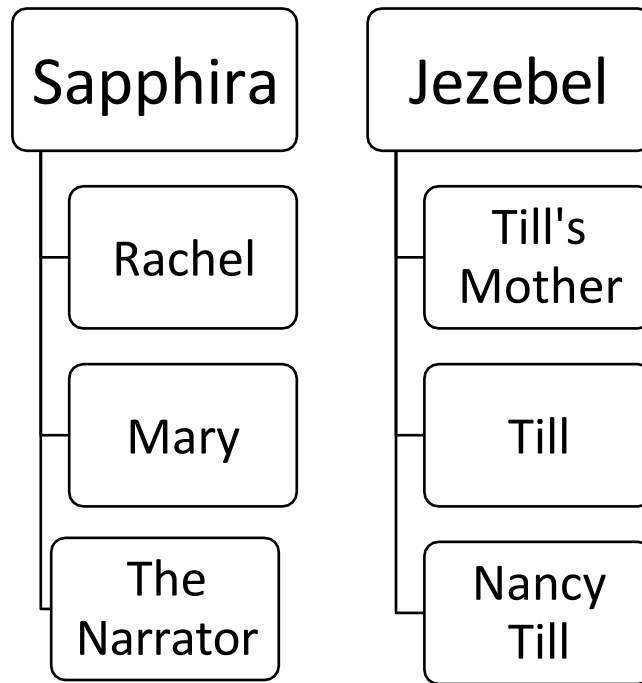


Figure 2: The Matriarch Hierarchy in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

CHAPTER III

Once Lost is Later Restored: A Reading of Cather's Career

The previous chapters discuss the presentation of some characters in Willa Cather's fiction; the focus is devoted mainly to understanding how they establish or demonstrate their unique identities. After proposing a reading of these characters, it is useful to shed some light on the author of this fiction and propose a reading to understand the development of Cather's writing career. Known as a regional author due to her close connection to Nebraska and the west, Cather has inspired and induced many scholars to argue that her intention is to increase the awareness of this area and thus criticize rapid industrialization and the consequent change brought about to local communities. In support of the previous chapters and to broaden the understanding of Cather as an accomplished author, this chapter provides a view of one of Cather's earlier productions as well as a later one to explore how, as an author and not unlike characters in her fiction, her career undergoes a process of construction. Also, her career and experience as a

writer developed through various stages until she achieved her desired position. In this chapter, I propose to answer the question of what we gain or learn from reading Cather's work and to what degree Cather is still relevant to the modern reader or author.

Specifically, this chapter presents "Paul's Case" and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as examples to elucidate how Cather's fiction developed through her literary career.

The Troll Garden, an early collection of stories published in 1905, includes the celebrated "Paul's Case." His mother having died when he was born, Paul is presented as a high school trouble maker who causes problems for his teachers. At the same time while working as an usher he envisions himself becoming an appreciated artist. Ultimately, he steals money from his employers and flees to New York. When he learns his father restored the money and is on his way to New York to fetch him back to Pittsburgh, he commits suicide by jumping in front of a train.

Many times in this story, Cather mentions and refers to Paul's interest in art. She writes while waiting Carnegie Hall to open, where works as usher, "he decided that he would not go home to supper...he decided to go up into the picture gallery" (120). To his pleasure, there is no one in the gallery except for the old guard. "After a while he sat down before a blue Rico and lost himself" (120). However, when he notices his duty time is about to start, he hastens to leave the gallery. On his way out, he makes "a face at Augustus ...and an evil gesture at the Venus of Milo¹⁰..." (120). This piece of information caused me to question whether Paul is showing appreciation for art or not. It seems he is uncertain about his position concerning art. Knowing him to be a troublesome student, readers might think

¹⁰ Augustus and the Venus of Milo are classical sculptures presented in a picture gallery next to the Carnegie Hall where Paul works as usher.

Paul has a creative personality for whom the typical (traditional) school environment is a poor fit. Also, seeing his delight that the gallery is not crowded implies that his taste for art is sensitive and refined to the point it only allows for private enjoyment. But his reaction when he leaves the art gallery affects the reader's view and challenges expectations. As the narrative unfolds, the reader perceives a kind of gap that mystifies the understanding of Paul's character and his position in relationship to art, leaving it incomplete and consequently inconclusive. I would argue, however, that the gap that develops in attempting to understand "Paul's case" is intelligible if we try to understand it from the perspective of the "Triangular" desire developed by René Girard¹¹; moreover, our understanding of it will be improved by applying the same triangle to Cather's early career experience as a whole.

Girard's mimetic theory includes the "Triangular" desire presenting the idea that there is no original desire. All the desires people experience have been formed and inspired by someone else who serves as a mediator between the subject and the target object of desire. In other words, desire is always a form of imitation which people develop to access what they desire. The desired object can be something physical (like food, house, etc.) or a spiritual accomplishment (as peace, higher social recognition, respect and so on). In such a relationship, as both the subject and the mediator develop the same interest in the object of desire which in turn only increases the demand for the desired object, resulting in a rivalry which "only aggravates mediation; it increases the mediator's prestige and strengthens the bond which links the object to this mediator by forcing him to affirm openly

¹¹ René Girard (1923-2015) a French critic and anthropologist, one of his fundamental ideas is the Mimetic Theory.

his right or desire of possession” (Girard 13). This rivalry can be resolved through understanding the type of mediation that the mediator provides in the competition for the targeted object. There are two types of mediation: external includes a sufficient distance between the one and its mediator to have contact; and internal with little distance between the competitors allowing them to defeat one another (9). That is the mediator can be exist far beyond the subject environment; they never interact or meet each other. In contrast, the internal mediation refers to the fact that the subject and his/her mediator are close to each other. And the latter usually causes the subject to think of his mediator as an obstacle which parts him from his desire. ¹²Therefore, the subject tries to remove the mediator in order to secure his/her access to the desire. In this case, Girard argues there is a need for a scapegoat whom is considered as the source of the rivalry and by destroying it the peace is restored. Also, Girard argues the distance between the mediation and the subject is not necessarily a physical distance; it could be a spiritual one. However, my reading of Cather’s career is by identifying the components of the triangular desire only, and without the scapegoating mechanism. However, Frances Zauhar applies the triangular desire and the scapegoating mechanism to some of Cather’s work in a comprehensive way which I will refer next.

This competition between the subject and its mediator is useful for Girard in understanding both prehistoric as well as the contemporary societies; at the same time it is useful to apply it to “Paul’s Case” and Cather’s early writing experience. In point of fact, this attempt to understand some of Cather’s works through Girard’s perspective is not completely new. There are certain critics who attempted to understand some Cather’s

¹² Henry James can be considered as the external mediation for Cather, while Sarah One Jewett is the internal one.

works through the lens of Girard's conceptualization particularly via mimetic theory and its "Triangular" desire. For instance, Frances Zauhar discussed Cather's creation of artists as characters in three different periods of her life: early, middle, and late, and the role of art in the lives of those characters. Returning to "Paul's Case" and the struggle with art, I affirm Paul's failure to achieve his desire to be a respectable artist is due to the absence of mediator. There is no available mediator for Paul to imitate. Early on in the story, we learn that Paul possess distinct preferences about enforcing privacy to facilitate his undisturbed enjoyment of art as "he was delighted no one was in the gallery" (Cather 120). Another aspect of Paul's appreciation is through his immersion in the Arts as, for example, forgetting himself in front of the blue Rico and his delight at seeing the musical instruments at the symphony. Interestingly, later the narration reveals Paul's separation from his model of imitation through the construction of the hotel and its glass door ajar. "At last the singer came out, accompanied by the conductor, who helped her into her carriage...Paul followed the carriage over to the hotel, walking so rapidly as not to be far from the entrance when the singer alighted and disappeared behind the swinging glass doors... in the moment that the door was ajar it seemed to Paul that he, too, entered. He seemed to feel himself go after her up the steps, into the warm, lighted building, into an exotic, tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease" (122). This construction is no place for Paul; it is that "all the actors and singers of better class stayed there when they were in the city" (247). The last quote reveals not only that the hotel is parting Paul from his mediator, but all the actors and singers who could possibly stand in as good examples for Paul to imitate are from outside the city. That means even if Paul happened to encounter them it would be a short-time experience, leaving Paul unable to explore his target desire.

Paul's feeling "as a prisoner set free" (251) at Carnegie Hall reflects his great identification with art; however, it is apparent the "triangular" desire components have not been completed. Paul lacks a mediator to lead him to move toward his targeted object. In other words, the components of desire's triangle are not complete. The mediator who serves as a source of motivation or an example for Paul to follow is absent (does not exist). As discussed earlier, the subject does not necessarily need to follow the exact leads of the others to achieve his desire, yet he is supposed to see the other or the mediator as a guide that triggers and motivates him to possess his object and attain the targeted desire. In an attempt to find what he longs for, Paul steals money from his employer and flees to New York, seeking prospects more suited to his desires and dreams. Because art and beauty are Paul's priorities, he does not abandon his strivings towards art. While in New York his taste for beauty is reflected in the careful buying and detailed arrangement of his rooms, which show his strong mental images of beauty. The unbalanced longing toward the desire (being an appreciated artist) that stems from the lack of the mediator "Other" to pioneer the way to Paul's journey to art leads to Paul's unfortunate fate. Therefore, it is important to have the three main components of the "Triangular" desire to ensure the moving toward and evoking of the longing for achieving desire.

The absence of the mediator in "Paul's Case" parallels Cather's own at the time of composing this specific story. When *The Troll Garden* was published in 1905, Cather was neglecting her own feminine persona and assigning literature to the masculine privilege. Cather scholars acknowledge her early work had been highly influenced by the style and the writing of Henry James, which lead her to believe that "woman and artists are contradictory identities, a conviction that was another barrier to her own literary

emergence” (O’Brien, 69). By writing from a masculine perspective, Cather causes some disturbance to the “Triangular” desire. And this unsuccessful triangular metaphor resulted from Cather’s less self-assured gender identity. However, “In the late winter of 1908 Willa Cather was escorted by Mrs. Louis Brandeis to meet her friend Annie Fields at 148 Charles Street in Boston” (Carlin ,171) during which Cather met Sarah Orne Jewett, a fateful meeting that nourished Cather’s confidence concerning female writers’ voices and achievements.

Her choice of mediator or model for imitation achieves limited success, even though it works as a good lesson as her career develops because some of the techniques she acquires from the imitation lasted until her later works. In addition to Cather’s perception of female author, she shared other aesthetics with James which is frequently discussed by critics. In one attempt to outline James influence in Cather’s production, Elsa Nettels claims, “they expressed and shared allied critical principles and held to the highest aesthetic standards of the novelist’s art” (190). Nettels argues the style and setting of “The Marriage of Phaedra” from *The Troll Garden* is a reminiscent of James style as Cather depicts a story in which she located her aristocratic characters in a fashionable houses in London. Another similarity Nettels points is “the artist as a subject for fiction.” This particular similarity starts early in Cather works and continues until the end of her authorship career. Paul is a failed artist; Carl in *O’ pioneers!* is a sketcher; Jim Burden can be considered as an author; St. Peter an honored author, and so on. Also, one of the similarity introduced by Nettels and which stands out to me is

“Both James and Cather seek to engage the reader’s imagination, and they do so in similar ways, by withholding critical scenes and refusing to specify. For

instance, James leaves the reader to imagine the final scene between Densher and Milly Theale (after she has been fatally stricken by learning that Kate and Densher have deceived her). In *The Professor's House*, by keeping to St. Peter's point of view after Tom Outland enters his life, Cather leaves many questions unanswered. What are Tom's feelings about Rosamond, whose engagement to him is only mentioned in a few sentences? Why does he go at the first opportunity to fight in France, as if he wished to leave Hamilton, and yet choose to remain in Hamilton instead of accepting the fellowship at Johns Hopkins as St. Peter urges him to do? St. Peter perceives that his wife resents his friendship with Tom Outland but does not realize that for her, her sons-in-law were substitutes for an estranged husband. The reader wonders what Tom Outland thinks of his relationship with St. Peter, whether it is connected in any way with his engagement to the daughter" (209).

This pattern of Cather's style seems to be present in her early and late works. In *O'Pioneers*, the readers expected more information about the figure that appears in Alexandra's dreams. Also, Jim Burden entrusted his recollections of Antonia into a friend who never appears or identified in the story. In later works, Till in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* retells the history of the Back Creek plantation to the young narrator, but no information is told about Till's daughter real father.

John Murphy describes Cather and James as "kindred spirits" in their techniques and subjects. He argues the "pictorial qualities" of Cather's works agrees with "James's prescription in "The Art of Fiction" that the novelist "competes with his brother the painter in his attempt to render the look of things . . . that conveys their meaning, to catch

the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle” (377)” (225). Interestingly, those “pictorial qualities” were flourishing and frequent throughout Cather productions like in *O’Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *The Professor’s House*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, etc.

After adopting and learning from James, Cather encounters Sarah Orne Jewett, which impacts Cather’s career in a distinguished manner. Cather was fortunate to meet Sarah Orne Jewett who served as a mediator for her as she helped her see and explore fiction from a different perspective and implored her to improve her gender awareness. Also, Cather’s meeting with Jewett which developed into a close friendship should be considered “as *the* crucial turning point in Cather’s career” (Carlin 172). One of the significant contributions to Cather’s fiction is in Jewett’s first letter on 27 November, 1908 which “advises Cather *not* to write through a male persona when narrating a romantic relationship with a woman character” (173). Jewett wrote “because she had come of age during the era when romantic women’s friendship were more socially accepted, she never felt she had to camouflage a story of love or romantic attachment by casting one of the characters as male” (O’Brien 78). Jewett’s perspective of lesbianism does not hinder her from achieving a respected authorship; therefore, she advises Cather to reflect on her work what she feels. And to acknowledge her personal desires and never manipulate it. Such a statement reflects on how Jewett informs Cather about the real desire they share, and they must express it in order to write a masquerade free fiction. Actually, it took Cather time to take advantage of this advice. After this letter, Cather composed her *My Antonia* through the narration of a male persona, yet it is one of her most successful and remarkable

accomplishments, though written from this perspective. Her style then shifts to *My Mortal Enemy*, which is narrated by a female character.

By attending to Jewett's advice, Cather restores the "Triangular" desire and the mimetic theory with the correct components. According to the theory, because the desired object is not restricted to a single material thing, Cather can imitate or apply Jewett's model without the encumbrance of a sense of rivalry. In other words, the initial "Triangular" which includes James as a model of imitation is unsuitable for Cather because she is competing for recognition within a group (male authors) which she is not part of. However, as she recognizes herself as "anything but a woman," she succeeds in her competition within the society of female authors. This does not imply the subject (Cather) and her mediator (Jewett) must be the same gender. Later, on Cather's career, she adopts Hawthorne which is a successful achievement.

Reading "Paul's Case" in this autobiographical light shows how Paul's desire to be an appreciated artist is unachievable, even as it parallels Cather's own experiences. It seems like the author had carried her desire for guidance unconsciously through her depiction of Paul. Moreover, Jewett's further contributions to Cather and mentoring her works serve the same role Tom Outland provides to St. Peter. Comparing "Paul's Case" and *The Professor's House* from the view of the "Triangular" desire, it is clear the lack of mediator in the first has been fulfilled in the latter. Considering the time of publication of these works in relation to the contributions of Jewett, I argue that Cather elevated her position in the world of literary production as she encounters Jewett and develops an appreciation of female contributions to literature. Also, we can see the unavailable artist model in "Paul's Case" is substituted unconsciously by Tom Outland.

Regardless if the mediator that Cather needed is from the same gender or not, it is clear she needs one. As her career progressed, Cather starts to adopt other successful American authors like Hawthorne who seems to have influenced Cather's depictions in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Paul is not alone among fictional characters that scholars compare to Cather. They also frequently view Father Latour from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as Cather's counterpart. By the time Cather published this novel in 1927, she was not only in a balanced situation relative to the "triangular" desire, but also had surpassed the level of maturity in terms of authorship by following a good advice. Also, she finds more examples to follow, such as Hawthorne whose impact on her depictions in this novel is clear. According to Tom Quirk, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mark Twain, and Hawthorne became models for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but specifically Hawthorne is the one who is "a more reliable model of serenity and artistic restraint" (50). This claim refers to the overall tone Cather adopted in this novel, which distinguishes it from the others. Also, it follows the main argument of this paper concerning how Cather restored and balanced her "triangular" desire to achieve a superior position in authorship and notes how she learned from other authors how to maintain her success.

John Murphy "explore(s) Cather in the Hawthorne context" (162) by comparing their works. Among the compared works of those authors are *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Marble Faun*. In his beautiful and artistic comparisons, Murphy details some similarities between those works. He views the depiction of two travelers who involved in religious tasks in their journeys as a parallel between the two novels. Another interesting similarity noted by Murphy, and which I view as important and appealing to my argument in this chapter, is the distinction between "American life and

Latin civilization” (173). He writes “Hawthorne’s most startling occurs just before the murder, when the company of Americans sings “Hail Columbia” while picking its way through the Roman ruins” (174) is a similar kind to “a band of drunken Indians had come to serenade the soldiers at the fort” during Christmas Day in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. He concludes that “The search for cultural balance, between the new and the old, Europe and America, directed both novelists toward religion as a subject. The rock and the cathedral implied integrity of vision, a unity of nature and civilization...” (175). Murphy’s insightful reading of the similarities between Cather and Hawthorne adds to the fact that Cather managed to adopt a good example through which she achieved a self-positioning among elite American authors.

She has found her way and voice, and in the composition of this novel, I argue that she establishes not only a national but an international ideology. In other words, as Cather manages to find a good mediator, she moves forward in her literary career since she emphasizes the presence of other cultures in her works. In putting Cather’s works into a triangular diagram, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* would be on the top. My reading of this novel focuses on the inspirations Cather uses in developing this novel by referring to some passages in which Cather’s voice addresses the entire world not only her local setting. In her letter to the editor of *The Commonweal*, Cather gives a detailed account of the sources of her inspiration, indicating she retrieved most of the information from the biographies of two European (French) priests presented in *The Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf* by William Joseph Howlett, chronicling Father Lamy and Father Machebeuf’s lives in New Mexico.

Janis P. Stout claims Cather intentionally imitates Dorothy Canfield's novel *The Brimming Cup*¹³ because the social inferiority that Cather felt makes her view her accomplished friend Dorothy Canfield as a rival. Consequently, the prologue to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a mere reflection of Canfield whom Cather emulates in order to suppress her inferior sense of self.¹⁴ As well, Stout insists that Cather's sense of jealousy and rivalry with Dorothy Canfield was initiated as soon as they meet because they had participated in a nationally recognized story depiction project awarded in Nebraska. However, this specific remark facilitates the refutation for such an accusation by referring to some details given by Cather about her composition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather informs her audience in her letter to *The Commonweal* of November 23, 1927 that "Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition" (9). Since her student/school days, Cather was preoccupied by writing a legendary type of story/novel, which it seems she probably discussed this with her friends (even with Dorothy Canfield as they worked on their project). If so, it is possible for Canfield to have used Cather's ideas, rather than the reverse. Later in the same letter, Cather states "I did not sit down to write the book until the feeling of it had so teased me that I could not get with other things. The writing of it took only a few months because the book had all been lived many times before it was written" (10). Such details are enough to tell about the author's life project. She wanted the

¹³ The article's argument is readable from the perspective of rivalry and "triangular" desire developed by Rene' Girard

¹⁴ The author uses some letters between the authors to refer to the uneasy friendship and rivalry. Also, she uses the similarities between their novels which published on few years from each other: Canfield's 1920; Cather's 1927.

subject of writing about legendary figures to be written before establishing her career as an author, but when the chance presented itself she leapt at it (and did not wait for anyone to publish a novel that opens in Rome to copy or imitate it).

Though this article's argument sounds unfounded, Cather's prologue reflects a supreme and international theme. As Cather's main purpose in this novel is the depiction of the Old World and its evolution into the New World, the choice of the characters and their roles in the prologue constitutes a successful technique to widen the scope of her message. "At Rome" is how Cather chooses her initial setting of her dream novel with cardinals discussing the propagation of their faith in the territory of New Mexico. Such a setting is primal and moves the reader into scenes in which they visualize archaic communities once ruled by religion. Also, those figures never appear later in the narrative, yet the readers are aware of the fact that everything experienced by Father Latour and Father Vaillant is a result of the election in the prologue. Such a depiction allows Cather to achieve her aim in this novel. She writes, "Such writing would be a kind of discipline in these days when the "situation" is made to count for so much in writing, when the general tendency is to force things up" (10). She believes this book would "discipline" and appropriate people's experience. Therefore, she chooses a setting that would appeal to all of humankind since the beginning of life on earth. The cardinals, performing the religious force of societies¹⁵, elect their messengers to "discipline" communities and teach them the appropriateness of cohabitation. And such a message and teaching is universal in all religions. Because her purpose and great concern is to address humanity, she would probably choose such religious figures even if not a Christian. By representing such a

¹⁵ In this, I mean all societies: old and new, Eastern and Western.

discussion and election at the beginning, Cather is imposing the idea of Fate and resignation on her audience, such as telling them there are some things in our lives we cannot contribute to and their existence is similar to our own and if we try to change it, we will change our true identity, even like changing the race we were born in to.

Death Comes for the Archbishop does not stand as a stage to present only the above universal message which the propagation of Faith; however, there are some other messages throughout the book, which reflect Cather's purposes from such a depiction. After using faith in the prologue to unify humanity as much as she can, in her narrative she uses a symbol of this specific faith to show how humanity or humankind can be unified and live together without overlapping or troubles. The beautiful and rich beginning of chapter four, "A Bell and a Miracle" in "the Vicar Apostolic" explains how Father Latour is awakened by an ancient silver bell ringing. This experience is "a pleasing delusion" (42) for the archbishop because it enables him to travel through the great cities of religion, such as Rome, Jerusalem, and New Orleans, while he is in his bed in Santa Fe. His reaction when he learns that it was no delusion is noteworthy as he discusses history and how different nations have contributed to it. Here is how he and Father Vaillant discuss it in a way appealing to the Universal message of the novel:

"I am trying to account for the fact that when I heard it this morning it struck me at once as something oriental. A learned Scotch Jesuit in Montreal told me that our first bells, and the introduction of the bell in the service all over Europe, originally came from the East. He said the Templars brought the Angelus back from the Crusades, and it is really an adaptation of a Moslem custom."

Father Vail ant sniffed. "I noticed that scholars always manage to dig out something belittling," he complained.

"Belittling? I should say the reverse. I am glad to think there is Moorish silver in your bell. When we first came here, the one good workman we found in Santa Fe was a silversmith. The Spaniards handed on their skill to the Mexicans, and the Mexicans have taught the Navajos to work silver; but it al came from the Moors"(44-45).

The historical account of the service bell that Father Latour presents to his friend reflects the borders lines that Cather tries to blur between cultures and societies to bring them to unity. According to David Porter, the bel serves different roles in the novel. "Its ringing of the angelus, nine strokes divided into three groups of three, mirrors the structure of the novel. Its purity of tone embodies the crystalline clarity that suffuses the entire novel, and the ancient and diverse metals that are melted into its substance and that account for its unique timbre parallel the rich mixture of old and new that the bishop create in their work in the New World" (258). Particularly, the bel al udes into the adaptation of the old world discipline in the modern one. It seems as if Cather's voice is speaking out loud to proclaim that the existence of one race or culture is as significant as the other. And those nations contribute to ensure each other's survival. So, as al the silver items blend to make the bell in order to produce "a beautiful tone," individuals and nations as wel can blend their culture to form a coherent universe.

Another aspect of the book in which Cather literally and practically reflected her respect for diversity is through the representation of the variants in the use of the language by non-native speakers. Early in the book while in Rome, cardinals from

different countries chose French for their conversation. Then, when the narration moves to the United States, the major characters Father Latour and Father Vaillant, though French speakers, also learned and mastered other languages such as English and Spanish. The French language is used throughout the novel; however, the author who narrates the story in English says that, “As this was Christmas Day, the two friends were speaking in their native tongue. For years they had made it a practice to speak English together, except upon very special occasions, and of late they conversed in Spanish, in which they both needed to gain fluency” (39). The fact that the friends speak French on their special occasions shows how they carried their mission as priests in the New World devotedly, but when it is time to celebrate themselves, their identity, and their heritage they speak French. They do speak Spanish for practice and to get used to the spoken language in their new world, but still it is important for them to preserve their own language, which represents and reflects their identities which enables them to recognize the other tongues. Since it is a setting of couple French speakers with no other languages speakers, the priests converse in their own language out of respect to their French identity.

In a similar way, Cather uses Father Latour to comment on the use of English by another non-native speaker. In book three, in the chapter titled “Jacinto,” Cather presents how the use of language could reflect and inform about individuals even though there are some mistakes in speaking. After the first conversation between Father Latour and his Indian guide, Jacinto, Cather comments on how the non-native speakers are aware of the linguistic mistakes:

“Jacinto usual y dropped the article in speaking Spanish, just as he did in speaking English, though the bishop had noticed that when he did give a noun its

article, he used the right one. The customary omission, therefore, seemed to be a matter of taste, not ignorance. In Indian conception of language, such attachments were superfluous and unpleasing, perhaps” (91).¹⁶

Even though it is a commentary on linguistic use, yet the quote alludes to the modification of the history of the English language. It probably reflects Cather’s concern about the influence the Indian would contribute to the new language’s history when they master it. Also, it seems like an evaluation of language development as well as an attempt to understand others even if they speak differently.

However, Father Latour’s respect for other nations is not only presented through his reflections on the Indian’s use of English and the Spanish (exemplified by Jacinto). But also, there are some incidents in which he shows his respect and openness toward others. We know that he never drinks spirits in front of Indians nor does he question their faith and beliefs with him because he “didn’t think it polite, and believed it to be useless” (92). Also, he does not do so because he believes, however they talked about it, it will be difficult to be interpreted or recognized as the Indians. “There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him” (92). Such recognition is not easily come up to. Eagerness could lead some to find a way or a tool to value and estimate other’s action. Nevertheless, Cather through this perception insists on the fact that the individuality of people and their unique identities cannot disturb the unity with others if each achieved an awareness of the

¹⁶My initial reaction to this exact quote was that I felt Father Latour is like HAL9000 in Space Odyssey or Siri in our modern iPhone.

other's difference. Thus in my reading of this section of the novel, it seems to me that Cather is criticizing the attempts to achieve an understanding of the relationships among groups through studies, which was an emerging fashion at the time. Probably, Cather is consciously criticizing one of the trendy theories by that time which is the Social identity theory that was a hypothesis in attempt to understand how individuals form their social groups, look for allies, and practice some kind of prejudices or discrimination against other groups.

By presenting the level of maturity and universal openness that Cather achieved in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the unsuccessful artist in "Paul's Case," this chapter suggests how Cather benefits from other authors' examples and how the idea of experience is important for achieving goals. As she had hoped to write a legendary work since her "student days", she tried to publish in different styles, and produced different models of composition until she found her own voice to her own satisfaction. Previously, before she had been introduced to the pioneers who showed her the way to develop better techniques as an author (Jewett for instance) she was in the "triangular" desire with others. She was competing with rivals to find a place at the table with other authors; however, after she published and enhanced her reputation, she started to compete and exceed her initial perspective of writing so as not to produce a common type of literature, but to surpass that and achieve excellence and a legendary level. The best way to refer to Cather's career at the beginning and after publishing *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is to see her in a similar situation compared to two neighboring countries and their border zones. The rich country transports her figures from and to the border zones in air conditioned automobiles and supplies the border checkpoints with the most developed technology to ensure safety. What

makes the rich country superior to the poor one is the capability to adopt all the possible ways to move forward, while the poor's concern is to prove sustainability. By Cather's attempt to unify all cultures and appreciate them in a similar way it is considerable why Cather loaded her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, with a large number of powerful female characters from different races and social classes. As she welcomes different culture backgrounds into *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she distributes power among all her female characters regardless of their social group.

CONCLUSION

Having complete my chapters, I want to emphasize the insights that I want readers to take away with them. As I explained my purpose in the introduction, I am attracted to Cather and her fiction because of her exploration of a variety of themes, subjects, and settings, and even more significantly her contributions to the appreciation of other cultures. Universities back in my home country need suggestions to expand their repertoires and introduce other authors and their fiction to represent America in the twentieth century, Cather is an excellent candidate to serve this purpose. From my chapters, I feel it is urgent to select and explore some ideas from Willa Cather which are appealing because of my cultural perspective.

The first chapter clarified for readers several recurring practical issues of concern to individuals as well as communities. Among the occurrences is the existence of the “Abject,” and the way I personally, and readers as well must perceive the other (either ideas, individuals, or cultures) in our daily life. Individuals typically respond with discrimination, hatred or an unwillingness to understand the abject, or the ideas or people who do not see the world in the same way that they do. However, the chapter explains how the abject or the threats existing around us are just as important as we are; that is,

individuals cannot understand completely who they are (or cannot have a complete sense of their identities) unless they encounter something seemingly opposite to them. In other words, reading abjection allows us to see those who threaten the meaning that is a reflection of ourselves because the complete meaning cannot be understood from only one point of view, in this same way, the light of day cannot be completely recognized without experiencing the dark of night. As discussed in the chapter, Jim Burden as a white American male cannot achieve a complete understanding of his identity without Antonia, the European darker-skinned female immigrant. And he admits that this very difference is important for their existence. Upon returning to visit Antonia, he tells her that he wanted her to be in his life “as anything that a woman can be to a man” (Cather 156). However, even he is not able to specify the nature of the relationship that he wants with her, whether as sister, mother or wife, and this reflects how the abject is important to the establishment of identities. In other words, Jim’s uncertainty about the type of the relationship he wants with Antonia shows how his sense of identity cannot be clarified for him unless with the existence of Antonia, as his “abject.”

Furthermore, reading suicide from the perspective of “abjection,” even if it might appear shocking for readers not from my culture, will be highly useful because suicide is often culturally condemned. Also, I believe my reading of suicide contributes to Cather studies especially to the papers introduced in spring 2017 in an attempt to understand the soldier’s suicide through Cather’s lens in *One of Ours*. Cather’s ideology in presenting suicide in *My Antonia* corresponds to how my Muslim culture perceives suicide. The inclusion of the incidents involving suicide in the novel, I argue, are both questioning

suicide as well as condemning it. Both the characters in the novel and the assumed majority of readers react with disgust, as predicted by “abjection” theory.

My second chapter leads the reader to a recognition of the complicated patterns of power that exist in our world and how things in the real world are not exactly as they appear to be. It allows the reader a broader and clearer view of social power related issues (and does not make their view of the social pattern distort like the reflected images in the car’s side mirror). I present the pattern that derives from the power basis of gender practices; however, this does not hinder us from seeing the *beneficial* power in other pattern of hierarchy. The main purpose of my reading of the novel is to show how each and every member of a community has potentially the same impact as all others. No one is stronger in hierarchical situation than another. A front desk receptionist has a role and impact in his/her institution on a par with the institution’s leader because we live and interact in a way that is a two directional process. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* presents distinct groups from different social classes, yet all of them reflect a pattern of power that benefits themselves as well as other members around them without any corruption of the typical patriarchal social system in the novel.

My last chapter focuses on Cather’s career as an author to understand her development through her works, which will be significant to students and future authors as well. The students will learn how to read literature in ways other than those traditionally taught. In my country university literature courses commonly introduce a work as a mere story or fiction unrelated to the author’s life or a social movement. By introducing this reading which relates the author to her works, I am not only presenting a new view of Cather and her work, but actually, I am attempting to challenge the current system of

teaching literature in our universities. This will allow English literature students to learn to question and explore the subject being introduced to them. It might be a little challenging to change the educational system as whole, but it is worth the try to start with one university at least.

For future authors, whether English or Arabic, including myself, the examples presented in the chapter on how Cather changed and developed throughout her literary career inform the students that they need to try different patterns of depiction without worrying about attempting to change their style; that is, it helps them to perceive literature as a way to express oneself rather than to hide the self. And the change they attempt in their style does not mean to completely disregard the early attempts of writing. Cather, for example, had started introducing other cultures in her fiction as early as *O’Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*; however, when she created the depictions in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* her perception of other cultures reflects a mature level of appreciation.

As described in the detailed chapters above, those works of Cather presented here are only a module to bring readers to an understanding of themselves by providing the means to achieve insights related to subjectivity through the use of psychological and psychoanalytic approaches. I prefer to start with fictional characters, rather than the author, to present to the audience the importance of fiction as a source of self-understanding and find approaches to increase our sense of identity. The last chapter shows how success can be achieved through this process and not as something introduced in the form of a package. As contemporary readers, it is significant to acknowledge the lives of famous artists in order to understand their works, understand their struggle, and incorporate their techniques to find our own voices. Also, discussing major and significant themes which apply to

different discussion settings will help me as well as my students in the near future to bring Cather to life in our classroom discussions. And it will help to read and introduce twentieth century American literature other than *The Great Gatsby*, which for a long time has been the only work taught from this period.

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