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THE IMAGE OF THE HIRED GIRL IN LITERATURE THE GREAT PLAINS, 1860 TO WORLD WAR I

SYLVIA LEA SALLQUIST

On farms and in small towns across the Great Plains during the nineteenth century, hired girls were necessary domestic helpers. Spring planting and fall harvest compounded the normally heavy work load of farm women, and even in towns, housekeeping was labor intensive. Help with the daily chores was always welcome. As a result, hired girls were in keen demand and short supply. Despite their crucial role in housekeeping, hired girls have received little systematic attention from scholars. Social historians have recently displayed renewed interest in servants, but their works have focused on domestics in the urban East and have given scant consideration to hired girls in rural and small-town America. Little is known about these women: who they were and why they hired out.¹

Novels and memoirs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggest answers to these questions. If they do not reveal precisely who these women were, they do at least tell us

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who people at the time thought they were. The purpose of this article is to examine, from a historical perspective, the image of the hired girl held by novelists and writers of memoirs, and to compare this image with what present-day historians have written about servants. Annette Atkins, Julie Roy Jeffrey, Sandra Myres, and Glenda Riley, among others, have exposed the dangers of treating novels about frontier women as historical fact.²

Who then, in the eyes of contemporary writers, were the hired girls? Were they young or old, single or married? Had they been born in America or overseas? Were they black or white? How well educated were they? Why did they hire out? Did people perceive hired girls as fundamentally different from other females?

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF HIRED GIRLS

Age is one of the most important demographic characteristics to consider. Those females identified specifically as "hired girls" in both novels and memoirs about the agrarian plains were invariably young, in their midteens to early twenties. Girls who hired out in their

midteens include Faye Lewis, who later wrote about her South Dakota childhood in *Nothing to Make a Shadow*, and suffragist Jessie Haver Butler. Surette, in Mari Sandoz's biography of her father, *Old Jules*, was in service at nineteen.³

The most detailed treatment of hired girls in the works under consideration is found in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. In this classic, Cather lovingly fictionalized the lives of those immigrant pioneers who settled the plains. One of these, the novelist's heroine, was the Bohemian Ántonia Shimerda. Ántonia worked as a field hand for three years before becoming a hired girl at seventeen. During her five years as a domestic, a number of her farm friends also moved to town seeking employment. Although Cather did not specify the ages of these secondary characters, it is clear from both the narrative and the context that they were also in their mid- to late teens. Cather suggested this in describing the girls physically and socially. First, the language used to portray them conveys the image of nascent sexuality. Lena Lingard, for example, caused a stir when she appeared in church dressed as a young lady. Until then, apparently no one had noticed the "swelling lines of her figure . . . hidden under the shapeless rags she wore in the field." Similarly, Cather's narrator Jim Burden described the three Bohemian Marys as "a menace to the social order" for the same reason. Secondly, the hired girls clearly shared interests transcending their status as immigrants and working women. Cather, who used "hired girl" to refer to all wage-earning women except teachers, described the preoccupation of the hired girls with their social lives, clothes, and dancing in terms that approximate historian Leslie Tentler's depiction of the female urban workplace as an "adolescent counterculture" in which social relations assumed paramount importance.⁴

Not every female engaged in domestic service was young, however. Older women servants appeared occasionally in novels and memoirs, but they were referred to as "housekeepers" rather than hired girls. A particularly poignant example of such a woman is Ann Raney Cole-

man. Widowed at thirty-seven, Coleman contracted an unfortunate second marriage with a man who wasted her small substance and abused and abandoned her. As a result, her remaining years were financially uncertain and she was forced, at times, to resort to domestic service to support herself. More typical were widows who worked for an interval before remarrying. Elinore Rupert, for instance, was a washwoman in Denver before taking a position as housekeeper for Wyoming rancher Clyde Stewart, whom she soon married. But older domestics such as these were the exception.⁵

A second important demographic characteristic is marital status. Historians generally have identified hired girls and urban domestics as single. Only after the transformation of service to a live-out institution did significant numbers of married women take positions as servants; this change did not take place until the early twentieth century. Novelists and writers of memoirs also portrayed hired girls as single. Cather's hired girls were all unmarried, as were Nikoline Johansen in *Their Fathers' God* and Paulina Skaret in *The Emigrants*.⁶

The agreement between scholars and writers of novels and memoirs concerning the marital status of hired girls is not surprising in light of three facts. First, as we have seen, most household helpers were in their teens or early twenties.⁷ Second, the average age at marriage for females in the United States in the late nineteenth century was between twenty and twenty-three. Recent research has cast doubt on the common assumption that women, because of their relative scarcity on the frontier, routinely married as young as fifteen. To the contrary, disproportionate sex ratios allowed females greater freedom to pick and choose among suitors. Pioneer women, like their eastern sisters, more often married in their late teens or early twenties. And third, most nineteenth-century working women were single.⁸

To be sure, married women were not entirely absent from the field of domestic service. Cass Barns, a frontier physician and author of *The Sod House*, offhandedly mentioned hiring a homesteader's wife to do some work for his

family. Similarly, when Berna Hunter Chrisman's father went to Montana to scout the land, his wife resorted to working in a hotel. From time to time, then, married women also worked as paid housekeepers.⁹

With regard to a third demographic characteristic, ethnicity, the novels and memoirs present different pictures. By reading only fiction one would conclude that all servants were immigrants, typically Scandinavian, Bohemian, or German. In all the novels where ethnicity was specified, only the Martin girls in Bess Streeter Aldrich's *Song of Years* were native-born Americans, and they were referred to as helping—rather than hiring—out. Willa Cather attributed this disparity to her belief that social pretensions prevented American-born girls from hiring out, regardless of family circumstances.¹⁰

By contrast, in the memoirs, servants were a mixed lot ethnically. Faye Lewis, Jessie Haver Butler, and Grace Fairchild's daughters were all native-born. Butler's mother, who also had worked out in her youth, was the child of German-born parents. Sandoz's Swiss Susette was the sole immigrant.¹¹

If the memoirs have accurately portrayed the ethnic composition of hired girls on the plains, it is a picture in direct contrast with that of service in the urban East. There, native-born white women were fleeing from domestic service to white-collar jobs, while immigrant women and, by the twentieth century, an increasing number of black women were filling the vacancies. Similarly, historian David Schob has argued that most rural midwestern hired girls were native-born until the mid-nineteenth century. Then an acute shortage of American-born servants developed, and immigrant domestics became the norm. This image of the hired girl as immigrant found expression in the works of novelists. Memoirs, however, record numerous cases of native-born servants in the prairie and plains region. Using census data, historian David Katzman has provided statistical evidence to prove that American-born females remained an "important element" among servants. Virtually absent in the large eastern

cities, native-born white domestics were concentrated in rural and small-town America. Census sources also indicate an increase in the numbers of native-born domestics in the central United States between 1900 and 1920, a fact that supports the recollections in the memoirs.¹²

A fourth demographic trait to consider is race. In both fiction and memoirs, all servants on the agrarian plains were white, an image at odds with reality. Even in the Midwest, black women accounted for one in every ten domestics in 1900 and approximately one in six by 1920. Perhaps blacks in the statistics were concentrated in the larger towns and thus were invisible to authors who wrote about rural and small-town life. Nonwhite servants appeared only in memoirs from the ranching regions, and even these were not blacks. Nannie Alderson, a Montana ranchwoman, recalled hiring, at different times, three Cheyenne laundresses. In *No Life for A Lady*, Agnes Morley Cleveland mentioned her family's Mexican washwoman. Authors dealing with the agrarian plains, however, gave no indication of the presence of nonwhite women as household help.¹³

With respect to the fifth demographic characteristic, education, the sources disagree. Novelists tended to portray hired girls as having sacrificed formal education for the sake of family goals, while writers of memoirs saw hiring out as an avenue to personal advancement. *My Antonia* is the best example of the first approach. Asked if she would be attending school, fifteen-year-old Antonia responded, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like a man now." Despite her retort, Antonia regretted the sacrifice. She was, after all, as much the daughter of her genteel, intelligent father as of her ambitious, outspoken mother. Rather than disparage her hired girls for their lack of schooling, Cather thought them wiser and more interesting than the younger siblings "for whom they had made such sacrifices and who have had such 'advantages.'" The "refined" girls in town went to school, but the country girls who worked out were, to Cather, far more knowledgeable.¹⁴

Although it deprived Antonia of a formal

education, Cather realized that hiring out offered a means for immigrant girls to learn the language. Antonia's broken English improved rapidly once she began to work for the Harlings. Rølvaag's Nikoline, who spoke only Norwegian when she arrived in the Dakotas, was anxious to work for an American family in order to learn English. Peder Holm helped her secure a place with his Irish in-laws, though they were dubious about hiring someone who did not "even know how to talk." When she quit six months later, her former employer attested that she could preach "like a full-fledged priest." Learning English was generally the only education any fictional hired girl received.¹⁵

In the memoirs, however, a strong correlation exists between hiring out and schooling, especially in early-twentieth-century accounts. Emma Fairchild was only one of several females who secured a high school education by working as a servant.¹⁶

The novels and memoirs clearly present disparate images of the ethnic and educational backgrounds of hired girls. Literary and artistic considerations help explain why novelists depicted the servant as immigrant, while writers of memoirs emphasized hiring out to acquire an education. In all the works of fiction except *My Antonia*, servants had only secondary roles. Their immigrant identity had less to do with their occupation than with the authors' subject matter. Because Ole Rølvaag and Johan Bojer wrote about the experiences of their fellow Norwegians on the American frontier, most of their characters were Scandinavians. Throughout his *Giants in the Earth* trilogy, Rølvaag manipulated his plot to suit the theme of cultural conflict. In *Their Fathers' God*, Peder's marriage to an Irish Catholic woman provided the author with an opportunity to elaborate on the religious and cultural strains he thought inherent in such a match; likewise, Peder's attraction to Nikoline, the Norwegian hired girl, served as a foil, enabling Rølvaag to contrast the wretchedness of his hero's life with the happiness that might have been his had he not married outside his Norwegian Lutheran

heritage. In short, Nikoline's function within the novel dictated that she be Norwegian. Paulina Skaret's main purpose in Bojer's book was not to serve as a prototype for the hired girl, a job she held only occasionally. She was, instead, one of the emigrants whose lives the author followed from the Old World to the New, one who had only incidentally hired out in her youth. Willa Cather created a series of polarities in *My Antonia* that help explain why all her heroines were immigrants. She contrasted the freedom and endless motion of the land to the suffocating smugness of the towns; the physical vigor of the hired girls to the listlessness of the well-to-do village girls whose "bodies never moved inside their clothes"; the immigrant country girls who willingly worked to the Americans who thought themselves above manual labor. In *My Antonia* these dichotomies were controlling, blinding Cather to the native-born women in her beloved Webster County who hired out alongside the immigrants.¹⁷

When writers of memoirs described their experiences (or those of other family members) as servants, they linked hiring out with attending school, to the exclusion of other motives. This occurred, at least in part, because writing reminiscences, like keeping journals, is a selective process. The memoirs, especially published ones, were usually composed by middle-class individuals with education and leisure sufficient to the task. At the same time, those who entered service for other reasons were less likely to record their experiences later.

WHY GIRLS HIRED OUT

Novels and memoirs also provide insight into how others perceived women's motivations for working. Hired girls, like women employees in general, have often been dismissed as frivolous workers. According to one historian, most hired girls were either "marking time until they found a suitable husband" or working to acquire luxuries.¹⁸ By viewing women's work in relation to anticipated future marriages, historians have presumed motive. Only by abandoning

post hoc, ergo propter hoc logic can we begin to explore the function work played in women's lives. To do this we must consider not only the extent to which women chose to work, but also the degree to which these choices reflected cultural values, the availability of other jobs for women, or economic necessity. If valid analysis of any group must begin with the goals and expectations of the people themselves, as James Henretta has cautioned, then Thomas Dublin's advice to historians of nineteenth-century America—that is, to view work and wages in familial rather than individualistic terms—cannot be ignored.¹⁹

Novelist Willa Cather understood this when she portrayed immigrant farmers' daughters as hiring out to help their families establish themselves on the Nebraska frontier. For Antonia, work was a given, not a matter of choice, especially after her father's suicide. In the wake of this tragedy the family marshaled its resources. Children were one of these resources, and neither Antonia nor anyone else in her family questioned that young and old, male and female alike, should work. And work Antonia did. Her brother Ambrosch "hired his sister out like a man." Although there was no shortage of farmers willing to hire her, some of the townswomen wanted to save Antonia from this rugged life. When the Harlings needed a hired girl, Grandmother Burden suggested Antonia. After a lengthy debate between Ambrosch and the Harlings concerning Antonia's pay—the results of which gave Ambrosch the lion's share of his sister's earnings—Antonia went to work in Black Hawk. She was not asked whether she wanted to hire out nor was she party to the negotiations concerning her pay. Yet there is no indication that she objected or even thought it unusual that she was not consulted. Apparently Antonia never questioned her brother's right to allocate her work and wages on behalf of the family.²⁰

Antonia was not the only hired girl in this novel to contribute to her own family's advancement. Jim Burden remembered that they had all sent money home to help "pay for ploughs and reapers, brood-sows, or steers to

fatten." As a result, the foreign farmers on the Divide were the first to prosper.²¹

Family welfare explains why these fictional immigrant women worked, but not why they chose domestic service. In the late nineteenth century, small towns like Black Hawk offered few opportunities for women in the realm of paid employment. Within this limited sphere, according to Cather, cultural expectations operated to steer immigrant women into domestic service and to reserve teaching jobs for the native-born.²²

None of the memoirs considered here pictured daughters hiring out to assist their families. Mollie Dorsey's repeated expression of her desire to lighten her father's burden comes closest. Offered a position in a hotel, she mused in her journal that the six-dollar-a-week wage was good and "if the worst came to the worst I might take it." But that never occurred. Dorsey did eventually go to work, but as a dressmaker and a teacher, not a servant.²³

Memoir writers did, however, make frequent mention of education as a motive for working. Whereas by the early twentieth century domestic service had become a dead-end occupation for women in the urban East, in the West it appears to have afforded females an avenue for self-improvement and, perhaps, mobility. For many rural parents, distance from town and a shortage of cash were two obstacles to securing a good education for their children. Some young women like Jessie Haver Butler solved this problem by taking "bed and board" jobs in town in order to attend school there. By hiring out in this manner, Butler was following in her mother's footsteps. Dakota rancher Grace Fairchild wanted her children to continue their education but was staggered by the expense of sending her large brood away to school. "There just wasn't enough butter and egg money to pay for their room and board," she conceded. Undaunted, the eldest hired out in exchange for food and lodging, setting a precedent for her younger sisters in the process.²⁴

The need to earn their keep in town while obtaining their education explains why these women worked. Their goal explains in part

their reasons for choosing domestic service. Housework was more flexible than most other jobs available to women. Chores could easily be scheduled around school hours, since house-keeping remained primarily task-oriented. Other reasons for selecting service may have included a preference for living with a family. Teachers often "boarded around" with the scholars, and dressmakers sometimes resided with their clients. Historian Michael Katz has suggested that living with another family, usually as a servant or a boarder, constituted a semi-autonomous stage in the lives of nineteenth-century preindustrial youth. A third possibility is that domestic service may have seemed a "natural" occupation for females. Many domestics, when asked why they chose housework, responded in this vein: I "was used to it at home, and it seems more natural-like."²⁵

Assuming that women were interested in marriage, some writers believed that working provided women an opportunity to "get out and look things over for themselves."²⁶ Given the prevalence of this notion, it is noteworthy that none of the servants studied sought to find a husband by hiring out. Even though marriage does not appear to have been a motive, romance involving household help was a popular theme. If these females were single, novelists in particular were determined to alter that condition. Writers frequently equated hiring out with courtship and marriage, even if the girls themselves did not.

A common novelistic strategy involved romantic involvement between a hired girl and someone in the employer's household. One of Alexandra Bergson's field hands in *O Pioneers!* cautiously courted and eventually married one of his employer's hired girls. In *Song of Years*, Ed Armitage married Phoebe Lou Martin several years after he had rushed up to her father's house seeking help for his expectant sister.²⁷

While hiring out and courtship went hand in hand, as it were, in most novels, for one character in *Their Fathers' God* the two were synonymous. When Peder Holm's father-in-law injured himself, Peder's wife returned home to care for her widowed father. In time Peder

volunteered to find household help for the Irishman, an offer Doheny dismissed with a good-natured, "Aw . . . I guess I can still do my own courting." Later, when Peder's mother suggested that she take Susie's place so that the daughter could return to her husband, Doheny reacted as if she had made "an indecent proposal" and reiterated that he could do his own courting.²⁸

In *Spring Came On Forever*, the author dropped even the trappings of romance. When Otto Weis came to court the widow Amalia Holmsdorfer, he explained his intentions, inventoried his livestock, and indicated that "if she were so minded to take them all on as well as himself, he would appreciate it if she could come before the threshing." Amalia laughed and told him to hire Lizzie Gebhardt instead.²⁹

To some extent, literary considerations explain why novelists and memoir writers invested hired girls with different motives for working. Fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally embodies gender norms derived from the cult of domesticity. Accordingly, "true" women subordinated their needs as individuals to those of others, pursued marriage and motherhood as their highest calling, and eschewed "the world" for "the home." Plots involving romance and marriage entertained readers but also served to reaffirm society's expectations concerning women's domestic destiny. Cather's heroines all violated the proscription against female employment, and her narrator ridiculed the "respect for respectability" that militated against women's working. Nonetheless, Cather's ascription of selfless motives to the hired girls was in accord with gender-role expectations and helped to justify their employment. Since historians have discovered that turn-of-the-century working daughters routinely contributed a greater percentage of their earnings to the family income than sons did, it is noteworthy that none of the memoir writers considered here mentioned family need as a reason for working. Perhaps their neglect stemmed from the principle of selectivity referred to earlier. They did, however, recall hiring out to attend school. From the structure

of these passages it is evident that they were writing about their education; the job itself was only a means to an end.³⁰

HIRED GIRLS AND SEXUAL PROMISCUITY

Novelists and memoir writers often portrayed servants as somehow different from the mythical "girl next door." The degree of this divergence varied, with hired girls' conduct ranging from vaguely curious to decidedly beyond the social pale. In *Song of Years*, Aldrich described the Martins' servant as a "queer mortal." Hamlin Garland remembered his family's household helpers as tellers of chilling bedtime tales.³¹ But these were minor eccentricities. More serious were the associations between hired girls and sexual promiscuity. The virtuous woman, chaste before marriage and faithful once wed, was the nineteenth-century ideal.³² Although by no means all hired girls violated this stricture, the servant as sexual deviant was a popular theme.

The affair described by Rølvaag in *Their Fathers' God* represents the mildest case of sexual transgression in this literature. Peder Holm was only recently married and soon to become a father when he found himself falling in love with his father-in-law's hired girl. As if by agreement the young people behaved in such a way as to guarantee that nothing would come of their love for each other. When Peder had an opportunity to hire Nikoline, he refused; yet when she took a position in town he begged her to return to work for his neighbors. In short, he wanted her close at hand, where she would be a source of comfort but not temptation. Nikoline derived scant comfort from his proximity and, to relieve the tension, decided to return to Norway. Only on the day of her departure did she confess her love for Peder, and then only in metaphors. Both of them respected the fact that their love was outside the bounds of what was permissible in nineteenth-century society.³³

Many fictional hired girls possessed Nikoline's desires but few her restraint. By their

emphasis on transgression, novelists suggested that hired girls honored purity in the breach more often than in the practice. Cather conceded that some "remained as serious and discreet in behavior as they had been . . . on their father's farm," but these exemplary hired girls commanded little attention. Her heroines led spicier, more adventurous lives. Their zest for life, coupled with a disregard for Black Hawk's social conventions, often brought them more than the "good times" they sought.³⁴

Ántonia's life in town began discreetly enough. So completely was her life intertwined with her employers' that townspeople regarded her as the Harlings' ward rather than their hired girl. But when a dance tent came to town in the spring, Ántonia's attentions turned elsewhere. Her popularity there ultimately brought a break with her stern employer. Convinced that she was acquiring her friends' lax reputation, Mr. Harling demanded that Ántonia either quit going to the tent or find another position. She chose the latter. Once outside the protective shelter of the Harling home, Ántonia was exposed to influences less healthy than taffy pulls, hay fights, and occasional back-porch scuffles with suitors. Forewarned of her new employer's profligate ways, Ántonia eluded his advances. The real danger came from another quarter, however. After a long engagement, Ántonia's fiancé sent for her, presumably to marry her. Once in Denver, Ántonia, too trusting to doubt anyone she loved, believed his every tale. Sick, homeless, and unemployed, the boyfriend moved in with her. When her money ran out, he deserted her. She returned home a few months later, crushed and disgraced. "I am not married . . . and I ought to be," she told her friend, the Widow Steavens. The rest of the year she plowed, threshed, and herded for Ambrosch, just as she had done before she went to work for the Harlings. In December her baby was born.³⁵

The three Bohemian Marys also provided fodder for the town gossips. Mary Dusak, who worked for a bachelor from Boston, "was forced to retire from the world for a short time." Her replacement, Mary Svoboda, was "similarly embarrassed."³⁶

Although *Ántonia* and her Bohemian friends violated social norms, they were nonetheless heroines, as Cather made clear. One literary critic, Elizabeth Hardwick, has written that "sexual transgression loses its overwhelming character as a wrong or as a mistake when the persons have virtues of a compelling sort."³⁷ *Ántonia's* virtue—a trusting, caring nature—was, ironically, the quality that got her into trouble. When her fiancé was sick and out of work, she allowed him to live with her because she believed that he was an honorable man, that he intended to marry her. When he proved false, *Ántonia* was crushed. Back on the family farm, she worked industriously and behaved modestly, as if doing penance for her mistake. But if she had violated one canon of nineteenth-century domesticity—purity—she excelled at another: mothering. "No baby was ever better cared for," declared Mrs. Steavens; *Ántonia* "loved it from the first as dearly as if she'd had a ring on her finger." It was, the widow lamented, a shame that *Ántonia* was now unlikely ever to marry and raise a family.³⁸

Time proved the widow wrong. Misplaced trust such as *Ántonia's* would have proved the ruin of a lesser woman, but because *Ántonia* possessed heroic qualities her transgression did not mortgage her future.³⁹ Anton Cuzak was a drifter when he met *Ántonia* and recognized in her the qualities he needed in a wife. Her illegitimate baby did not blind him to *Ántonia's* essential goodness. So it was that *Ántonia*, unfit according to Victorian social standards for what was regarded as woman's highest calling, married Anton. Their marriage prospered in every sense. When Jim Burden visited his childhood friend years later, he described her as "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."⁴⁰ A woman of such mythic proportions could be tested, but not overcome, by adversity.

Similarly, the three Bohemian Marys possessed sufficient virtue to redeem their past mistakes. All three married, raised large families, and were well-to-do—hardly the common fate for "fallen" women in nineteenth-century America.⁴¹ Cather was not so kind with mar-

ginal characters who went astray, however. Two nameless Swedish girls were left "the worse for the experience" by the rapacious Wyck Cutter, who established one of them "in the business for which he had fitted her."⁴²

The distinction between prostitution and domestic service was not always clear. The "extra girls" in Mari Sandoz's novel *Slogum House* practiced both "professions" simultaneously. Gulla, wife of the genteel but ineffectual Ruedy Slogum, ran a wayside ranch for cowboys and other transients. Gulla's "girls" served as kitchen help by day, as prostitutes by night.⁴³

If hiring out had unfortunate consequences for some women, it provided a refuge for others. Grace Fairchild recalled a motherless girl who rarely stayed home. When she could find work she hired out; at other times she lived with relatives while attending school or stayed with neighbors and worked for her keep. Only when she had nowhere else to go did she stay home. The reason soon became clear. One day the fifteen-year-old girl showed up at a neighbor's house in tears, charging that her stepfather had raped her. In this case, hiring out appears to have been one way for the girl to avoid her stepfather's incestuous advances.⁴⁴

In her memoir *Sand in My Eyes*, Seignora Laune told of one, possibly two, women who used hiring out as a refuge. Once, when her husband had pneumonia, the author hired the help of Birdie. Neither her attire nor her former occupation as a madam inspired confidence, but Birdie had resolved to make a new start and now supported herself by working for families like the Launes. Another time Laune's husband had a prostitute, Kitty, paroled to him pending trial. The children adored her, and Laune appreciated her industriousness. As soon as her case was settled, though, Kitty left town. What became of her is a mystery.⁴⁵ For women like Birdie, and possibly Kitty, paid housework enabled them to escape their former way of life.

In real life as in fiction, redemption of the "fallen woman"—in this case the prostitute—demanded heroic qualities few possessed. Birdie's

escape from prostitution was exceptional. In general, the road from service to prostitution was more frequently traveled than the one going the opposite direction.⁴⁶

Reformers and historians both have looked at the connection between domestic service and deviance. Progressives linked prostitution with poor pay and working conditions for women, and viewed with alarm the large number of prostitutes who were formerly servants. Reformers also feared that some women were introduced to lives of prostitution after rape or seduction by their employers presumably made them unmarriageable. Historians have also noted that a prostitute was most likely to have been a servant once, simply because domestic service was the single largest employment of women well into the twentieth century.⁴⁷

Nineteenth-century women's novels frequently depicted women violating sexual norms in order to demonstrate the penalties for such behavior. Although the women considered here transgressed against these standards in one way or another, their mistakes did not automatically spell ruin for them. Heroines like *Antonia* suffered for their misdeeds but were not destroyed by them. Reformed prostitutes such as Birdie escaped from the brothel through faith and hard work. The attitude toward and treatment of such women suggest that the authors had been strongly influenced by the progressive belief in the rehabilitation of the "fallen woman."⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

The writers examined here presented no single, uniform image of the hired girl. Where the novelists saw unschooled immigrants and selfless family assistants, the memoir writers found educated Americans who had worked their way through school. Literary considerations—plot structure, theme, and the novel's function as a social document—partially account for these discrepancies. In spite of some disagreement over who worked and why, on a more general level the novelists and memoir writers agreed. Both portrayed the hired girls as acting in a purposeful manner. These women were making positive contributions to their

families and to society at large; they were not merely biding their time. Similarly, the memoir writers and novelists shared a preoccupation with the theme of servant sexuality. While some authors emphasized love, courtship, and marriage, others dwelt on the seamier side: seduction, rape, and prostitution. Deviance was a popular theme, even though Willa Cather, whose heroines often violated society's sexual norms, conceded that many hired girls led discreet and unobtrusive lives.⁴⁹ Although these works provide clues as to the identity of hired girls, detailed historical analysis on the basis of statistical and archival sources is needed to assess the accuracy of these images.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, March 1983.

1. Two recent studies of domestic service in the United States are David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981). David E. Schob discusses hired girls briefly in *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

2. The novels I survey containing references to hired girls include: Bess Streeter Aldrich, *Song of Years* (1939; reprint, Leyden, Mass.: Aeonian Press, 1975) and *Spring Came On Forever* (1935; reprint, New York: Meredith Press, 1963); Johan Bojer, *The Emigrants*, trans. A. G. Jayne (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1925); Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954) and *O Pioneers!* (1913; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941); Ole Rølvaag, *Their Fathers' God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931); and Mari Sandoz, *Slogum House* (1937; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). Memoirs, journals, and other personal histories include: Nannie T. Alderson and Helena Huntington Smith, *A Bride Goes West* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942); Cass G. Barns, *The*

Sod House (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1930; Agnes Morley Cleaveland, *No Life for A Lady* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941); Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1956); Sherna Gluck, ed., *From Parlor to Prison: Five American Suffragists Talk about Their Lives* (New York: Random House, 1976); Berna Hunter Chrisman, *When You and I Were Young, Nebraska! The Autobiography of a Pioneer Woman, 1879-1900* (Broken Bow, Nebr.: Purcell, 1971); John Ise, *Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1936); Beverly S. Kaplan, *Daniel and Agnes Freeman, Homesteaders* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Johnsen Publishing Co., 1971); C. Richard King, ed., *Victorian Lady on the Texas Frontier: The Journal of Ann Raney Coleman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); Seignora Russell Laune, *Sand in My Eyes* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1956); Faye C. Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1962); Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (1935; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); Mollie Dorsey Sanford, *Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories, 1857-1866* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959); Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of A Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961); Walker D. Wyman, ed., *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier, Retold from the Original Notes and Letters of Grace Fairchild . . .* (River Falls: University Press, University of Wisconsin-River Falls, 1972).

3. Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow*, pp. 151-54; Gluck, *From Parlor to Prison*, pp. 63-69; Sandoz, *Old Jules*, p. 212. See also Bojer, *Emigrants*, pp. 203-4 and Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, pp. 33-55. For information on the ages of servants, see Schob, *Hired Hands*, p. 191, and Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, pp. 80-82.

4. Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 167, 201, 203; Leslie Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 67.

5. King, *Victorian Lady*, and Stewart, *Letters*, p. v, passim.

6. Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 162, 297-98, 305-18; Cather, *O Pioneers!* pp. 84-86, 104-5; Rølvaag, *Their Fathers' God*, pp. 233-34, 279-80, 289-91; Bojer, *Emigrants*, pp. 204, 296. See

also Sanford, *Mollie*, pp. 4, 16, 20, 108; Aldrich, *Song of Years*, pp. 101-2. Schob attributes the scarcity of servants to early female marriage in *Hired Hands*, p. 193. Katzman describes the transformation of domestic service from a predominantly live-in to a predominantly live-out institution in *Seven Days a Week*, pp. 51, 87-91, 177-79.

7. Historians also describe hired girls and servants as young: Schob, *Hired Hands*, p. 191; Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, p. 80-82.

8. Robert V. Wells, "Women's Lives Transformed: Demographic and Family Patterns in America, 1600-1970," in *Women in America: A History*, ed. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 20; Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), pp. 66-67; Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (1980): 189-91; Robert W. Smuts, *Women and Work in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959), p. 3.

9. Barns, *Sod House*, p. 58; Chrisman, *When You and I Were Young*, 238-39. See also Cleaveland, *No Life for A Lady*, p. 230. Katzman provides statistics on marital status of servants in *Seven Days a Week*, p. 87.

10. Aldrich, *Song of Years*, p. 40; Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 199-200. For ethnicity, see, for example, Rølvaag, *Their Fathers' God*, pp. 226-27, 230, 234; Aldrich, *Spring Came On Forever*, pp. 4, 17, 29, 41; Cather, *O Pioneers!* p. 84; Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 197-201.

11. Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow*, p. iv; Gluck, *From Parlor to Prison*, pp. 63-69; Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, p. 3; Sandoz, *Old Jules*, pp. 212, 221.

12. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, pp. 62-72; Schob, *Hired Hands*, pp. 194-95.

13. Statistics are from Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, p. 63. Alderson and Smith, *Bride Goes West*, pp. 131, 181; Cleaveland, *No Life for A Lady*, p. 223.

14. Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 123, 198, 199.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 155; Rølvaag, *Their Fathers' God*, pp. 172-74; Schob, *Hired Hands*, p. 198.

16. Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, pp. 33-35. See also Gluck, *From Parlor to Prison*, pp. 63-65, 67-69; Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow*, p. 151; Schob, *Hired Hands*, p. 191.

17. Rølvaa, *Their Fathers' God*, pp. 275, 289-91, 311-18, passim; Bojer, *Emigrants*, pp. 204, 296; Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 199; see also, pp. 15-16, 28, 198-204. The U.S. Bureau of the Census manuscript census schedules for 1880 and 1900 record the presence of native-born hired girls in Webster County.
18. Schob, *Hired Hands*, pp. 204, 207.
19. James A. Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Conceptual Bias," *Labor History* 18 (1977): 170; Thomas Dublin, "Women Workers and the Study of Social Mobility," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9 (1979): 649.
20. Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 147; see also pp. 151-54.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 200; see also pp. 161, 240-41.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.
23. Sanford, *Mollie*, p. 15; see also pp. 16, 66-68, 86-87.
24. Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, p. 33. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, and Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, discuss prospects for servants in the East. See also Gluck, *From Parlor to Prison*, pp. 63-69; Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow*, p. 151. In order to attend school, some young women lived with relatives in town instead of hiring out. See, for example, Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, p. 82.
25. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, p. 5; see also pp. ix, 4, 95-145, 245-60. Sutherland discusses efforts to modernize the "feudal" institution of domestic service in *Americans and Their Servants*, pp. xii, 3-6, 156-68. Michael Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).
26. Schob, *Hired Hands*, p. 204.
27. Cather, *O Pioneers!* pp. 86, 212, 227-29; Aldrich, *Song of Years*, pp. 101-2.
28. Rølvaa, *Their Fathers' God*, pp. 177, 193-94.
29. Aldrich, *Spring Came On Forever*, pp. 166-67.
30. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74; Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 11, 13-16; Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, pp. 85-93.
31. Aldrich, *Song of Years*, p. 386; Garland, *Son of the Middle Border*, p. 68.
32. Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," pp. 151-74.
33. Rølvaa, *Their Fathers' God*, pp. 229-34, 272-318, passim.
34. Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 200; see also p. 208.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 312; see also pp. 193-214, 223, 268, 297-98, 306-18.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-3.
37. Elizabeth Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 183.
38. Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 318; see also pp. 268, 297-318, 344.
39. Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal*, p. 207.
40. Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 353; see also pp. 218, 328-67.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 210; Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal*, p. 186.
43. Sandoz, *Slogum House*, p. 30.
44. Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, pp. 82-83.
45. Laune, *Sand in My Eyes*, pp. 158-64, 124-25.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-64. Ruth Rosen discusses the limited options open to women in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the reasons that some women considered "the sporting life" the most attractive alternative. See Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). Julie Roy Jeffrey describes the unenviable fate of most western prostitutes in *Frontier Women*, pp. 120-28, 132-34.
47. For descriptions of working conditions in jobs open to women at the turn of the century, see Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present*, 2d ed. (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979), pp. 118-50; Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*; and Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did Was to Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979). On servants and illicit sex, see U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners in the United States*, vol. 15, *Relation between Occupation and Criminality of Women*,

61st Cong., 2d sess., 1911; Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, pp. 14–37, 155; Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, pp. 213–18.

48. Ruth Rosen discusses progressive reformers and prostitution in *Lost Sisterhood*, passim.

49. Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 200.