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Gentlemen prefer modernism : 'middlebrow' culture and the transmutation of realism in the works of Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst

Stephanie Lewis Thompson

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Stephanie Lewis Thompson entitled "Gentlemen prefer modernism : 'middlebrow' culture and the transmutation of realism in the works of Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Mary E. Papke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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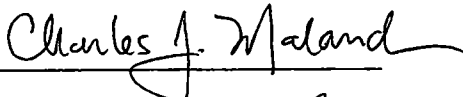
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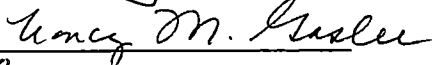
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Mary E. Papke, Major Professor


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and recommend its acceptance:







Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

**Gentlemen Prefer Modernism: "Middlebrow" Culture and the Transmutation of
Realism in the Works of Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton,
Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst**

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Stephanie Lewis Thompson
May 1999

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband

James Clay Thompson

and my parents

Mr. James L. Lewis

and

Mrs. Gail S. Lewis

for all of their support.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who have made my time at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, so rewarding. Both the faculty and the students in the English Department have challenged me throughout my eight years here. I am especially grateful to my Dissertation Committee, Mary Papke, Charles Maland, Nancy Goslee, and Christine Holmlund for all of their support and encouragement; I could never have completed this dissertation without all of their helpful insights.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the emergence of a modernist aesthetic in early twentieth-century America and its effect on women writers, particularly those with allegiances to the nineteenth-century realist tradition fostered by William Dean Howells and Henry James. A number of the anxieties about authorship and aesthetics expressed by early twentieth-century women writers have their roots in the nineteenth century, a period when more women began careers as writers; therefore, I analyze Louisa May Alcott as a nineteenth-century exemplar of the limitations imposed by Victorian gender constructions, particularly as they are informed by the ideology of women's "influence." I also consider the aesthetic limitations of the domestic and sentimental fiction genres on a woman's desire for personal fulfillment as an artist. I argue that the onset of the modernist era does not erase the tensions between the notions of woman's "appropriate" cultural influence and artistic ambition, but it instead shifts the emphasis of women writers' anxiety to aesthetic representation, especially as it concerns a move away from realism and into the mode of "transmutation," an aesthetic propounded by Edith Wharton and continued in the work of Willa Cather and Fannie Hurst. Writers like Wharton, Cather, and Hurst are seldom classified as "modern"; they did write in a manner quite different from the most experimental narratives of their modernist contemporaries, and Wharton and Cather in particular criticized modernist aesthetics. However, there are important parallels between the work of these women and the goals of the modernist movement that can offer insights into the complicated relationship between the emerging "middlebrow" culture that consumed ever-growing numbers of popular and "literary"

texts and the literary critics who articulated “taste” for this culture in literary magazines, newspapers, and new formations like the “Book of the Month Club.”

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Introduction

The Case of Lorelei Lee and the Emergence of "Middlebrow" Culture

I seem to be quite depressed this morning as I always am when there is nothing to put my mind to. Because I decided not to read the book by Mr. Cellini. I mean it was quite amuseing in spots because it was really quite riskay [sic] but the spots were not so close together and I never seem to like to always be hunting clear through a book for the spots I am looking for, especially when there are really not so many spots that seem to be so amuseing [sic] after all. So I did not waste my time on it but this morning I told Lulu to let all of the house work go and spend the day reading a book entitled "Lord Jim" and then tell me all about it, so that I would improve my mind while Gerry is away. (Gentlemen Prefer Blondes 28)

The Case of Lorelei Lee

Anita Loos' popular 1925 satire *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the fictional diary of the beautiful, blonde flapper Lorelei Lee, is usually described (when it is discussed at all) as the author's attempt to ridicule the vacuous blondes whom H.L. Mencken preferred over a more sophisticated, intellectual brunette like Loos herself.¹ The irony of Mencken's fascination with the Lorelei Lees of the world is, of course, his general

¹ There are only a few recent articles on Loos' immensely popular novel, which was hailed by Edith Wharton, James Joyce, and William Faulkner when it was published in 1925. In a letter to John Hugh Smith in 1926, Wharton professed that "the literary committee of Ste. Clare unhesitatingly pronounce [the novel] the greatest novel since *Manon Lescaut*"; she herself pronounced it "*the great American novel*" (Lewis 491). Legend has it that the novel was one of the last Joyce read in the days before his eyesight failed. Yet, despite the fact that the novel had both critical and popular support (according to Richard Schrader, the novel was reprinted seven times between November 1925 and January 1926, seven more times in the following seven months, and over forty-five times in the next forty years), few critics analyze the novel or its relationship to the other novels which appeared during this watershed year for American literature. Schrader's essay "But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes': Anita Loos and H.L. Mencken" (1986) examines the series of incidents between Loos and Mencken which supposedly inspired her novel. The two were friends, but she wanted more than an intellectual relationship; however, at that time he was infatuated with Mae Davis, who according to Loos had "a naive, stupid viewpoint on everything, which happened to intrigue Menck" (qtd. in Schraeder 4).

disdain for those who lacked his wealth of knowledge; the fact that Lorelei succeeds in high society despite her lack of erudition indicatives an aspect of modern culture which Mencken abhorred. As Susan Hegeman's "Taking *Blondes* Seriously" points out,

The novel's very conception was thus with the intent to entertain one of the most vociferous critics of American middle-class life. Mencken's coinages "booboisie" and "babbitry" described what he saw as the banality, conformism, and pretension of the American--particularly the Southern and the Midwestern--middle class. His appellation for Little Rock, Arkansas, "the Sahara of the Bozarts" (Beaux Arts), inspired Loos to make that city Lorelei's hometown. (529)

The aspirations of this middle-class culture represented a threat to the elite intellectual class which Mencken and others had guarded so carefully, but Lorelei Lee in particular and the flapper in general, because of their sexual charms, are allowed to breach the gap between high and low culture. The flapper becomes such an object of interest during the 1920s not only because of her flamboyant disregard for the gender roles which permeated Victorian culture but also for the breakdown of high culture which she represents.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is Lorelei's diary, in which she records her observations about the men who, like Mencken, "admire" her for her "brains" and her aspirations to improve said "brains" through reading and travel. Because of her desirability, wealthy, supposedly educated men are willing to provide the means for her "improvement," so for her, "knowledge" is a commodity which can be obtained, much as a book can be purchased. Of course, Lorelei's convoluted, obviously naive, commentary

about the world and people around her, as well as her butchered spelling and syntax, make her inability to acquire “culture” painfully clear to the reader.² Yet, while Loos’ style is a central element of the narrative, asking the reader to question the values of a culture which can nourish a Lorelei Lee, Wyndham Lewis criticized Loos for making her heroine an object of satire, for he believed she made “fun of the illiteracy, hypocrisy and business intellect of an uneducated american [sic] flapper-harlot for the benefit of the middle-class public who can spell” (qtd. in Hegeman 528).

Lewis and Mencken’s disdain for the middle class caused them not to “get” Loos’ joke, probably the case for many of its readers. That is, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is a satire not only of Mencken’s desire for the “dumb blonde” but of his inordinate fear of the middlebrow infiltration of high culture. The fact that Lorelei Lee does succeed and even seems innocent of the reasons for her success marks those around her (who wish to “educate” her for all of the wrong reasons) as the truly ominous threat to culture. This account from the mind of the flapper/ingenuie asks serious questions about the status of culture in the 1920s, an era fraught with tensions about the emergence of the middlebrow. This term, which according to Janice Radway first appeared in the 1920s, emerged in response to the discomfiting breakdown between high and low culture which was becoming more apparent at this time:

The middlebrow was formed, rather, as a category, by processes of literary

² Susan Hegeman’s “Taking *Blondes* Seriously” argues that Loos’ “unedited” presentation of Lee’s diary can be compared to Gertrude Stein’s narrative techniques in which language is manipulated in order to foreground its “materiality” (527).

and cultural mixing whereby forms and values associated with one form of cultural production were wed to forms and values usually connected with another. Thus, . . . the scandal of the middlebrow was a function of its failure to maintain the fences cordoning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high. (152)

Lewis' criticism of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is the product of just such fears, for he believed the book was written "for the marketplace" at the same time it ridiculed the very people who would purchase the book, those of the middle class who aspired to be "cultured" and could look at Lorelei Lee and realize their superiority. Purchasing the novel was a way of buying the assurance that they, unlike Lee, could aspire to the "highbrow."

The increasing tension between high and low culture which occurred during the 1920s was not a new phenomenon, of course, but the idea of culture as an obtainable commodity, much like the diamond jewelry coveted by Lorelei Lee, horrified many of the cultural elite; if knowledge and culture could be bought, as the Book-of-the-Month Club and other emerging enterprises like the film industry suggested, the position of the highbrow was indeed tenuous. In some ways, modernism can be seen as a reaction against the growing numbers of people who obtained high-school and college educations, for as more people gained access to the traditional culture represented by the Harvard Classics series "shelf of books," a new distinction had to be made to demarcate those who

possessed superior cultural knowledge.³ The emergence of a modernist aesthetic in early twentieth-century America is part of an ongoing process in the development of American culture. According to Radway, the trend towards disposable literary forms such as newspaper serials and dime novels, made possible both by technological innovations and a growing literate readership, facilitated the notion of literature as a utilitarian commodity which could be purchased, used, and then disposed of if no longer needed. These types of texts were usually anonymous or published under a “brand name,” and by the 1870s, cultural critics began to lament the disappearance of the “book.” No longer a treasured object to be preserved in a library and passed on to future generations as a signifier of status and knowledge, the book became an object of circulation which anyone could possess.⁴ Radway suggests that literary criticism took on a new role in the late nineteenth century to counter this trend, with critics “reinventing” the literary and suggesting that its language was unique, with a “kind of special opacity produced by complexity, subtlety, and intricacy of verbal organization” that required an engaged and knowledgeable reader (141). Modernism, then, is an outgrowth of this particular view of literature, and the critics who hailed the textual complexities of modernist narrative did so because this kind

³ Harvard president Charles W. Eliot suggested that all Americans could improve themselves through reading, and he proposed that a five-foot shelf could hold all of the texts needed to achieve this self-education. The Harvard Classics series, initiated in 1909, was a marketing strategy by P.F. Collier & Son which purported to provide the education advocated by Eliot (Radway 145-146).

⁴ See Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997) for a discussion of nineteenth-century publishing trends in America and their effect on the perception of “literature.”

of language play marked its status as “literary” and thus separate from the marketplace.

However, the segregation of literature from commercial commodity applied only to the highbrow, and whatever did not fit into the category of the “literary” faced condemnation for pandering to the marketplace. Like a Lorelei Lee, who effectively used her talents to achieve financial security but risked the derision of those who could perceive her inferior intellectual status, authors who estimated the desires of middlebrow readers and wrote texts which would appeal to a wide audience were eschewed by the cultural elite who advocated the misunderstood prototype of the “genius” writer. As the “literary” became a more complex category of specialized language, women writers in particular felt the effect of this hostility towards the marketplace in which so many of them had become successful. Radway’s analysis of the genesis of the Book-of-the-Month Club offers important insights into the cultural wars of the 1920s, examining the inner workings of the Club and the critics who immediately attacked its premise that middle-class readers should have access to “culture” in the shape of a committee-chosen book every month. In what way did the debate fostered by the emergence of the middlebrow affect the authors who found themselves in its midst? Female authors in particular were caught up in the cultural wars of the early twentieth century, for just as they were held responsible for their effect on the morality of their readers in the nineteenth century, so, too, were they held accountable for the growth of the middlebrow in the twentieth century, a cultural trend seen as part of the “feminization” of culture decried by modernists like Eliot in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Middlebrowism and Cultural Influence

A number of the anxieties about authorship and aesthetics expressed by early twentieth-century women writers have their roots in the nineteenth century, a period when more women began to pursue careers as writers. Therefore, I begin this dissertation by analyzing Louisa May Alcott as a nineteenth-century exemplar of the restrictions imposed on female authors by Victorian gender constructions, particularly as these limitations are framed by the supposedly empowering ideology of women's "influence." The onset of the modernist era does not erase the tensions between the notions of woman's "appropriate" cultural influence and artistic ambition; instead, we can see women writers' anxiety shift to concerns about aesthetic representation, especially in their movement away from the realism of the late nineteenth century and into a mode I will call "transmutation," an aesthetic propounded by Edith Wharton and continued in the work of Willa Cather and Fannie Hurst. All three of these writers emphasize the need to move beyond a realism which merely reports facts and records details about the physical environment, but their rejection of a journalistic style of writing does not coincide with what they perceived to be the aesthetic aims of the modernist movement, for all of them felt that modernist aesthetics perpetuated the worst elements of realism and merely shifted the emphasis from the physical to the psychological. Instead, these writers formulate a narrative technique enabling them to represent particular characters or environments which may not seem "artistic" but are turned into objects of aesthetic pleasure through the author's abilities. Despite their abiding interest in the aesthetic effect of their fiction, these writers are seldom classified as "modern"; indeed, they did write in

a manner quite different from the most experimental narratives of their modernist contemporaries, and Wharton and Cather in particular criticized what they saw as modernist aesthetics. However, there are important parallels between the work of these women and the goals of the modernist movement that can offer insights into the complicated relationship between an emerging middlebrow culture which consumed ever-growing numbers of popular and “literary” texts and the literary critics who articulated “taste” for this culture in literary magazines, newspapers, and new formations like the Book-of-the-Month Club.

An exemplary case of a writer caught up in anxieties about the middlebrow is Edith Wharton. Despite the recent revival of interest in her created by feminist reevaluations of her work and acclaimed film adaptations of her novels such as Martin Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence*, critics continue to neglect some of her most popular fiction, the “jazz age” novels of the 1920s and 1930s, including *The Children*, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1928.⁵ Many literary critics, both her contemporaries and ours, consider her later work inferior to the body of work leading up to and including *The Age of Innocence*. As I began to read Wharton’s “flawed” novels, as well as those by her popular contemporaries Anita Loos and Gertrude Atherton, I was surprised by their

⁵ The Book-of-the-Month Club has an archival site available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.bomc.com/archives>. This site lists the main selections for every month since the club’s inception in 1926. The Club chose two of Cather’s books as main selections during her lifetime, *Shadows on the Rock* in 1931 and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in 1941. In addition, the club offered a set of her books in 1996. In addition to Wharton’s *The Children*, the Club offered *The Age of Innocence* and *The Buccaneers* as a set in 1993. However, none of Hurst’s novels was a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection despite her popularity; perhaps the rights to publish her books were too high.

differences in style and focus from the modernist novels of the 1920s and 1930s by Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. The near erasure or marginalization of these women writers (and, also, a number of popular male writers like Booth Tarkington) from the American literary canon seems to be the result both of their popular appeal and their divergence from “modernism,” which we now consider the predominant aesthetic movement of the opening decades of the twentieth century. Those authors who adhered to pre-modernist conceptions of realism and Victorian notions of “propriety” were often faced with a double accusation--that their work lacked technical innovation and that they were not courageous enough to question Victorian mores. While some writers of this period who could be categorized as anti-modernist are still part of the canon, their uneasy footing in the literary history of the early twentieth century creates challenges for those who wish to consider their work as a part of the broader historical and cultural milieu we now perhaps too narrowly call the modernist period. This project aims to consider the ways in which the emerging category of the middlebrow affected the aesthetic tendencies and literary reputations of Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst, writers whose careers illustrate the effect of the growing tension between aesthetic and marketing concerns--that is, the relationship between the aesthetic projects of these four authors and the cultural atmosphere in which they produced their work.

Mid-nineteenth-century women writers often saw their art as a means of expanding their sphere of “influence,” as William Alcott urged them to do, and this belief in the political or moral efficacy of their art perhaps lessened the tension between their

duties as women and their impulses as artists.⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe goodnaturedly depicted the conflict between women's roles and authorship in a letter to her sister:

Since I began this note I have been called off at least a dozen times; once for the fish-man, to buy a codfish; once to see a man who had brought me some barrels of apples; once to see a book-man; then to Mrs. Upham, to see about a drawing I promised to make for her; then to nurse the baby; then into the kitchen to make a chowder for dinner; and now I am at it again, for nothing but deadly determination enables me ever to write; it is rowing against wind and tide. (Fields 128)

While Stowe's juggling of domestic and artistic duties expresses well the difficulties of maintaining a balance between the two (and, clearly, she prioritizes her role as mother over that of writer), many female authors recognize the impossibility of fulfilling the expectations of gender roles. To complicate the matter, for many nineteenth-century women writers, the roles of woman and author become inextricably linked since the public expected them to endorse feminine values in their writing. Louisa May Alcott expresses despair over her role as guide to America's "little women," and late nineteenth-century women writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps decry the absence of choices for women writers; the domestic duties Stowe embraced were seen

⁶ In *Letters to a Sister; or Woman's Mission* (1850), William Alcott defines woman's "mission" as a cooperation with the "Redeemer of men, in bringing back from its revolt, the same world which was lost by another species of co-operation on the part of Eve" (25-26). This "influence" over mankind could be achieved through personal relationships, but he also recommends writing as a way to broaden women's influence (138).

not only as cumbersome but as detrimental to a woman's capacity to develop her artistic talent. The onset of the modern era does not erase these tensions between domestic (and national) duty and ambition, but it shifts the emphasis of women writers' anxiety to aesthetic representation and canonization. Female writers in the twentieth century became more concerned with the ways in which their gender often placed them into the category of "popular" writers, a denigrating position which indicated a lack of seriousness about aesthetics and provided a way for highbrow critics to demarcate the feminine and the middlebrow as coexisting categories.

The goal of my dissertation is to look at a specific historical moment between World War I and the early 1930s, what we now consider the "modernist" period, and to examine the influence of the emerging category of the "middlebrow," usually construed as part of the ongoing "feminization" of American culture, on Wharton's, Cather's, and Hurst's perception of the modern era and their roles as female writers within this historical moment. While women writers of the late nineteenth century such as Louisa May Alcott rebelled against the constrictions of the "cult of true womanhood" for reasons which I will explore in a moment, these early twentieth-century writers who were beginning to benefit from changing gender constructions often looked to the "order" of the domestic sphere, a concept promulgated by mid-nineteenth-century writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, as a way to rebel against the chaos of the modern era and to structure their own aesthetic theories. I do not want to suggest that these writers fit into a neat pattern: sometimes conservative in their aesthetic practices in comparison to their modernist contemporaries, these writers nonetheless rebel against traditional conceptions

of the feminine and the types of writing considered appropriate for their gender, particularly the genre of domestic sentimental realism. Their upbringing, education, personal relationships, and aesthetics all differed, yet despite their diversity, all seemed aware that they were writing at moments of change--Alcott in the transition from sentimentalism to realism, the other women during the shift from realism to modernism--and all seemed aware that the aesthetic and moral values they endorsed in their fiction would negatively affect their critical reception. While all wished for validation as artists, all understood their complicated positions. Wharton, Cather, and Hurst esteemed something other than the alienated, fragmented, and egoistic personae of the emerging modernist writers like James Joyce and sought to find some order in the chaos of this transitional culture, often finding their concepts of order in feminine and domestic ideals which were increasingly becoming associated with the middlebrow. In order to understand these authors' desire to distance themselves from what is now considered the dominant aesthetic mode of their era, I will analyze their journals, autobiographies, letters to contemporaries, essays on the art of fiction, and their fiction, especially the *kunsterroman*.

Fears about the contamination of the literary by the middlebrow class of readers are connected to the concerns about "influence" which permeated nineteenth-century discourse. For Noah Porter, president of Yale University and author of *Books and Reading* (1871), readers had become too indiscriminate about what they read, and the role of the cultural elite (and good books) was to "teach" or influence readers as to proper tastes and reading habits. His concern about undirected, voracious reading echoes the

belief that inappropriate reading would contaminate the minds of young female readers, but while broader fears about fiction's negative influence stemmed from the moral corruption that could result from reading romances, Porter's fear was that the indiscriminate reader would become "indolent" (Radway 144). As Radway and others point out, the fears expressed by Porter are couched in gendered terms, for the "passive" reader is figured as a "feminine" one. Books must have a positive influence on their readers, forcing them to be active participants in the reading process, not passive (hence feminized) consumers of a cultural commodity. Porter's concern prefigures the twentieth-century obsession with aesthetic influence and a belief by the cultural elite that the breakdown of the boundaries between high and low culture would lead to a kind of cultural chaos in which there would no longer be a way to distinguish which aesthetic objects were untainted by marketplace demands. The valuation of a culture separate from the drives of market demands heightens at the very time that the market begins to have a more direct influence on cultural production in the forms of book clubs and the film industry, both of which promised to give the middle-class consumer an immediate access to "culture."

Porter's rhetoric focuses upon the kind of cultural influence a text enacts upon its reader, but his concerns are rooted in the concept about "influence" which permeated nineteenth-century discourse and had its roots in Victorian gender ideology. Barbara Welter's groundbreaking work on the mid-century gender ideology, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," lays out the four primary virtues expected of women at this time: purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness. Using documents from conduct

literature, college catalogues, diaries, popular poetry, and even fiction, Welter demonstrates the pervasiveness of certain expectations for the “proper” woman which rendered her “the hostage in the home” (151). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s depiction of the saint-like Uncle Tom, who by virtue of his suffering becomes Christ-like, is similar to Welter’s description of what the “true woman” suffered for the redemption of her culture: “She would be another, better Eve, working in cooperation with the Redeemer, bringing the world back ‘from its revolt and sin.’ The world would be reclaimed for God through her suffering, for ‘God increased the cares and sorrows of woman, that she might be sooner constrained to accept the terms of salvation’” (152).

Fulfilling the duties of piety allowed women to operate within the public sphere since “unlike participation in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive”; however, the other virtues--domesticity, purity, and submissiveness--all underscored woman’s true place, in the home (Welter 153). Indeed, her “national duty” was to stay at home; if woman were to leave her proper sphere, as a Reverend Mr. Stearns put it, “the beautiful order of society . . . [would] break up and become a chaos of disjointed and unsightly elements” (qtd. in Welter 173). Women’s education thus cultivated the domestic arts and reinforced her role as a complement to her husband and the educator of her children, a role increasingly emphasized as the nineteenth century drew to a close.

Intellectual pursuits did not, however, render a woman more fit for improving the world; in fact, according to doctors of the day, women’s physical ailments often resulted from mental overexertion. For instance, Dr. Edward Clarke, whose position as professor

of psychology at Harvard College in 1873 granted him credibility in such matters, describes the death of “Miss G” as caused by “over-work,” but not that of the physical kind:

She was unable to make a good brain, that could stand the wear and tear of life, and a good reproductive system that should serve the race, at the same time that she was continuously spending her force in intellectual labor. . . . she steadily ignored her woman’s make. Believing that woman can do what man can, for she held that faith, she strove with noble but ignorant bravery to compass man’s intellectual attainment in a man’s way, and died in the effort. (35)

While later women writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman ridiculed the “rest cure” promoted by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell to ease the “suffering” of intellectually overstimulated women, Louisa May Alcott’s journal demonstrates the pervasiveness of the perceived link between mental exertion and physical exhaustion. After one of her writing “fits” in 1861, she writes, “I found that my mind was too rampant for my body, as my head was dizzy, legs shaky, and no sleep would come” (Myerson 104). As a result of the repressive Victorian ideology demonstrated in Clarke’s vicious attack on females who sought an education, Alcott and other women writers of the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century reflected often on their problematic position as “artist” during an era when their pursuit of intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment often invoked derision from male writers and literary critics and their decision to pursue a vocation provoked wrath from those who felt they were abandoning their national duty to be proper wives and mothers.

Cultural "Progression": Sentimentalism, Realism, and Modernism

Despite the problems we can now see with the ideology embedded in the "cult of true womanhood," during the 1850s, the sentimental fiction which endorsed these ideals prevailed in the marketplace. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, after it was first published serially in *The National Era* in 1851-1852, sold over 300,000 copies by the end of its first year in print. By contrast, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* sold only about 1,500 copies in its first year and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* about 7,000 (Railton 74).⁷ Other sentimental novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* were the other top-selling novels of the decade. At this time, as Jane Tompkins argues, "the aesthetic and the didactic, the serious and the sentimental were not opposed by overlapping designations" (17). Thus, the didactic functions of the sentimental novel, particularly its celebration of the domestic sphere as a site of empowerment for women who remained pious and pure, were embraced by the mid-nineteenth century readers who purchased these novels.

However, by the time Alcott published *Little Women* in 1868, the realist mode advocated by William Dean Howells had already begun to command considerable critical appreciation, leading to a devaluing of the sentimental or sensational mode; critics began to construe the "literary" as a separate mode of discourse in order to preserve the function

⁷ Jane Tompkins argues that Hawthorne's novel sold as well as it did because of its affinities with the sentimental tradition: "Thus it is not the case that Hawthorne's work from the very first set itself apart from the fiction of his contemporaries; on the contrary, his fiction did not distinguish itself at all clearly from that of the sentimental novelists--whose work we now see as occupying an entirely separate category" (17).

of the “book” as aesthetic object. Literature as didactic treatise could obviously be considered “disposable”: once it had served its function (to abolish slavery or to uphold particular roles for women), the text was no longer needed.⁸ However, this separation of the “literary” from the merely “functional” did not immediately take on a gendered nature. For instance, New England regionalist fiction, much of it by women, predominated in the literary magazines and supplied an example of a more “realistic” women’s writing that differed in style and substance from the ephemeral sentimental and sensational fiction which dominated the marketplace in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Despite William Dean Howells’ celebration of women writers--specifically the regionalists--in his critical writings, wherein he claimed that “the sketches and studies by the women seem faithfuler and more realistic than those of the men” because “there is a solidity, an honest observation . . . which often leaves little to be desired,” the realists, including Howells, obviously questioned the ideals which the female sentimental novelists advocated in their fiction (134). Alcott herself demonstrated discomfort with this ideology in her fiction and journal entries, and the artist figures that populate much of her fiction, especially Jo March, express dismay with gender expectations. Ironically, the

⁸ David S. Reynolds’ *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* examines a wide array of texts which could be classified as “disposable” literature, in particular temperance tracts and other politicized pamphlets but also the myriad fictional texts which embodied the political debates of a particular moment. There were numerous temperance novels, the most popular being T.S. Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1854); even Walt Whitman wrote a temperance novel.

male authors like Hawthorne, Whitman, and Melville who are more closely aligned with realism's critique of Victorian ideology are, thus, considered the more important authors in the American canon, as Eric J. Sundquist's discussion of "realism" as a literary mode in Europe and America makes clear:

As it initially appeared in French aesthetic theory, "realism" designated an art based on the accurate, unromanticized observation of life and nature, an art often defiant of prevailing convention . . . To the European insistence on precise description, authentic action and dialogue, and moral honesty, the American tradition . . . adds a democratic openness in subject matter and style that breaks down rigid hierarchies even as it may indulge in imaginative disorder or utopian fantasy in order to probe the limits and power of a prevailing social or political reality. (502)

As Sundquist's definition of realism implies, the subject matter of the sentimental novels comes under fire at the time that the more "masculine" concerns of the public sphere take precedence over the minute contemplations of the domestic sphere found in much of women's writing. Unfortunately for Alcott, her most popular novels, especially the *Little Women* series, continued to focus on the details of women's domestic existence (even as they demonstrated its limitations), marking her fiction as belonging more in the tradition of the sentimental than the realistic. Here, as in the modernist period, aesthetics and ideology become intertwined.

While literary critics have denigrated texts such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* because of their sentimentality

and popular appeal, both of which are antithetical to the concept of the “literary,” contemporary feminist critics such as Jane Tompkins and Susan K. Harris have argued that we should value these same texts because of their attempts to institute a society based upon the values of the domestic sphere. Tompkins describes the “sensational designs” of Stowe and other writers of the era, depicting these artists primarily as reformers who hoped to valorize woman’s role in the domestic sphere in order to give women a measure of moral authority since legal restrictions such as disenfranchisement made the immediate political empowerment of women nearly impossible. Although both Tompkins and Harris do defend the forms of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, particularly its sentimental language and conventional endings, they do so in light of the reform goals of these authors; that is, in order to reach a wide readership, these authors had to disguise the subversive messages of their fiction within the traditional forms of domestic literature. Tompkins claims in her chapter from *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* entitled “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History” that such novels are an “effort to reorganize culture from a woman’s point of view” and, in certain instances, that they offer “a critique of society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville” (124). Hence, Tompkins must argue that subversive political content is embedded in the seemingly conventional, but she avoids the question of aesthetic complexity that caused these texts to be devalued in the first place. Her plea that we “see literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order” underscores her division of politics and aesthetics

(xi), but as Sundquist's definition of realism implies, the ideologically subversive is wedded to the aesthetically complex as definitions of the "literary" become more concrete.

The recuperation of women's texts is necessary, critics such as Tompkins and Harris would argue, because while many of the "popular" writers in the nineteenth century, as well as a large part of the reading public, were women, literary and cultural critics preferred men's writing, which predominated in the forming canon of American literature. Growing concerns over the "feminization" of American culture could be one reason that as critics began to confine the definition of the "literary" to a particular type of specialized language, so, too, did they confine the "literary" to a particular subject matter. Critics valorized those texts which embodied the adventure narrative by celebrating the frontier and exploration, perceived as more "American" subjects than the home, while the division of spheres narrowed most women's experiences to those areas deemed unimportant as the basis of "real" literature.⁹ As Jackie Byars argues in her study of cinematic melodramas,

⁹ In *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Ann Douglas compares the sentimental novelists' desire to reach "consumers" with the aims of "inevitably more serious writers like Melville [who] attempted alternately to re-educate, defy, and ignore a public addicted to the absorption of sentimental fare" (10). James D. Hart's study of popular American literature attributes the growing number of novels dealing with domesticity on the emergence of a middle class, a new *bourgeoisie* which he believed to be controlled by women, for the wife, "the men frankly and fondly admitted, was their arbiter in affairs that might be called cultural. . . . Men were busy with money-making, politics, and all the other so-called practical affairs of the day; women took over the arts, social department, and domestic standards" (86). Thus, Hart sees the separate spheres ideology as responsible for the American novel's being "taken out of the hands of a Cooper and put into those of women who resembled Cooper's feminine characters" (90).

Traditional (masculine) critics have favored the notion that the individual is separate from society, resting on the assumption that individuals have some meaning apart from and prior to the society in which they exist, and texts that reinforce this view, generally showing a male hero in conflict with a feminine society, came to compose the literary and film canons, those bodies of texts “acceptable” for society. (18)

This critical discrimination between popular fiction and literature thus depends upon the concept of separate spheres, allowing critics to belittle women writers for their focus on domestic experiences that are not seen as “universal” and, hence, not the basis for real literature. This differentiation between public and private, or, more specifically, male and female, especially affects the perception of popular women’s writing, creating problems that still confront literary scholars today, for even some feminist scholars question the literary “value” of popular writers such as Louisa May Alcott despite their agreement that her writing serves as an important social documentation of the position of the woman writer in the Victorian era. However, the reading public did not have the same preferences as literary critics, and acclaimed writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James were left to bemoan their lack of popular success, often blaming the “mobs of scribbling women” who dominated book sales.¹⁰ Even the most “literary” of writers

¹⁰ Edith Wharton comments on James’ sensitivity about his lack of popular success in the chapter of her autobiography dedicated to the study of his fiction: “This sensitiveness to criticism or comment of any sort had nothing to do with vanity; it was caused by the great artist’s deep consciousness of his powers, combined with a bitter, a life-long disappointment at his lack of popular recognition. I am not sure that Henry James had not secretly dreamed of being a ‘best seller’ in the days when that odd form of

recognized the need for a large audience for their books, and writers like Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst found ways to manipulate their aesthetic goals so that they could satisfy marketplace demands.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, America faced a period of upheaval as many began to question the Victorian ideology which had, for the last several decades, dominated our country's moral, cultural, and political values. According to Ann Douglas, "nineteenth-century America was, in certain senses also usually considered pejorative, more Victorian than other countries"; this same Victorian ideology retained a strong hold in America during the early twentieth century, pervading much of the literature of the period (5). However, as Henry May's *The End of American Innocence* (1959) demonstrates, changing attitudes began to emerge during the prewar period, and the literature of this era illustrates the conflicting paradigms, both ideological and aesthetic, in effect during this time. According to May, literature and politics in particular reflect the ideological transformations in America in the early twentieth century (xiii). As May and other cultural analyses of the era document, the period prior to and immediately after World War I was one of tremendous political and ideological upheaval in America, when the United States had to reconsider its isolationist policies, address the changing roles of women, and acknowledge growing racial conflicts; most consider the literature that emerged from the modernist period as reflective of this chaos.¹¹

literary fame was at its height . . ." (*A Backward Glance* 191).

¹¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land, Volume 2: Sexchanges* addresses the upheaval in gender roles created by World War I. They argue that women's

Ironically, our present perception of the modernist literary period tends to find a cohesive aesthetic for this era, with a dominant literary mode emerging as a result of the chaotic social circumstances and young authors' rebellion against the traditional establishment. Raymond Williams describes how our present critical conceptions of modernism privilege a particular type of writing and devalue others, arguing that the "late-born ideology of modernism" selects those artists who privilege the

subconscious or unconscious as well as . . . a radical questioning of the processes of representation. The writers are applauded for their denaturalizing of language, their break with the allegedly prior view that language is either a clear, transparent glass or a mirror, and for making abruptly apparent in the very texture of their narratives the problematic status of the author and his authority. (*The Politics of Modernism* 33)

In *Marxism and Literature* (1977) Williams reminds us of the danger of focusing upon only what we perceive as the "dominant" system of a particular era. Instead, we should "recognize the complex interrelationships between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance" (121). While his conception of dominant, emergent, and residual cultures is helpful as a way to understand the upheavals

opportunities for employment and travel during the war, as well as their relative removal from the physical dangers of combat, created an atmosphere of adversity, with men becoming increasingly hostile towards women. After the war, women agitated for greater rights (including the vote), believing that they could not return to their previous positions. Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, her autobiography about her war experiences, reflects the feelings of women during this period of transformation. In particular, she writes about the ways that her work as a nurse during the war allowed her to break Victorian taboos about an unmarried woman's viewing and understanding the male body.

of early twentieth-century American culture and our present perception of this literary period, we must be careful about narrowing our perception of what modernism “is” by holding onto our current idea of the era’s “dominant” mode. In essence, improperly using Williams’ theory to understand modernism can lead to the premise that modernism “triumphed” over realism and sentimentalism. The idea that one movement ends, making way for the new dominant one, is particularly problematic for an era in which the “residual” movement, realism, remains so strong, as it does even today.

This concept of progressivism, that an “inferior” culture must die out in order for a “superior” one to take its place, is, in a sense, a Darwinian conception of culture which assumes that the fittest will survive. The early decades of the twentieth century felt the impact of Darwinism in numerous ways, including its influence on the eugenics movement which peaked in the 1920s. Albert Edward Wiggam’s *The Fruit of the Family Tree* (1924) begins innocuously with a discussion of Gregor Mendel’s study of heredity traits in peas, then applies these theories to other plants and animals; finally, he asserts that we need to use genetic theories not only to improve crops but to better the human race. While we should care for the weak, for this constitutes “civilization,” we should also use positive eugenics, or the encouragement of marriage and childbearing among the “higher” classes, to lessen human misery. The idea that we must take the accidents of evolution and turn them into the purposeful weeding out of the “weak,” which concept found its most horrific manifestation in Hitler’s “final solution,” obviously depends upon what a particular culture values as those traits/people that should prevail/survive. Such selective breeding also occurs in the shaping of modernist literary aesthetics; here,

ironically, that which the American branch of eugenics most esteems, domesticity, is that which is the least valued by modernist aesthetics.¹² Thus, female authors were again facing conflicting messages: one's duty to one's nation is embedded in one's domestic, maternal role, but one's role as an artist is to rebel against all of that which comprises the "traditional."

Feminizing Modernism?

As the end of this century approaches, critical methodologies such as poststructuralism, materialism, and new historicism have begun to open up new ways of examining literature, asking us to return to long-ignored texts, many of them by women, to reexamine their "value" and to consider the ways in which these authors dealt with the conflicting ends of ideological and aesthetic concerns. Such approaches have proven invaluable to feminist critics as a way of validating women's texts that have previously been left out of the canon, suggesting that we view these texts as historically and culturally significant even if they do not reflect the aesthetic standards deemed necessary

¹² All of the eugenics arguments focused upon the necessity of women putting the welfare of their children above all else. Since these arguments predominated in the post-suffrage era, one could see them as politically reactionary. These debates took several different forms. One of the most striking was the argument that the contemporary New Woman, envisioned as the "girl-woman" flapper in Wharton's 1920s novels, was "shirking [her] tremendous responsibilities, not because [she] do[es] not want babies, but because [she] [has] allowed [her]sel[f] to want phonographs, and upholstered furniture, and installment pianos, and 'freedom' and travel, more than [she] want[s] to carry [her] fair share of the world-old burden of woman" (320). The deceptive collapsing of politics and domestic responsibilities is also telling: "And this improvement of life, the perfecting of the babe at her breast, is not only woman's supreme duty, but is her one deathless passion. At last her new freedom has given her the opportunity to make *her natural passion her political platform*" (Wiggam 280).

for canonization. Susan K. Harris' analysis of nineteenth-century American women's fiction, *19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretative Strategies*, provides an overview of early twentieth-century analyses of the popular women's fiction of the nineteenth century in order to demonstrate the long tradition of denigrating these novels. Fred Lewis Pattee's study of mid nineteenth-century literature, *The Feminine Fifties* (1936), for instance, utilizes "a critical strategy that starts with assumptions about the author's sex, moves out to her autobiography, and proceeds to examine her work as an extension of her biological structure and life experiences," which practice Harris argues is common in pre-1978 examinations of women's literature (Harris 2). As she notes, Pattee may not have read many of these popular women's novels which he condemned for "pander[ing] to women's hysterical tendencies" (3), but, ironically, such biased scholarship may have helped to resurrect the very fiction it sought to condemn for its lack of "artistry." The attacks made on nineteenth-century women writers by early critical studies such as Pattee's and even those by female critics such as Helen Waite Papashvily in her *All the Happy Endings* (1956) maintained traditional assumptions about female authors' "abnormality," a charge perpetuated by the belief that the anger in these texts represented a "ruthless" and "vicious" attempt to undermine culture (as opposed to the current feminist reading of these authors that they wanted to reform their culture): "Thus she [Papashvily] reads the convention of female moral superiority as one strategy to mutilate the male, suggesting that women portrayed female competence in practical affairs and superiority in religious ones not only in order to undermine male hegemony but also to undermine male confidence"(6). Harris also suggests that Papashvily's critique

of nineteenth-century women writers may stem more from post-World War II fears about the decay of the family and suspicions about women's responsibility for this sad state; whatever the reasoning behind this interpretation of nineteenth-century women writers' motives, her characterization probably led to the more sympathetic studies by Jane Tompkins and Susan K. Harris herself, since both critics praise these texts for their attempts to "undermine male hegemony" to better their culture, not to destroy it.¹³

Harris' own analysis, instead of condemning these authors for "pandering" to women readers or "castrating" a patriarchal culture, focuses on their use of familiar (to their audiences) sentimental and religious language, allowing them to manipulate seemingly conventional textual structures for the purpose of their cultural critique. For her, the seemingly formulaic "happy endings" of these novels often disguise their subversive content; that is, the female characters, often driven by their rebellion against traditional values but contained finally by marriage or death, should not be remembered for the final pages of the novel but for the five hundred pages preceding that ending which glorify the heroine's rebellion. Similar interpretative strategies are currently being used to discuss Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, especially since the author noted her

¹³ Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942) demonstrates the depth of contempt towards women in the World War II era and later:

Mom is everywhere and everything and damned near everybody, and from her depends all the rest of the U.S. Disguised as good old mom, dear old mom, sweet old mom, your loving mom, and so on, she is the bride at every funeral and the corpse at every wedding. Men live for her and die for her, dote upon her and whisper her name as they pass away, and I believe she has now achieved, in the hierarchy of miscellaneous articles, a spot next to the Bible and the Flag, being reckoned part of both in a way. (185-186)

distaste at having to end the novel with its heroines' marriages but that concessions to her audience's preferences (and publisher's demands) had to be made. Such instances show the importance of audience expectation, a publisher's control over women's writing, and the desires of the authors themselves, sometimes expressed in journals and perhaps encoded in the heroine's acts of rebellion against the very societal dictates which mandated the novels' endings. However, the methodologies used by contemporary feminist critics may also complicate the analysis of women's fiction by emphasizing these texts solely as social documents with embedded attacks on contemporary culture instead of analyzing them as literature, constructions stemming from the author's desire to be an "artist," not just a cultural critic. In fact, Wharton, Cather, and Hurst repeatedly stated their aesthetic goals, perhaps as a way to counter the mounting critiques of the modernist era that narratives with a popular appeal could not also be "literary."

While in many ways our late twentieth-century conception of modernism is the result of historical, cultural, and aesthetic "accidents" which happened to converge at a particular moment, authors and critics of the period we now call "modernist" shaped which values came to predominate, and these were not always the values promoted by the authors I am focusing on in this study. T.S. Eliot in particular structured the values of modernism, privileging an elite culture which would act as a guardian of the high culture against the mass culture of the uneducated populace (Billington 56). Unfortunately for women writers such as Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst, whose aesthetic of transmutation and interest in women's lives often appealed to this mass audience, or, more appropriately, the emerging middlebrow culture, "the more cultural products are

seen to refer directly to contemporary social circumstances, or 'real life,' the less likely they are to be accepted immediately into the 'canon' of high culture" (Billington 47). While the high modernists like Eliot and Pound believed themselves to be responding to "contemporary social circumstances," their position as alienated artists and lone chroniclers of a culture that was "an old bitch gone in the teeth"--because of women's influence, no doubt--differed from the ways in which other writers of the era, particularly women, responded to the cultural crisis.¹⁴ In addition, the growing hostility by cultural critics like Alfred Kuttner about the perceived "feminization" of American culture no doubt helped shape the critical reception of texts by and about women (Hoffman 22).¹⁵ The categorization and, hence, marginalization of these writers (marginalized at least in the sense that they are not considered part of the modernist movement) indicates a problem with the high modernist paradigm by which we judge the literature of the early

¹⁴ Radway's discussion of the conflicting aesthetics of the period is useful for understanding the position in which Wharton, Cather, and Hurst found themselves. More "traditional" reviewers like Henry Seidel Canby, one of the members of the Book-of-the-Month Club selection committee, admitted a preference for the "older generation of writers" embodied by Wharton, Cather, and Tarkington, "in part because he found the despairing cynicism of the modernists deeply disturbing," but at the same time, "he was also keenly aware of the radical nature of modernist formal experimentation and acknowledged that this kind of stylistic play was often more closely attuned to the tempos and 'deranged' sensibilities of the contemporary age than was the work of the authors he favored personally" (178).

¹⁵ Even relatively recent studies of early twentieth-century America condemn the "feminization" of our culture. Ann Douglas describes the shift from a masculine Calvinist sensibility to a "feminized" consumer culture as one characterized by "anti-intellectual sentimentalism purveyed by men and women whose victory did not achieve their finest goals. America lost its male-dominated theological tradition without gaining a comprehensive feminism or an adequately modernized religious sensibility" (13).

twentieth century, for much of the most popular literature from this time--by men and women--is no longer read or even available today, giving us a skewed perception of this period.

Recently, a number of feminist critics have begun to examine the problem of the woman writer's position in the modernist period. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's three-volume study *No Man's Land* [*The War of the Words* (1988), *Sexchanges* (1989) and *Letters from the Front* (1994)], the anthology *Unmanning Modernisms: Gendered Re-Readings* (1997), edited by Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson, and Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (1990) have all attempted to redefine "modernism," particularly in relation to gender. These studies question the current perception of modernism, a movement conceptualized by its "founders" as a "masculine" one which devalued women writers, especially those who concentrated on the feminine, domestic, and sentimental. Gilbert and Gubar's *The War of the Words* characterizes the modernist era as a period in which women's emerging political power and the subsequent shifting of gender roles provoked male authors into creating fictional visions of male power and female powerlessness. The emasculated Prufrock and the chattering tea-room women who frustrate him are paradigmatic of the images emerging from this war, and Gilbert and Gubar assert that this "war of the sexes" is the predominant force behind modernism:

. . . historians and literary critics have traditionally associated the problems of so-called "modernity" with "the long withdrawing roar" of "the Sea of Faith," with Darwinian visions of "Nature, red in tooth and

claw,” with the discontents fostered by an industrial civilization, with the enemies within the self that were defined by Freud, and ultimately with the no man’s land of the Great War. But while all these phenomena did, of course, shape the twentieth century as an age of anxiety, their meaning is notably altered when they are juxtaposed with what Samuel Hynes has called “the vast change that took place in the relations between the sexes and in the place of women in English society in the years before the War.”

(21)

Hynes’ comment could apply equally to American culture, particularly with the growing agitation for suffrage and its relation to the emergence of the New Woman. Gilbert and Gubar’s premise that modernism is “differently inflected for male and female writers” is a useful starting point for a consideration of the relationship between Victorian notions of women’s influence and modernist aesthetics for American women writers (xii). However, while they claim that their study is based on the “material conditions of history” (xiii), their analysis, like that in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is, ironically, still rooted in the psychoanalytic assumptions about gender formation which shaped many of the negative representations of women in this century such as Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* (1942). Considering feminists’ divisive debates about the efficacy of psychoanalysis for cultural transformation, I believe that a more historically and aesthetically grounded consideration of the impact of Victorian gender ideology on modernist-era women

writers, particularly those not classified as “modernists,” is necessary.¹⁶

While the first volume of Gilbert and Gubar’s study focuses more on the impact of the “war of the sexes” on the development of modernism than on individual women writers’ contributions to modernism, Bonnie Kime Scott’s anthology attempts, in turn, to collect the repressed and forgotten female voices of the period in order to delineate the interrelationships between its male and female writers. Her “modernist family tree” establishes a space for women writers within a movement considered by many to be “masculine”; however, the writers she includes in the anthology, such as Virginia Woolf, H.D., and Gertrude Stein, are already considered part of the high modernist canon because of their innovative narrative techniques, similar to those of male modernist writers like James Joyce and Ezra Pound. Scott does not seriously consider the writers who were the most popular ones during this period and, thus, the most involved in the tensions over the middlebrow. Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson, the editors of *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*, are caught up in the same emphasis

¹⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, in her study of the value of Lacanian psychoanalysis for feminist theorists, warns us of the dangers inherent in this union. She cautions that “the cultivation of a critical *ambivalence* is necessary when using [Lacan’s] work” (*Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* 190). Ultimately, she insists, “feminists can accept his views and perspectives only at great cost--that of feminist commitments--for his position is clearly antagonistic to, not agnostic about, any feminism committed to an equality of the two sexes, and an autonomous position for each” (191-92). I would argue that Gilbert and Gubar’s seemingly random choice of texts to demonstrate their thesis and their concentration on the “psychological” motivations of the authors create a kind of textual analysis which seems divorced from the context of their argument. That is, they are unable to do more than find evidence which they see as symptomatic of this “war of the sexes” instead of considering the broader implications of changing gender ideologies on the way women writers of the early twentieth century are positioned in the canon today.

on the dominant modernist aesthetic. While they propose to “reevaluate the gender politics informing literary modernism” (vii), their introduction disavows any “agenda” for their anthology: “We deliberately chose not to impose any criteria or agenda on our contributors regarding the question of modernism, female or otherwise. As a result, our collection is multivocal and does not conform to either standard or revisionist paradigms of modernism as a period, a set of definitions, or a literary aesthetic” (ix). An obvious critique of their approach is that without asking questions about modernism’s aesthetic, we cannot understand the position of writers like Wharton, Cather, and Hurst who do not fit into “either standard or revisionist paradigms” of modernism. Tellingly, their anthology also emphasizes already canonical writers like Virginia Woolf and H.D. or those like Radclyffe Hall whose lifestyles and/or subject matter establish them as socially or morally anomalous and, hence, more “modernist.” None of the contributors to the collection focuses attention on writers like Wharton, Cather, and Hurst, all of whom were popular and even critically acclaimed in some literary circles of their own day.

Analyzing three topics will lead to a better understanding of why these writers resisted the dominant modernist aesthetic: their assertions about art and culture; the application of their aesthetic theories in their fiction, specifically in texts that deal with an artist figure and/or the correlations between art and domesticity; and the relationship between their goals as writers and the reception of their work by both a popular audience and literary critics. Genevieve Sanchis Morgan’s “The Hostess and the Seamstress: Virginia Woolf’s Creation of a Domestic Modernism” provides a helpful way to begin thinking about the tensions between critical and popular reception which affected women

writers during this era. Her article re-reads *Mrs. Dalloway* in light of the children's story found in the author's manuscript version of the novel and appraises Woolf's modernist aesthetics as an undermining of masculine modernist assumptions by documenting the correlations between artistry and domesticity in the manuscript version of *Mrs. Dalloway*, noting Woolf's efforts to mask this link in the published version. Sanchis Morgan argues that while Woolf's radical style and her use of domestic themes have been acknowledged by previous critics, we need to understand that Woolf celebrated the female gaze in a "poetics of domesticity," a taste for "art for art's sake" illustrated by the society hostesses popular during the modernist era, at the same time that she felt the need to mask her appreciation of domestic artistry (91).

However, Wharton, Cather, and Hurst were more explicit about the fact that their aesthetic--transmutation--was rooted in the feminine and domestic. Transmutation is defined as the process of changing something into a "higher form," and each of these authors sought to do just that with their characters, particularly their female ones, as the conversation between Willa Cather and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant about Cather's conception for *My Ántonia* demonstrates. The fact that these writers used typically feminine objects or activities--gardening, the "sheath" metaphor, and buttons, for example--to describe their aesthetic preferences, while the male modernists utilized more masculine conceptions of the creative process that invoked the alienation of the artist from the world of nature and culture, is the cause of their own alienation from the modernist movement.

While Woolf masked a domestic sensibility within a modernist aesthetic, making

her more acceptable to the high modernists, Wharton's, Cather's, and Hurst's use of the aesthetic of transmutation to respond to the disjunctions between domesticity and art that nineteenth-century women writers faced created a problem both for modernist-era critics and those of our own day. That is, instead of regarding only some moments of the early twentieth century as the "modernist period," a retrospective categorization which neglects the multifaceted literary practices in both high and popular culture, especially during the time when these two modes are beginning to merge due to shifts in publication practices, the emergence of the cinema, and reviews of literature in both highbrow and popular publications, we need a better understanding of the various aesthetic choices available in this period and the reason that so many authors chose not to follow the call of "modernism." In addition, we need to examine the tensions felt by those authors who realized their form of writing was considered "outdated" by their--usually younger--peers and what impact this knowledge had on their own aesthetic practices.

In chapter one, I will examine the career of Louisa May Alcott, since she can provide a basis for understanding the tension between rebelling against and reinforcing tradition--and in essence, between achieving popular or critical acclaim--which also affects the relationships of the other three writers to the modernist movement. She wrote during the period when popular women's fiction prevailed, although by the 1870s the realist mode advocated by William Dean Howells had begun to emerge and New England regionalist fiction predominated in the popular and literary magazines, supplanting the dime novels and lurid fiction that supplied many of Alcott's paychecks before the popularity of *Little Women*. Her journals evidence her strong desire to be considered a

significant writer, an ambition probably fostered by her associations with the Transcendentalist circle in Concord. Ultimately, though, the conceptions of gender perpetuated by the “cult of true womanhood,” and, more specifically, by the ideology of woman’s “influence,” prevail in her fiction, and despite the anonymous sensational fiction written mostly before *Little Women*, the work published under her name and the anonymously-published *A Modern Mephistopheles* generally upholds the Victorian ideals impressed upon her by her parents. Her fiction and journal entries do show discomfort with this ideology, however, and the artist figures who populate much of her fiction, especially Jo March, express dismay with gender expectations and the constraints of sentimental realism, a resistance which offers an important model for future American women writers. The critical response of Alcott’s contemporaries to her work, one largely premised on this struggle between the values of the dominant culture, which still upheld the cult of true womanhood ideology, and the emerging mode of realism, which often questioned the ideological underpinnings of Victorian America, has undergone scrutiny by recent feminist critics who see Alcott as more critical of Victorian ideology than novels such as *Little Women* might suggest. The implications of such critical re-evaluations, which I will consider more fully in the chapter on Alcott, can also be seen in the recent attempts by feminist critics to “re-read” modernism, especially in relation to gender ideology.

In chapter two, I begin to focus more specifically on the modernist period and ways in which the anxiety of influence transforms into particular aesthetic concerns. Whatever her misgivings about the quality of her “art,” Alcott was successful in the

marketplace because of her ability to transform the appropriate ideological content into well-crafted narratives. As a model for later women writers like Wharton, Cather, and Hurst, Alcott showed that a woman could succeed in the literary marketplace, be a public figure, and travel among the circles of the literary elite. However, Edith Wharton's remarks about Alcott in her autobiography show the discomfort felt by her descendants. How might one rebel against the constraints that gender ideologies placed on women's writing at a time when the "New Woman" ideal was emerging and concepts about aesthetics were changing both with the turn of the century and the emerging "art world" of modernism? The fact that Wharton's "genteel" fiction about the upper classes fared better with critics than the novels that I will analyze, *Summer* and its harsh representation of New England village life and her later "jazz" age novels *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, suggests that her contemporaries wished to keep her in the nineteenth century, and she rebelled against the "genteel" label at the same time that she criticized the "vulgarity" of modernists like Joyce. Most importantly, though, the continued tendency to associate her with the "genteel" tradition refuses to recognize the fact that in *Summer* and in her critical statements of the 1920s she sought to formulate her theory of "transmutation" and to create an aesthetic more in keeping with the supposed goals of modernism than with the "genteel" tradition of realism. Most importantly, Wharton wanted to create an aesthetic which could teach her audience the values of the traditional culture she continued to uphold. Her *kunstlerromans* about Vance Weston emphasize her own discomfort with the middlebrow culture which produced him, and her artist model is the more cultured and sophisticated Halo Spear. Hence, Wharton reverses the association

of the middlebrow with the feminine.

Chapter three analyzes Willa Cather's aesthetic model, one which intertwines the modernist autobiographical impulse with the belief that one's art must reach a broad audience. Cather's goals for her audience differed a bit from Wharton's. While both showed concern that modern technology and the growing importance of marketing concerns in the publishing industry were corrupting the literature that they and others wanted to create, Cather's model of the literary is a more populist one than Wharton's. Their critiques of modernist aesthetics and culture are quite similar; that is, both charged modernist writers for engaging in too much description and not enough transmutation, and, like Wharton, Cather struggled against the conservative cultural ideals of "femininity" which had constrained women writers in the past. However, she looked to the folk and communal notions of art to structure her aesthetic in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia*, and a consideration of Cather that examines her aesthetic theories and the process of "transmutation" in her pre-1920 fictions will reveal allegiances with Virginia Woolf's call in the 1919 essay "Modern Fiction" to "come closer to life" (107). Yet, the tendency to read Cather's work as "merely" autobiographical while continuing to ignore the connections between her aesthetic and that of other modernist writers impoverishes our understanding of her work and its contributions to modernism, especially her desire to bridge the growing gap between the artist and his audience which occurs during the modernist era.

In chapter four, I will concentrate upon an author who is probably unfamiliar to most people. More than Wharton and Cather, Fannie Hurst's career defined the

middlebrow for many of her contemporaries; as a result, she has largely disappeared from literary history. Ironically, Hurst was critical about the emergence of middlebrow tastes, but while she condemned writers who pandered to a lowest-common-denominator audience, she realized that her work had a mass appeal. Much like Wharton and Cather, she seemed to feel a responsibility to “teach” her readers in terms of both the aesthetic innovations she pursued in a novel like *Lummo*x and the social issues which she takes up in *Imitation of Life* and other novels throughout her career. Hurst became an important commentator about the plight of women, and in addition to addressing such dilemmas in her fiction, her speaking engagements and essays usually focused on the intersections between art and political efficacy. Because Hurst is closely associated with the film industry, which association is now crucial in perpetuating any interest in her work, her career is perhaps the most telling example of the effect of high culture’s fear of the middlebrow on a writer’s reputation, for while her fiction was praised during the 1920s, the growing association between her texts and “women’s films” during the 1930s parallels a downturn in the critical reception of her works and perhaps leads to her eventual erasure from the canon. However, her fiction of this period is more aesthetically complex than critics have recognized, and more than Wharton and Cather, she could be construed a “modernist.” Her literary legacy--or lack thereof--is a frightening reminder of the effect of popularity on a woman writer’s reputation. Before turning to Wharton, Cather, and Hurst, however, I begin this dissertation with the study of a popular nineteenth-century woman writer whose career is currently undergoing a re-evaluation, Louisa May Alcott.

Chapter One
“A Truly Good and Useful Woman”:
Louisa May Alcott and the Anxiety of “Influence”

This summer, like the last, we shall spend in a large house (Uncle May's, Atkinson Street), with many comforts about us which we shall enjoy, and in the autumn I hope I shall have something to show that the time has not been wasted. Seventeen years I have lived, and yet so little do I know, and so much remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire --a truly good and useful woman.

In looking over our journals, Father says, “Anna's is about other people, Louisa's about herself.” That is true, for I don't talk about myself; yet must always think of the wilful, moody girl I try to manage, and in my journal I write of her to see how she gets on. Anna is so good she need not take care of herself, and can enjoy other people. If I look in my glass, I try to keep down vanity about my long hair, my well-shaped head, and my good nose. In the street I try not to covet fine things. My quick tongue is always getting me into trouble, and my moodiness makes it hard to be cheerful when I think how poor we are, how much worry it is to live, and how many things I long to do I never can. (Cheney 39)

“Little Woman” or “New Woman”?

While beginning a study of modernist-era women writers with an examination of Louisa May Alcott's literary career may seem unusual, her concerns about authorship and canonical status provide a telling paradigm for the conflicts between critical and popular success which become more pronounced with the emergence of a middlebrow culture in the modernist period. As Janice Radway reminds us, publishing practices of the nineteenth century established the notion of the book as a disposable commodity, and Alcott began her career as one of the anonymous newspaper and dime novel hack writers who provided much of this inconsequential reading material. However, unlike many of her contemporaries in this field, Alcott emerged as a successful author with the

publication of *Little Women* in 1868.¹ The *Little Women* series and her other juvenile fictions provided her with financial security and allowed her to publish more “serious” novels like *Work* (1872). Her most popular narratives obey many of the plot formulas and moral dictates of domestic sentimental fiction, a genre popularized by writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and Maria Cummins in the mid-nineteenth century, but unlike many of her contemporaries, Alcott expressed discomfort about the restrictions such formulas imposed on her creative capacities. While Alcott’s parents fostered the ideals of “true womanhood” in their daughter, the author often had trouble reconciling her own desire to be a successful writer with the mandates of Victorian domestic ideology, and in both her fictional narratives and her journals, we can see her struggle to break away from the confines of the only fictional form considered appropriate for women of her day.

At the age of seventeen, Louisa May Alcott already understood the contradictions of the “cult of true womanhood,” for she desired to be a “truly good and useful woman” while at the same time she feared that the “things I long to do I never can.” Traditionally, we think of the journal as a site of private confession, but Alcott’s journal, as the passage opening this chapter demonstrates, is structured around public responses: those of her father, her mother, and, ultimately, her reading public, for she revised her journals before her death, anticipating their interest to a generation of readers brought up with the “little

¹ Catherine Stimpson states that over 6 million copies were sold in *Little Women*’s first century of continuous publication (966). The book has never been out of print and is available in over twenty different English language editions.

women” of Alcott’s fiction. Her journal is thus a kind of performance for these various readers, one which documents her attempts to be a “truly good and useful woman” as well as her rebellion against this role. With her final revisions, her journals become a retelling of Jo March’s struggle and a performance of the nineteenth-century ideal of “little womanhood.” Her journal entries document her attempts to tame her desires and her “quick tongue,” leading many to see her juvenile novels as conduct guides for America’s youth. In fact, the rhetoric of women’s influence, part of the “cult of true womanhood” ideology prevalent in nineteenth-century conduct literature and women’s fiction, pervades Alcott’s writing and shapes her perception of herself as both a writer and as “Aunt Jo,” the woman whose influence would guide generations of readers.² However, while the denouement of *Little Women* depicts the domestic bliss which rewards Jo as she renounces the allure of fame and fortune and chooses to become a wife, mother, and teacher of young boys at Plumfield, Alcott herself did not choose the traditional path prescribed for Victorian women, suggesting her own discomfort with the ideology she promotes in her sentimental fictions. In addition, the anonymous “sensational” fictions such as *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) which are now being republished under her name represent further evidence that Alcott perceived the dangers inherent in the role of a

² Ednah D. Cheney’s introduction to *Louisa May Alcott: Life, Letters, and Journals* (1889) reminds us of the power of a writer over her readers:

The novelist comes to us in the intervals of recreation and relaxation, and by his seductive powers of imagination and sentiment takes possession of the fancy and the heart before judgment and reason are aroused to defend the citadel. It well becomes us, then, who would guard young minds from subtle temptations, to study the character of those works which charm and delight the children. (xi).

“truly good and useful woman.” Yet, the numerous readings of Alcott’s thrillers as “subversive” and *Little Women* as accepting of patriarchy reduce these texts to paradigmatic structures of anger and submissiveness when they are actually complex explorations of the relationship between a woman’s artistic ambition and patriarchal oppression. Alcott’s anxiety about her writing is less the one about aesthetics and critical reception that we see in modernist-era women writers, although we do see such concerns emerge at times in her depiction of Jo March, than one about moral influence. While her duty as a “truly good and useful woman” is to foster the ideology of true womanhood in her readers, she understands that to do so limits her own artistic capabilities and undermines her position in the American literature canon, which, as I discussed in the introduction, favors narratives depicting an adventurous masculine spirit in opposition to a feminized culture.

Reading Alcott’s Message to America’s “Little Women”

“Anxiety of influence” is, of course, Harold Bloom’s conception concerning male authorship. Bloom applies Freud’s elaboration of the Oedipus complex to explain literary history as the attempt of the poet, “locked in Oedipal rivalry with his castrating ‘precursor,’” to “disarm that strength by entering it from within, writing in a way which revises, displaces and recasts the precursor poem” (Eagleton 183). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* offers a feminist revision of Bloom’s theory, arguing that eighteenth and nineteenth-century women writers lacked a clear literary lineage and thus “struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was

endemic to their literary subculture” (51).³ Judging from Alcott’s comments about her fiction in her journals, she did experience anxieties about the quality of her writing and the legacy she would leave behind. She often expressed disdain for the “rubbish” which, ironically, furnished her with her early financial success as a writer. For example, an entry written when Alcott was twenty-two states, “I don’t waste ink in poetry and pages of rubbish now. I’ve begun to live, and have no time for sentimental musing” (Myerson 73). Perhaps Alcott’s criticism of “sentimental musing” derived from her desire to emulate a writer whom she perceived as achieving both success and artistic integrity. After reading Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Bronte in 1857, she wondered “if I shall ever be famous enough for people to care to read my story and struggles? I can’t be a C.B., but I may do a little something yet” (85). The “anxiety of authorship” Gilbert and Gubar posit for women writers resulted from a *lack* of maternal ancestry, but Alcott’s reading preferences indicated that female as well as male writers influenced and inspired her.⁴ This suggests that Gilbert and Gubar’s theory about women writers’

³ Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* appeared after numerous feminist examinations of the canon (such as Ellen Moer’s *Literary Women* and Patricia Meyer Spacks’ *The Female Imagination*) which uncovered the long tradition of female novelists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While literary history had erased many of these women from the canon by the twentieth century, nineteenth-century women authors *were* often aware of their literary foremothers. When Jo March reads her first story in print, she “wonder[s] if Miss Burney felt any grander over her *Evelina* than she did over her ‘Rival Painters’” (*Little Women* 178).

⁴ A 1852 journal entry detailing her reading preferences lists Goethe, Schiller, and Emerson alongside Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (Cheney 45). Clearly, her tastes vacillated between the metaphysical and the sentimental, the “serious” and the “sentimental.”

“anxiety,” especially in the case of late nineteenth-century American writers like Alcott, suffers from a lack of historicizing. A consideration of the nineteenth-century rhetoric of “influence” in America offers a clearer understanding of the type of “anxiety” from which Alcott suffered. For Alcott, this anxiety is less one about the lack of female literary precursors than one about the restrictions on aesthetic construction which the “true womanhood” ideology places upon women’s writing.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out in *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), nineteenth-century women writers basically had two narrative endings available to their characters: death or marriage. While she does not see women writers of the nineteenth century as capable of engaging in the same types of resistant narratives as those of the twentieth, she does believe that “sometimes the ends of novels were inspiration, sublimating the desire for achievement into a future generation” (1). This presents an important question, though: What frustrations did writers like Alcott experience because of these aesthetic limitations? Many contemporary feminist scholars do defend *Little Women* as a landmark text for women readers and writers, primarily because of its depiction of a rebellious, “unfeminine” girl and her desire to write, for these critics do perceive Jo’s struggle as a universal one. Ruth K. MacDonald defends the book from the perspective of a feminist scholar invested in the novel’s subversion of patriarchy, arguing that we must examine the life of Jo March in the later books of the *Little Women* series in order to understand fully Alcott’s intentions. Catherine R. Stimpson does not even bother to defend the novel on the basis of its value as cultural critique; she creates the category of the “paracanon,” a

place for works that may or may not have “literary value” but nevertheless continue to be loved by a large number of readers, and she uses *Little Women* as her primary example of such a text. This allows us to ignore aesthetic merit and the question of *why* so many readers continue to consume this narrative and to identify with Jo’s struggle; for Stimpson, we just do. The need to create such a definition in a discussion of *Little Women*, one that elides issues of canonical literary qualities and cultural values, again points to the problems surrounding the study of texts (especially women’s) for reasons other than aesthetic merit: We end up ignoring the ways in which the author manipulates the narrative conventions available to her, and, thus, the ways in which she undermines the dominant ideologies of her day, for in the case of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, aesthetics and ideology are inextricably connected.

Susan K. Harris’ essay “‘But Is It Any Good?’: Evaluating Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Fiction” (1993) contends that we need to rethink our approaches to novels by nineteenth-century American women in order to understand their importance as both cultural icons and literary texts. Her “process analysis” explores the ways in which nineteenth-century women writers approached contemporary ideological constructions, particularly the “cult of true womanhood,” but she also analyzes the aesthetic construction of their novels:

If we look at them as both reactive and creative rather than asking them to self-consciously embody “timeless truths,” [the current gauge for “aesthetic” quality] we can understand their aesthetic, moral, and political values, both for their contemporaries and for us. While traditional

criticism tends to examine literary works either historically, rhetorically, or ideologically, the method I am calling process analysis investigates all three axes in its contemplation of any given work. (264)

The “structure and theme” of the novels often conflict, Harris argues, because the writers had to “observe, at least superficially, essentialist rules for inscribing female protagonists and for their narrators’ attitudes toward their heroines’ adventures” (266). So, by examining the tensions between structure and theme, we can begin to uncover the ways in which the text questions the roles of women in American society instead of uncritically accepting the Victorian ideals of true womanhood, as the ending for a novel such as *Little Women* might first suggest. Harris’ essay, a development of Jane Tompkins’ theories about the “sensational designs” that literary texts work upon us, provides a helpful way to consider Alcott’s *Little Women* and *A Modern Mephistopheles* in light of the current debates within feminist scholarship about the value of these novels, particularly in terms of their capacity to influence young female readers: can these texts serve as subversive messages to “little women” about their role in Victorian America and their potential for artistic fulfillment and success?

The questions of “influence”—those of the woman over society, the author over her reading public, and of men over women—which *Little Women* examines reemerge in the current feminist debates about the message of Alcott’s novel to America’s “little women,” and the fate of Jo is at the heart of these debates. The “images of women” criticism of second-wave feminist theorists especially focused upon questions concerning how a novel’s depiction of women influenced its readers and the society at large, and the

critical discussions of *Little Women* repeatedly return to the question of Alcott's "influence." Frances Armstrong insists that the novel "was indeed a contributor to the ideology of women's littleness which had been developing for at least two centuries" (453), while Catharine Stimpson replies that "much of the joy of *Little Women* exists because one part of the text encourages rebellion" (969). Beverly Lyon Clark believes that Alcott wrote out of a sense of familial duty, not as a creative outlet, and thus, while Alcott "gives some play to subversive ideas of self-expression, her overt message is that girls should subordinate themselves and their language to others" (81). These contradictory readings about the implications of the novel's conclusion and Jo's transformation reflect the very conflicting messages about "influence" which the novel itself expresses.⁵

The concept of women's "influence" becomes increasingly important in America during the nineteenth century and can be connected to the growing separation between the

⁵ Despite the burgeoning amount of scholarship on Alcott, *Little Women* is seldom taught in canonical American literature courses; even the progressive *Heath* anthology includes only a brief excerpt from *Work*, primarily for its sociological insights about a nineteenth-century working woman and its significance as an "autobiographical" text. As Elizabeth Keyser notes in her introductory remarks, "*Work*, like *Little Women*, is autobiographical and covers nearly twenty years in the life of its heroine. . . . [it] does more than expose the plight of women; it celebrates the power of female narrative as well as female solidarity" (*Heath* 70). Unlike *Little Women*, *Work* is not perceived as juvenile or popular fiction, for *Work* did not enjoy the popularity of her March family trilogy. Ironically, however, even Alcott scholars express misgivings about the "value" of Alcott's work not only in terms of its aesthetic merit but even about the viability of reading her fiction as a critique of the subjugation of women in nineteenth-century America. The concern is this: does Alcott intend for her young female readers to see *Little Women* as a recommendation to give up childish things (such as artistic ambitions) and to seek happiness in domestic harmony, or is the young, rebellious, unmarried Jo March the true role model in this text?

public and private spheres which I discussed in the introduction. Rhetoric which invoked essential differences between men and women and asserted that each sex had an appropriate "sphere" predominated in the era which Barbara Welter describes as the apex of the "cult of true womanhood," 1820-1860. Obviously, the elevation of "purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness" as womanhood's ultimate virtues outlived the era which Welter concentrates upon in her analysis, and Louisa May Alcott's fiction of the 1860s and 1870s, particularly the juvenile novels like *Little Women* and the anonymously-published *A Modern Mephistopheles*, verifies the predominance of this ideology for her generation as well as the growing anxieties women like Alcott felt about gender roles. The concept of influence is a slippery term, for in this world split between the public and private spheres, how can women extend the reach of their power beyond their home while at the same time staying in it?

The Anxiety of "Influence"

The writers of Alcott's day faced this dilemma, and while their strategies for employing their "influence," however imagined it may have been, varied, their emphasis on the importance of the domestic sphere and their insistence that the domestic sphere did in fact influence the public sphere were two responses to the issue. James Hart's study of the popular novel describes the increasing significance of the domestic space in fiction as women became the primary consumers and producers of literature:

Because women were the rulers of the home and home was where the novel was read, fiction came more and more to concern itself with women and their special world. It excluded business (husbands daily disappeared

from fiction to enter some remote, uncharted world where they earned money); it neglected politics (civic affairs and the structure of a democracy were seemingly impolite parlor topics); it was ignorant of social movements (incoming immigrants and westward-moving pioneers were merely quaint characters used for contrast with the normal middle class); and ethical or theological problems were viewed only in the simplest Sunday school terms. (90-91)

Clearly, Hart's characterization of mid-nineteenth-century women's fiction, made a century later, seems rather insufficient to readers today, especially those with feminist sensibilities. However, we must read this fiction in the context of its time, and for many women, home was their sphere, and, increasingly, they did write about it. Alcott never married or had children, but she lived with her parents (and in her adulthood, supported them) throughout most of her life; thus, she offers a unique perspective on the negotiations between the public and private spheres which plagued the female artist of the nineteenth century, especially because of her desires for fame, money, and a lasting literary legacy, desires not acknowledged by many other women writers of her day. More importantly, though, Alcott's journals and fiction demonstrate her concerns about exerting an appropriate "influence," an anxiety which plagued the woman writer unconvinced that being confined to the domestic sphere was best for herself and her country.

While the rhetoric of women's influence was meant to reinforce the ideology of separate spheres, these concepts complicate one another. Women were supposed to exert

a positive influence on their husbands, children, and other family members, as a plethora of etiquette guides, religious tracts, biographies for girls, domestic guides, and novels of the period remind us. Louisa's own uncle, William Alcott, in *Letters to a Sister* (1850), exhorts women to "exert a proper influence," for they "rule the world" (74, 84). Like many of his time, he felt that the home was the appropriate site in which women might exercise their superior morality, but he does also acknowledge that a woman could use her pen to extend the range of her influence beyond the domestic sphere; this use of a pen primarily refers to letters written to absent family members but also writing meant for the public. However, the overlapping of public and private that Alcott promotes is considered dangerous by other domestic reformers.

For instance, while Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The American Woman's Home* (1869) envisioned the far-reaching impact of a woman's influence, they urged women to refrain from political engagement, for contact with the public sphere would result in a contagion of the "purity" of women and, thus, of the domestic space. Their exhortation to the "American mother and housekeeper who rightly estimates the long train of influence which will pass down to thousands, whose destinies, from generation to generation, will be modified by those decisions of her will which regulate the temper, principles, and habits of her family," while seemingly the type of radical invocation of woman's power that late twentieth-century feminist interpretations of women's fiction from this era find in the mid-century writings by women, is thus tempered by the belief that women's influence can only be properly wielded in the kitchen, the parlor, the nursery, and, while unmentioned, the bedroom (Beecher 214).

While Stowe abhorred slavery because she believed it created an inevitable overlap between the domestic sphere and the marketplace, thus diminishing the woman's ability to influence her family properly, the increasing "damned mob of scribbling women," no matter how "domestic" the subject matter of their fiction, meant that even after the Civil War transformed the economic system which so disturbed Stowe, women's publishing and other such "problems" would continue to invade the hallowed domestic space.

For Catherine Beecher and many other reformers of the period, teaching and charitable work were the only appropriate avenues through which women might exercise their influence outside of the home. A proper education for women would prepare them to be good wives and mothers as well as teachers, for the relationship between a student and teacher could and should replicate that between a child and mother. An 1828 edition of *The Ladies' Magazine*, edited by domestic reformer Sarah Josepha Hale, published a letter from a husband who complained that his wife's inadequate education meant that he had "no companion in my wife" and that his "children have no instructress in their mother" (514). Education, properly administered, would make a woman better suited for marriage and her role as her family's moral compass.⁶ George Burnap claims in *Sphere*

⁶ While Hale, Beecher, and other educational reformers seem conservative to us today because they advocated women's education only in order to make them better wives and mothers, comparing their rhetoric to that found in journals like *The Home Circle: A Monthly Periodical Devoted to Religion and Literature* demonstrates the radical nature of their arguments. An editorial about women's education in this Nashville-based journal in 1855 offers the portrait of "The True Woman":

Heaven knows how many simple letters, from simple-minded women, have been kissed, cherished, and wept over by men of far loftier intellect. So it will always be to the end of time. It is a lesson worth learning by those young creatures who seek to allure by their accomplishments, or

and Duties of Woman (1848) that a “good wife” has “power over her husband’s happiness,” but, more importantly, that marriage also improves a woman’s character (102). Next, working with the poor and unfortunate--as Marmee and Beth do in *Little Women*--is the logical outgrowth of a woman’s pious concern for her fellow man. A collection of women’s biographies entitled *Women of Worth: Book for Girls* (1860) depicts the lives of women, some famous, some the wives of famous men, and others noted in their lifetime for charitable work, to demonstrate to young female readers what kind of behavior is “appropriate” for them. Margaret Mercer’s work in prisons, for example, represented well the “true moral influence which women, when her education is properly conducted, and her position rightly understood, will exercise over men, over society” (76). She must, of course, “rightly understand” her position in order to use her “power” correctly.

In order to forestall criticism that their authorship divested them of their “womanhood,” Louisa May Alcott and other writers did attempt to subsume their writing into a domestic activity seen as necessary for the family’s survival.⁷ Yet, the central

dazzle by their genius, that though he may admire, no man ever loves a woman for these things. (467)

⁷ *Ruth Hall*, Fanny Fern’s 1855 novel which explores the plight of a woman driven to support her daughters with her pen, contains a passage similar to those in which Alcott describes the benefits of her earnings:

There was *the* book. Ruth’s book! Oh, how few of its readers, if it were fortunate enough to find readers, would know how much of her own heart’s history was there laid bare. . . . She could recall the circumstances under which each separate article was written. Little shoeless feet were covered with the proceeds of this; a little medicine, or a warmer shawl was bought with that. (175)

problem for nineteenth-century women writers was the fact that, ultimately, publishing placed a woman firmly in the public sphere whereas the ideology of true womanhood maintained that the domestic sphere should remain “untainted by the marketplace” so that it could be a haven for men from the corruptions of this same public sphere (Hart 86). While a number of women writers used pseudonyms or had husbands to negotiate their book deals, Alcott published much of her work with her name on the cover and frequently conversed with her publishers about the marketing of her work.

Perhaps to placate women who felt the same uneasiness as did Alcott about the appropriateness of women’s confinement to the domestic sphere, especially the women who were starting to agitate for their rights (the Seneca Falls convention was held in 1848, the same year Burnap published his collection of “sermons” for women), an increasing tendency to link women’s influence with national strength emerged toward the middle of the century. In Mrs. Lydia H. Sigourney’s novel *Lucy Howard’s Journal* (1858), the happy housewife Lucy proclaims that she “believe[s] home-happiness to be the secret of national prosperity” (322). As Gillian Brown asserts, recent feminist revisions of nineteenth-century literary history posit women as “producers and embodiments of the American dream of personal happiness,” and their domesticity “constitutes an alternative to, and escape from, the masculine economic order” (Brown 6). However, the repetition of sentiments like Lucy Howard’s reminds us of the pervasiveness of many nineteenth-century women’s belief that they did exert influence on the “masculine economic order.” Stowe’s conclusion to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, suggests that women never have to step outside of the home sphere to exercise their

benevolent power; they merely need to “*feel right*” so that “an atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being” (442). For Stowe, this sensibility was the key to societal transformation, but as Stowe’s novel ironically demonstrated, the domestic and economic spheres cannot be separated so easily.⁸

Alcott’s own experience as a daughter and an aspiring author reminds us of the complex contradictions between the rhetoric of influence and the ideology of true womanhood. Because of Bronson Alcott’s inadequacies as a provider, his daughter Louisa faced an odd dilemma. Her family needed her financial support, thus exacerbating her inability to be the daughter who fit the “true womanhood” ideal that her father, despite his own failure to embody the male virtues of Victorian ideology, insisted that his wife and daughters strive to attain. While Jo March faces a similar predicament between becoming a “little woman” or following her more masculine and creative impulses, her efforts to help her family derive largely from the hardships of the Civil War and their father’s absence or illness, providing a noble and usually self-effacing excuse for her and her sisters’ work outside of the home. However, the anxieties created by this ironic conflict between domestic responsibility and “true womanhood” permeated both Alcott’s journal entries and her delineation of characters like Jo March and Gladys of *A Modern Mephistopheles*.

⁸ While Jane Tompkins argues that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s use of the jeremiad form creates a subversive subtext in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she fails to analyze the complex rhetoric of influence which informs Stowe’s novel. Since the concept of “influence” preceded Stowe’s novel, her use of it is not really that radical, especially since she is so accepting of the ideology. Alcott, on the other hand, questions the implications of women’s “influence.”

Perhaps as a result of these anxieties, Alcott often belittled her writing by emphasizing its function as a source of monetary support for her family. She obviously wanted the approval of her family, which often seemed to be rooted more in what Alcott's fiction could do for the family's finances than what it could do for her lasting literary legacy. Martha Saxton's biography of Alcott details her frustrations over her family's dependence upon her, arguing that she "transformed her freedom into indentured service" to her family and that her writing becomes part of her entrapment (204, 300). Alcott's ability to provide for her family with the income from her sensational stories is well-documented in her journal entries from 1858-1860: "Earned thirty dollars; sent twenty home" (Myerson 91); "\$21 from Lovering; \$15 home" (94); "Got a carpet with my \$50, and wild Louisa's head kept the feet of the family warm" (98). Similarly, Jo's writing provides material comforts for her family, but it also imparts psychological benefits for Jo, who takes pride in her ability to care for her family:

To the seaside they went, after much discussion, and though Beth didn't come home as plump and rosy as could be desired, she was much better, while Mrs. March declared she felt ten years younger; so Jo was satisfied with the investment of her prize money, and fell to work with a cheery spirit, bent on earning more of those delightful checks. She did earn several that year, and began to feel herself a power in the house, for by the magic of a pen, her "rubbish" turned into comforts for them all. *The Duke's Daughter* paid the butcher's bill, *A Phantom's Hand* put down a new carpet, and the *Curse of the Coventrys* proved the blessing of the

Marches in the way of groceries and gowns. (310)

Alcott does not only detail the monetary “power” Jo could exert with her pen; she also emphasizes the March family’s pride in Jo’s talent. Soon after the trip to the seaside, Jo calls a family council to discuss the possible publication of her first novel, for “‘Fame is a very good thing to have in the house, but cash is more convenient’” (311). However, Jo’s family weighs not the financial impact of the novel’s publication but the effect of the novel’s reception on Jo’s reputation as an author. Her father advises her to let the book “ripen,” while Marmee suggests that “‘criticism is the best test of such work, for it will show [you] both unsuspected merits and faults, and help [you] to do better next time’” (311). While the 1950 Alcott biography by Madeline Stern describes the writing of *Little Women* as a happy reliving of Alcott’s childhood, suggesting that scenes such as the March family council were also routine in the Alcott household and that *Little Women* practically wrote itself (as God “wrote” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), Saxton’s 1977 biography paints a bleaker picture, arguing that the book was written out of financial necessity, not nostalgia or the creative impulse, and the kind of family support depicted in the council scene had no basis in the reality of Alcott’s life.⁹

⁹ The sense of frustration which Saxton describes may be self-imposed, for she does describe the Alcott family’s pride in Jo’s writing:

Bronson began including Louisa among the characters on whom he discoursed during his conversations. Louisa found herself in the company of Margaret Fuller, Longfellow, Emerson, and Hawthorne. Although she protested against this publicity, her father persisted in discussing her: “I find I have a pretty dramatic story to tell of her childhood and youth, gaining in interest as she comes up into womanhood and literary note.” (Saxton 299)

Yet, also according to Saxton, “she was turning her one channel of self-expression into

Little Women: Or, How Jo March Learns to Control her "Sharp Words"

Saxton's assertion that Alcott wrote *Little Women* without "rewriting or rethinking a word" contributes to the continued aesthetic devaluation of the novel and its creator (295). Yet, Alcott's most popular and analyzed novel provides a telling case study of her frustration about the rhetoric of influence which dominated the gender ideology of her day, and she herself places the novel within the context of other popular sentimental novels which endorse true womanhood ideals. For example, after Marmee gives her daughters a lesson in humility, Jo quotes Aunt Chloe from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--"Tink ob yer marcies, chillen! Tink ob yer marcies!"--reminding us that the novel not only teaches us about the evils of slavery but about the delights of forbearance in the face of hardship (52). Again and again, Marmee offers her "little women" lessons in self-control and finally admits to Jo that she has had to learn, through her husband's example, to repress her own anger. Marmee's example, in turn, teaches Jo the value of self-control after Jo, furious at Amy for burning her first manuscript, almost lets Amy drown. The lesson troubles Jo, however: "How did you learn to keep still? That is what troubles me--for the sharp words fly out before I know what I'm about, and the more I say the worse I get" (92). While Jo is concerned at this moment with controlling her temper, her emphasis on keeping "still" and controlling the flow of her "sharp" words makes her question here

the chore of a menial. . . . She saw her life as a series of installments to be paid against a debt her parents had incurred. She felt that she had fewer and fewer choices, as a woman and as a writer" (300). Her father's pride in her celebrity could not overcome the anxiety created by their financial dependence upon her and the fact that her responsibilities compromised her goals as an artist.

particularly problematic. For, ultimately, the control of her words and the “rubbish” she writes is the lesson that Jo must learn.

Under the tutelage of Marmee and through her relationships with her sisters and Laurie, Jo comes to understand and appreciate her role as a “truly good and useful woman.” When Amy chastises her that women must learn to “be agreeable,” or, in other words, to hold their tongue when they disapprove of others, Jo teaches the ever-proper Amy a lesson in true womanhood: ““But I think girls ought to show when they disapprove of young men, and how can they do it except by their manners? Preaching does not do any good, as I know to my sorrow, since I’ve had Teddy to manage; but there are many little ways in which I can influence him without a word, and I say we *ought* to do it if we can”” (341). Here, Amy learns from Jo’s example and eventually takes upon herself the duty of managing Teddy, and he acknowledges her ability to guide his behavior. The numerous examples of the March women’s positive influence on those around them suggest that Alcott accepted the true womanhood ideology prevalent at the time. Beth’s illness and death, for example, call upon the popular sentimental image of the dying child who can transform her family through her death-bed wishes, a motif used by Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and by T.S. Arthur in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*.¹⁰

¹⁰ As Beth is dying, she asks Jo to take her place in the March household, for ““you’ll be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world”” (479). Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant argue that Alcott “kills off” Jo and turns her into Beth, a submissive figure, and in fact, during Beth’s first illness Jo places her hood upon her head (reminding us of the writing cap she wore to signal that her “fit” was upon her) and “the submissive spirit of its gentle owner seemed to enter into Jo” (212). However, while Jo does attempt to fill the void left by Beth’s death, she chafes at the restrictions of this role: “She had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no

According to Ann Douglas, such concessions to the power of sentimental “rubbish” implicate Alcott as one of those authors who “feminizes” (and devalues) American culture. However, while *Little Women* extols the power of women to affect the behavior (and hearts) of those around them, the novel’s exploration of the influence of the true womanhood ideology on the artistic temperament exposes the complexities of Alcott’s attitude towards the gender constructions of her time.

While Jo will learn the importance of her role in influencing those around her, she does not at first associate her writing with this aspect of her womanhood. Professor Bhaer condemns a paper similar to that which publishes her “rubbish,” stating, “I do not like to think that good young girls should see such things . . . I would rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash” (401). Jo half-heartedly defends the popular thrillers, but the narrator of *Little Women* emphasizes that not only does Jo’s writing lack the capacity to influence her readers positively, it is also a harmful influence on its author. While the threats facing heroines of many sentimental fictions are sexual, Jo’s temptation is not sexual, but the description of Jo’s “desecration” attests that there is little difference in the result of her passion:

She thought she was prospering finely, but unconsciously she was

matter how hard; and now she had her wish, for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to Father and Mother, trying to make home as happy to them as they had to her? And if difficulties were necessary to increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others?” (499) At this point, her mother suggests that she resume writing to make herself happy, and this is when she begins writing the domestic pieces that eventually culminate in her “good book.”

beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society and, imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us. (401)

Jo's dilemma echoes those of captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's: how can one have "experiences" (for Jo does experience life in the big city of New York and at least imagines and researches the experiences of her heroines in her thrillers) and still remain "pure"? The last line of this passage raises an interesting point, however--it suggests that experience is inevitable. In instances like these, we see the narrator of the novel undermining the ideology which the novel seems to uphold. If one must have experiences in order to enrich the creative process, and the condemnations of Alcott's work by critics like Henry James would support such a belief, can a female be both a "truly good and useful woman" and a literary genius?¹¹

¹¹ Like other women of her time, Alcott was both urged to write about what she knew--the domestic sphere--and condemned for the "littleness" of the fictional world this provided. As Susan K. Harris points out, Susan Warner's titling of *The Wide, Wide World* ironizes the situation of women in the nineteenth century, for their world usually was not "wide" but narrow. While Alcott and many other nineteenth-century female (and male) writers question the narrowness of the domestic sphere, the need to uphold the virtues of "true womanhood" in order to be published and read in their own day can make their works seem utterly conservative and old-fashioned today. Alcott was caught in a catch-22 situation; write about "what you know," which for most nineteenth-century women writers meant being relegated to the inferior "mobs of scribbling women," publish the anonymous thrillers which were the most pleasurable for her to write but offered no chance for public recognition as an "artist," or, finally, attempt to create "serious"

Jo's guilt, a result of Professor Bhaer's criticism of "trash" writing and the knowledge that her parents would disapprove of the thrillers, leads her to stop writing the sensational stories and to begin writing "intensely moral" tales for children's magazines (409). However,

much as she liked to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls because they did not go to a particular Sabbath school, nor all the good infants who did go as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels when they departed this life with psalms or sermons on their lisping tongue. (410)

Because Jo cannot punish the "naughty boys" of her children's stories, she eventually

literature and face the scathing reviews of writers like Henry James, whose standard for literary quality excluded even Alcott's adult novels like *Work* and *Moods*. Henry James' review of *Moods*, a work which Martha Saxton and other critics have described as a fictionalized account of Alcott's yearning for Henry David Thoreau, asked that Alcott only "write about what she [knew]," for he felt that she could not convincingly combine the love triangle between Sylvia, Geoffrey, and Adam with transcendental philosophy (Saxton 282). Obviously believing that Alcott took such criticism to heart, readers of her own time and ours scrupulously detail the correspondences between the fictional little women and Alcott's own life; in fact, Madeline B. Stern's 1950 biography of Alcott often seems more like a revision of *Little Women* than a literary biography. Ironically, Alcott used *Little Women*, perceived as her most autobiographical novel, to mock the critic's tendency to dichotomize between "real life" and art:

. . . she could laugh at her poor little book, yet believe in it still, and feel herself the wiser and stronger for the buffeting she had received. "Not being a genius, like Keats, it won't kill me . . . and I've got the joke on my side, after all, for the parts that were taken straight out of real life are denounced as impossible and absurd, and the scenes that I made up out of my own silly head are pronounced "charmingly natural, tender, and true." (314)

abandons this genre as well, but Alcott “punishes” Jo by entrapping her within the very concept of “little womanhood” which she sought to escape by going to New York to pursue a writing career and escape Laurie. Putting aside the writing that feeds her “vortex” causes Jo, like Alcott herself, to lose her consuming passion for writing, a move that enables Jo’s incongruous transformation into a Victorian “little woman.”

Since the transformation of Jo March from independent artist to wife and mother is at the heart of the feminist debates about the novel’s influence, examining Alcott’s attitude towards her fictional creation is an important step to understanding the frustrations these scholars have had about Alcott’s endorsement of Victorian gender ideology. Martha Saxton’s assertion that Alcott manipulated her often painful childhood memories into popular children’s narratives, thus granting her some control over her past, seems substantiated by the numerous parallels between Alcott’s life and that of the March family. More striking, however, is the fact that Alcott revised the narrative of her own life so that it imitated that of her “little women.” That is, her journals, which she edited late in her life in order to prepare them for publication after her death, reflect and comment upon her younger self, encouraging us to read her own life as a mirror of *Little Women*. For example, a May 1860 entry states this:

Had a funny lover who met me in the cars, and said he lost his heart at once. Handsome man of forty. A Southerner, and very demonstrative and gushing, called and wished to pay his addresses; and being told I did n’t wish to see him, retired, to write letters and haunt the road with his hat off, while the girls laughed and had great fun over *Jo’s* lover. (Myerson 98, my

emphasis)

Another entry refers to “Meg’s [Anna’s] wedding” (99). Alcott probably realized much of the interest in her own life story would stem from her readers’ belief that the “little women” *were* Alcott and her sisters. The repeated emphasis of the fictional over the real--Anna’s name is the one placed in brackets--positions Alcott’s journal revisions as part of a myth-making process which attempts to disguise the painful parts of her life by blurring the line between fact and fiction. However, we could also see these revisions as an acknowledgment of the relationship between Jo and herself, for both experience fierce ambitions for success and artistic fulfillment.

However, in the second half of *Little Women, Good Wives*, Jo’s path diverges from Louisa’s. Alcott scathingly responded to the letters she received asking her about the marriage plans of the four “little women,” especially the possibility of Jo and Laurie’s union: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life. I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone” (167). However, she does marry Jo to Professor Bhaer and ends *Little Women* with Jo’s declaration of her happiness in the domestic sphere, leading feminist critics to ask whether Alcott “sold out” in an attempt to acquiesce to her audience (and her publisher’s) demands. Ruth K. MacDonald argues that we must understand *Good Wives* as representative of what Alcott’s audience, not the author herself, wanted for her characters. However, the second half of the novel not only describes Jo’s marriage but her development as an artist. According to Alcott’s own account, her readers were primarily concerned with the marriage prospects of Jo and the other sisters; her depiction of Jo’s writing career cannot, then, be dismissed as part of

her acquiescence to audience demands. Thus, the anxieties in the second half of the novel as Alcott struggles between fulfilling the expectations of her audience and her own feelings about the development of an artist are significant for understanding the novel's message to American girls.

Throughout *Little Women*, Alcott describes Jo's passion for writing, and when this passion seizes Jo, financial and personal concerns escape her:

She did not think herself a genius by any means; but when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, *unconscious of want, care, or bad weather*, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh. Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untasted, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, *even if they bore no other fruit*. (307, my emphasis)

Alcott's journal also describes the writing process as something which transports her to an "imaginary world," a place similar to Edith Wharton's "secret garden." Such parallels encourage us to read these passages in Alcott's journals and *Little Women* as indicative of the female artist's passion for her vocation. Yet, Jo gives up writing in order to take up the traditional role of wife and mother, invoking the charge that Alcott encourages women to submit to traditional gender roles.

In order to explain this self-effacement, Elizabeth Keyser asks us to contemplate the possibility that Louisa May Alcott's advocacy of "little womanhood" in the

conclusion of *Little Women* serves as a mask; that is, we should read Jo's fate as a challenge to the "cult of true womanhood" rather than an uncritical acceptance of this ideology. She believes that the discovery of Alcott's anonymously published sensational fiction and their "subversive" nature (i.e., the heroines are driven by sexual passion, occasionally use drugs, and sometimes struggle to be free of patriarchal authority) urges a re-reading of Alcott's juvenile fiction, particularly the *Little Women* series. In fact, the most recent of the *Little Women* film adaptations, directed by Australian woman director Gillian Armstrong, encourages revisionist attitudes towards Alcott, for this version depicts Susan Sarandon's Marmee as a nineteenth-century feminist, influencing her daughters to think for themselves and to believe in their strengths, even if their talents are not "womanly." Her insistence that marriage is not the only goal for a woman's life echoes Alcott's sentiment in the before-mentioned journal entry; however, the cinematic Marmee is decidedly more feminist than Alcott's, for the novel's mother does hope first and foremost that her girls will find marital bliss: "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives . . . To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience" (111-112). However, Armstrong's feminist film version does not significantly alter Alcott's original intentions since the conclusion of the text is the same: Jo marries Bhaer and gives up writing sensational fiction.

Jo's change in priorities can be read as a response to the Victorian ideology which

dictated proper behavior for a woman. According to Victorian codes of behavior, not only could Jo's writing possibly taint her "womanly" virtues, as the passage quoted earlier demonstrates, but her desire to be a writer threatens her true calling as a wife and mother. When she rejects Laurie's marriage proposal, she claims that she cannot marry him because he would "hate my scribbling, and I couldn't get on without it" (418). While Laurie's previous support of Jo's "scribbling" and Professor Bhaer's damnation of sensational fiction make Jo's claim suspicious, especially in light of the fact that she had already given up writing sensational stories so that her parents and Bhaer would not be ashamed of her, her avowal still points to the problem that eventually forces Jo to give up all "scribbling" except for the occasional celebration of the domestic sphere. Marriage and art do not mix when one is trapped within Victorian domestic ideology. Therefore, we see this abrupt shift in Jo's character late in the novel. Despite her earlier trepidations about womanhood, Jo declares her happiness as a wife and mother, as her son Teddy is "my greatest wish . . . so beautifully gratified" (Alcott 560). Her artistic aspirations are put aside for domestic bliss.

As Harris' "process analysis" reminds us, we need to examine the novel's contradictions between structure and theme to understand the ideological implications of Jo's transformation. We must remember that the demands of Alcott's publisher and readers, as well as the ideology of the Victorian era and the conventions of sentimental realism, affected the narrative construction of *Good Wives*. However, by resisting the most romantic resolution, the marriage of Jo and Laurie, Alcott suggests that marriage for the purpose of love is restricting, whereas a marriage based on more egalitarian interests

such as intellectual pursuits and the founding of a school could produce a less restrictive marriage. The marriage of John and Meg, in which Meg humbly learns to submit to John's--and her mother's--example in order to become a "better" wife, reinforces this message. Jo and Bhaer's plans for Plumfield allow for a marriage based on mutual work, not so much the "divided spheres" of a marriage such as her elder sister's. In addition, Jo can foster the ambition in others (eventually, even girls) that she was unable to pursue herself. While marriage confines Jo Bhaer to the life of Victorian womanhood, she encourages some of the female students at Plumfield to pursue careers in such professions as medicine and the arts.

The novel ends with the tableau of the "little women" surrounded by their families as they reminisce about their ambitious childhood dreams of success; however, Jo's comment about her happiness as a wife and mother must be examined in relation to her hope that she will continue to write: "the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven't given up the hope that *I may write a good book yet*, but I can wait, and I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these'" (560, my emphasis). In *Little Women*, the struggle against Victorian gender constructions is embodied in Jo's personal ambitions, not universalized as a struggle that all humans face, for, in fact, Marmee, Meg, Beth, and, to some extent, Amy, all embrace the ideals of true womanhood throughout the novel. Even if Jo eventually becomes the "truly good and useful woman" that Alcott's journal entry describes, a distinct trace of ambition lurks beneath the veneer of true womanhood. Much like Hester Prynne in the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, Jo March and Alcott anticipate a time when women can pursue careers,

artistic and otherwise, without guilt. Alcott thus attempts to show her uneasiness over marriage for an artist while still seeming to bow to the conventions of the time and of the genre.

In the later novels of the *Little Women* series, *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886), Alcott returns to her anxieties about women's influence. Ruth K. MacDonald emphasizes the importance of the later novels in the *Little Women* series for understanding Alcott's intentions about Jo's character, but in many ways, the Jo Bhaer in *Little Men*--the focus on men in each title is suggestive in and of itself--becomes more and more like Marmee. This novel is probably the most conventional of the trilogy, and Jo Bhaer endorses many of the sentiments of the "cult of true womanhood." Her encouragement of Daisy and the other girls they allow to attend Plumfield often conforms to the traditional trajectories of the "true womanhood" ideology--her gift to Daisy in *Little Men* is a miniature kitchen set. In addition, her desire to teach her niece Bess the useful "art" of needlework is couched in the rather conventional view about women's education that while "needlework is not a fashionable accomplishment," her "girls shall learn all I can teach them about it, even if they give up the Latin, Algebra, and half a dozen ologies it is considered necessary for girls to muddle their poor brains over nowadays'" (191). This novel is explicit in its advocacy of Victorian domestic ideology, and here Jo proclaims:

"I'll tell you that one of my favorite fancies is to look at my family as a small world, to watch the progress of my little men, and lately, to see how well the influence of my little women works upon them. Daisy is the

domestic element, and they all feel the charm of her quiet, womanly ways. Nan is the restless, energetic, strongminded one, they admire her courage, and give her a fair chance to work out her will, seeing that she has sympathy as well as strength and the power to do much in their small world. Your Bess is the lady, full of natural refinement, grace, and beauty. She polishes them unconsciously and fills her place as any woman may, using her gentle influence to lift and hold them above the coarse, rough things of life and keep them gentlemen in the best sense of the fine old word." (*Little Men* 313)

However, the description of Nan here suggests that different types of "influence" are possible and that not only the traditionally ideal woman like Bess or Daisy exerts a positive influence on men.

In fact, in *Jo's Boys*, the final novel of the trilogy, published only two years before Alcott's death, we see her expressing a more politicized notion of influence which extends a woman's power outside of the domestic sphere. Jo's nieces, Bess and Josie, become a sculptor and an actress, respectively, and Nan, the most Jo-like character of these later novels, becomes a doctor and espouses feminist views. Women's suffrage, a cause Alcott herself supported, is vigorously debated throughout the course of the novel, and the commonsense acceptance of the novel's male and female characters of a woman's right to vote suggests that Alcott felt more comfortable inserting politics into this late novel. When Tom boldly claims, "I believe in suffrage of *all* kinds. I adore *all* women, and will die for them at any moment if it will help the cause," Nan responds, "Living

and working for it is harder, and therefore more honorable. Men are always ready to die for us, but not to make our lives worth having” (94-95). While Jo March may have turned into a “truly good and useful woman” for the Victorian age, she manages to teach her charges, both boys and girls, the value of a woman’s influence when it is not restricted to the domestic sphere. In a novel published soon after *Little Men, A Modern Mephistopheles*, she in fact explicitly demonstrates the *danger* of an influence which is restricted to the domestic sphere.

A Modern Mephistopheles: The Death of a “Truly Good and Useful Woman”

In her analysis of Alcott’s work, Elizabeth Keyser argues that the discovery of Alcott’s sensational fiction, now the focus of much Alcott scholarship, should encourage us to reread the fiction published under Alcott’s name during her lifetime, especially *Little Women* and its problematic conclusion. The fact that the thrillers were published anonymously, thus seeming to release Alcott from the constraints of propriety facing her when she wrote *Little Women*, would suggest the wisdom of Keyser’s claim. As Martha Saxton claims, “in her lurid stories she didn’t need to be responsible for a morality, an expected metaphysic, or a righteous ending. Her characters could behave with the violence, anger and ruthlessness that she kept tightly locked away. Her women could behave without regard to Concord ethics or Victorian claims of femininity” (261). Saxton’s and Keyser’s analyses of Alcott’s thrillers often echo Gilbert and Gubar’s readings of nineteenth-century women writers in *The Madwoman in the Attic* in which women writers fight the “anxiety of authorship” by creating texts with a palimpsestic narrative that subverts the very patriarchy which the texts seem to uphold. Often, the

authors create “doubles” such as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* in order to show the harmful effects of patriarchy; Saxton likewise describes the heroines of Alcott’s thrillers as “[Alcott’s] own self, let loose” (262). However, in most of these nineteenth-century texts, the “double” is destroyed and patriarchy seems to be firmly re-ensconced by the end of the text. Gilbert and Gubar, in turn, often reduce texts to a certain paradigm that ignores the more subtle aspects of the narrative.¹² Similarly, essays on Alcott’s sensational thrillers by Jeanne Bedell, Judith Fetterley, and Rena Sanderson all describe these fictions as “exorcisms of patriarchy.” All argue for the “radicalism” of Alcott’s sensation fiction, as does Madeline Stern’s introductory essay to *Behind a Mask*, the first published collection of her thrillers.

However, Alcott’s anonymous thrillers, perceived by many critics as more subversive than the fiction published under her own name, evidence deep ambivalence about her decision to pursue a writing career. The motifs of acting, disguise, and disclosure reappear throughout her thrillers, and while these themes are typical of the gothic genre, the repeated connections between these themes and artist figures asks us to examine carefully the relationship between Jo March and the luckless heroines of the thrillers. Jo March, like Alcott, must conceal her identity in order to publish her sensational fiction; while male pseudonyms were common for women writers during this era (the Bronte sisters, for example), Alcott and Jo conceal their names only for the

¹² For example, Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis reduces Bertha Mason to a psychological symbol of Jane’s rage, when more recent studies by critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasize Bertha’s importance as a marker of Britain’s colonial oppression and racism.

thrillers, an admission that these texts were more “dangerous” than their domestic sentimental fiction. Alcott and Jo both describe these anonymously-published texts as their greatest writing pleasure, so why must this pleasure be concealed from others?¹³

Alcott published *A Modern Mephistopheles* almost a decade after *Little Women*, at which time she had already established herself as a writer of domestic sentimental fiction aimed toward a juvenile audience. This novel differs from her earlier sensational fiction in that the book was part of the popular *No Name Series* instead of a piece written specifically for the mass-produced newspapers and magazines which indulged their audiences’ taste for the lurid.¹⁴ *A Modern Mephistopheles* blends the conventions of the sensational genre with the ideological underpinnings of the domestic sentimental novel, using the character of Gladys as bridge between the two forms. The novel opens with Felix Canaris, an impoverished but beautiful young man, despairing over his inability to achieve success as an author and contemplating suicide. Miraculously, Jasper Helwyze, a mysterious, wealthy man, appears on Felix’s doorstep and offers him food and lodging. Felix accepts his offer, and eventually, Helwyze proposes to publish his poems. The poems bring Felix critical acclaim, celebrity, and the attentions of Gladys, a young woman with no family connections who has been taken in by Helwyze’s former fiancée,

¹³ In a conversation with LaSalle C. Pickett, Alcott claimed that her “natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them on my pages and set them before the public” (qtd. in Stern, “Louisa Alcott’s Self-Criticism,” 334).

¹⁴ This series, sponsored by Roberts Brothers Publishing Company, allowed famous authors to publish books anonymously and asked the public to guess the author.

Olivia. Helwyze and Olivia's own relationship is complicated by her rejection of him after a tragic accident left him in constant pain and with the knowledge that his life would be shortened considerably. While Olivia realized her error and eventually returned to comfort Helwyze, his bitterness towards her colors his outlook on life and love and drives him to manipulate those around him so that they will experience his pain; thus, he devises a plan to manipulate Felix and Gladys into a marriage which he believes will be unsuccessful due to Felix's yearning for fame and fortune. While the couple grows to love one another and decides to abandon Helwyze's luxurious home and to embark upon a poor but independent life together, Helwyze uses his trump card to drive a wedge between them: he, not Felix, wrote the poetry which won the young man fame and Gladys' heart. The novel's tragic ending points not only to the dangers of unbridled ambition but also to the danger of investing all of one's energies into the true womanhood ideal, as Gladys does.

Until recently, most feminist critics have chosen to concentrate on "Behind a Mask" as Alcott's most "subversive" thriller. Like *A Modern Mephistopheles*, the earlier story examines the nature of performance, with actress Jean Muir "performing" the role of the perfect domestic servant in order to ingratiate herself with a wealthy family and win herself a husband; her scheme succeeds and while the revelation of Jean's real identity provokes the Coventry family's horror, the narrator's tone suggests that we are meant to sympathize with Jean's motives. In many ways, the heroines of Alcott's thrillers are precursors to Jo March, women trapped in a patriarchal culture with few means to express their creativity, sexual desire, and need for independence. No one seemed to

connect Alcott to *A Modern Mephistopheles* during her lifetime, but the similarities to *Little Women* are obvious. Gladys's reliance on Christian virtues echoes that of the March family, particularly Marmee and Beth, and like *Little Women's* use of *Pilgrim's Progress* as a structuring device, this novel is modeled upon a number of narratives, particularly the Faust legend, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In addition, the repeated references to acting also remind us of the March sisters' performances in their attic. However, while acting allows Jo and her sisters to shed momentarily their Victorian roles as "little women" without permanently damaging them, the "performances" in *A Modern Mephistopheles* lead to the downfall of the characters, particularly Gladys.

Gladys resembles Beth March more than the rebellious Jo, even though she is the female artist figure of the novel. Beth humbly accepts Victorian gender ideology, perhaps because of her devout Christianity, and submits to her family's guidance as well as her eventual death; she seems to be modeled on *Jane Eyre's* Helen Burns. Gladys, who has no family and only the manipulative Olivia to guide her, submits to her husband and God. Like Beth, Gladys is desexualized for the most part, only revealing a passionate side when she is given drugs by Helwyze. The fact that she dies in childbirth emphasizes the danger of sexuality for women; Beth is allowed to die before she is corrupted by sexual desire. The fact that Alcott's most "mature" sensational novel depicts a passive heroine, one whose primary "actions" are beliefs in God and human goodness, indicates her growing realization that she cannot subvert patriarchal domination through her fictional representations of womanhood.

Elizabeth Keyser argues that the allusions to and revisions of particular literary texts which occur in *A Modern Mephistopheles* do enable Alcott to “construct an alternative identity for women--especially women artists,” but her thesis is problematic (123). She claims that *A Modern Mephistopheles* is “Alcott’s most elaborately disguised yet fullest disclosure of her artistic intents and purposes. By associating her artist hero, as well as his masculine and feminine alter egos, with Hawthorne’s Dimmesdale, she confesses that she, like the pillar of the patriarchal community, is an accomplished actor” (141). While Alcott does revise male narratives such as *The Scarlet Letter*, we must remember that Dimmesdale dies at the end of Hawthorne’s novel, while Hester Prynne survives, subverting her sentence by her elaborately embroidered “A” and the success of her daughter Pearl. Hawthorne even ends his novel by envisioning the “new woman” that Prynne prefigures. Perhaps Gladys’ death is, then, Alcott’s response to Hawthorne and her own *Little Women* novels--that the hope for a future in which “new womanhood” replaces “true womanhood” is idealistic. In Victorian America the “new woman,” or more specifically, the “new woman artist,” is still suspect in the eyes of a puritanical New England community; thus, Alcott renders Gladys into an acceptable role model by making her a Christian martyr.

To reiterate this point, Alcott revises the Faust legend as well. This allusion recurs in a number of Alcott’s texts, and her journals recount her abiding interest in the legend; the repeated act of selling one’s soul for fame in this and other texts intimates her fear that her own success as a writer comes at a great cost to herself as an artist and a woman. The entire novel is a reenactment of Goethe’s *Faust*: Jasper Helwyze desires that Felix

Canaris play the role of Faust to his Mephistopheles, and when he first finds the desolate writer near death, impoverished and desperate about his inability to publish his poems, “the stranger read the little tragedy at a glance, and found the chief actor to his taste” (4). When the wealthy Helwyze later offers to publish his book of poems and to give him the chance for fame, asking that in return Canaris stay with him as a companion, Canaris immediately takes up his role in the drama:

You have divined my longing. I do hunger and thirst for fame; I dream of it by night, I sigh for it by day; every thought and aspiration centres in that desire; and if I did not still cling to that hope, even the perfect home you offer me would seem a prison. I *must* have it; the success men covet and admire, suffer and strive for, and die content if they win it only for a little time. Give me this and I am yours, body and soul; I have nothing else to offer. (8)

The rest of the novel enacts the struggle between Helwyze and Canaris for control over Canaris’ life, art, and, most importantly, his relationship with Gladys, for whom the invalid Helwyze develops an unhealthy attachment. It is his passion for the innocent Gladys which causes him to try to corrupt her soul by exposing her to “dangerous” literature:

Rich food and strong wine for a girl of eighteen; and Gladys soon felt the effects of such a diet, though it was hard to resist when duty seconded inclination, and ignorance hid the peril. She often paused to question with eager lips, to wipe wet eyes, to protest with indignant warmth, or to shiver

with the pleasurable pain of a child who longs, yet dreads, to hear an exciting story to the end. (86)

As Jo's writing of sensational stories "corrupts" her innocent nature, Gladys' role as Helwyze's pupil threatens "the soul of the woman" that "seemed to sit apart in the wilderness of its new experience, tempted by evil as well as sustained by good spirits, who guard their own" (86).

However, the narrator insists on the inherent good nature of Gladys, whose motives are less mercenary than those of her husband and Helwyze. She, too, is an artist, but her primary talent, singing, is depicted as a complement to her lover's talent for writing, for we see her singing either his poems or, in the tableau scene which serves as the novel's climax, those of Tennyson. However, her talent also acts as a form of seduction. Her performance of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* while in a drug-induced delirium allows Gladys to expose her sensuality and "seduce" her husband, a move which enrages Helwyze because while he gave her hashish to relieve her inhibitions, he hoped that her drug-induced state would decrease her inhibitions in his own presence but not allow her to expose her sensual nature to her husband, thus cementing his own bond with her. While Gladys performs her domestic arts of embroidery and singing only within the confines of the domestic sphere and only for the pleasure of her husband, her performance in front of Helwyze, Felix, and Olivia exposes her sexual nature to others besides her husband. The bond this moment creates between her and her husband may ensure both her spiritual salvation and his, but her consequent death in childbirth reminds us of the dangers of sexuality for women.

To complicate the questions surrounding Gladys' "goodness," the nature and outcome of Helwyze's attempted seduction of Gladys is purposely left unclear. Once they are alone together and she is in a state of hypnosis, she admits her fear that he is in love with her. Immediately after this encounter, we discover that Gladys is pregnant, but the child is assumed to be Canaris', and Alcott emphasizes Gladys' state of grace as if to reinforce this interpretation: "It seemed as if some angel had Gladys in especial charge, bringing light out of darkness, joy out of sorrow, good out of evil; for no harm came to her,--only a great peace, which transfigured her face till it was as spiritually beautiful, as that of some young Madonna" (150). A later reference to a portrait of an "angel, with the Lily of Annunciation in its hand" hanging above Gladys' head reiterates the earlier indication that Gladys is still "pure," even if she is about to have a child (153). This purity is important, for it is what enables her spiritual influence over both Helwyze and Canaris to continue even after her death.

Like Beth March and other fictional heroines who choose death over an impure life, Gladys seemingly writes her own destiny and condemns herself to death. As Helwyze reads aloud the romance supposedly written by Felix, the similarities between herself and the heroine and Canaris and the hero strike her, and "presently the living man beside her grew less real than that other, who, despite a new name and country, strange surroundings, and far different circumstances, was so remarkably the same, that she could not help feeling and following his fate to its close" (104). The death of the hero, however, prompts her to ask Felix to rewrite his work: "Let him live to conquer all his enemies, the worst in himself; then, if you must end tragically, let the woman go; she would not care,

if he were safe" (104). Gladys' willingness to sacrifice the romance's heroine extends beyond the fictional realm; she is also willing to efface herself in order that Felix might find "salvation." When his role as a literary impostor is exposed to his wife, her subsequent death in childbirth seems to be the result of her inability to face his deception, but one might argue that she is merely fulfilling the role she has written for herself. That is, in order for Gladys to be a "truly good and useful woman," she must die, a motif used in numerous nineteenth-century domestic dramas. The novel ends with Canaris setting out to make a name for himself as an actor, since he has failed miserably as a writer. While this goal ostensibly stems from his noble desire to make himself "worthy to follow and find [Gladys]" (204), pursuing an acting career is also the only logical extension of the roles of "author" and "genius" he has been playing throughout the novel. Before, he was Helwyze's puppet, but by disclosing Helwyze's authorship of the poems he has claimed as his own, he can now become the author of his own destiny.

Why does Alcott downplay Gladys' role as an artist? This seemingly would have allowed Alcott to develop a fuller critique of Victorian gender ideology and its effect on the development of the woman artist, probably a more damning portrait than the one found in *Little Women*, but instead, Alcott focuses on Gladys' effect on the morality of those around her. Making Felix and Helwyze the primary artist figures of the novel reiterates the privileges that a patriarchal culture gives to male artists, even a false one like Felix Canaris. *A Modern Mephistopheles* is thus a satire on the hubris of male creators, ones who feel they have the right to manipulate not only a fictional creation but other human beings' lives. Helwyze, an accomplished poet, does not want fame or

fortune from his talent; he only wants to manipulate the lives of Felix, Gladys, and Olivia, punishing them for his own suffering. He is the logical extreme of patriarchal control, and it is this control which makes it impossible for the others to live their own lives. Felix comes the closest to escaping but the fact that he becomes an actor, destined to perform only the creations of others, indicates that he has had to give up his dream of being a "real" artist. Like Gladys, he shifts his true aspirations to the afterlife, hoping that by fulfilling his potential in this world he can join his wife in the next. Alcott, too, seems to have given up on the possibility of artistic fulfillment or companionate marriage in this world. In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, she shows the extremes of the artistic temperament, masculine and feminine, and the destructiveness of each. While the novel ends with the promise that Felix and Gladys will be reunited in heaven, this only reminds us of the impossibility of an "ideal" existence on earth. The female is destroyed for the sake of the male's survival, and here, the destruction is more blatant than Jo's self-effacement. But cloaking this self-effacement in Christian ideology undermines the effectiveness of her critique for the audience of her day because female martyrdom would have been not only an accepted, but an applauded way for a woman to "fulfill" herself according to the values endorsed by Victorian society.

Let us now return to *Little Women*, wherein Alcott is supposedly rewriting *herself*. While the desolation of Gladys' death is lessened for the reader by the narrator's insistence on her salvation, Helwyze's knowledge that he, unlike Felix, cannot follow Gladys in death devastates him and suggests that for those without the security of religious beliefs, failure in this life to achieve love or success cannot be ameliorated by

the belief that one will be rewarded in the hereafter. While *Little Women* and many nineteenth-century melodramas like *The Lamplighter* also dwell on the rewards of heaven, Alcott's repeated frustration with her role as a Victorian woman and its conflict with her writing career suggests that she was not personally so calmed by the belief which sustained Gladys. She realized that she, like Canaris, "sold her soul" by adhering to the ideologies and narrative strategies deemed appropriate for women of her era; even if some of her characters fought against the constraints of "little womanhood," they are either destroyed or ensconced within the domestic sphere by novel's end. Only in two of her novels, *Work* and *Jo's Boys*, does she gesture towards the possibility of fulfilled ambitions outside of the domestic sphere for women.

Perhaps Alcott perceives herself, then, not as a savior but as a martyr to the cause. By playing the Victorian "little woman" in her role as moral guide to America's youth, she can at least influence some of her readers to question the fact that Jo and other female artists must give up their ambitions (or even die) in order to fulfill their role as Victorian women. By contrasting Alcott's pursuit of a literary career with the fates of her artist-heroines, we can see her own rebellion against Victorian norms more in her life than her art. Perhaps this allows later writers to move beyond the "moral pap" Alcott so detested writing by virtue of resisting her example, encouraging later writers like Wharton, Cather, and Hurst to rewrite the narrative of the woman artist, a move Alcott could not make herself, constrained as she was by her own "talent" (not genius, as Amy March distinguishes between the two in *Little Women*) and her Victorian contemporaries.

Edith Wharton recalls reading *Little Women* as a girl, mainly because "all the

other children read [it],” but she remembers being “exasperated by the laxities of the great Louisa” (*A Backward Glance* 51). Wharton, by calling Louisa “great” at the same time she denounces her writing ability, recalls the reason for beginning this study of middlebrowism and modernism with Alcott. She provided a model for writers like Wharton, as well as a reminder of the fact that popular success (often achieved through following the conventions of the domestic sentimental novel) and artistic merit were believed to be incompatible, even by Alcott herself. Investigating Alcott’s attitude towards her tenuous position as a writer during the Victorian era allows us to establish a pattern for the fears that arise with popular women writers of the modernist era. While some of these writers receive more critical acclaim from “serious” critics and readers than Alcott did, critics still often attempt to read their works as mimetic reconstructions of their personal experiences, experiences limited to the “women’s sphere,” the way Louisa May Alcott’s texts are usually read, despite these writers’ dramatic differences in style and subject matter from Alcott’s. For these writers, the creation of an aesthetic is more clearly an issue than it was for Alcott, whose ambition to be seen as a “serious” writer is never really elaborated into an aesthetic project.

Literary critics, among them Wharton, do have valid reasons for their reservations about Alcott’s talent, but unlike those of many of the “scribbling women,” her works are still widely read and even celebrated as harbingers of realism. That is, her work does at times manage to transcend the boundaries imposed by Victorian ideology. Using Jo’s character, she questions the space available for women writers, and while Jo gives up her writing to pursue motherhood, her longing to write still resonates with readers today. The

novel marks the shortcomings of a society that squelches a free spirit like Jo (or like Alcott herself) into writing pieces that seem “moralizing” and stodgy to us today. Like Daisy Miller, Jo and Gladys die--one metaphorically and one literally---because their true selves go unrecognized by society. Unlike Henry James’s delineation of Daisy Miller’s character through Winterbourne’s shuttered eyes, though, Alcott’s vivid rendering of Jo’s development both as a writer and a human being makes us sad for the passing of the “young artist” into “little womanhood,” perhaps one of the reasons that later women writers attempt to rewrite Jo March’s story by allowing themselves to pursue their artistic ambitions. The question is not so much what impact Alcott had on her young readers’ sense of morality but what effect her career had on those women writers who followed her.

Chapter Two
“It’s either nothing, or far more than they know”:
Edith Wharton’s Argument with Modernism

My impression is that, among English and American novelists, few are greatly interested in these deeper processes of their art; their conscious investigations of method seldom seem to go deeper than syntax, and it is immeasurably deeper that the vital interest begins. Therefore I shall try to depict the growth and unfolding of the plants in my secret garden, from the seed to the shrub-top--for I have no intention of magnifying my vegetation into trees! (A Backward Glance 198)

Edith Wharton’s “Secret Garden” and the Aesthetic of Transmutation

Edith Wharton’s reaction to Louisa May Alcott, a mixture of admiration for her success in the marketplace and horror at the “laxities” of her prose, underscores the tensions which she confronted in her own career as the emerging middlebrowism of the 1920s threatened her literary reputation. While Wharton’s work up to and including *The Age of Innocence* (1920) enjoyed both popular and critical success, many critics condemned her later novels and the aesthetic treatises that she wrote during the last two decades of her career. However, the “problem” with Edith Wharton’s reputation is something critics have been debating since her first book of stories, *The Greater Inclination*, appeared in 1899. Some of the most frequent complaints are that her style mimics that of Henry James, that her social class limits her view of the world, that as a woman writer from the “genteel” era she is, like Louisa May Alcott, confined by Victorian gender roles, and, finally, that as an “exile” from America, she is too constrained by the literary influences of the upper-class Europe that she finally chose to

make her home.¹ Virginia Woolf's analysis of American fiction in a 1925 edition of the *Saturday Review of Literature* provides an example of the ways in which Wharton's contemporaries, including the more sympathetic European critics, viewed her work. Woolf's essay asserts the importance of Wharton's fiction, but at the same time, she insists that Wharton's work is not really "American," that, in fact, her novels are no different from those being written in Europe.² Using commentary similar to that later found in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf acknowledges that the truly American writer, male or female, suffers from the same anxieties that confront most women writers: "They are too conscious of their own peculiarities as a sex; apt to suspect insolence, quick to avenge grievances, eager to shape an art of their own" (2). Yet, she goes on to say, these weaknesses are inevitable as American writers struggle to form a new language that is adequate to "cope with this vast land, these prairies, these cornfields, these lonely little groups of men and women scattered at immense distances from each other, these vast industrial cities with their skyscrapers and their night signs and their perfect organizations of machinery" (3). In order "to describe, to unify, to make order out of all of these severed parts, a new art is needed and the control of a new tradition" (3). The struggle for this order is, of course, what makes American fiction both immature and refreshingly

¹ Shari Benstock discusses these criticisms of Wharton in *No Gifts from Chance* (100).

² Virginia Woolf's review particularly praises Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis as uniquely "American" authors but also mentions Willa Cather and Fannie Hurst. Her criteria for "American" fiction is that it offers the English reader something that he could not find in "native" literature. Wharton and Henry James, she argued, were more European than American.

“modern.” Nowhere, however, in Woolf’s delineation of the “American” is the ordered world of Old New York, which is perceived to be at the heart of Wharton’s fictional territory.

This classification of Wharton as an “expatriate” is correct in many senses; she did feel a certain alienation from America but also from all of the modern world. Her fiction is, at its best, an attempt to come to terms with this alienation from her class, her gender, and the emerging modernist aesthetics which she intensely disliked, and an attempt to find some way to create order out of chaos, which is, ironically, what Woolf describes as the project of American fiction. However, the “severed parts” Wharton wished to piece back together were primarily those of the old world, not the new one. Her attraction to classical ideals, her frustration with “the woman question,” and her desire to be both a successful and an accomplished artist at a time when the emerging category of “bestseller” all too often was equated with the emerging category of “middlebrow” superceded the need to make sense out of the modern psyche by dissecting it, as she felt most modernist writers too often tried to do. As a result, Wharton’s work is not classified as modernist, making difficult the task of literary critics who wish to understand the motives behind her aesthetic practices.³

³ Ironically, while Maureen Howard condemns Edith Wharton’s autobiography *A Backward Glance* as a “fraudulent work” (43), she insists that only the chapter about her professional life, titled “A Secret Garden,” shows the author’s “true” self. Howard’s criticism stems from her desire for Wharton to “tell the truth” but not to “tell it slant,” a common method of the Victorian-era autobiography; perhaps her need for frankness emerges out of a need to understand Wharton’s attitude about the relationship between her personal and professional lives.

While most literary critics characterize Edith Wharton as an expatriate because of her removal to Europe, her “real” home, as she defined it, was her “secret garden.” In this world that she populated with imaginary characters, she was finally free of the problems of her life such as her husband’s mental illness, her financial concerns, criticisms of her work, and the mounting problems of the world at large. And in this secret garden, she could cultivate her “argument with modernism,” which was in many ways an argument with America, though not the sociological problem about women’s status that Elizabeth Ammons’ *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* identifies as the focus of her fiction. Wharton’s project, particularly after the onset of World War I, was an attempt to find a literary aesthetic that suited her ideals about form and order. She had been formulating such aesthetic theories since the beginning of her career as a writer, but primarily in her works about landscape and architecture.⁴ Through fiction such as *Summer* (1917), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and *The Gods Arrive* (1932), Wharton confronted the personal and professional dilemmas of the woman artist, particularly in the modernist era.

However, analyses which regard her work as *only* a rendering of Wharton’s own experiences as a woman artist fail to expose the complexity of Wharton’s artistic

⁴ Judith Fryer’s *Felicitious Spaces: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (1986) provides an overview of Wharton’s writing on architecture and interior design and relates this interest to a number of Wharton’s fictions. In particular, she emphasizes the fact that The Mount, the only house which Wharton actually built, allowed limited access to Wharton’s private quarters. The house allowed “a kind of social interaction that is carefully planned, controlled, deliberate” (73); each room, Wharton believed, should be “preserved as a small world by itself” (71). The limited access to her bedroom helped to create this sense that her writing could be created in this separate world.

processes. She found herself in conflict between her desire to subvert the Victorian repressions, both aesthetic and political, which continued to haunt women writers in the modernist era and her desire, on the other hand, to adhere to the elements of “classical style” which she felt were necessary to preserve art in the face of the “raw material of sensation and thought” which dominated modernist writing. In *Summer*, we can see Wharton’s attempt to refine her aesthetic of transmutation, which aesthetic is her answer to the conflicts mentioned above. That is, she shaped a narrative technique which achieved many of the supposed objectives of modernist writers because she wanted to create a language that would speak to an America which was moving away from the world of classical harmony that she knew and loved so well. Obviously, her need to continue to elaborate this aesthetic and to criticize modernist narrative techniques during the 1920s and 1930s reflects her dissatisfaction with the public’s response to a novel such as *Summer*. The target of her critique in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, her final two completed novels, is the ego-driven stream-of-consciousness style which Vance Weston himself describes as “pathology . . . [substituted] . . . for invention,” thus echoing Wharton’s attack on modernism in her non-fiction texts (*GA* 115). She specifically targets *Ulysses* through her satiric portrait of Mrs. Glaisher, who reads the novel only to fulfill her “duty” as an arts patron. *Ulysses*, like other works in this style, is an exercise in shoddy technique, not the “real” exploration of characters and situation which Wharton’s own aesthetic theories advocated. Her growing hostility towards modernism during the 1920s parallels a distinct shift in the critical response to her aesthetic practices and the denigration of her late fiction continues to this day.

The notable disagreement about the quality of Wharton's work of the 1920s and 1930s can be seen in part as the result of a similar split in the world of literary criticism at the time of the publication of these novels. The old guard of critics, represented by those like Henry Seidel Canby, were staunch supporters of writers like Wharton and harsh critics of modernism. In fact, Canby argued that the older generation of American writers like Wharton was "bearing the burden of invention, creation, revolution in art while the youngsters are talking" (169).⁵ The concept of literary "movement" which encourages late twentieth-century critics to see Wharton's work as a revolt against progress ignores the fact that many critics of her own day saw modernist aesthetics as intellectual *regression*; Wharton and her older contemporaries were, instead, the "inventors." This growing conflict between realist and modernist aesthetics, the old and new generation, and middlebrow and high culture must be considered in relation to the portrait of the artist we see in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, which novels are in many ways companion pieces to *A Backward Glance* (1934). The character George Frenside, a literary critic who is sympathetic with Vance Weston's compulsion to write but who also fears the effect of Weston's ambition upon his lover Halo Spear, has been perceived by some as a voice for Wharton, but we could also see him as representative of critics like Canby, whose support for Wharton's fiction gave her the needed confidence to condemn modernism openly in these later works.

⁵ As Katherine Joslin points out, the response of many male literary critics to modernism was similar to Wharton's. Richard Aldington felt that *Ulysses* created "a tremendous libel on humanity" (qtd. in Joslin 340). Canby argued that none of the young modernists had the skill of Wharton or Booth Tarkington (162).

However, the younger generation of critics like Waldo Frank were much less sympathetic with Wharton's aesthetic goals, perceiving her interest in "order" as a sign of her conservatism. She entitled the chapter in *A Backward Glance* which described her aesthetic of transmutation "A Secret Garden" because the metaphor of cultivation evoked her love of gardening, identified this pastime with her writing, and also alluded to the order which she desired to make out of the raw materials of nature and the creative imagination. When discussing her writing with friends, especially later in her life when she was absorbed with nurturing her garden at Pavillon Colombe, she often invoked this metaphor to describe the writing process, telling correspondents she was "digging away at *Twilight Sleep*" or "digging hard at *The Buccaneers*" (Lewis 490, 575). The use of the term "digging" reiterates one of the most important elements of Wharton's aesthetic, the labor which must go into the writing process. More than any political agenda or social alliance, this desire to "cultivate" the raw material of social observation into art and to describe this endeavor in her critical essays about fiction branded her a conservative according to the radical young critics and authors of her day.

Wharton was meticulous about every aspect of her writing, and while her serialization deadlines in the last two decades of her career may have compromised the aesthetic complexity of her later novels, she was always concerned with their quality, including details about their physical appearance, orthography, and advertising.⁶ She was

⁶ In a 1902 letter to Richard Watson Gilder about the cover of *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, Wharton voiced her concern about the editor's use of "vulgar spelling," for "in a book about beautiful gardens, there ought not to be any vulgar orthography! . . . Pardon my frankness, but I always care very much for the make-up of my books" (Lewis

an astute businesswoman despite the self-deprecating tone she sometimes used with her publishers, and she lobbied for what she considered suitable promotion for her books; as the positive reviews of her early work bolstered her confidence, she became increasingly aware of the relationship between good business practices and successful authorship.⁷ Despite the fact that she was financially independent, she longed for her readers to appreciate her work, and bestseller novels and positive reviews were two signs that she was reaching her public.⁸ Perhaps this business sensibility and her regimented writing routine masked the importance she placed on the “imagination,” although the imagination

74).

⁷ While an early letter to Scribner’s editor Edward L. Burlingame in 1894 took the tone of a pupil talking to a mentor (“I appreciate greatly your giving so much time and thought to so trifling a subject”), only five years later she complained to William Crary Brownell about the lack of advertising for her first volume of short stories, *The Greater Inclination* (1899): “It has met with an unusually favorable reception for a first volume from a writer virtually unknown,” so she compared the book’s advertising to those “appearing under the same conditions” (Lewis 33, 37-38). Later in her career, she left Scribner’s because she felt that they had not adequately advertised her work. After sales for *Ethan Frome* (1912) did not meet her expectations (4,200 copies were sold in the first six weeks), her relationship with her publisher began to deteriorate (Lewis 230). Finally, after Charles Scribner told her he did not have room to publish *Summer* serially, she signed a contract with Appleton’s, telling Scribner that her new offer “combined serial publication in one of several magazines with book publication by them, on terms so advantageous that, in view of your refusal, I should not have felt justified in rejecting the opportunity” (Lewis 387). While Scribner criticized Wharton for what he deemed impoliteness in light of their long-standing business relationship, Wharton’s business sense dominated over her sense of obligation. Her tenure with Appleton was the most lucrative one of her career, with the company securing film and stage adaptation rights which far exceeded the serial and royalty fees she commanded. For example, the Broadway runs of *Ethan Frome* and *The Old Maid* (1924) earned her \$130,000 between 1935-37 (Lewis 512).

⁸ Wharton’s inheritance gave her an income of \$10,000 a year (Benstock 48).

plays a central role in her conception of the artistic process.⁹ In both *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) and *A Backward Glance*, Wharton discusses the importance of technique in the creation of fiction, but she also uses organic metaphors like gardening to underscore the importance of the intangible or “natural” aspects of the creative process.¹⁰ However, Waldo Frank’s review of *The Writing of Fiction* condemned Wharton for “assuming that literature, like everything else, was to be made to order according to *mechanical* specification” (Radway 216, my emphasis). He concentrated his attack on her discussion about technique instead of her emphasis on organicism because this criticism aligns Wharton with the hated middlebrow who, these young modernists believed, were debasing true culture.

Despite the resurgence of interest in Wharton in the last two decades, the biases of the 1920s “young radicals” like Frank continue to inform the way critics regard her later work.¹¹ Her relationship to modernism is particularly tenuous, for literary history’s

⁹ See Benstock’s biography for a description of Wharton’s writing routine. She wrote (in bed) every morning, and “the quality and color of paper, the thickness of her pen nib and smooth flow of ink (she used black on the cream paper and blue for the pale-blue stationary), the snuggled comfort of her bed with one or another of her little dogs tucked up beside her, the piles of books and the latest reviews strewn across the rose-colored duvet--all of these were critical elements in her creative process (69).

¹⁰ By “technique,” Wharton meant the “selection and arrangement” of the subject, form, and characterization of the novel (*The Writing of Fiction* 31). She argues that the style of the author should vary depending upon the subject matter and berates critics who expect continuity in style (114).

¹¹ Part of the reason for the antagonism between the old guard represented by the “genteel realists” like Wharton and Canby and the younger “radical” generation represented by Frank is the issue of class. Wharton describes her society’s attitude (i.e., that of the world of Old New York and of her family) towards authorship as “something

configuration of modernism as a peculiarly male and anti-establishment movement largely dismisses writers like Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst from debates about the modernist aesthetic. While Wharton wrote much of her fiction during an era of upheaval and rebellion against convention, Louis Auchincloss' introduction to Edith Wharton's autobiography states that Wharton "had to be tidy, even in her memories. . . . It was an era of restraint where people believed there were things to be shown and things not be shown" (ix-x). Yet, her attitude towards modernism and the chaos of the world

between a black art and a form of manual labour" (69). Here, the idea of writing as "labour" is clearly derogatory, and unlike the women of Louisa May Alcott's generation who could claim that they wrote in order to support their family, Wharton confronted criticism for crossing gender and class boundaries when she chose to pursue a writing career. Further, her financial successes as an author probably infuriated the young writers who had difficulty making a living, even though her characterization of artist Vance Weston in *The Gods Arrive* and *Hudson River Bracketed* is an acknowledgment of the very hardships most writers faced when trying to earn a living from their pen.

Another example of this class-based criticism can be found in a review of *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Critic V. L. Parrington argued that a less privileged life would have improved Wharton's art: "If she had lived less easily, if she had been forced to scrimp and save and plan, she would have been a greater and richer artist, more significant because more native, more continental" (qtd. in Lauer 78).

Even seemingly positive analyses of her work that are sympathetic to its allegiances to the realist or, more specifically, the Jamesian tradition (a comparison that Wharton herself abhorred because of her dislike of James' later novels) are framed by not-so-subtle suggestions of the limits of her vision due to her being a woman. A 1947 study of American fiction by George Snell situates Wharton and Willa Cather's place in literary history in relation not only to what he perceives as their imitation of the "master," Henry James, but also to their gender: "The more private and intricate speech of verse seems to have been the congenial medium for the American woman writer's expression. In the whole range of American fiction, then, it seems apparent that only Edith Wharton and Willa Cather have contributed a sizable body of work that to our present sight may last" (140-141). While his selection of these two authors seems to indicate praise of their work, he hedges his compliment by wiping out an entire tradition of female American novelists, and his intimation that their work "may last" is a further reminder of the tenuous position of women writers in the canon.

around her is explicitly stated in her autobiography, her letters, and the *kunstlerromans* which were written towards the end of her career. That attitude was complex and colored by the effect the emerging aesthetic would have on her own reputation, but as her novels *Summer*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, and *The Gods Arrive* demonstrate, she wanted to understand the motives behind modernist narrative techniques and the unconventional lifestyles that we now see as motives for this aesthetic, and in the case of *Summer*, she attempted to create an aesthetic which she felt would respond to the impulses of the modern age.

**“Removing the Rose-Coloured Spectacles”:
The Transmutation of Desire in *Summer***

At the height of the war which many see as ushering in the modernist era and signaling the end of the beautiful and ordered culture loved by Wharton, she wrote *Summer*, a novel that represents in part her hope for the possibilities of a modern fiction which adheres to classical notions of order while at the same time allowing more insight into the motivations of a character who lacks the power of articulation of a Newland Archer. Critics expected Wharton, a genteel Victorian woman, to write only about what she could know--that is, “Old New York.” While this milieu did often supply the background of her fiction, few of her works actually center upon this society. Many of her most memorable characters--Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, Charity Royall, Ethan Frome, Kate Clephane, and Vance Weston--are outside of this stratum of culture; some try to become part of it, which attempt often spells their doom, while others, like Charity and Frome, are never to know anything about the rarefied air which “Old New Yorkers”

breathe. Wharton, despite her critique of modernist “pathology” in the 1920s and 1930s, did explore the psychology of characters who lack her own privileged cultural background. However, her aesthetic theories move her to depict characters like Charity Royall in a manner strikingly different from the stream-of-consciousness school which came to predominate in highbrow fiction during the decade following *Summer*’s publication in 1917.

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton describes her motivations for writing *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, her two novels which most vividly depict the lives of those completely situated outside of the milieu of Wharton’s own experience:

For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett. In those days the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighbouring hills; and Emily Bronte would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors. (293-294)

Edith Wharton’s description of the evolution of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* demonstrates her desire to be as frank as possible in her depiction of the “grim” places of New England, and a number of her contemporaries found these novels--those least associated

with the genteel realism for which she had become famous--both unbelievable and "dirty." While readers perhaps sympathized with the pitfalls of her more sophisticated heroes and heroines, the culture--or lack thereof--exposed in these two novels garnered some of her harshest critical indictments. Ironically, the language used by critics to condemn *Summer*, a novel published when the war was well underway and the modernist movement began to flower out of the mud of its trenches, is strikingly similar to the words she would later use to condemn modernist writers like James Joyce.

A number of critics, first of all, indicted Wharton for being unfeeling in her representation of Charity. Francis Hackett Edgett, writing for the *New Republic*, criticizes Wharton for her "icy restraint" and her tendency to represent Charity's fate in a "callous" manner. Her "frigid eye" allowed her to distance herself from this character, he argues, and her "undoubted purpose" is to "dish the heroine for the sake of the sensation of dishing her" (Tuttleton 249-50). He argues that "Charity Royall is nothing to her author, is merely a creature to be substantiated in detail in order that a dramatic sensation can be properly pulled off" (250). Wharton may go "slumming among souls," but she cannot represent these souls with "sympathy and plausibility," Edgett insists (251). *Summer* is one of Wharton's most explicitly sexual novels, and early reviewers of *Summer* like Edgett describe it as a common tale of seduction, the type usually found in sentimental fiction. He asserts, for instance, that the novel "simply restates the inevitable fate of a country girl when a city man crosses her path" (253). Essentially, then, his condemnation of the novel resides in Wharton's "dissecting" of Charity in an unsympathetic manner, a charge she later makes against writers of modernist stream-of-consciousness fiction.

Other critics offer slightly more sympathetic views of the novel, but in doing so they compare it to the naturalist fiction which Wharton also believed to be too “pathological.” John Macy and a number of other reviewers place the novel in the naturalist tradition by comparing Charity to a Thomas Hardy heroine, but while they acknowledge the complexities of her character, these critics still consider her a victim of fate. Interestingly, one of the most appreciative reviews comes from T.S. Eliot. He hopes that the novel will be a “death-blow to a kind of novel which has flourished in New England, the novel in which the wind whistles through the stunted firs and over the granite boulders into the white farmhouses where pale gaunt women sew rag carpets” (Tuttleton 263). While Eliot’s description of New England regionalist fiction sharply differs from the “rose-coloured spectacles” vision Wharton sees herself as revising, her delineation of female passion *is* in sharp contrast to regionalist female characters such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Miss Asphyxia and Mary Wilkins Freeman’s Old Woman Magoun. Perhaps Wharton’s exploration of female sexuality is what prompted Eliot’s praise, as well as his prediction that the novel would be seen as “disgusting” by many American readers. However, his assertion that the novel will revise the current drab renderings of New England life (and women) suggests that he believed readers and critics would ultimately see the novel’s value. In this novel, Wharton attempts to demonstrate the devastating effect of Victorian gender ideology on women, especially their capacity for creative expression, and while Eliot claims that Wharton’s realism in *Summer* is achieved by “suppressing all evidence of European culture” in North Dormer, he fails to comprehend that this novel is, like much of her fiction, about just that Western culture’s

oppression of women's self-expression. While much of the value of the novel is its critique of the harsh New England small-town existence which stifles someone of Charity's inborn perceptiveness, whose life, unfortunately, is not all that different from that in the "Old New York" which destroys Lily Bart, the novel is most importantly an attempt to create a language for these women, as well as for the writer like Wharton who stands between the "kodak realism" of the past and the emerging modernism of her present.

Wharton's own life reflects the theme which constitutes much of her artistic achievements. Auchincloss is correct in the sense that *A Backward Glance* is an exercise in "restraint." As we now know, Edith Wharton refused to discuss sexual desire in her published autobiography; Wharton, unlike her modernist contemporaries, did not wish to disclose details about her private life. Despite the difficulties of her marriage to Teddy Wharton which she does discuss with friends in her correspondence, she rather blithely describes her married life in the published autobiography. She also admits in her preface a refusal to "set down in detail every defect and absurdity in others, and every resentment in the writer" (xx). However, in *Life and I*, a manuscript version of her memoirs, she describes a central moment in her sexual awakening that is not included in *A Backward Glance*. Shortly before her marriage to Teddy Wharton, Edith "begged" her mother to explain "what being married was like," but her mother responded with stereotypical Victorian prudery and a "look of icy disapproval," prompting Wharton to remember, "I felt at once how vulgar she thought me" (1087). Wharton criticizes this Victorian repression, for she "had been convicted of stupidity for not knowing what [she] had been

expressly forbidden to ask about, or even to think of" (1088). Gloria C. Erlich insists that this encounter with her mother stifled Wharton's natural "appetite for sensuous experience" and forced her to bury her "entire sexual nature" until the affair with Morton Fullerton allowed her to explore a previously hidden aspect of her personality (26, 28). Wharton herself acknowledges that her mother's disapproval and silence "did more than anything else to falsify and misdirect my whole life" (1088).

Wharton's failure to divulge her affair with Morton Fullerton in her autobiography indicates that she did indeed exercise restraint when writing a "public" memoir.¹² However, the recovery of her letters to Fullerton in 1980, which act finally confirmed the existence of their affair, compelled scholars to reexamine the measure of restraint that this genteel writer exercised when writing fiction. In a sense, these letters, along with the Yale manuscripts and letters that were opened in 1975, serve as a confession which exposes her sexual nature, a side of Wharton that her friends, colleagues, and later biographers would ignore until her recovered letters to Fullerton exploded the myth of her "coldness." This characterization of Wharton long shaped our perception of her as an author; consider, for instance, the attack Edgett made on *Summer*.

¹² Wharton's unpublished memoirs and letters, while certainly not those of a "genteel" upper-class woman, were nonetheless private. She even repeatedly asked Morton Fullerton to destroy her letters to him, fearful that they would fall into the wrong hands (Gribben 11). This desire for privacy is understandable considering that, after the discovery of Wharton's letters to Fullerton, the inevitable biographical analogies linking Charity and Harney's liaison to Wharton and Fullerton's affair begin to emerge in the critical discussions of *Summer*; for example, Kathleen Pfeiffer contends that the discovery of the affair, which renewed interest in Whartonian studies, should also engender new interest in *Summer*, long neglected because of its deviations from the novel of manners which comprises much of her opus up through *The Age of Innocence*.

While the notions of Victorian repression which continue to shape our perceptions of Wharton remain common, Michel Foucault's interrogation of the "repressive hypothesis" in his *History of Sexuality Vol. I* suggests that we might read Wharton as an author whose fiction disrupted Victorian gender constructions, albeit through the subtle methods which comprise her aesthetic. Foucault argues that the prevalence of confessional discourse during the Victorian era undermines the repressive hypothesis that structures our conventional view of Victorian sexuality and, thus, the literature of this period. For Foucault, the confession operated as a means of establishing a discourse about sexuality, not as a means of repressing it: "It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done--the sexual act--and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it" (63). His theory about confessional discourse offers a helpful way to understand this novel; written several years after the affair with Fullerton had ended and during the war which many see as the primary impetus for the modernist movement, *Summer* serves as an important juncture for Wharton, allowing her to develop a language for sexual desire and at the same time to create an aesthetic which responds to the needs of the modern era. *Summer* and Wharton's other fiction may seem "genteel" in relation to other modernist narratives because of her refusal to describe explicitly sexuality in the same manner that some modernists did, but her novel does "reconstruct" or transmute desire in a fashion similar

to Foucault's concept of the "confession."¹³

In *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks insists that "we live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed" (3). Because Brooks considers narrative to be such a vital part of our existence, he contends that the reading (and I would add writing) of narrative should be understood as a "textual erotics," as a type of metonymic desire that propels us to completion while at the same time insisting that we can never achieve that consummation (37). While Wharton suppresses the overt sexual language of the pornographer, her use of metaphorical language suggests a displacement of the "sexual," allowing the author both to reconstruct desire in a narrative form that would be acceptable to her reading public and to postpone her (and our) own pleasure by never fully inscribing sexual desire in language.¹⁴ The drive towards culmination that Brooks describes requires that

¹³ Such an approach to *Summer* might result, however, in no more than reading the text as an acknowledgment of her illicit affair, or, at least, as an exploration of the passion which results from such an affair, as numerous critics have done. While the novel does contain elements which suggest parallels to Wharton's own life, I would argue that we should instead read *Summer* as a text about desire in terms of its narrative structure, not for its biographical ties to Wharton's own life.

¹⁴ Wharton never published explicitly pornographic texts, although the "Beatrice Palmato" fragment (now published in Cynthia Griffin Wolff's biography of Wharton) demonstrated her ability to write such fiction as well as her interest in the incest motif which dominates a number of her novels, including *Summer*. Wolff insists that we should not see the fragment as an "inference about Edith Wharton's own love-making" but, instead, as "a rather striking insight into the way Edith Wharton *conceptualized* love and sexuality" (297). The summary and fragment demonstrate Wharton's ability to write an overtly erotic language, similar to the published erotica of Anais Nin. One of Nin's stories, "Linda," explores the relationship between confession and erotics explicitly, for it

postponement prevent any actual completion, for as Lacan suggests, the actual attainment of desire is death. *Summer* constantly engages in this postponement of desire; within the confessional mode is the need to keep delaying and retelling so that one never reaches the attainment of desire or, at least, never narrates the completion of that desire.

Brooks' theory of narrative postponement and Wharton's own ideas about the necessity of transmuting "disconnected impressions" into art suggest her methodology for writing *Summer*. In *The Writing of Fiction*, she argues that "the stream-of-consciousness method differs from the slice of life in noting mental as well as visual reactions, but resembles it in setting them down just as they come, with a deliberate disregard for their relevance in the particular case" (12). Since the novel concerns an uneducated girl with little ability to interpret her reactions to what is beautiful, Wharton could have indulged in the same techniques of the "kodak" realists or the stream-of-consciousness modernists, loosely stringing together Charity's disjointed perceptions to suggest her inarticulate nature. However, Wharton's rendering of Charity's consciousness asks us to contemplate what is hidden in Charity, what society has repressed, for the beauty of the metaphors which Wharton uses to invoke Charity's impressions of the world around her are, in fact, transmutations of Charity's experience.

Summer describes the sexual awakening of Charity Royall, a young woman whose

describes a young girl's discovery of sexual pleasure during a confession to her priest. As she tells him about her "impure" sexual longings, she attains sexual gratification: "Every word she said increased her excitement, and with a pretense of guilt and shame she threw herself against the priest's knees and bowed her head as if she would cry, but it was because the touch of the tassel had brought on the orgasm and she was shaking" (*Delta of Venus* 80).

position in the rural community of North Dormer is tenuous because of her “tainted” origins. An illegitimate child born to a promiscuous mountain woman, Charity is constantly reminded of the benevolence of Lawyer Royall, the man who brought her down from the mountain to raise her and “save” her from the influences of the mountain people. Charity is both fascinated with and repulsed by her origins and yearns to escape the confinement of Royall’s home and the North Dormer community. When Lucius Harney, a young architect, comes to North Dormer to research some of the historical houses in the area, Charity finds a link to the outside world. Yet, the narrator of *Summer* constantly reminds us of Charity Royall’s inability to articulate her desire and thus to control her fate and escape North Dormer. While this limitation encourages Candace Waid to interpret Charity as a failed artist, such a characterization is a problematic misreading of the text since Lucius Harney is the primary artist figure of the novel and Charity has no specific artistic ambitions. Rather than delimiting Charity’s artistic self-realization, the novel attempts to condemn and even to subvert the Victorian codes of sexual repression that have created Charity’s inability to find an appropriate voice for her desire. The novel is, then, in effect, Wharton’s attempt to construct such a voice for Charity through the transmutation of Charity’s thoughts or, more specifically, her creation of a metaphorical language, one which depends primarily upon Charity’s interactions with the natural world. *Summer*, though written at the mid-point of Wharton’s career, is the essence of the aesthetic which she articulates later in the 1920s and 1930s. This is Wharton’s most experimental narrative in many ways, but even though Wharton points to the possibility of desire and creativity for a woman like Charity, she

makes clear as well that the repressiveness of Victorian gender ideology will repeatedly frustrate this potential.

Catherine Belsey's materialist analysis of narrative examines the potential of language to shape subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, Belsey notes that the inevitable gaps in ideology prevent language from constructing a subject. Instead, the subject remains a site of contradiction, constantly "thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation" (597). Belsey also proposes that in Victorian realist fiction, the narrative's emerging focus on the social relationship, specifically the interaction of the individual and society, makes ideological gaps more evident and thus more open to critique. The contradictions in a text allow us to examine the operations of ideology and, thus, the construction of the *author's* subjectivity. Instead of reading *Summer* as Wharton's attempt to reconstruct her own desire for Fullerton, however, we might approach the narrative as a reconstruction of *the* desiring subject--Charity--as formed by a particular--confessional--mode of narrative and explore the ways in which Wharton shapes and frustrates Charity's subjectivity.

Summer opens with the promise of change for its heroine. As Peter Brooks states, "desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun" (38), and Wharton does begin the novel with this drive towards change. The description of a beautiful summer day that opens the novel is interrupted by the appearance of a strange young man, prompting an unknown girl to murmur, "How I hate everything!" (2, 5). At this point, the heroine has not even been

named; Wharton twice marks her only by her desire for change, a desire instantly attached to the young man who will become her lover. Yet, during the early stages of Charity and Harney's relationship, she conceals the desire she feels for him. Wharton does, however, reveal Charity's passionate nature through the oddly distanced narratorial voice which dominates the first half of the novel. For instance, the narrator relates of Charity early on that "she was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded" (12). At this point, the natural world seems to draw out her sensual aspect; the reader knows as well from the opening scene that Harney will draw out this side of her even more intensely. Wharton thus encourages the reader to accept Charity's "immoral" actions by identifying her sensuality with nature, just as she does with Sophy Viner in *The Reef* (1912).

Wharton also refuses to depict Charity as the naive heroine of sentimental fiction who unconsciously falls into the clutches of the more worldly man. Charity understands the nature of relationships between men and women, for she carefully watches the village romances and must deal with her foster father's desire for her. After Charity decides not to leave North Dormer (and Lawyer Royall), Miss Hatchard tries to encourage her to change her mind, claiming, "You're too young to understand" (15). Yet, her frank reply to the embarrassed Miss Hatchard--"Oh, no, I ain't"--demonstrates that Charity *does* understand all too well. However, Wharton also insists on her lack of first-hand knowledge about the subject: "She had always kept to herself, contemptuously aloof from village lovemaking, without exactly knowing whether her fierce pride was due to the

sense of her tainted origin, or whether she was reserving herself for a more brilliant fate” (43). Charity understands, then, the rudimentary elements of sexual relationships, but only when she meets Harney does she come to understand what passion means; her state in the first half of the novel functions as the performance of a desire waiting to be awakened.

One of the most sensual moments in the novel places Charity on the threshold of sexual experience but revolves around the postponement of her desire. When she fears that Harney plans to leave North Dormer, perhaps at the insistence of the watchful Lawyer Royall, Charity leaves her house and finds herself staring into Harney’s window. Charity first understood the power of her sexuality through Harney’s gaze upon her: “She had learned what she was worth when Lucius Harney, looking at her for the first time, had lost the thread of his speech, and leaned reddening on the edge of her desk” (43). Now, as Charity watches him through his bedroom window, Harney becomes sexualized under her own gaze: “He had taken off his coat and waistcoat, and unbuttoned the low collar of his flannel shirt; she saw the vigorous lines of his young throat, and the root of the muscles where they joined the chest” (70). Yet despite her desire, she cannot cross the threshold and join him; while his gaze acknowledges her sexual power, she does not wish to become a purely sexual being in his eyes: “In every pulse of her rigid body she was aware of the welcome his eyes and lips would give her; but something kept her from moving. It was not the fear of any sanction, human or heavenly; she had never in her life been afraid. It was simply that she had suddenly understood what would happen if she went in” (72).

Charity's decision to walk away without making her presence known to Harney suggests that she is not a victim of fate, as some critics contend but, instead, a desiring subject who is in control of her actions. More than this, however, her vigil on the threshold emphasizes her satisfaction in postponement, even if that postponement might be permanent. Later, when she and Harney begin meeting secretly, she recognizes that delay is itself a mode of desire, for "their past was now rich enough to have given them a private language; and with the long day stretching before them like the blue distance beyond the hills there was a delicate pleasure in postponement" (90). Here, the pleasure of postponement is explicitly connected to language itself, although this "language" is clearly not an inscribable one.

The fireworks display, however, provides the most stunning example of displaced desire in the novel. Particularly for the modern reader, memories of fireworks displays suggest this is a fitting metaphor for the pleasure of postponement. The audience anticipates each burst of fireworks, expecting the next one to be even more spectacular. Yet when the display is over, the trails of smoke in the sky remind us of what has passed only moments before. Our desire can never be fully sated, and the finale always disappoints us. In the novel, the exploding fireworks offer a type of orgiastic release for Charity and Harney's as yet unconsummated passion. As Charity watches the display, the language used by the narrator to describe her response is overtly sexual: "Charity's heart throbbed with delight. It was as if all the latent beauty of things had been unveiled to her. She could not imagine that the world held anything more wonderful" (103). Wharton also describes the crowd's response as sexual, for "the stand creaked and shook with their

blissful trepidations” (104). Charity’s reaction, then, allows her to become part of the society from which she has always felt distanced; while the pursuit of sexual pleasure ostensibly alienates the fallen woman from society as a whole, in this case, a kind of transmuted orgasmic pleasure allows Charity and the rest of the crowd to participate in a subversive act together. Indeed, Charity becomes so lost in the feeling of “hav[ing] been caught up into the stars” that she ignores Harney’s presence; her experience of passion overwhelms her so much that she forgets the ostensible object of that passion (104). At this moment, of course, Harney loses his self-control and kisses her passionately for the first time, perhaps trying to recapture the intensity both felt while watching the fireworks.

This kiss serves only as a prelude, for Wharton engages in methods of postponement throughout the remainder of the novel, combining strategies of plotting and other narrative methods to seduce the reader. *McClure’s* magazine published the novel serially in 1917, and, of course, serialization requires such tactics of delay to ensure a reader’s anticipation of the next installment, but Wharton also retained these methods when she revised the text for its publication in book form.¹⁵ One such strategy is the

¹⁵ She received \$7,000 for the serialization rights to *Summer*, her first deal negotiated with Appleton. While serialization proved lucrative for Wharton, she never seemed to reconcile the benefits of the monetary compensation with the limitations the magazine audience placed on her fiction. As her career progressed, she became more frustrated with the picture magazines which published most of her work, telling Rutger B. Jewett in 1933 that she feared she could not “write down to the present standard of the American picture magazines. I am in as much need of money as everybody else at this moment and if I could turn out a series of potboilers for magazine consumption I should only be too glad to do so; but I really have difficulty imagining what they want” (Lewis 572). In the case of *Summer*, however, some of the strategies used for serialization happen to coincide with the aesthetic goals of the author.

novel's circular mode of narration. Often, Wharton begins to relate a climactic event, cuts it off at the end of a chapter, and then skips ahead in time at the beginning of the next chapter only to reexamine that event later through the filter of Charity's consciousness. Peter Brooks offers an explanation for this narrative strategy: "Repetition, remembering, reenactment are the ways in which we replay time, so that it may not be lost. We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing, of course, that we cannot. All we can do is subvert or, perhaps better, pervert time: which is what narrative does" (111). The most significant occurrence of this narrative strategy comes at the supposed climactic moment of the novel. When Harney overtakes Charity on her first attempt to run away to the Mountain, we expect the couple to take up where they left off the night before. Harney, indeed, expects a reenactment of the previous night's kiss: "Kiss me again--like last night," he tells her (119). But the kiss is only suggested, for he draws her face to his, and the chapter closes. The next chapter opens after a lapse of two weeks, and only through Charity's rapturous thoughts about the time they have spent together does the reader learn that they have consummated their relationship, though the reenactment of the exact moments of consummation remain unthought, unscriptable even in this most private of discourses. While Charity and Harney experience the culmination of their physical desire, the reader must continue to participate in Wharton's narrative strategies of postponement.

Wharton also utilizes the ellipsis repeatedly to signify postponement, especially so

in the second half of the novel.¹⁶ The ellipsis represents the power of the unsaid; Charity cannot fully express her desires, but the ellipsis serves as the mark of what she cannot say and suggests as well to the reader that desire always overflows expression. This narratorial technique frustrates the reader, however, forcing him or her to participate in the experience of waiting for a fulfillment that might never come. Wharton's most compelling use of the ellipsis occurs when Charity seems to be in an almost daydream-like state: "The air was perfectly still, and from where she sat she *would be able* to hear the tinkle of a bicycle-bell a long way down the road. . . ." (127, my emphasis).

Wharton's narration here does not merely signify that Charity's thoughts are inexpressible; the ellipsis also suggests her willing participation in the act of postponement. Charity perhaps engages in these mental deferrals in order to prolong a desire which she realizes cannot last: "The first fall of night after a day of radiance often gave her a sense of hidden menace: it was like looking out over the world as it would be when love had gone from it. She wondered if some day she would sit in that same place and watch in vain for her lover" (130). In any case, such deferrals clearly afford her great pleasure despite her fear that her relationship with Harney will eventually end.

As if to draw attention to the ellipsis as signifying unspoken desire, Wharton uses this same method sparingly when transcribing a character's dialogue. In two pivotal moments in the novel, Lawyer Royall's homecoming speech and Harney's promise to

¹⁶ Interestingly, this technique is frequently used by James Joyce in *Dubliners* (1915), particularly in "Eveline." We can actually see a similarity in the narrative styles of Joyce and Wharton at this point in their careers, although she attacks his later style.

return to North Dormer and marry Charity, Wharton uses the ellipsis to emphasize both the desire and the misgivings that accompany the character's thoughts. In these instances, though, the ellipsis does not trail off into seeming nothingness as it does when marking Charity's consciousness. The ellipsis here serves only as a bridge to the next few words, suggesting that the character seeks time to construct language and perhaps obstruct meaning, instead of the ellipsis functioning as a marker for the impossibility of constructing words capable of expressing one's desires. The difference between the use of ellipsis in Charity's consciousness as opposed to that in Harney's and Royall's speeches also highlights the fact that the men in this culture, even one like Royall who has been "stifled," can and do construct their thoughts articulately, whereas a woman like Charity cannot reach this stage. As if to underscore this, after Royall's eloquent speech about coming home to North Dormer "for good," a moved listener responds, "'That was a *man* talking'" (139).

Wharton also emphasizes the failure of narrative to achieve the completion of desire by highlighting the inadequacy of language in correspondence. Candace Waid's interrogation of the positioning of the female writer in Wharton's fiction, particularly her analyses of *The House of Mirth* (1905), "The Muses's Tragedy," and *The Touchstone* (1900), focuses on the importance of letter-writing in Wharton's texts. For Margaret Aubyn of *The Touchstone*, her correspondence to her lover Stephen Glennard exposes "'the woman's soul, absolutely torn up by the roots--her whole self laid bare; and to a man who evidently didn't care; who couldn't have cared,'" according to those who read the published correspondence (60). While this narrative takes place after Aubyn's death,

her readers, including Glennard, must come to recognize the emotional investment in Aubyn's letters. Wharton herself experienced this when she began writing to Fullerton, searching for the proper mode of expression as she wrote the man who would later become her lover and undergoing an "awkward groping for a suitable tone of expression" (Gribben 12). Her fictional characters often experience similar difficulties when attempting to express themselves in writing, and Charity Royall fares particularly badly as she tries to find the suitable words to write to her lover after he leaves North Dormer.

Time and again Charity admits that language is not the chosen means of communication between her and Harney, for the "pauses when they ceased to speak because words were needless" serve as the most fruitful moments of communion between them (100). However, she still understands that "the gulf between them was too deep, and that the bridge their passion had flung across it was as insubstantial as a rainbow" (152). When Harney leaves North Dormer, the only bridge between them is formed of letters, and this bridge is particularly unstable: "She read [his] letter with a strange sense of its coming from immeasurable distances and having lost most of its meaning on the way," and she fears that her own letter to him "would never reach its destination" (152). After she sends him the letter releasing him from his obligation to her, a pathetically abbreviated missive which she knows can never truly express her desire for him, she waits for his response and fears that it, in turn, will not come. Wharton experienced a similar fear, for Morton Fullerton often broke off his relationships by his frustrating tactic of "periods of unexplained disappearance and silence" (Gribben 8). More problematic than Harney's silence, however, is the letter he does send. As Charity muses over its

meaning, she thinks: "It was so beautifully expressed that she found it almost as difficult to understand as the gentleman's explanation of the Bible pictures at Nettleton; but gradually she became aware that the gist of its meaning lay in the last few words. 'If ever there is a hope of realizing what we dreamed of . . .'" (163). Charity's consciousness imposes an ellipsis here because she understands that the unexpressed thoughts in this letter are more significant than its actual content.

Despite Harney's failure to end the relationship with Charity outright, his letter intimates strongly the impossibility of its continuing. As Wharton knew from experience, a letter offers a poignant illustration of stasis, for its ever-presentness belies the fact that once written, it becomes a signifier of the past. Harney's letter imposes an indefinite deferral upon their desire, which deferral will ensure her continued longing for him; however, her pregnancy requires a definitive action instead of a perpetual reenactment of her longing for Harney. Thus, her marriage to Lawyer Royall, her surrogate father figure, is inevitable. Throughout the text, Wharton hints at their impending union. As if in a fairy tale, Royall proposes three times to Charity, but her decision to give in to his wishes does not imply the fruitful and fortunate fairy tale ending. Instead, their wedding night suggests a sterile postponement of desire in marked contrast to the fertility of Charity and Harney's relationship. Charity has invested all of her desires in Harney, as is evidenced by her continued need to inscribe her desire within aesthetic images or narratives which allow her to reproduce a specific moment with him. The picture hanging over the bed in the hotel room where she is to spend her wedding night with Lawyer Royall symbolizes this need:

But presently this merciful apathy was succeeded by the sudden acuteness of vision with which sick people sometimes wake out of a heavy sleep. As she opened her eyes they rested on the picture that hung above the bed. It was a large engraving with a dazzling white margin enclosed in a wide frame of bird's-eye maple with an inner scroll of gold. The engraving represented a young man in a boat on a lake overhung with trees. He was leaning over to gather water-lilies for the girl in a light dress who lay among the cushions in the stern. The scene was full of a drowsy midsummer radiance, and Charity averted her eyes from it . . . (198)

Perhaps Charity knows that marriage to Harney would spell the end of his desire for her, for she refuses to give in to the fate of other girls who "had to" get married to their lovers. Her marriage to Royall at the end of the novel does not, however, represent a "hymn to generativity and marriage," as Cynthia Griffin Wolff claims, but, instead, a collapsing of Charity's desire for Harney (285). Marriage, the sanctified "fulfillment" of sexual desire, offers only emptiness and a semblance of death, and marriage can only signify a perpetual postponement of desire for both Charity and Royall. The last lines of the novel are weighted with a sense of stasis, not the promise of change that opened the novel: "Late that evening, in the cold autumn moonlight, they drove up to the door of the red house" (205). This description serves as a repetition of Charity's first homecoming, but instead of intimating that her life is about to begin again, Wharton's narrative structure thus gestures towards the impossibility of achieving the fulfillment of desire, for Charity is emerging from the season of passion and life into the season of barrenness and

death.

The necessity of submitting to the “appropriate” act of marriage, the only ending possible for Charity other than death in the Victorian sentimental tradition, reiterates the stifling of desire and its expression which the novel constantly gestures towards but ultimately must deny. The postponement techniques that seemed to promise a greater fulfillment, the kind of orgiastic release demonstrated by the firework display, can lead only to disappointment and frustration. The ending of the novel is, then, as disappointing as Charity’s life must be; for Charity, as for Wharton herself, “Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death” (*A Backward Glance* 379). The novel’s lack of closure, similar to that found in Fannie Hurst’s *Lummo*x, highlights the inadequacies of language for expressing the plight of women like Charity and Bertha and also suggests the direction Wharton’s fiction must take. Her search for a suitable “modern” aesthetic shifts towards the search for order in the modern world, and for Wharton, this order can best be expressed by women of her own class and character. Her later female characters, such as Rose Sellars in *The Children* (1928) and most importantly Halo Spear in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, attempt to create a world of order amidst the chaos of the modern world, and in Halo Spear’s case, this attempt is explicitly linked to the role that art must play in these changing times.

**Edith Wharton’s Argument with Modernism:
Hudson River Bracketed and *The Gods Arrive***

Wharton’s most explicit argument against modernism and the suppression of the female voice can be found in her last two completed novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and

The Gods Arrive. She combines this critique with her interest in the *kunstlerroman*, a genre which she had previously explored only in an abbreviated format in texts like *The Touchstone* and several short stories. However, unlike the “tactic of protest and complaint” used in earlier *kunstlerromans* by Fanny Fern and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Wharton chose, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues, in these early works “an ingenious, self-effacing mode of fiction” to “address the difficulties of the [feminist *Kunstlerroman*]” (xx). Yet, Wolff’s laudatory tone when discussing Wharton’s early *kunstlerromans* changes dramatically when she analyzes those written toward the end of her career, and for Wolff, the problem seems to be precisely their attempt to delineate Wharton’s aesthetic and her critique of modernism: “Over and over again they attempt to ‘explain’ the creative process to the reader; and they become more like catechism or primers than true fictions. Shrill in her defense of what she thinks to have been ‘her way,’ Edith Wharton has become, of all things, a bore” (380-381). While Wolff wrote her biography early on in the period of feminist reappraisal of Wharton’s career, her failure to reconsider the significance of Wharton’s last two completed novels in her revised 1995 edition of the biography shows the continuing blinders with which critics look at these texts, cited by Wharton as two of her favorite novels (*Summer* was another).¹⁷

¹⁷ Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s 1995 introduction to her revised biography of Wharton, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (first published in 1977), discusses Wharton’s interest in the *kunstlerroman* genre, particularly early on in her career. Her new introduction deals at length with Wharton’s interest in the portrayal of artists, yet she dismisses her only two full-length *kunstlerromans*, calling them a “tremendous disappointment,” for they “display Wharton at her old-fashioned, lecturing worst” (380). Wolff offers a dismissive five-page discussion of the two novels; compare this to the lengthy discussion of *Summer* in the 1977 edition and an additional chapter on *Summer* in

Wharton in fact published *Summer* while she was working on "Literature," a novel she never completed but which, like her last two novels, offered a portrait of the artist. Penelope Vita-Finzi and others have discussed "Literature" as the forerunner to *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. Wharton began that novel in 1915 and even had a contract with Scribner's to serialize it, but the war interrupted the writing of it both practically and emotionally: "I had a really big novel in me . . . a year ago . . . but things have killed it--one thing after another" (qtd. in Benstock 313). She actually wrote about seventy pages and a plot synopsis, which Vita-Finzi prints in *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, but *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* are significantly different from "Literature," and Wharton's critique of modernism obviously becomes the cornerstone of the later novels. I would argue that the reception of *Summer*, in addition to the outcome of the war and the emerging dominance of a particular modernist aesthetic, made it impossible for Wharton to write a *kunstlerroman* which did not explore her argument with modernism.

While our current perception of modernism complicates any attempts to situate Wharton within this movement, such definitions also affect greatly any reading of her only full-length *kunstlerromans*, both because of their attacks on the modernist aesthetic and their ostensible difference from her pre-1920 work. For example, Marcia Phillips McGowan opens her article on *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* with the claim that "it is difficult to find a critic who likes Edith Wharton's final novels" when in

the revised edition (based on the discovery of the Fullerton letters).

fact, the contemporary reviews of the novel reveal a number of critics who not only liked the novels but praised them for being “comprehending,” “compassionate,” and “beautifully written” (McGowan 73, Tuttleton 470-471). The *Times Literary Supplement* claimed that *Hudson River Bracketed* “takes a worthy place in Miss Wharton’s work,” and L.P. Hartley of the *Saturday Review* argued that the novel was an important contribution to the contemporary portrait of America (Tuttleton 474, 476). As our current perception of modernism as an avant-garde reaction against traditional culture began to take shape, however, it became more difficult to situate Wharton’s novels within any paradigm of modernism.¹⁸ As Shari Benstock points out in her essay “Landscape of Desire: Edith Wharton and Europe,” to “theorize Edith Wharton as a modern is a direct challenge to those who make and shape literary history” (32). The critique of modernism found in these novels causes many critics to label them as “reactionary,” and such characterizations configure Wharton as the old-fashioned author with a metaphorical finger in the dike, helplessly trying to stem the tide of avant-garde culture invading

¹⁸ Katherine Joslin’s “‘Fleeing the Sewer’: Edith Wharton, George Sand and Literary Innovation” describes the problems with “progress” which Raymond Williams’ model of dominant, emergent, and residual cultures also poses. She discusses the ways in which Wharton and Sand rebelled against the dominant “movements” of their day (modernism and realism, respectively, and one could think of Alcott’s career in this context as well) and how our linear models of literary history, which imply a movement forward and, thus, progress have impeded our understanding of these two writers: “The map of the journey, however, does not allow for writers who resist movement, who question progress, who refuse to innovate” (337). Despite Joslin’s support of Wharton and Sand’s aesthetic revolt against “progress,” her characterization of Wharton is problematic in that she sees her as someone who refused to innovate. I would argue that Wharton’s aesthetic practices were in fact an innovation: a development of the realist mode (which she does in fact condemn for its “kodak” tendencies).

Europe and the United States.

This notion of aesthetic conservatism then becomes linked with the sense that Wharton's later work is politically backwards as well, making it difficult to understand these novels as part of Wharton's "argument with America," defined by Elizabeth Ammons and others as a proto-feminist attack on patriarchal culture. Within this framework, the novels' seeming endorsement of maternal nurturance (and actual motherhood) as a creative woman's greatest accomplishment distances *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* from Wharton's earlier critiques of women's oppression such as *The House of Mirth* and *Summer*. Since the resurgence of interest in Wharton since the 1970s can be attributed to academic feminists, these novels, typically dismissed by these same feminists, are now the only ones of Wharton's late period that are not currently in trade paperback, and the expensive editions that are currently in print are not widely available. Since these are Wharton's only full-length *kunsterromans*, why are these novels neglected today? Even present-day critics who do consider their relationship to Wharton's opus perceive them as inferior works, signs of her failing power as a writer and her growing conservatism toward the end of her career. Katherine Joslin notes how many recent feminist studies of Wharton situate her as a "transitional" figure in order to explain this social and aesthetic conservatism, a strategy especially evident in Ammons' *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, which critique seems unsure about what to do with Wharton's later works because they seem to reify motherhood and thus negate her earlier novels' claims about the oppressions of marriage for American women (Joslin 350). Many literary critics, feminist and otherwise, find it easier to cast off these late

novels as misshapen mistakes instead of examining the complex arguments Wharton had with modernism and with contemporary America.

Ultimately, Wharton's final two completed novels are a meditation about her growing realization that the kind of realism formulated in *Summer*, one which rejects the "kodak" brand of representation and moves towards a more developed rendering of the character's consciousness, is doomed by certain modernist sensibilities in the same way that Charity's sensuality and desire for expression are stifled so soon after her "awakening." While Wharton turns towards this more candid form of realism which acknowledges and expresses women's sexual passion, the modernist resistance to Wharton's style of realism, ironically, ends up stifling the very expression of the "real" which it proclaims to prefer. As Wharton becomes more aware of the challenges which the modernist aesthetic poses for her concept of transmutation, she is forced to develop her critique of the stream-of-consciousness style in her essays of the 1920s, her last completed novels, and her autobiography, prompting today's critics to disregard the ways in which her aesthetic project, most eloquently developed in *Summer*, achieves many of the aims of modernists that, according to Wharton, remain unrealized in their art.

While Wharton alienated herself from the emerging aesthetic of the war era and expressed concern that her deviation from modernist practices would affect her reputation as an artist, her rather strident arguments against the aesthetic practices and egoistic tendencies of modernism belie the concurrences between Wharton's theories and the emphasis on cultural continuity espoused by some modernists and supposedly threatened by the emergence of the middlebrow. For instance, her emphasis on the relationship

between tradition and artistic development is quite similar to the elevation of “high culture” expounded by modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In Eliot’s famous “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), which many cite as the primary text of modernist and formalist aesthetics, he, too, emphasizes the importance of “labour” in the creative process:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twentieth-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (14)

A year before the publication of Eliot’s manifesto about tradition and talent, Wharton wrote to an aspiring poet about the necessity of absorbing the past in order to shape one’s creative voice in terms strikingly similar to those of Eliot (and earlier, Matthew Arnold):

. . . poetry is an art as exact & arduous as playing the violin, or sculpture or painting. It presupposes long training, & wide reading, & a saturation in the best that the past has to give. I will not express any opinion on your talent because if it is in you to write better poetry, as it may well be, you

must prepare yourself for so noble a mission by reading the best, & only the best, & by studying the grammar & etymology of your language as well as the history of its rhythms. It takes a great deal of the deepest kind of culture to write one little poem, & if you will read the lives and letters of some of the poets you mention, you will see that they all had it . . .

(Lewis 411)

While Eliot's most noted modernist poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Wasteland*, may seem to have little in common with Wharton's fiction, their sense of the alienation caused by modern culture, their desire for an "orderedness" which would serve as a counterpoint to this culture's chaos, and their belief that the past held the key to artistic integrity are the hallmarks of both writers' aesthetic theories and creative processes. Wharton is thus a participant in the modernists' attack on middlebrowism, but by the 1920s, her popular appeal placed her in the middlebrow camp despite her satirical representation of the publishing industry in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* and her negative comments about middlebrow culture in her letters.

Wharton seems aware of this contradiction, and comments to friends and fellow writers during the 1920s and 1930s evidence a growing fear that the shifting critical response to her work would have a lasting effect on her reputation. Despite the fact that Wharton, unlike her creation Vance Weston, had both the "imagination" and the necessary cultural background to enrich that imagination, her claim that she dared not "magnify [her] vegetation into trees" reminds us of the reticence Wharton experienced when evaluating the worth of her writing. Ever discreet in describing her vocation, she

writes that “any attempt to analyze work of one’s own doing seems to imply that one regards it as likely to be of lasting interest, and I wish at once to repudiate such an assumption,” and in her letters to friends as her career and life drew to its close, she expresses similar doubts about her work’s future impact (*A Backward Glance* 197). For example, a letter to Margaret Terry Chanler after the publication of *The Mother’s Recompense* in 1925 expresses concern with the critical evaluation of that novel: “You will wonder that the priestess of the Life of Reason shd take such things to heart; & I wonder too. I never have minded before; but as my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they know. . . . and I wonder, a little desolately, which?” (Lewis 483).

Despite the seeming confidence evident in Wharton’s critiques of modernism, a possible explanation for these concerns about the lasting interest of her work might be her classification as a “genteel realist” in a period increasingly enamored of modernist experimentation, radical in its textual style and subversive in its subject matter. She describes, for instance, her frustration with the younger generation’s contempt for the achievements of writers of her own era:

The poor novelists who were my contemporaries (in English-speaking countries) had to fight hard for the right to turn the wooden dolls about which they were expected to make believe into struggling suffering human beings . . . [but] we who fought the good fight are now jeered at as the prigs and prudes who barred the way to complete expression--as perhaps we should have tried to do, had we known it was to cause creative art to be

abandoned for pathology! (*A Backward Glance* 127).

Wharton obviously believed, then, that she and other writers of her generation *had* led the way to “complete expression” and that the modernist aesthetic only dissected human nature without transforming this “pathology” into art. Further, in “Tendencies in Modern Fiction” (1934), she argued that “expression” is inextricably bound up with the process of creating art, for “copying can never be a substitute for creative vision” (Wegener 171). Merely reproducing the minutiae of what constitutes everyday existence, as she felt realist, naturalist, as well as most modernist, writers, did, could not be construed as “transmutation,” the act she demanded as a necessary component of the artistic process.

The aspect of modernism that Wharton most wished to position herself against was what she deemed the tendency to “pour everything out of their bag,” or, more precisely, the stream-of-consciousness technique of much of the fiction and poetry we now deem “modernist” (Wegener 172). In a 1923 letter to Bernard Berenson, Wharton denigrated *Ulysses* and what she describes as the theory-dominated writing of the modernist period: “It’s a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind), & uninformed & unimportant drivel; & until the raw ingredients of a pudding *make* a pudding, I shall never believe that the raw material of sensation & thought can make a work of art without the cook’s intervening. The same applies to Eliot” (*Letters* 461). Clearly, since Wharton is positioning herself against Eliot when making such claims, thus implicitly disavowing if not the similarities in their theories, then their practice, she is positioning herself outside of the emerging aesthetic which we see today as the defining one of modernism.

Another important element of Wharton's critique of modernism stems from what she sees as its relationship to realism and naturalism, particularly the "kodak" school. The kodak metaphor, in its mechanical nature starkly contrasted to the vegetative gardening one, identifies Wharton's frustration with modern culture, which she sees as replacing the transmutation of artistic creation with the "snapshot" method of the camera in photography and the cinema, about which latter art form she had nothing positive to say. The modernists, she argued, used "exaggerated physical realism," employed "superficial disguises [such] as singularities of dialect and slang," and "situate[d] their tales among the least developed classes" in order to "facilitate their realism" (Wegener 173). The modernist reinvention of realism concentrated on the lower classes, Wharton believed, because it was simpler to "depict rudimentary characters, moved from the cradle to the grave by the same unchanging handful of instincts and prejudices, than to follow the action of persons in whom education and opportunity have developed a more complex psychology" (Wegener 173). Like Howells and James, then, she found certain modernist choices of subject matter unfortunate at best and the aesthetic techniques deployed by them similarly ill-considered.

Wharton's growing dissatisfaction with modern aesthetics prompts her to delineate the faults of the modernist writer as personified by Vance Weston. A number of critics claim that she makes her only full-length *kunstlerromans* about a male writer in order to distance herself from the protagonist and thus to discourage the type of "who's who" analysis of the novel so common in the 1920s (as the ubiquitous questions put to Vance about the "sources" of his characters remind us), but such a claim leaves too many

questions unanswered. In *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* she suggests that the middlebrow orientation of American educational institutions and publishing companies fosters a decline in culture, and the character of Weston implies a direct relationship between modernism and middlebrowism. For Wharton, these two trends nurture each other--they are not antagonistic, as Waldo Frank would claim--and the fact that Wharton's only full-length novels which specifically focus on a "writer" depict a male artist implies that, for her, the excesses of modernism are particularly masculine. While Wharton had become increasingly interested in formulating her problems with modernist aesthetics during the 1920s in her letters, essays, and *The Writing of Fiction*, her last two novels allow her to elaborate on the reasons she felt the modernist aesthetic was inherently corrupt. Weston, the hero of these *kunsterromans*, is the vulgar American Wharton abhors, but in the early stages of his career, he is also the embodiment of her own aesthetics.¹⁹ Then, his emphasis on the importance of inspiration and imagination for the writing process closely echoes Wharton's own vision of writing as a metaphysical experience, but he, unlike Wharton, does not have the education or cultural background to cultivate the natural elements of his talent. Her specific targeting of the excesses of modernism through her satirical depiction of Vance Weston be seen as her attempt to defend her own style of writing--perhaps embodied in Weston's first novel *Instead*--to the critics who had denounced her as "old-fashioned."

¹⁹ Penelope Vita-Finzi points out that the terminology Wharton uses to describe Vance Weston's "inspiration" is quite similar to that Wharton uses when describing her own work: "divine," "dream," "vision," "soul," "spirit," "mysterious," and "mystical" (52).

While *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* are both fueled by a romance plot, the true heart of each book is Vance Weston's development as an artist, Halo Spear's shifting perceptions of her lover's talent, and Wharton's satiric insights about the publishing industry and modernist aesthetics. These novels return Wharton to the problem of creative expression for women and the complex relationship between creativity and sexuality which she explored in her earlier, shorter *kunstlerromans* and *Summer*. Wharton here condemns the excesses of the modernist ego, both in light of the artistic creations it produces and the women it feeds upon.²⁰ Vance Weston, the artist figure of these novels, is a midwesterner from a "new money" family who longs to escape what he sees as the barrenness of life in his hometown of Euphoria, Illinois. After observing his girlfriend Floss Delaney in a tryst with his grandfather, the devastated Weston pours his heartbreak into a short story, and his desire to become a writer fuses with his desire to escape the oppressiveness of women and the midwest. The need to recover from a prolonged illness helps him to convince his parents to send him to stay with relatives in upstate New York (for he believes New York City will offer him both inspiration and opportunity as a writer), and it is at Paul's Landing that Weston meets his "destiny."

²⁰ See Julie Taddeo's essay "A Modernist Romance? Lytton Strachey and the Women of Bloomsbury" for a discussion about Strachey's and other male modernists' "use" of the women in their lives. Strachey positions Dora Carrington, a "New Woman" and an artist herself (like Halo, she is a painter), as both a muse and a domestic servant, her role as a "sexless, ministering angel" (143). In many ways, although Weston and Halo Spear have a sexual relationship, their union is far too similar to the unequal one which existed between Strachey and Carrington.

His immediate attraction to the sophisticated Halo Spear and the Willows, the estate she will probably inherit someday, is more of an aesthetic and intellectual response than a physical one. When he first meets Halo, Weston is a young and basically uneducated boy who dreams of writing poetry. She, in turn, encourages his artistic ambition while at the same time showing him the wide gulf between his personal experience and education and what he wishes to write about. Spear, like Wharton, advises the aspiring poet of the necessity of saturating himself in the best the past has to offer. Through her, Weston develops a longing to learn more not only about the world around him but of the long history about which he knows so little. When he tells her that he had read "The Ancient Mariner" in college, but he had never been introduced to "Kubla Khan," she laughs ironically and replies, "I wasn't laughing at you, but at the intelligence of our national educators--no, educationists, I think they call themselves nowadays--who manage to take the bloom off our greatest treasures by giving them to young savages to maul" (*HRB* 66).²¹ The middlebrow education which cannot provide a sense of cultural and historical continuity to students like Weston is the target of Halo's derision. The "mutilated beauty" which she perceives to be the legacy given to young Americans reminds us of Wharton's own attitude about modern society's frivolous conception of culture; indeed, Halo Spear often acts as Wharton's voice in these novels, the critic both of Weston's growing modernist "sensibilities" and of contemporary culture at large.

Weston's emerging poetic impulses are momentarily stilled when a false

²¹ A review of *Hudson River Bracketed* by Percy Hutchinson criticizes Wharton for "slander[ing] Western educational institutions" (Tuttleton 468).

accusation concerning the theft of some rare books from the Willows forces him to flee Paul's Landing. His brief attempt in New York City to become an author fails, so he returns to Euphoria and takes up the "practical" newspaper career which his father has chosen for him. However, Lewis Tarrant, now Halo Spear's husband and the owner of a literary journal, discovers Weston's first story, declares him a "genius," and offers him a job. "One Day," the story about Floss' betrayal of Weston, is read as "'the early morning 'slice-of-life'; out of the boy's own experience, most likely,'" according to George Frenside (*HRB* 194). Weston then returns to New York to pursue a literary career; he also marries Laura Lou, his young cousin. Halo, however, continues to foster Weston's literary abilities and to awaken his passion by introducing him to cultural treasures and talking to him about his desire to be a writer. Eventually, she helps him to write *Instead*, a novella about the woman who once owned the Willows. After its publication, the positive critical reception and moderate sales of the novella convince Weston of his worth as an author, but his marriage to Laura Lou, who is incapable of understanding his artistic urges, their poverty, and his growing desire for Halo all conspire to stifle his creative output. Laura Lou's tragic but fortuitous death from consumption, as well as Halo's separation from her egotistical husband, allows the two to hope that they can be together as the novel closes.

Wharton initially conceived *Hudson River Bracketed* as a self-contained narrative, but the pressures of serialization and her absorption in the characters moved her to write a sequel. Published three years later, *The Gods Arrive* begins with Vance and Halo's elopement to Europe. However, the humiliated Tarrant refuses to grant Halo a divorce,

making a marriage to Weston impossible; the resulting openness of their relationship threatens Halo's "traditional" ideals of order and harmony, which she clings to despite the bohemianism surrounding them in Paris and her seeming rejection of convention. A chance reunion with the newly-wealthy Floss Delaney causes Weston to question his ability to devote himself to one woman, and while Halo encourages him to be free so that his writing will not suffer, she is devastated when he leaves her to return to America, supposedly to promote his new novel *Colossus*. While Halo's pregnancy and Floss' strategic marriage to a duke prompt the couple's reconciliation at the end of the novel, the reader is unsure whether Weston has matured emotionally, intellectually, or artistically enough to fulfill his potential as Halo's partner, as a father, and as an artist.

Interpretations of the novel's conclusion differ dramatically; some describe Weston as moving through an important maturing process that enables him to return to Halo, while others feel he is still a "child," as Halo's own comment to him at the close of the novel suggests: "But then I shall have two children to take care of instead of one!" (GA 439).²²

²² Carol Singley describes Weston's transformation as the result of his reading of Augustine's *Confessions*:

The reader is encouraged to believe that Vance Weston has begun to resist the self-indulgent, romantic escapes he has pursued throughout his life. He is "determined not to abandon himself to such dreams" but to be ruled by realities. Seen in terms of the Christian emphasis on the necessity of memory in order to make an adequate confession, Vance's return to the Willows is a sign of his acceptance of faith. (207)

Julie Olin-Ammentorp describes Weston and Halo's union as both "traditional and nontraditional, both radical and reactionary" (309), and Dale Bauer argues that Halo takes on the role of Weston's "mother" because of her realization that "she is neither Vance's intellectual comrade nor the inspiration for his erotic passion" (141). The ending of the novel "only confirms the sexual economy of the novel: schemes like bohemian life and trial marriage rely on maternal ideology and the maintenance of heterosexual norms"

There is no doubt, however, that Vance Weston's union with Halo Tarrant (who, as few critics bother to note, is the most Wharton-like character in the novel) provides him with the "receptive" imagination needed to fulfill his own vision. *Instead*, his first novel, is the fruit of their union. The writing of this novel is described in terms that suggest parallels to Wharton's own aesthetic, the "transmutation" of images and ideas into art:

He had brought his fresh untouched imagination to the study of the old house and the lives led in it--a subject which to her had seemed too near to be interesting, but to him was remote and poetic as the Crusades or the wars of Alexander. And he saw that, as she supplied him with the quaint homely details of that past, she was fascinated by the way in which they were absorbed into his vision, woven into his design. (*HRB* 357)

As Vance writes the novel, he depends upon Halo to act as a "womb" for his imagination, for "what his imagination had engendered was unfolding and ripening in hers" (*HRB* 341). Vance and Halo thus act as two halves of a whole in the creation of this book, for before Halo offered her "exquisite participation," as Vance imagines it, he could not "wake" the "dumb walls" of the Willows and bid them to speak of the past (*HRB* 341, 338).

In fact, the form of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* reiterates that

(143).

Vance and Halo are two halves of a creative personality.²³ More than the first novel, the sequel vacillates between the consciousness of Weston and Halo, showing the ironic discrepancies between the two protagonists, particularly their romantic illusions about one another, their changing perceptions about Weston's writing, and their frustrations about their relationship. The novels continually shift between Vance's and Halo's consciousnesses, one or the other being the dominant "voice" of a particular chapter. Wharton uses this technique to enhance the novels' ironic depiction of Vance's artistic "development," for as his career progresses in terms of fame and financial recompense, his aesthetic sense devolves. Wharton also emphasizes the fact that as Vance and Halo's sexual relationship progresses in *The Gods Arrive*, their intellectual communion deteriorates, and as Halo becomes less of a participant in Vance's creative process, the quality of his writing clearly degenerates and her physical and emotional well-being declines as well.

Wharton's denunciation of modernist "excess" in these two novels thus emphasizes her belief in the relationship between overindulgences in "style" and sexuality. All of Weston's attachments to women are "excessive": first the sentimental adoration of his child-wife Laura Lou, then the fevered intellectual companionship with

²³ Marcia Phillips McGowan argues that we should see these two novels as a *bildungsroman* of Halo Spear, not just a *kunstlerroman* describing Vance Weston's development. The form of the two novels supports her claim: "The third person narration of each novel allows for shifting centers of consciousness. Halo's point of view pervades over one-fourth of the first novel and one-third of the second; Vance's accounts for the rest. To deny the importance of this narrative strategy is to displace Halo Tarrant as subject" (74).

Halo, and, finally, the purely sexual obsession with Floss Delaney. This last fixation causes his writing to devolve into the excesses of modernist “drivel.” When one rejects the necessity of the transmutation of art, as Weston does after the publication of *Instead*, one strays. Floss inspires only Weston’s body, not his mind, and his pursuit of her in *The Gods Arrive* coincides with his writing a novel which refuses to engage in the transmutation of experience into art. Ironically, Waldo Frank, one of Wharton’s harshest critics, perceived modernists like James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence as innocent of this fault; he classified their work as “organic” compositions of life experiences.²⁴ Wharton, however, depicts Weston and other modernists as rejecting this organic process, and this for her was the sin of modernism, its result the “me” book which refuses to care about the reader (and Floss’ brand of self-absorbed vanity mirrors the novel Weston writes when under her spell).

Despite Weston’s self-absorption, this novel is the least about Weston “himself.” As Frenside forecast, this is the real test of the artist--how well he can write about something “outside of himself” (*HRB* 194). For Wharton, Weston obviously fails the test. Halo charges that his obviously Joycean *Colossus* is “much too long,” although “nothing

²⁴ In a 1926 essay entitled “Utilitarian Art,” Frank argues that in true art, the “sensory appeals--to eye, ear, appetite, memory, emotion--are the materials which the artist has composed into the organic whole called art: which differs from its elements even as life from its ingredients” (145). However, in “utilitarian art,” “the main matter (instead of the means) is some appeal to the senses” (145). He classes Virginia Woolf’s art as utilitarian because her words are “for a personal sensory delectation which her reader may share. She is not creating at all: she is transposing” (146). However, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence are able to “compos[e] these sensations into organic life” (145). Whatever the vague distinctions between “true art” and that which is merely “utilitarian,” gender seems to play a role in his critique of both Woolf and Wharton.

particular happened in it, and few people even pretended to know what it was about” (355). More importantly, Vance moves from his belief that the novel encompasses everything about himself and all of humankind to perceiving the novel as being about nothing. He first imagines *Colossus* to be the depiction of “a human soul, his soul, in the round” (*GA* 172), but after reading it to Halo, he perceives that unlike his writing of *Instead*, when they were in concert about the aesthetics of the novel, she cannot sympathize with his goals here. Interestingly, *Instead* is about a woman’s life, a fictionalized portrait of Halo’s ancestress, but *Colossus* becomes the mirror of Weston’s self-absorption. Halo describes it as “a sort of primitive torso. A fragment of experience dug up out of the sub-conscious” (*GA* 315). She understands that Vance is “fragmented” as well and that his completion of the novel begins their “intellectual divorce” (345). Only after he finishes the book does he begin to understand Halo’s judgment of the novel, describing it as a “big dump of words,” but with this self-criticism he rather childishly blames Halo for its failure; her criticism, he believes, “deflected its growth” (346-47). At this point, Halo ironically suggests that perhaps he needs a new woman to feed his artist’s ego (or, rather, to stimulate his creativity), and he tells her about his relationship with Floss, prompting her to think, “He’ll get over it and I shan’t. He’ll use it up in a story, and it will go on living in me and feeding on me” (349).

This image of man’s feeding upon woman for his creativity is one repeated throughout the novel, but ironically, only after Weston decreases his intellectual (and physical) dependence upon her does Halo become thinner, paler, and more wasted looking. When he finally returns from London, Halo looks at her reflection in the glass:

“Her face was almost as grotesquely illuminated as the servant’s; her eyes looked swollen with sleep, her cheeks drawn and sallow. ‘I’m an old woman,’ she thought. ‘How can he ever care for me again?’” (*GA* 330). The self-absorbed Floss, however, cannot be consumed by Weston, although he mistakenly perceives her as food for his creative spirit: “There was a dumb subterranean power in her that corresponded with his own sense of the forces by which his inventive faculty was fed” (385). This image of man’s creative faculty as “feeding” off women is not just rooted in the idea of woman as man’s inspiration. Halo, in fact, wants to be his creative spark; for her, “the need of her blood” is to be his Muse, but she desires this to be a partnership and she wants Weston to be her “companion on the flaming ramparts” (*HRB* 484-85, 500). Weston, however, can never really perceive their relationship as a partnership; he constantly shifts between viewing her as a teacher, a Muse, a lover, a child, and, in the end, as a maternal figure--but never as his equal.

While Weston is clearly unable to understand Halo’s motivations or creative impulses (an inability duplicated by many critics of the novels), we must remember that he is the target of Wharton’s satire. Halo, like Wharton herself, clings to “beauty, order and reasonableness” despite the chaos of the world around her, and it is she who takes on the mantle of creator, albeit in the most “traditional” sense--as a mother--in the novel’s conclusion (*GA* 85). Yet, the repeated allusions likening the creative process to childbirth in these two novels ask us to look at Halo’s pregnancy as a metaphorical as well as a literal one; she is the “mother” of what Wharton hopes will be the future of culture. As long as Weston listens to Halo’s advice and follows her as his Muse, his work will bear

more lasting fruit, not the “stillborn” effect of the *Colossus* novel. However, we have little faith in Weston’s ability to put aside his own ego and listen to Halo’s advice; in a sense, Wharton is admitting her failure to convince her audience of the value of her own aesthetic preferences.

Wharton’s theories about the writing of fiction, which sharply contrast with the notions promoted by the “modernists” in these novels, show her desire to defend a way of writing that she sees as disappearing in the post-war era. Penelope Vita-Finzi’s *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction* argues that Wharton’s aesthetic asks for a return to “classical ideas” while denigrating post-war values and art (11,17). While Vita-Finzi suggests that Wharton’s frustration may stem from her diminishing abilities as a writer from the mid-1920s until her death, I would argue that in these later novels, some of her least critically acclaimed, she asserts her position as a “significant writer” by demonstrating the inferior art of those who can only assimilate and churn out the current fashionable trends; such an “artist” disdains traditional culture and desires to annihilate it because he cannot understand it. These artists want to “make it new,” but the “wholesale rejection of the past” effected by the New York and Parisian bohemians of the two novels finally turns Weston’s initial groping for the “past” that Wharton sees as necessary to the artist’s development into a self-absorption which destroys his artistic credibility (*GA* 77). She seems to have little hope in the modernists’ ability to listen to her pleas for “beauty, order and reasonableness.”

Wharton creates Halo Spear as an example of what Charity Royall could have become given the benefits of education, culture, and family connections; unfortunately,

their fates are far too similar, gesturing towards the modernist oppression of women's creativity at a time when women were supposedly granted more "freedom," sexual and otherwise, than ever before.²⁵ Despite the momentous changes that occurred in American society in the years between the publication of *Summer* and *The Gods Arrive*, Americans were incapable of embracing a heroine who sought sexual or creative freedom for herself. Wharton's emphasis on Weston's sexuality as opposed to Halo's (who seems strangely asexual in her maternal deference to Weston's needs) indicates that Wharton realized America was not ready for the language of female desire she introduced in *Summer*.

Thus, Wharton's project shifts from the more overtly political critique of patriarchal oppression in her pre-1920s novels to an elaboration of her aesthetic, but this project is really no less political. During the latter part of her career, she explicitly links her ideals of order to the female artist or muse, a stark contrast to the visions of female disorder posed by many male modernists such as D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. While she does often demonstrate the disorder caused by women, particularly those like Floss Delaney and *The Children's* Joyce Wheeler, whose egoism causes them to ignore the tumult they leave in their wake, the female characters who are concerned about self-expression, as well as attracted to classical notions of order, harmony, and beauty, hold out the hope for order in a world of chaos. The title of *The Gods Arrive* suggests a certain amount of optimism that women like Halo Spear can transform the

²⁵ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land Volume II: Sexchanges* for a discussion of the male modernist's attitude towards women, particularly as a result of World War I.

modern world--and modern art--but the fact that her potential is linked to maternity also reminds us of Wharton's uneasiness about the position of the woman artist in the modern world. In the next chapter, I will argue that Willa Cather struggled with many of the same problems that haunted Wharton. Both expressed frustrations with modernism; however, Wharton developed an aesthetic of transmutation rooted in classical concepts of harmony and order, which aesthetic perhaps alienated the growing middle-class readership in post-war America. Cather, on the other hand, looked to folk art and storytelling for her inspiration, modes which depended upon communal exchange for their artistic power. Raised in the mid-west region of the United States that Wharton perceived as the root of middlebrow tendencies, Cather celebrates the artist and audience who can appreciate the art of storytelling with much less regard than Wharton to the means by which that appreciation is cultivated.

Chapter Three
“Come Closer to Life”:
Willa Cather and the Modernist Autobiographical Impulse

The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (The Song of the Lark 263)

Making a Sheath: Willa Cather and Audience Reception

In *The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather describes the process of artistic creation using a piece of pottery as her inspiration. Singer Thea Kronborg's artistic revelation during her sojourn in the desert can be understood as Cather's early attempt to explain the impact of the western landscape and domestic arts upon her aesthetic conception.¹ This is probably the most frequently quoted passage in Cather criticism, for those attempting to understand her artistic theories rightly perceive this image of the “sheath” as central to her aesthetic.² In this example, she links the power of the woman's “voice” as an artistic

¹ Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (1953) describes Cather's 1912 trip to Arizona to visit her brother Douglass. Cather wrote several letters to Sergeant detailing the landscape, which she found overwhelming, and the Mexicans she met. These letters, as well as Sergeant's account of them in her book about Cather, reveal the ways in which this trip affected Cather's writing, for after her trip to the Southwest, she began *O Pioneers!*, the first of her “prairie” novels. Most Cather critics see this sojourn as the break between her work as an editor at *McClure's* and her tenure as an author who based her art on memories of her childhood experiences in Nebraska, revived by the trip to the Southwest.

² A number of feminist readings of *The Song of the Lark* have concentrated on the meaning of the word “sheath” in this passage. In “Writing Against Silences: Female Adolescent Development in the Novels of Willa Cather” (1989), Susan J. Rosowski

tool to the creative capacity of domestic implements. Most importantly, the passage demonstrates Cather's emphasis on artistic simplicity and lasting quality, an early version of her theory of the *roman à l'américaine*, which insists that a novel should not be "overfurnished" or "manufactured to entertain great multitudes of people," for such a novel becomes "quickly threadbare and can be lightly thrown away" (*Not Under Forty* 44). However, despite the fact that this passage captures so many of the themes which dominate analyses of Cather's fiction, critics fail to consider how this passage relates to that other element so central to an understanding of her work--the autobiographical impulse, the aspect of her fiction which most closely aligns her with her modernist contemporaries. Most critics characterize Cather's early "prairie" novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918), usually considered the primary novels of the Cather canon and certainly among her most popular works, as "autobiographical" in varying degrees. The descriptions of the prairie landscape and the frontier village, particular characters and events, and the immigrant stories which form

comments that "Thea Kronborg learns about her own potential to serve as a receptacle": "Unlike a Freudian view that girls and women suffer anxiety from the absence of outward signs of creative (i.e., sexual) activity (visible genitalia made more visible by erections and emissions of sperm), Cather describes girls and women as enjoying the security of knowing they carry within themselves that which they need to be creative" (61). Other readings of this passage are more explicit in their reading of "sheath" as a sexual term. Ellen Moer's *Literary Women* (1963) reminds us that *vagina* is the Latin term for a sheath or scabbard, and Sharon Hoover, in "The 'Wonderfulness' of Thea Kronborg's Voice" (1995), suggests that "Thea's realization of the sheath as a passageway for bringing forth life precedes her experience of it as a scabbard for the symbol of male power" (268) and that creativity is a "birthing" process. Judith Fetterley's "Willa Cather and the Fiction of Female Development" (1993) argues that Cather actually reverses the traditionally sexist understanding of female sexuality as passive, for in this passage, the "sheath" becomes an active producer of art (229).

the “patchwork” pattern of these novels are all elements seen to derive from Cather’s own life experience, and rightly so. However, Cather’s autobiographical impulse differs from the more egocentric one of most modernists; a clear distinction between Cather and her contemporaries resides in her desire to create a supportive community for her artist figures instead of highlighting their isolation. While her fiction of the post-war era is decidedly more pessimistic about the potential for finding such a community, I wish to examine the early novels in which she develops an aesthetic of transmutation at odds with the egotistical modernist autobiographical impulse, an aesthetic in which she uses her personal experience to render the artist a part of his or her community instead of isolating him or her from that community.

The fact that Cather’s project differs from that of her modernist contemporaries is highlighted by the fact that recent studies of the autobiographical impulse in modernist fiction such as Suzanne Nalbantain’s *Aesthetic Autobiography: From Life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anais Nin* (1994) continue to ignore Cather, despite the fact that Cather biographers like James Woodress actually use passages from her novels to describe her life experiences. The tendency to perceive Cather’s work as fundamentally different from the project of modernists like Joyce and Woolf is partially the result of her general exclusion from the “high modernist” camp--and her project is certainly different from theirs. However, we need to understand how and why her aesthetic project differs from those of her modernist contemporaries. My textual analysis in this chapter will concentrate upon *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia*, two of Cather’s early and most popular novels, for these are the most frequently

cited as “autobiographical” renderings of Cather’s own childhood and adolescent development.³ I hope to show the means by which Cather challenges one particular trend of modernist fiction, the aesthetic autobiography. Cather’s destruction of personal letters and her refusal to write an autobiography complicate any attempts to pinpoint definitively the “facts” in her fiction; further, her own aesthetic theories ask us not to do so. Instead, we should consider the process of transmutation in her fiction, the ways in which she uses her upbringing in Nebraska as a “sheath” to transmit her art, and the ways in which she constructs the audience for whom this art is intended. More than her modernist contemporaries, Cather searches for ways to include her audience in her aesthetic project and, in doing so, offers an alternative to the egotistical nature of much of the literature we now term “modernist.”⁴

³ Both Judith Fetterley and Susan J. Rosowski’s readings of Cather’s fiction concentrate on her fiction as autobiography. For example, Fetterley’s 1993 essay analyzes the “anxieties” in *The Song of the Lark* which later re-emerge in *The Professor’s House* (1925). According to Fetterley, the “tone” of the earlier novel echoes the hopefulness that Cather felt about her relationship to Isabelle McClung, whereas the despair of the 1925 novel emerges from McClung’s marriage. Rosowski, however, examines the fiction as emblematic of patterns of female adolescent development later outlined by psychologists like Carol Gilligan. For Rosowski, Cather’s “general idea of adolescence” runs along lines of gender difference; for males, “development proceeds by linear, sequential stages, one replacing the other,” whereas for women, development is marked not by sequential development but by “transformations”: “Continuity lies beneath apparent changes as her female characters’ age, and instead of metaphors of death, Cather uses ones of reconfigurations” (60-61).

⁴ In “The Name and Nature of Modernism,” Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane discuss possible definitions of the movement, but they agree that the movement is characterized by a shift towards “sophistication and mannerism, towards introversion, technical display, [and] internal self-scepticism” (26). They go on to argue that modernism can be characterized as an “arcane and private” art, one which “tends to divide its audience aristocratically into two groups--those who understand it and those

The conflicting Romantic sensibilities about art in the "sheath" passage reinforce the importance of audience in the elaboration of Cather's aesthetic. The Keatsian description of the artistic process, wherein a moment is "arrested" and continues to exist for future generations, promises an eternal life for art, but the fact that the pottery is, after all, broken also reminds us of Shelley's "Ozymandias": that is, we must remember that art, like life, is "hurrying past us." Thea's talent--singing--is particularly vulnerable to the erasure of time, for unlike the sculpture at the Art Institute which remains available for people to admire, Thea's voice can only be shared with her immediate audience. The fact that Thea can realize the magnitude of her talent only here in the desert, alone, emphasizes the impact of life experiences on a person's art not in terms of subject matter or point of view, the typical focus in the autobiographically directed criticism of Cather's work, but in terms of aesthetic sensibility; only while alone can Thea come to realize the importance of an audience. The intersection between life experience and aesthetics epitomized by this passage suggests how we can begin to understand Cather's autobiographical impulse and its conflicts with modernism, a movement often characterized by its autobiographical and egotistical tendencies despite T.S. Eliot's theory of impersonality. For Cather, the aesthetic autobiography is a communal, not an individual, project.

who do not" (27-28). Their concept of modernism establishes the idea that modernism is egotistical in an aesthetic sense, for the artist is not necessarily concerned with whether or not his audience "gets" his work. Wharton and Cather each emphasize the destructiveness of such an attitude, as Wharton's characterization of Vance Weston demonstrates.

Willa Cather and Modernism

In most configurations of American literary history, critics do not consider Willa Cather a “modernist.” Like Edith Wharton, she increasingly distanced herself from the modern world in her fictions of the Nebraska frontier and, later, in her historical novels like *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). However, recent feminist revisions of modernism are attempting to situate Willa Cather within the modernist movement in order to create a stronger position for her within the American literary canon. For example, Bonnie Kime Scott’s *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (1990) includes Cather in her “modernist family tree,” but her gesture of inclusion does not seem to be based upon a reconsideration of Cather’s narrative techniques or theories; instead, this move appears to be motivated by Cather’s work as the editor of *McClure’s*, a position which sometimes enabled her to shape her audience’s tastes, and her unconventional (unmarried, perhaps lesbian) lifestyle. In *Willa Cather’s Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* (1990), Jo Ann Middleton insists that Cather’s style is “radical” in that “she did fully explore the possibilities of discontinuity as she developed her technique of juxtaposition and she mastered the poetic use of the reverberating symbol and image” (10). Yet, Middleton’s analysis of Cather’s style fails to situate her within the high modernist canon, and she really sees only Cather’s work of the 1920s, the three short novels which most characterize her theory of the “unfurnished” *roman à l’américaine*, as aesthetically modernist.⁵ This gesture, of course, ignores Cather’s

⁵ Jo Ann Middleton designates *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor’s House* (1925), and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) as “modernist.” She defines modernism as “the

popular and critically acclaimed work written prior to 1920, the works which, for most people, characterize Willa Cather's career and aesthetic tendencies.

While I will argue that the intersection of aesthetics and autobiography highlighted by the "sheath" passage from *The Song of the Lark* constitutes Cather as part of an important modernist trend, I must emphasize her wariness of, and even hostility to, the modernist aesthetic project and the modern world, which reaction I see as primarily manifested in her conceptions about audience and reception. Cather deplored the post-war society in which she found herself characterized as "old-fashioned" by the younger generation of writers that included Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, two other writers who often used personal experience as the basis of their fiction.⁶ In the

outlook that views the world in its complexity, refuses to accept simple or conventional solutions, and then experiments with new answers and radical suggestions" (10). For her, Cather's radical narrative experiment is her "stringent excision," or what she calls the "vacuoles" in Cather's text, the "apparent absences in Cather's work that are full of meaning" (11). The term "vacuoles" is a botany/biology term which refers to a "cell that seems empty, but helps to maintain cellular structure" (54). She argues that this metaphor is useful for understanding Cather's aesthetic because of its "potential to identify structural absences that, in fact, allow for a fuller story than should be technically possible" (55). The seeming gaps or missing elements in Cather's novels are in fact an opportunity for the reader to enter the text: "In the juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated episodes, scenes, events, or details, the reader will experience an intense moment of realization . . ." (51). Clearly, Middleton wants to align Cather's narrative style during this period with Ernest Hemingway's.

⁶ H.L. Mencken's 1922 *Smart Set* review of *One of Ours*, Cather's war novel which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923, argues that Cather falters when she writes about something outside of her experience--in this case, war. The first half of the novel, which follows Claude Wheeler's childhood on the prairie, Mencken finds believable, but once Cather shifts to the front in France, he feels that the novel is "at the level of a serial in *The Ladies' Home Journal*," a telling comment about the critical perception of women's magazines and the literature they published (Schroeter 10). John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* and other modernist renderings of the war are more "realistic," but the war in

introduction to *Not Under Forty*, her collection of essays which contains what many perceive as her primary aesthetic treatise, "The Novel D meubl ," she claims that she named the collection for those who could remember the world before 1922, when it had "broken in two."⁷ While a number of modernists like Virginia Woolf made similar claims for cultural transformations in the early twentieth century which are also characterized by dramatic breaks in time (Woolf dates the shift from 1910, the year of King Edward's death, and the onset of World War I defined the break for many others), Cather's statement suggests a preference for the prelapsarian world, not the "modern" one. Because of their mutual distrust of the "jazz age," Cather and Wharton are often paired in critical studies of the fiction of the post-World War I period as examples of the lingering "genteel tradition," and as I argued earlier, they are rarely considered in relation to the high modernist movement.⁸

Today, we tend to view modernist fiction as a radical "break" from what came

Cather's novel "is fought out not in France but on a Hollywood movie lot" (12). Ernest Hemingway made a similar critique of Cather, arguing that she learned about war from the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁷ E.K. Brown's tribute to Cather in the 1946 *Yale Review* considers the implications of this remark by Cather. As he notes, both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published in 1922, but "I doubt that she was primarily remembering Joyce or T.S. Eliot . . . she was certainly thinking much more painfully of changes closer to the actual fabric of living in America," such as the automobile, for a garage now stood in the place of Annie Field's home, a place which had been her link to the past (Schroeter 73-74).

⁸ The essay by George Snell discussed in the Wharton chapter is a primary example of such a study, although more recent works like Judith Fryer's *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* seek to find more fruitful ways of considering the relationship between these authors than their "apprenticeship" to Henry James.

before it, realism and its outgrowth, naturalism. However, Cather and Wharton each believed that what we now consider “modernist” prose was in fact an extension of naturalist fiction, dedicated to an intense delineation of detail, perhaps becoming more egotistical or subjective than naturalist fiction had been but still an attempt to “transcribe” experience, not to “transmute” it. What they define as “modernist,” we are more likely to characterize as “realist” or “naturalist” today, and since we characterize modernism as a radical break from what preceded it, these authors’ tendencies to note the correlations between contemporary fiction and its nineteenth-century predecessors problematizes our very notions of what constitutes “modernism.” Henry Seidel Canby, a literary critic sympathetic to the projects of Wharton and Cather, published an essay rather ironically entitled “The Young Romantics,” which work describes the tendencies of the young writers to whom Wharton and Cather were opposed: “This literature of the youngest generation is a literature of revolt, which is not surprising, but also a literature characterized by a minute and painful examination of environment. . . . true youth is giving us this absorbed examination of all possible experiences that can come to a boy or girl who does not escape from everyday life” (152). Canby also sees this writing as a “new naturalism,” which, for him, leads to the “biographic tendency” in the writer to detail all of those aspects of the writer’s life which constructed him as an artist and/or hindered his progress as an artist (155). Yet, he argues that this tendency does not stem from a “desire to tell the truth about human nature,” as Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* did, for these egoistic writers are only interested in their *own* natures, not the culture that both nurtured and frustrated them (155-156).

Cather, too, is concerned with the self-obsession Canby describes in his essay. During a *New York World* interview in 1923, Cather posits the goal of the true novelist as a reaching for “originality,” a transmutation of a person’s experience which acknowledges the differences between self-indulgence and art:

So long as a novelist works selfishly for the pleasure of creating character and situation corresponding to his own illusions, ideals and intuitions, he will always produce something worth while and original. Directly he takes himself too seriously and begins for the alleged benefit of humanity an elaborate dissection of complexes, he evolves a book that is more ridiculous and tiresome than the most conventional cold cream novel of yesterday. (Bohlke 59)

Note here that Cather chooses a word often used by Wharton, “dissection,” to characterize modernist technique, perhaps suggesting a dis-ease with the growing relationship between science and literature that Max Eastman posits in *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science* (1931). Eastman’s book, first published in 1929 as a series of essays in *Harper’s* and *Scribner’s* magazines, discusses the encroachment of science into the field of literature, which he “judge[s] to be the great intellectual event of our time . . . [and the movement] responsible for the qualities of our literature” (vii). Eastman sees the growing tendency towards “dissection” in literature as a natural outgrowth of scientific inquiry:

The intrusion of this disciplined and skeptical attitude of inquiry, into the world-old business of chatting about human nature, has been one of the

principal events of our time. It is unhappily named psychology, the science of the soul--although its first step was to dismember the soul--and it is unhappily associated with all the most profitable forms of hocus-pocus. It is more tightly associated, however, with biology and the physiology of the brain and nervous system. . . . It arrives at last in the fields occupied by literary essayists and the professors and critics of literature. (9-10)

Despite her early plans to become a doctor and her knowledge about science, Cather rejects the relationship between science and literature in an unpublished fragment "Light on Adobe Walls": "Art is a concrete and personal and rather childish thing after all--no matter what people do to graft it into science and make it sociological and psychological" (*On Writing* 125). For both Cather and Wharton, aesthetic capability does not reside in the capacity to detail meticulously physical surroundings or psychological impressions; instead, the most honest kind of art is a transmutation of one's own ideals and illusions which can reach an audience.

Their resistance to a particular fictional trend does not mean that Wharton and Cather were aesthetically reactionary, however; each insisted that they sought a break with literary tradition, and neither relied on the past for suitable literary models. While they both admired the socially and morally conscious realism of William Dean Howells, the complex narrative innovations of Henry James, and the modernist sensibility of Marcel Proust, each endeavored to create an aesthetic model which suited her own needs

and transformed the possibilities of “realism.”⁹ Thus, they rejected the form of realism practiced by their nineteenth-century predecessors and twentieth-century adherents like Booth Tarkington. While today we generally consider Wharton and Cather to be “realists,” they were each attempting to create a new kind of realism, one which did not have the pitfalls of the “sociological and psychological” trends that they designated as “modernist.” In her aesthetic treatise “The Novel D meubl ,” Cather describes the problems of fiction obsessed with the details of society which really do not reveal anything about the character(s):

There is a popular superstition that “realism” asserts itself in the cataloguing of a great number of material objects, in explaining mechanical processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations. But is not realism, more than it is anything else, an attitude of mind on the part of the writer toward his material, a vague indication of the sympathy and candour with which he accepts, rather than chooses, his theme? Is the story of a banker who is unfaithful to his wife and who ruins himself by speculation in trying to gratify the caprices of his mistresses, at all reinforced by a masterly exposition of banking, our whole system of credits, the methods

⁹ In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton describes her reaction to reading Proust’s *Du Cote de Chez Swann*: “I began to read languidly, felt myself, after two pages, in the hands of a master, and was presently trembling with the excitement which only genius can communicate” (323). Elizabeth Sergeant remarks that Cather, too, “was always happy to know of new French authors, whom she preferred to new American authors. There was Proust. . .” (157).

of the Stock Exchange? Of course, if the story is thin, these things do reinforce it in a sense,--any amount of red meat thrown into the scale to make the beam dip. But are the banking system and the Stock Exchange worth being written about at all? Have such things any proper place in imaginative art? (*Not Under Forty* 45-46)

Cather and Wharton's attempts to transmute the worlds of their memory and impressions into art are important aesthetic achievements of the early twentieth century even if they are not "modernist" in the sense that we currently define modernism; our desire to categorize the art world of the early twentieth century in certain ways has narrowed our perception of this era. Ironically, a writer now firmly entrenched in the "high modernist" camp, Virginia Woolf, sensed Cather's importance in the development of a distinctly "American" fiction.

Virginia Woolf's 1925 essay on "American Fiction," which I discussed in the previous chapter, specifically praises Cather's work as an example of an emerging American tradition whose genesis is in the landscape of the country. While she makes no parallels between her own fiction and that of the American novelists she praises, there is an important link between these two authors which is established in Woolf's 1919 essay "Modern Fiction." Woolf, much like Cather and Wharton, critiques the tendency of fiction to focus on physical "material": "If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word, materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (105). She praises James Joyce as a writer who attempts

“to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves [him]” (107).¹⁰ Of course, Wharton in particular criticizes Joyce for being too self-indulgent, but Woolf’s assertion on re-inventing “realism” parallels the goals of Wharton and Cather, even if their conceptions of the practice of this theory differ.

In “Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather,” Phyllis Rose argues that both Cather and Woolf attack what Rose terms “physical realism” but then diverge when it comes to what the writer should delineate in her fiction. Rose states that Woolf chooses a “psychological realism” close to that of Joyce and Lawrence, while Cather prefers the “archetypal,” for she believes that the inner self can be “catalogued” as minutely as the physical world (131). For both authors, however, it is the “mood” which unites a novel, not the plot (133). While I agree with much of Rose’s argument, especially her consideration of the similarities between Cather’s and Woolf’s aesthetics (an important link to modernism which most Cather critics ignore), I find her discussion of Cather’s “archetypal” mode deficient. Many Cather critics would agree that her work reaches for mythic archetypes, and it is this very aspect of her writing which has alienated many scholars of the modernist period, for they see her archetypes as moral statements and reactionary attempts to reassert the values of the past.

Critical Reception and Cather’s Autobiographical Impulse

The continued resistance against conceptualizing Cather as an important

¹⁰ Woolf wrote this essay after James Joyce had published *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; *Ulysses* was only beginning its serial publication at the time she wrote this essay.

contributor to the aesthetic trends of the early twentieth century stems from this emphasis on her conservatism, both politically and artistically, which emerged during critical discussions of her work in the 1930s.¹¹ David Stineback argues that the contemporary reviewers of Cather's books, rather than the literary scholars who began to write about her work in the 1930s, provide more useful insights into her fiction because they do not focus on the elements of her writing that later critics do, primarily the assertion that she "subordinates her characters to autobiographical and moral impulses" (170). Stineback insists that the contemporary reviews of her work manage to capture the essence of Cather in a way that later literary scholarship does not, and he also claims that her "characters are strikingly autonomous, biographically and morally. Time and again Cather seems to create people for their own sake" (170). While I would agree with Stineback that we can see distinctions between the reviews and the more "academic" and leftist criticism of the later period, I believe that he fails to acknowledge the fact that many of her early positive reviews did in fact come from people like Henry Seidel Canby who were essentially academics. Canby and others chose to write reviews, edit literary journals, and in Canby's case serve as the chairman of the Book-of-the-Month Club selection committee because during the teens and 1920s, there were no posts in American literature in academic institutions, and Canby clearly wanted to be part of the formation

¹¹ Cather's novels of the 1930s can be characterized by their lack of political content, and the radical critics of this period attacked her work for this. However, while Fannie Hurst consciously moved towards a more politically aware art during the Depression era, critics found fault with her fiction also. Apparently, popular writers could not really win the battle with the critics.

of "American literature."¹² His championing of writers like Cather and Wharton and his uneasiness about the trends he saw developing in "modernist" fiction (although, of course, he did not term it as such) cause a critic like Stineback to place him with the more traditional reviewers who favored Cather's "nostalgia" as opposed to the "radical" academics who perceived her work as "reactionary." Yet, many of the reviewers in the 1930s criticized Cather's work, and there were scholars during this period who praised her; thus, the distinction between reviewers' and academics' responses to Cather's work which Stineback makes is too polarized to explain the radical shift in opinion about Cather's work that does seem to occur during the 1930s.

Perhaps it is the tie between audience and author which Cather's aesthetic fosters that alienates modernist scholars. Cather can be considered a "popular" writer (for me, this means that many people read her books for pleasure), but her work is less often studied in an academic setting than her high modernist contemporaries like Woolf. Sharon O'Brien examines the "case against Willa Cather" in the academy, and while she agrees with Stineback that Cather has faced unfair attacks from critics, she acknowledges an important trend that contributed to this decline in favor:

Cather's unmaking did not result merely from the political and social climate of the 1930s, even though the nation's economic plight led some

¹² According to Janice Radway, Henry Canby left the academy to pursue his work as a literary reviewer, editor, and Book-of-the-Month Club committee member because "he felt that the conservatism of the literary academy prevented him from devoting his attention to the all-important task of searching out a literature appropriate to the modern age" (265).

left-wing reviewers and critics to attack what they considered her conservatism and escapism. Cather's literary decline coincided with, and was in part a product of, the self-conscious attempt of reviewers, critics, and academics to create an American literary canon. (111)

In many ways, the problem is this: critics who want to assert the importance of including Cather's work in American literature courses find that this claim often necessitates being able to characterize her as a "modernist," for it is otherwise difficult to teach her within the context of the early decades of the twentieth century. Thus, her supporters usually resort to de-emphasizing the autobiographical impulses of her work, since this aspect of her writing is often associated with what some call her nostalgic and reactionary tendencies. Yet, it is her reshaping of this modernist impulse which is the most significant contribution of her literary aesthetic.

Of course, a consideration of the autobiographical impulse that frames Cather's literary aesthetic is complicated. Cather herself contributed to some of our current difficulties in analyzing the relationship between her life and her fiction, as well as the relationship between her work and that of her modernist contemporaries. While a number of interviews throughout her career provide the numerous "myths" about her childhood, particularly the effect of her family's move from Virginia to Nebraska when she was nine, her interactions with the immigrants on the Nebraska prairie, and her "tomboyish" childhood, Cather never wrote an autobiography, and she and Edith Lewis burned much of Cather's correspondence before her death. A stipulation in Cather's will forbids the publication of or quotation from any of the surviving correspondence, although what

remains is available to scholars in scattered libraries throughout the country.¹³ This sanction obviously complicates the work of the biographer. Several of Cather's friends, including Edith Lewis and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, did publish memoirs about Cather, but Sergeant's work focuses more on Cather the artist than Cather the person, and their growing estrangement as Cather grew more critical of the modern world and literature suggests that Sergeant, who characterized herself as a modernist, lacks sympathy for her subject's frustrations with modernism.¹⁴ Further, Edith Lewis, Cather's long-time companion, roommate, and literary executor, had a serious stake in maintaining the privacy which Cather demanded during her life. As a result of these various factors, biographers often depend on Cather's fiction and her sporadic interviews to provide

¹³ Margaret Anne O'Connor's "A Guide to the Letters of Willa Cather" offers a detailed list of the locations of the surviving Cather correspondence. Her letters are housed in numerous libraries, colleges, and private collections throughout the country, making it difficult for scholars to study what little survives of her correspondence, especially since the letters cannot be published or quoted.

¹⁴ Sergeant details at length Cather's growing dissatisfaction with the modern world and the estrangement this created in their relationship:

. . . she was deeply aware of post-war life and literary currents, bewildering and new; and did not conceal from her friends her round aversion for the strong, disillusioned young talents that rushed along the literary seas, as if they alone possessed the rights of navigation. I saw her as a fine little French corvette, designed on gracious, firm lines, threading her way through the turbulent waters of the Jazz Age. Though abstractly--and concretely, too--she believed in youth, its creativeness and its fecundity, in her fifties, as she then was, the young hopefuls of her own profession were the 'sports.' They kept their eyes fixed on the restive present and the unpredictable future, with its confused, pressing world-consciousness. She, whose vision was directed to the past, with its traditional limitations, was sailing by the true compass. (194)

Sergeant, ten years younger than Cather, considered herself part of this younger generation which Cather, for the most part, dismissed.

details about Cather's life and her attitude towards modernism.

For example, James Woodress, who has published two biographies about Cather, circumvents the problems surrounding the writing of a Cather biography by quoting from her fiction, claiming that much of it is based upon personal memories. While Woodress rather disingenuously claims that "the biographer of a writer like Cather, whose memories and experiences are woven into the fabric of her fiction, has to separate the reality from the invention," he then goes on to blur further the line between reality and invention as he discusses her life and work (42). Repeatedly, he notes parallels between people Cather knew and her fictional characters, her descriptions of the Nebraska prairie and the reactions of characters like Jim Burden to that landscape, and places Cather lived and visited and the places Cather described in her fiction. While this allows for a much more fully developed biography than had previously been available on Cather, one still wonders who is the "real" Cather and who is the persona created by her fiction, which we may or may not suppose to be Cather herself.

And, ultimately, we need not ask if Cather's characters are meant to be perceived as representations of her. Much Cather criticism focuses obsessively on the biographic "facts" in her fiction, yet recent trends in autobiographical theory question the possibility --or even the necessity of--"truthfulness" in the autobiographical genre. Shari Benstock's essay "Authorizing the Autobiographical" poses questions about the possibility of self-revelation, the supposed premise of the autobiography:

Autobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence

between the manner and the matter of its discourse. That is, autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction. (11)

Of course, such theories are of the postmodern temperament and reveal our concerns with the impossibility of having, much less representing, a unified self. But the previous emphasis on “truth” or “facts” in the autobiography, stemming from a belief that this genre was merely an outcropping of the biography, has given way to the belief that truth is not really even the desirable aim of the genre, and this claim should make us reconsider our conception of autobiographical fiction as well. Suzanne Nalbantian’s essay “Aesthetic Lies” asserts that the “prevailing attitude in the 1990s of critics of the autobiographical genre is that autobiography is by its very nature an enterprise of fiction, creating a fictive self which does not necessarily have to live up to an accountability of verifiable truth” (21).

I want to elaborate upon the distractions created by the obsession of reading Cather’s fiction as a kind of confessional autobiography. James Woodress in fact comments on this very problem in an essay responding to questions about Cather’s sexual preference, criticizing Jane Rule, Lillian Faderman, and Deborah Lambert for assuming that Cather was a lesbian, for, he argues, “deducing biographical data from fiction is a nonproductive business” (“Cather and Her Friends” 82). This essay was written a few years before his second biography on Cather was published in 1987, and, of course, in that biography he dismisses the idea that Cather was a lesbian because of the absence of

“facts” to support such an assumption. Yet, his own tendency in that biography to fuse fiction and life only exacerbates the confusion for scholars of Cather’s work.

The problems fostered by such tendencies become evident when examining the critical debates about *My Ántonia*, one of Cather’s early critical and popular successes. Judith Fetterley’s analysis of the narratorial point of view in the novel illustrates well the problems I have been discussing. She argues that the original 1918 introduction in which Cather herself is more clearly the narrator gives way to a new introduction in 1926 in which the narrator is unnamed and ungendered, a move that is symptomatic of the central problem of the novel: Why must Jim Burden and not Cather (or any female narrator) tell Ántonia’s story? Fetterley argues as follows:

In *My Ántonia* Cather renounces the possibility of writing directly in her own voice, telling her own story, and imagining herself in the pages of her text. *Obviously* autobiographical, the *obvious* narrator for *My Ántonia* would be Cather herself. Yet for Cather to write in a female voice about Ántonia as an object of intense and powerful feelings would require that she acknowledge a lesbian sensibility and feel comfortable with such a presentation. (52, my emphasis)

Fetterley argues that Cather must destroy her “self” and engage in a kind of self-effacement by speaking in Jim Burden’s voice instead of her own. Of course, this self-effacement seems to be the product of a gender transformation: by becoming “Jim Burden,” Cather can no longer speak in her own (or a “feminine”) voice. Why is Fetterley so concerned with this issue? Obviously her article is an attempt to suggest that Cather’s

sexual orientation--lesbianism--necessitated this narratorial strategy in order to disguise her true desire for Annie/Ántonia. We cannot ignore the political overtures Fetterley makes in naming Cather a lesbian when biographers like Woodress, who acknowledges the possibility, insist that no direct evidence of this sexual orientation exists, possibly because of Cather's own calculated destruction of her letters.¹⁵ Within this framework of consideration about the pitfalls of reading fiction as autobiography, we must reconsider our notions of fiction which perhaps stems from life; is it "facts" which matter so much as the aesthetic creation? How does Cather employ and transform the modernist autobiographical impulse in her own aesthetic?

Cather's Aesthetic of Transmutation

Cather began elaborating her aesthetic preferences early in life, and several sources, including Cather's own interviews and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's memoir, consider the impact of her period of apprenticeship in journalism and, later, her work as a magazine editor at *McClure's* on her aesthetic. Of course, many of the modernists like Ernest Hemingway served a similar apprenticeship, a fact which many see as contributing to their terse narrative style, but Cather worked primarily as an art critic. While Thomas Beer, a friend of Cather's, suggests in an article that Cather had managed to rise above her journalist origins, Sergeant, who met Cather while she was an editor at *McClure's*,

¹⁵ Other examinations of the narrative point of view of *My Ántonia*, such as Richard C. Harris', argue that the new introduction for the 1926 edition occurred as a result of Cather's growing dissatisfaction with the post-war world, for a note of longing nostalgia characterizes Jim Burden in the new introduction. Again, however, this overtly "biographical" reading of Cather's fiction neglects the aesthetic effect of the new introduction.

challenges this conception, for “having myself . . . seen how much she was able to learn and absorb from this environment, and how little ‘superior’ to it she felt, I did not commiserate her for her journalistic past” (195). This apprenticeship period allowed her to formulate many of her conceptions about art and artists and, finally, to help shape the literary tastes of *McClure’s* audience.

Cather does describe her journalist apprenticeship as an influence on her writing but primarily because of the knowledge she gained about what did *not* constitute literature. In a 1921 interview with Eva Mahoney for the *Omaha World Herald*, Cather discusses her realization that technique must be wedded to inspiration:

It was during the six years when I was editor of *McClure’s* magazine that I came to have a definite idea about writing. In reading manuscripts submitted to me, I found that 95 percent of them were written for the sake of the writer--never for the sake of the material. The writer wanted to express his clever ideas, his wit, his observations. Almost never did I find a manuscript that was written because a writer loved his subject so much he had to write about it. (Bohlke 37)

In this comment she not only emphasizes the importance of the “material”; she also implies that the work must be written for the sake of someone other than the writer--the reader. While as editor her job was in part to “weed out” the best material for the magazine, she also had the duty of finding material that would appeal to its readership.

Cather began to develop an understanding about artists, vocation, and audience long before her job at *McClure’s*. As a theater critic for the *Nebraska State Journal*

during her latter years of college and the year after her graduation, she was able to articulate her ideas about not only theater but a wide-ranging number of topics, including her fictional preferences, which often leaned toward romanticism. By 1896, the year she moved to Pittsburgh to take the job as editor of the *Home Monthly*, Cather had already written almost “half a million words of criticism, self-analysis, and explorations into the principles of art and the work of the artist,” according to Bernice Slote (4). While Edith Wharton did not undergo a period of higher education and apprenticeship in the publishing industry, much of her conception of classical aesthetics stemmed from her cultural background, her time in Europe, and her own assiduous reading. Cather, however, was part of a younger middle-class generation who sought college education and careers, and it was during this early period of her life that she had the opportunity to establish a sense of her conception of art.¹⁶ Bernice Slote describes the Cather revealed by this writing of the early 1890s, writing which Cather did not wish republished because she considered it “apprentice” work but the ideas of which she later echoed in interviews and aesthetic treatises of the 1920s:

The young Willa Cather--as she is revealed in her writing of the mid-nineties--was primarily a romantic and a primitive. That she was

¹⁶ Toril Moi’s analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s education in *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual* (1994) emphasizes the importance of the first generation of French intellectual women’s having such an opportunity and might provide some interesting insights into the problems faced by the generation which included Cather and Hurst, who, of course, were educated in late nineteenth-century America. In the case of Hurst, certainly, education was seen as a stepping-stone to marriage and motherhood, not a career.

eventually to be called a classicist, a Jamesian sophisticate, and the reserved stylist of the novel *démeublé*, may be one of the great jokes of literary criticism, for even if the novelist at fifty was different from the beginner of twenty, the critical tags of the years between tended to obscure the reality of Willa Cather's work. (31)

Cather's insistence on "reality" in art, Slote continues, differed from the reigning conceptions of realism at that time. She did not endorse the realism/naturalism of Howells, Zola, and Ibsen, for "to set down a multitude of exact details about the physical and actual world would not in itself give a sense of life, nor would a concern for social problems insure reality" (Slote 62). As Cather formulates her aesthetic during the 1920s, she insists that the key to art is not attention to details, for the "sharp photographic detail" so praised in turn-of-the-century writing was for her only a "novelty." Simplicity is the key, she argues, in the 1920 essay "On the Art of Fiction": "Art, it seems to me, should simplify. That, indeed, is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole--so that all one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page" (*On Writing* 102).

Cather's concept of art does differ from Wharton's more classical model described in the previous chapter. In a 1921 interview with Eleanor Hinman, Cather glorified the presence of art in the everyday; in particular, her experiences with frontier immigrants developed in her an appreciation of domesticity as an art form in itself. Annie, the inspiration for *Antonia*, Cather writes, "was one of the truest artists I ever

knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains” (Bohlke 44).¹⁷ This appreciation of “everyday” gestures as a form of art suggests to Cather what her true subject will be: while her aesthetic of transmutation is quite similar to Wharton’s, she chooses to transmute her own memories from her childhood; the world of Nebraska, its people and landscape, are turned into the impressions which dominate her fictional world.

In *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, Wharton asserts the importance of high culture in the development of the artist, a theory of development similar to T.S. Eliot’s in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” By contrast, in Cather’s *kunstlerroman*, *The Song of the Lark*, the depiction of opera singer Thea Kronborg focuses upon the means by which everyday experiences and the beauty of the Southwestern landscape, as well as the responses of her audience to her singing, shape her artistic sensibility. In fact, Thea’s experience in Chicago, where she has her first exposure to the “real” art of the museums and symphony performances, stifles her artistic development instead of enhancing it. In these fictional representations, as well as in Cather’s available nonfiction

¹⁷ Two essays in particular address the importance of the “folk” in Cather’s aesthetic conception. Ann Moseley’s “The Dual Nature of Art in *The Song of the Lark*” (1979) examines the struggle between the “Dionysian” and the “Apollonian” elements of Cather’s art, the tension between the inspiration provided by the Western landscape and people and the “control and perspective” provided by her apprenticeship in the East (20-21). Jean Schwind’s “Fine and Folk Art in *The Song of the Lark*: Cather’s Pictorial Sources” (1990) is less “mythic” in its exploration of Cather’s aesthetic; she focuses on the domestic arts that inspire Cather, particularly the millinery art of Tillie Kronborg which closes *The Song of the Lark* (92). The “juxtaposition” of fine and folk art is what informs Cather’s aesthetic and the form of her novels, and the juxtaposition of Thea and Tillie’s art at the close of the novel reminds us of the importance of the folk in Thea’s successful interpretations of operatic roles.

discussions of art, we can see Cather outlining a concept of “domestic aesthetics” which is, ironically, at odds with her negative perception about earlier female writers who wrote in a “domestic” tradition.¹⁸ However, it is only through the process of the artist’s “transmutation” and the transmission of art to an appreciative audience (an audience that the traditional “domestic” artist did not have) that the domestic experience becomes an aesthetic treasure, as *Ántonia* does through the eyes of Jim Burden.¹⁹

This belief in simplicity is echoed in a comment that Cather made to her close friend and business associate, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Early in her career, Cather had felt the deep influence of Henry James (and the Edith Wharton characterized as a

¹⁸ By “domestic,” I mean the “everyday.” Cather repeatedly emphasizes in interviews that an artist, male or female, must give up a personal life in order to embrace the artistic. As she herself chose not to marry or have children (whether this was the result of lesbianism or a conscious artistic choice), Thea Kronborg chooses art over life. Yet, it is her very experience growing up in a houseful of children, experiencing the ordinary elements of life in a prairie town, which help to shape her artistic sensibility, and Cather acknowledges this. In addition, a character like *Ántonia*, who is not an “artist” in the proper sense, is linked to the oral tradition of storytelling, and it is within her domestic sphere that she is most revered for her talent as an “artist.”

¹⁹ Some of Cather’s earliest commentaries on art, the theater reviews she wrote for the *Nebraska State Journal* during and after college, suggest that art is an all-encompassing process, one that necessitates giving up all else, including “love, popularity, happiness” (qtd. in Woodress 93). She denigrates women writers as having “a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. They are so limited to one string and they lie so about it . . .” (Woodress 110), a view quite similar to Wharton’s. Both writers seem to suggest that few women are capable of giving their entire life over to their art, and while Wharton’s marriage and social responsibilities precluded her doing so until she was in her forties, and Cather’s work on newspapers and as an editor at *McClure’s* kept her from living the life of a writer until her later thirties, both women eventually did devote themselves to the art of fiction. Cather’s friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett did soften her criticism of women writers, but her decision to remain single and childless, as well as her repeated use of male points of view in her fiction, raise interesting questions about her perspective of the “feminine” and its relationship to art.

Jamesian disciple), and her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), reflected the "master's" touch. At the urging of Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather searched for a personal aesthetic in her later fiction; the Nebraska novels which followed *Alexander's Bridge* are Cather's attempt to write about the parish, *hér* parish, so that she moves away from the often rarified atmosphere of the Jamesian novel of manners. However, Cather still believed in certain precepts of James, primarily his assertion that "the originator has one law and the reporter, however philosophic, another" (Sergeant 139). Sergeant describes the moment that Cather explained her goal for her upcoming novel, *My Ántonia*:

She then suddenly leaned over--and this is something I remembered clearly when *My Ántonia* came into my hands, at last, in 1918--and set an old Sicilian apothecary jar of mine, filled with orange-brown flowers of scented stock, in the middle of a bare, round, antique table, "I want my new heroine to be like this--like a rare object in the middle of the table, which one may examine from all sides." (139)

In this description, the subject of the novel becomes an aesthetic object, one to be "examined" but not "dissected." This distinction is an important one, for it is at the heart of the Cather aesthetic. She had already practiced this technique in *The Song of the Lark*, for while portions of that novel are concentrated in Thea's consciousness in the manner of a Jamesian novel, much of our perception of Thea is formed through other characters' perceptions of her. *Ántonia* also comes to us through impressions, as Jim's memory renders her to us in scenes and the stories she tells. Interestingly, though, Cather uses the word "rare" to describe this object, while the *Ántonia* Jim describes in his last meeting

with her seems anything but “rare”: “Ántonia came in and stood before me; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled. It was a shock, of course. It always is, to meet people after long years, especially if they have lived as much and as hard as this woman had” (331). Yet, Jim recognizes the essence of Ántonia beneath the aging and battered figure: “She was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished,” and her “inner glow” remained (332, 336). Jim can see those elements which make Ántonia “rare,” while many observers of the woman would not have understood this woman’s essence. This is what makes Jim the ideal narrator for this text, for he probably realizes more than Ántonia herself what her powers are over others; he is her ideal audience.

A Portrait of a Singer: *The Song of the Lark*’s Thea Kronborg

Because *The Song of the Lark* is a *kunsterroman* about the coming-of-age of opera singer Thea Kronborg, a young girl who comes to maturity in the community of Moonstone, Colorado (a community believed to be similar to Red Cloud, Cather’s own hometown), many read this novel as a combination of Cather’s own girlhood and the mature career of opera singer Olive Fremstad, whom Cather interviewed for material for the novel. However, while aspects of these two lives certainly find their way into the character of Thea Kronborg, understanding this novel only as an autobiographical *kunsterroman* avoids the ways in which this novel comes out of Cather’s experience as a theater critic, a magazine editor, and a participator in the development of a middlebrow culture which would reach a wider audience. This novel is considered to be Cather’s most “autobiographical” but also the novel in which she most explicitly comments on women,

aesthetics, and the artist's audience, a primary element of artistic creation as this novel demonstrates. The form of the novel, which allows Cather to emphasize the centrality of an audience to an artist's development, is an important key to understanding Cather's purpose, yet it is usually the form of the novel which is most heavily attacked by critics.

This novel is a *kunstlerroman* which stems from Cather's experience in ways perhaps similar to James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but unlike Joyce, who concentrates on the youth of the artist, not the flowering of his talent, Cather chooses to present the mature and successful Thea Kronborg in the final two sections of the novel, a decision which she later claims to regret in her 1932 preface to the revised edition of the novel. Not only did she feel that the novel had been "overwritten," breaking all of the aesthetic theories of the *roman à clef* which shaped her fiction of the 1920s, but also that she had gone too far in presenting Kronborg's life, for

The chief fault of the book is that it describes a descending curve; the life of a successful artist in the full tide of achievement is not so interesting as the life of a talented girl "fighting her way," as we say. Success is never so interesting as struggle. . . . I should have disregarded conventional design and stopped where my first conception stopped, telling the latter part of the story by suggestion merely. (qtd. in Heyeck and Woodress 653)

While most critics--both of her day and ours--agree that the latter sections of the novel are much weaker, supporting her claim that the novel would have been better had it ended earlier, she does not delete these latter sections from the revised edition of the novel, as

she certainly could have done.²⁰ The novel may have been “overfurnished,” and most of the cuts she made in the novel did occur in the last two sections and the epilogue, but she did not delete these portions altogether.²¹ According to Robin Heyeck and James Woodress, the latter portions of the novel are less interesting because here, Thea becomes Olive Fremstad and ceases to be Willa Cather, and “the deeply felt experience that was the essential ingredient in Cather’s best work” is of no use to Cather at that point (653). Again, Woodress assumes that only in the autobiographical mode can Cather be successful, ignoring the fact that opera was one of Cather’s passions and that the representation of the opera singer “Kronborg” was probably as interesting to Cather as the representation of the young “Thea,” for in these sections Cather can explore the reactions of a wider audience to Thea’s talent.

Critics have approached the method of representation/characterization in this novel in a number of ways: as a story about female development which can be seen as bearing out current psychological theories by psychologists such as Carol Gilligan, as a mythic representation of a “goddess” emerging from the wilds of the prairie, as a study of

²⁰ Most contemporary critics believed the concluding two sections and the epilogue were the weakest parts of this novel. H.L. Mencken found most of the novel “full of novelty and ingenuity in its details,” but the sections dealing with the adult Kronborg’s success venture too far away from Cather’s own experience (Schroeter 7). Maxwell Geismar *The Last of the Provincials* (1947), argues that “it is difficult to ignore the increasing accents of auctorial bitterness, almost of contempt, which mark the story of Cather’s heroine’s increasing fame as a singer” (Schroeter 184).

²¹ According to Robin Heyeck and James Woodress, Cather cut over 6,900 words from the original 146,000 of the first edition of *The Song of the Lark* for the Houghton Mifflin Library edition of 1932. Of these cuts, all but 153 words were in the last two sections and the Moonstone epilogue.

vocal theory, and as further proof of Cather's inability to depict mature sexual relations.²²

While critics have examined the ways in which this novel presents Cather's aesthetic theories, particularly the passage about the "sheath" quoted at the beginning of this chapter, most agree with Cather that the novel is flawed and "overwritten," when the very premise of the "sheath" passage is the simplicity of art which Cather elevates in her aesthetic treatises and her novels of the 1920s. The novel is in fact closer to the Jamesian mode of her first novel *Alexander's Bridge* than to *O Pioneers!* or *My Ántonia*, but it also serves as an important bridge between the two prairie novels. Here, Cather is able to combine the use of multiple consciousnesses to describe Thea Kronborg as she comes to an awareness of herself as an artist, Thea's ideas about art (which echo Cather's), and the difficulties faced by a female artist who chooses to pursue success in the public realm, as

²² I have already mentioned the readings by Fetterley and Rosowski, but some other popular interpretations of Thea's characterization in the novel concentrate on vocal theory and sexual development (believed to be related by some critics). John H. Flannigan's "Thea Kronborg's Vocal Transvestism: Willa Cather and the 'Voz Contralto'" (1994) emphasizes the transgressive possibilities of Thea's contralto voice and her choice of texts which can produce gender confusion (739). Thus, he believes that Thea's growth as a woman is closely related to the music she sings. Debra Cumberland's "A Struggle for Breath: Contemporary Vocal Theory and Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" (1996) examines the vocal theories which predominated in the early twentieth century, theories which encouraged passivity in the woman singer and discouraged learning about the relationship between one's voice and body. Cather, Cumberland believes, looked to emerging theories by anatomists such as Thomas Fillebrown who insisted that a singer had to learn the mechanics of their vocal apparatus. Lilli Lehmann, a German soprano admired by Cather, "stressed that singers could not fulfill their promise without a working knowledge of their own vocal physiology" (61). This emphasis on the body can be seen in Cather's novel, for Thea's consciousness of her body is a dominant motif in the book, especially when she bathes. Other critics address more specifically the issue of sexual development in this novel, attacking earlier comments that Cather could not portray romantic love or sex. In this novel, Loretta Wasserman insists in a 1982 essay, we clearly see Thea's sensual awakening in the Panther Canyon scenes (351).

opposed to the domestic space where *Ántonia* finds fulfillment as well as a permanent audience who appreciates her storytelling capabilities. *Ántonia* may have no desire for a wider audience than her family and friends, but *Thea*, like *Cather*, is not content with the narrow community of *Moonstone*.

Thea's audience begins with the narrow circle of the interested persons in the *Moonstone* community--Dr. Archie, Professor Wunsch, Ray Kennedy, Spanish Johnny, and the Kohlers.²³ Of *Thea*'s family, only her mother seems to appreciate *Thea*'s talent as a piano player and actively helps her to develop this talent by giving her practice time and, eventually, a room of her own in a house crowded with seven children. Dr. Archie, the physician who is as trapped in the *Moonstone* community as is *Thea*, is perhaps the first to realize, if only in a subconscious way, that her skills on the piano are not the root of her "difference." Ironically, when we are first introduced to *Thea*, she is voiceless, but as Dr. Archie treats her pneumonia and notices the "difference" in *Thea*, it is not her hands but her face and mouth that draw his attention: "No, he couldn't say that it was different from any other child's head, though he believed that there was something very different about her. He looked intently at her wide, flushed face, freckled nose, fierce little mouth, and her delicate, tender chin--the one soft touch in her hard little

²³ Laura Dubek's "Rewriting Male Scripts: Willa Cather and *The Song of the Lark*" (1994) examines the male characters of the novel and the ways in which Cather identifies with them: "I suspect that Cather's real identification lies not with *Thea* and her flowering as an artist but with her male characters who suffer from a script imposed on them by a repressive society frightened of desire" (293). For Dubek, the men of this novel often suffer from the repressions usually imposed on women at this time; *Thea*, on the other hand, seems to enjoy the freedoms that most men of her era enjoyed. Cather thus plays with gender stereotypes in order to confront their constraints on the creative self.

Scandinavian face, as if some fairy godmother had caressed her there and left a cryptic promise” (9). Repeatedly, Thea’s observers and admirers in Moonstone acknowledge her “difference,” though they are not all able to perceive exactly what that difference is or what form her “promise” will take. Wunsch, although he is her piano teacher, seems to know that her voice carries the potential that she will later reveal to others. When he gives her the *Orfeo* score shortly before he flees Moonstone, humiliated at a drunken binge that reinforces his outsider status in the community, his inscription on the score-- “*Einst, O Wunder!*”--suggests the belief that he has in Thea, that she will be the one who can fulfill all of the dreams for him, Archie, and Ray by using the voice that he knows has potential (84).

The passage wherein Thea begins to become aware of her “specialness,” after Wunsch has suggested to her that she might have potential as a singer (something she reveals to no one else until she sings for her Chicago piano teacher Andor Harsayni), has often been read as a sign of Thea’s sexual awakening, in keeping with the readings of this novel as one of female development:

She was shaken by a passionate excitement. She did not altogether understand what Wunsch was talking about; and yet, in a way she knew. She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. She brought everything to it, and it answered her; happiness consisted of that backward and forward movement of herself. The something came and went, she never knew how. Sometimes she

hunted for it and could not find it; again, she lifted her eyes from a book, or stepped out-of-doors, or wakened in the morning, and it was there-- under her cheek, it usually seemed to be, or over her breast--a kind of warm sureness. (70)

While this passage, and many of the ones that describe Thea's awakening awareness of her artistic power, are charged with a kind of physical sensuality, and Thea's sensitiveness about her body does separate her from the divas of Chicago who seem strangely distant from their physical selves, this description of a "friendly spirit" clearly refers to her hope for artistic fulfillment, not for sexual fulfillment or the hidden lesbian desire which Fetterley and O'Brien see in such passages.²⁴ The "secret" she and Wunsch discover together, the one which they "hid . . . away" and "never spoke of" is Thea's potential, not just to sing but to be the world-famous opera singer which she later becomes (70).

The reason Cather may have chosen to emphasize the perceptions that various people have of Thea ties in the fact that here, she is analyzing not only the artist but the audience. As I pointed out earlier, much of Moonstone is incapable of understanding Thea; they are, in fact, much like the audience in Chicago that Thea later criticizes. Lily,

²⁴ Judith Fetterley's article "Willa Cather and the Fiction of Female Development" particularly reads this "secret" between Wunsch and Thea as a sexual one, despite the fact that Harsanyi later defines the "secret" as the artist's passion for his work: "given the similarity of Cather's language to descriptions of the frequently covert and often subsequently repressed masturbatory experience of adolescent girls, I would identify this 'something' as referring equally to Thea's sexuality" (228). The emphasis on secrecy ties into Fetterley's belief that Cather's lesbianism is a subtext in this and other novels like *My Ántonia*.

the “angel-child of the Baptists” who is Thea’s Moonstone rival, wins the acclaim at a church concert, singing and reciting “Rock of Ages” to the delight of her audience, who are bored by Thea’s rendition of Reinecke’s “Ballade,” which both Thea and her mother know “would ‘never take’ with a Moonstone audience” (55, 53). Later, while in Chicago, Thea learns that the audience she needs cannot be found in the “stupid people” who make up Chicago concert audiences, people who can only appreciate the insipid “talent” of a Jessie Darcey:

Thea went to several of Jessie Darcey’s concerts. It was the first time she had had an opportunity to observe the whims of the public which singers live by interesting. She saw that people liked in Miss Darcey every quality a singer ought not to have, and especially the nervous complacency that stamped her as a commonplace young woman. . . . Chicago was not so very different from Moonstone, after all, and Jessie Darcey was only Lily Fisher under another name. (227)

Ironically, Thea finds her first responsive audience in Moonstone when, after she has begun her training in Chicago, she returns home and visits the Mexican settlement. Singing with Spanish Johnny, she learns for the first time “the response that such a people can give. They turned themselves and all they had over to her. For the moment they cared about nothing in the world but what she was doing. Their faces confronted her --open, eager, unprotected” (202).

Her performance for the Mexicans establishes the source of her dissatisfaction with her voice instructor Madison Bowers. While he can impart the technical knowledge

about voice which Thea lacks, her desire for the responsiveness of an audience who truly loves music escapes the understanding of her voice instructor, who sees only the need to manipulate an audience, not to identify with them. Bowers lectures her about the importance of “smoothness”: ““The art of making yourself agreeable never comes amiss, Miss Kronborg. I should say you rather need a little practice along that line. When you come to marketing your wares in the world, a little smoothness goes farther than a great deal of talent sometimes. If you happen to be cursed with a real talent, then you’ve got to be very smooth, indeed, or you’ll never get your money back”” (220). His perception of artistic talent as an investment which should garner one profitable returns if one is “smooth” enough seems reprehensible to Thea, who learns during her transformative trip to the Southwest that her vision of artistic fulfillment is not economic but domestic. Her voice is not a tool to gain money but to create pleasure for herself and others, a realization that makes her similar to *Ántonia*, although Thea has the opportunity to reach a much larger audience.

Cather’s emphasis on audience and the difficulty of capturing “impressions” so that one can transmit them to others is central to understanding this novel. Early in *The Song of the Lark*, Ray Kennedy, the railroad worker who loves young Thea, describes his own yearning to capture the beauty of the West in words the way Thea later captures it in her voice:

He felt strongly about these things, and groped for words, as he said, “to express himself.” He had the lamentable American belief that “expression” is obligatory. He still carried in his trunk, among the unrelated possessions

of a railroad man, a notebook on the title-page of which was written "Impressions on First Viewing the Grand Canyon, Ray H. Kennedy." The pages of that book were like a battlefield; the labouring author had fallen back from metaphor after metaphor, abandoned position after position. He would have admitted that the art of forging metals was nothing to this treacherous business of recording impressions, in which the material you were so full of vanished mysteriously under your striving hand. (101-102)

Here, the "labour" of writing is inadequate to meeting the task of expression; Kennedy understands the power of what he has seen but is unable to convey that power in words. It is only in his realization of Thea's "specialness" that he comes close to the greatness he desires, and the fact that he is the one who makes her study in Chicago possible through a life-insurance bequest is significant, for he understands the difficulty of the artist's goal: to make the power of one's impressions powerful to someone else through transmission and transmutation. Thea's voice, unlike Ray's writing, has the capacity to achieve this goal.

Thea's second piano teacher, Andor Harsayni, is the first person besides Wunsch to perceive the depth of Thea's talent and to realize that it is her voice, not her piano playing, that is the source of her power. His reaction to her voice is much like Jim Burden's reaction to *Antonia's* storytelling capabilities: "He loved to hear a big voice throb in a relaxed, natural throat, and he was thinking that no one had ever felt this voice vibrate before. It was like a wild bird that had flown into his studio on Middleton Street . . . no one knew that it had come, or even that it existed; least of all the strange, crude girl

in whose throat it beat its passionate wings” (164). Like the “breath vibrating behind” Antonia’s voice when she tells stories, Thea’s voice carries a raw power. Her distinctive quality in singing comes not from specialized training or vocal tricks but from an innate ability to interpret the operatic roles that she later makes famous.

When Thea first sings for the Nathanmeyers, a wealthy Jewish couple who are two of the few appreciative listeners she has in Chicago, her first rendition of “*Tak for dit Räd*” displeases Fred Ottenberg because ““You did it much better the other day. You accented it more, like a dance or a galop”” (242). Thea explains that while Bowers encourages her to sing the song “seriously,” her interpretation stems from “a story my grandmother used to tell” about a husband dancing his unfaithful wife off of the edge of a cliff. After she tells the story to Ottenberg and the Nathanmeyers, she sings the song again, pleasing her audience and prompting Mrs. Nathanmeyer to declare, ““That’s the first real voice I have heard in Chicago””(243). The conjunction of singing and storytelling here is Cather’s way of expressing the power that storytelling had on her own artistic development and an acknowledgment that Thea’s artistic power comes from the “folk,” not the rigorous training under a man like Bowers who cannot appreciate the source of Thea’s inspiration. Ironically, the wealthy and sophisticated Nathanmeyers, as well as the socialite and beer mogul Fred Ottenberg, are able to appreciate the source of Thea’s talent, so Cather is not suggesting that there is a class distinction; that is, both the poor Mexican immigrants and the wealthy socialites are able to perceive Thea’s vocal abilities. More importantly, unlike Bowers and the “stupid faces” Thea deplors while she is in Chicago, they are able to appreciate and enjoy her voice. The reason that Cather

spends so much of the novel recording others' impressions of Thea is that she wants us to understand the value of one's audience--only through an appreciative audience can Thea come to the realization of her talent, and both the initial revelation to Harsayni and this private performance for the Nathanmeyers are central to Thea's understanding that she does have a tremendous ability.

Thea never forgets who her real audience is. She does not perform for the wealthy, those who can afford the box seats at her opera performances but only attend these performances as part of social obligations; she performs for those who come to appreciate her voice. In a conversation with Ottenberg after she has become successful, she complains of the limitations of performing in New York. While the opportunity for choice roles may be greater and the performance halls more impressive, she claims, "In New York everything is impersonal. Your audience never knows its own mind, and its mind is never twice the same. I'd rather sing where the people are pig-headed and throw carrots at you if you don't do it the way they like it" (364). For the most part, her New York audience is hypocritical or incapable of discerning talent: "How can I get much satisfaction out of the enthusiasm of a house that likes [another singer's] atrociously bad performance at the same time it pretends to like mine? If they like her, then they ought to hiss me off the stage. We stand for things that are irreconcilable, absolutely" (384).

Indeed, what inspires Thea's singing are the "old things, like the Kohlers' garden," and she understands that her art stems from her childhood: "I am more or less of an artist now, but then I was nothing else" (384). And from her childhood, too, comes the audience she clings to, those who appreciate beauty even without understanding why.

She remembers, for example, an elderly couple at a piano recital she attended, “evidently poor people who had made sacrifices to pay for their excellent seats. Their intelligent enjoyment of the music, and their friendliness with each other, had interested her more than anything on the programme” (390). Unlike many artists, Thea is interested in the effect of her (and others’) art on the common person, and while Thea and Cather both criticize audiences for their inabilities to perceive art, they do understand that the perception comes not in class or cultural background but from the same incomprehensible qualities that form the basis of the true artist’s talent. Thea Kronborg is successful not only because she can sing but because she sings to those who can most appreciate her interpretations regardless of their musical knowledge; as Ottenberg tells Dr. Archie, ““She gets it across to people who aren’t judges. That’s just what she does. If you were stone deaf, it wouldn’t be all wasted. It’s a great deal to watch her”” (336). Cather’s emphasis on the audience’s influence on the artist is a central part of this novel, intimately connected to the novel’s form; the novel is not “overstuffed” with details but is, instead, Cather’s attempt to show us the many types of people who can appreciate Thea Kronborg’s talent. Cather’s articulation of the ideal audience as well as her formulation of an aesthetic theory of simplicity helps her to prepare for her next novel, which, despite its emphasis on domesticity, prairie life, and childhood friendship, is even more explicitly about audience and performance than is *The Song of the Lark*.

***My Ántonia* and Communal Storytelling**

In *My Ántonia*, Cather offers us impressions of Ántonia through the eyes of Jim Burden, a man who is capable of “seeing” only particular aspects of her character but

whose immersion in the prairie landscape which nurtured them both allows him to perceive the most “artful” impressions created by *Ántonia*. *Ántonia* and the main character of Wharton’s *Summer*, Charity Royall, are alike in that each comes from a “foreign” culture, each is sexually “fallen” and has a child to mark her “sin,” and each marries a man who is not her first choice. Yet, while Wharton cannot or will not imagine Charity’s existence as it extends into life with Lawyer Royall, Cather’s depiction of Burden’s reaction to *Ántonia*’s “fall” and the way his seeing her in her domestic setting erases his disappointment in her is a testament to the powerful strength of narrative: *Ántonia* chooses to continue her story, and Burden tells that story to us.

My Ántonia is perhaps Cather’s best-loved work, and like Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* series, this novel describes a girl’s development into a woman, making it attractive to feminist critics who want to analyze the effect of a particular character on their own psychological development as girls and women. Yet, unlike *Little Women*, which if not narrated by Jo March certainly presents her as the focus of the novel, *My Ántonia* is more of a *bildungsroman* of Jim Burden than of its namesake. We see her only as he does, and for him, *Ántonia* is the focus of nostalgic longings for the past, a marker of his childhood and growth into manhood. Feminist criticism’s debates regarding Cather’s “intentions” in this novel insist that *Ántonia* is the center of the novel and that the point of view of Jim Burden is irrelevant.²⁵ Yet, Jim’s story is one of male growth.

²⁵ This is especially true for those who argue that Burden is really only Cather in disguise, a “Willie Cather,” if you will. Judith Fetterley’s article “*My Ántonia*, Jim Burden and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer” (1986) insists that the novel contains “deep-seated resistance” to the conventions of the “masculine” *bildungsroman* (43), but

We cannot ignore the aspects of his story that are more suited to male experience at this time: the sexual temptation presented by Lena Lingard, his work under a male mentor at Nebraska and Harvard, his railroad executive job, and his travels. While a woman would have had relatively easy access to a public university education in the West, Jim's move to Harvard marks him as someone entitled to male privilege, and the apparent freedom he experiences despite his unhappy marriage again marks him as someone who can do as he wants. Cather certainly lived an unconventional life and chose not to marry or have children, but surely she recognized in Jim Burden someone whose choices many women would not have been able to enjoy at that time. Yet, it is the fact that Jim has access to more varied experiences and has seen the world that emphasizes the power of *Antonia* and her stories to enthrall any listener willing to appreciate her power as a storyteller.

Summarizing the "plot" of *My Antonia* reminds us that the novel is not really reducible to a reiteration of events, for it is a montage of sensations, impressions, and

she must choose the perspective of Jim over Antonia to mask her lesbian desire. Sharon O'Brien's "The Thing Not Named": Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" (1984) contains a similar argument, while Curtis Whittington, Jr. emphasizes the importance of Jim's perspective in the novel. While Jim begins the novel as an observer, he eventually becomes the novel's protagonist, and while some might read this as a "risk" with the novel's form, the "negative knowledge of life" that Jim has acquired while living "in the democratic state . . . will only deepen his existing attitudes" towards Antonia and life on the prairie (239). For Whittington, the novel is about Jim's pessimism about the "burden of the past." He cannot escape his nostalgia for the past, but he must return to the burdens of the modern world because that is his responsibility (245). Thus, the pull between nostalgia and progress is the focus of the novel, and this necessitates Jim's being the center of the novel.

stories--a kind of memoir, really.²⁶ The “story” is Jim Burden’s recounting of his relationship to *Ántonia* Shimerda Cuzak, an immigrant girl whose family moved to Nebraska at the same time that the recently-orphaned Jim moved there to live with his grandparents. Although *Ántonia* is several years older than Jim, he serves as a teacher (he teaches her to speak English) and a friend, and he even desires at times to be her lover. While readers of the novel may look for a “romance” to develop between the two and are frustrated by Jim’s failure to “help” *Ántonia* after he finds out that she has been abandoned by her lover and left with an illegitimate child to raise, their relationship is not premised on the traditional trajectory of the female *bildungsroman*, which usually does end in marriage.²⁷ Their relationship is based on the power of storytelling, and it is through the stories they tell to and about each other that their growth occurs.

²⁶ Here I am using Lee Quinby’s definition of “memoir” in her essay “The Subject of Memoirs: *The Woman Warrior*’s Technology of Ideographic Selfhood” (1992). She distinguishes “memoir” from “autobiography” as one of exteriority vs. interiority, for the autobiography “promotes an ‘I’ that shares with confessional discourse an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine that interiority,” while memoirs “promote an ‘I’ that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others” (299). *The Song of the Lark* is a kind of fictional memoir in that Thea is constituted by others’ impressions of her, but there is no “I” in that text; Cather chooses a first-person voice in *My Ántonia*, and while we do see Jim Burden “constituted” as the novel progresses, it is through his interactions with others, especially *Ántonia*.

²⁷ A number of readings of this novel criticize Jim’s “failure” to marry *Ántonia*. Despite his claim when he returns to Black Hawk that he would have liked to have had *Ántonia* as a lover, he does not stay in Black Hawk with her. In “Jim Burden and the Structure of *My Ántonia*,” John L. Selzer argues that while Jim did make mistakes in his youth, the mature man who tells us about *Ántonia* has learned from his mistakes. While the introduction shows a Jim who is a “melancholy wanderer,” the last section of the novel shows us a man who gains a “sudden awareness of the wisdom of *Ántonia*’s choices and the poverty of his own” (55). Critics’ frustration with the lack of romantic closure is similar to that found in debates about Jo’s rejection of Laurie in *Little Women*.

As Jim teaches *Ántonia* to speak English, he tells us that soon “she could talk to me about almost anything” (38). Soon after she has begun speaking fluently, we see the importance of narrative to their lives: Jim’s killing of a snake is not important as an act of survival but as an act of heroism and an opportunity to tell a story. After admitting to Otto that he killed the snake on the first blow, he goes to the kitchen and finds “*Ántonia* standing in the middle of the floor, telling the story with a great deal of colour” (49). While this might have been a “mock adventure,” it is a story she recounts to her children years later: “‘Tell us, Mr. Burden,’ said Charley, ‘about the rattler you killed at the dog-town. How long was he? Sometimes Mother says six feet and sometimes she says five’” (351). At this moment, Jim realizes the source of *Ántonia*’s power over her children, as he himself and others had felt it years before: “They seemed to feel the same pride in her, and to look to her for stories and entertainment as we used to do” (351). *Ántonia* is not an “artist” in the sense that city sophisticates would understand, but she weaves stories to entertain those she cares about, stories that come from her own experience as well as those of others.

When *Ántonia* hears the story of Pavel and Peter, the Russians who had to flee their country because of their shame after sacrificing a bride and groom whose sled they were driving in order to save themselves from a pack of wolves, Jim cannot understand the tale, which Pavel tells in a language only Mr. Shimerda and *Ántonia* can understand. We can see the effect that Pavel’s tale works only on *Ántonia*:

He was telling a long story, and as he went on, *Ántonia* took my hand under the table and held it tight. She leaned forward and strained her ears

to hear him. He grew more and more excited, and kept pointing all around his bed, as if there were things there and he wanted Mr. Shimerda to see them. "It's wolves, Jimmy," *Ántonia* whispered. "It's awful, what he says!" (54).

Later, in the sled on the way home, she recounts the story to Jim, and they "talked of nothing else for days afterward" (56). Only then does Burden narrate for us the horrific story of the wolves feeding on an entire wedding party, with the exception of the two men who thereafter fled to America. Pavel can tell this story only on his deathbed, and *Ántonia* and Jim recognize that they are privileged to hear the account: "We did not tell Pavel's secret to anyone, but guarded it jealously" (61). Now, however, the story is told in the context of demonstrating the bond between Jim and *Ántonia* that is created by this narrative. The fact that they "guarded" this story together suggests the power of a specific kind of personal narrative, the life-shaping event that one holds inside because a story is too horrible to tell.

My Ántonia is full of such horror stories: the tramp who kills himself by jumping into a threshing machine, Wick Cutter's attack on Jim, who is sleeping in *Ántonia*'s bed in anticipation of Cutter's motives, Larry Donovan's abandonment of *Ántonia*, and Wick Cutter's murder of his wife and his own suicide. The only event which Jim recounts "as it happened" is Cutter's attack on him, the event which seems to separate him from *Ántonia*, for it is after this happens that he leaves for college and distances himself from the place where he grew up. After the attack, Jim asks his grandmother not to tell anyone about it, and he refuses to see *Ántonia*:

I heard *Ántonia* sobbing outside my door, but I asked grandmother to send her away. I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness. . . . My one concern was that grandmother should keep everyone away from me. If the story once got abroad, I would never hear the last of it. I could well imagine what the old men down at the drugstore would do with such a theme. (250)

The other sad or horrific events are all told second-hand by someone who witnessed the event or heard the story; characters like the Widow Steavens, for instance, are introduced into the novel only long enough to tell a story. The criteria for being a good storyteller? Empathy with the subject is often a necessity, and the Widow Steavens obviously sympathizes with *Ántonia*'s "fall" and does not judge her despite the fact that an unmarried mother is usually the subject of gossip like that which Jim fears after Cutter's attack. Another is a desire to understand the inexplicable, as *Ántonia* demonstrates when she tells the story of the tramp: "'What would anybody want to kill themselves in summer for? In threshing time, too! It's nice everywhere then'" (179). Her need to understand the tramp's suicide probably stems from her horror at her own father's suicide years before, committed during the dead of winter.

Jim Burden does mention a more formal type of storytelling than these community-based narratives, but his example does not fit into our conception of "literature." He recounts going to the theater with Lena Lingard while he was a student at the University of Nebraska, the kind of event which critics read as "autobiographical," for

Cather herself was a theater critic. However, Jim goes to the theater not only for the pleasure of watching *Camille* and other melodramas but also to enjoy watching Lena's reaction to the play: "Through the scene between Marguerite and the elder Duval, Lena wept unceasingly, and I sat helpless to prevent the closing of that chapter of idyllic love, dreading the return of the young man whose ineffable happiness was only to be the measure of his fall" (276). Yet, it is not only Lena who responds to this play with tears, for Jim tells us that he, too, "wept unrestrainedly" (277). Being with someone else who could express her emotional response, who could be "unrestrained" in her experiencing of this narrative, allows Jim to "un-burden" himself. Lena, like *Ántonia*, allows a cathartic experience to occur. The importance of the "reader" or viewer is central here, as it is in the rest of the novel, and in her aesthetic treatise Cather herself emphasizes the need to have a willing reader who can "feel": "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there--that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself" (*Not Over Forty* 50).

"The thing not named" echoes Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative," except that Cather is talking less about an aesthetic of impersonality than one of the *personal*. It is only by pulling the readers in, making them believe in the emotions of the characters and the realness of those characters, that "the thing not named" comes to life. As Jim Burden watches an old, probably past her prime actress play Marguerite, he loses himself in the illusion of the play, which is, despite the visual and spatial demands of the drama,

created by its *words*: “I suppose no woman could have been further in person, voice, and temperament from Dumas’ appealing heroine than the veteran actress who first acquainted me with her. Her conception of the character was as heavy and uncompromising as her diction . . . But the lines were enough. She had only to utter them. They created the character in spite of her” (276).

While both the 1918 and the 1926 introductions to *My Ántonia* describe a Jim Burden made unhappy by an unsatisfying marriage, these moments of union with others, often initiated through narrative exchange, dominate the novel. In fact, Jim’s own story (all of the novel except the introduction) makes no mention of his unhappy marriage, and the closing lines of the novel emphasize his reunion with Ántonia and her family and the promise of fulfillment that his future relationship with them will bring: “For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past” (372). While the introduction describes a Burden who has faced many disappointments, the novel itself depicts someone who is disappointed only because he let himself lose his connection to his childhood; when he reunites with Ántonia, he regains all that he has missed.²⁸ For Cather, we all experience alienation; the question is, do we reach out to someone or something that can connect us back to

²⁸ Jim’s tie to his past differentiates him from the Professor of *The Professor’s House*, who has no such living link to his childhood and thus must experience his loneliness on his own.

ourselves? In many ways, *Ántonia* is less of a person than a representative of that which Cather's novels aim to be, that sheath which holds the breath, the story, to transmit the art to others. And the fact that not only *Ántonia* but those around her are constantly telling stories and inspiring Jim to do the same when he writes his manuscript suggests what Cather perceives to be the ultimate theme of this novel: by telling stories, we recapture that which has been lost to us.

Richard H. Millington offers one of the most useful readings of *My Ántonia*. While this novel is probably the most frequently analyzed of Cather's texts, the criticism often relies on the problematic autobiographical readings which I outlined earlier. These readings attempt to locate those moments in the novel which mirror Cather's own experience or to pinpoint those moments in which she has to "mask" her experience, such as the use of Jim Burden as a narrator in order to hide her desire for *Ántonia*. Millington, however, focuses on *My Ántonia* as an embodiment of Cather's aesthetic, an "anti-novel" which resists the structures of plot and description that embody the modern novel. He associates her perception of the novel to Walter Benjamin's in "The Storyteller" (1936): "At the center of each work is a protest against the constriction of experience characteristic of modern life, and in each work that protest takes the form of an attack upon the assumptions and experiences associated with novel reading and an endorsement of the alternative vision of meaning exemplified by the tradition of oral storytelling" (689). And this novel is a weaving together of a community's stories, the stories of the immigrants like the Shimerdas, the itinerant men who work for the Burdens, and Jim Burden himself. Yet, there are people in the community who are less invested in narrative

than others. The patriarch of the family who lives next door to the Burdens after they move to Black Hawk, Mr. Harling, is too interested in business to listen to anything other than his daughter's accounts of the day's business transactions. Mr. and Mrs. Burden are more concerned with their responsibilities to their grandson and neighbors; the only story we see Mr. Burden tell is the nativity story, read on Christmas day, although Jim acknowledges that "because he talked so little, his words had a peculiar force; they were not worn dull from constant use" (85). In a sense, these men and women are representatives of the two types of people that make a community like Black Hawk grow: the entrepreneur who establishes a thriving business and the immigrant farmers who eventually become solid community citizens, buying and selling goods and developing homes for themselves. The placement of the Burden's second home on the margin between town and country symbolizes their importance as the link between the frontier farmers who tame the land and those who build the towns. Many of these people are so busy developing the frontier into a liveable place that they have little time for storytelling or listening.

Perhaps it is this aspect of frontier life which kills Mr. Shimerda. A musician, he is one of the types of immigrant storytellers about whom Cather often writes. However, he can no longer play his violin, and the language barrier means that he cannot tell stories to anyone but his family, and his wife is clearly not an ideal listener. Only *Ántonia* understands her father's need for communication. When she captures a cricket and nestles it in her hair because its chirping sound reminds her of the old woman Hata who sang songs to the village children, this act allows her a moment of communion with her father:

“Her father put his hand on her hair, but she caught his wrist and lifted it carefully away talking to him rapidly. I heard the name of old Hata. He untied the handkerchief, separated her hair with his fingers, and stood looking at the green insect. When it began to chirp faintly, he listened as if it were a beautiful sound”(42).

What Cather’s novel reiterates over and over, then, is not that the novel form is corrupt and incapable of embodying the elements of community and oral storytelling, as Millington’s article suggests, but that people must be willing to tell their stories and to listen to others’ stories in order to prevent the death of art, represented by Mr. Shimerda’s futile response to life in the New World. Millington asserts that *My Ántonia* is a “counter-novel” in that it works against the *bildungsroman*, for the novel “records Jim’s endangerment by and eventual rescue from maturity” (699). While I would agree that the novel depicts Jim’s return to the place of his childhood and his reconnection with Ántonia, this is clearly not a regression (although Millington obviously places a positive value on Jim’s escape from maturity) but a progression. Jim learns the value of a narrative which is more important than the art forms which his wife esteems. As the introduction tells us, she is a patron of the “new” artists in the East, and, clearly, the speaker in the introduction denigrates Mrs. Burden’s value as an “arts patron”: “Her husband’s quiet tastes irritate her, I think, and she finds it worth while to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability” (ii). While the speaker in the introduction also lives in New York, s/he clearly spurns the art community thriving there, preferring instead to listen to Jim’s stories about Ántonia and their childhood. The novel is, then, a reaffirmation of Cather’s aesthetic, her belief

that the stories of one's own experience are more fulfilling than the "advanced ideas" of the young radical artists who are clearly "modernist."

Framing the novel with this affirmation of the value of the past and of one's own memories reinforces the importance of community at a time when the possibility of "community" has become questionable, and Cather's later novels do evidence an anxiety about finding the ideal audience framed in her earlier fictions. If we value our American past and landscape and the stories that we have told one another through the generations, *My Ántonia* is a potent reminder of what we might lose if we choose to listen only to the story of the "self," which seems to be the primary impulse of modernist narrative. Cather rejects this self-absorption by making the "self"--Jim Burden, Thea Kronborg--the repository of others' stories and emphasizing the artist's need for a sympathetic response from those around him--the artist must be appreciated by the ideal audience, outlined in these two novels--in order to become a true artist. Yes, many of her characters evidence a nostalgia for "the past," but her fiction often acknowledges that this past had its own set of problems. There is no elevation of the "past" as a better time, just an admission that we all look back with a sense of longing, a desire to recapture our youth and revisit those moments which have become the beautiful vases and urns which we turn around in our minds, trying to remember the features about them which transfixed us. It is this remembrance which creates the link between Cather and her audience.

Chapter Four
Anatomy of a Popular Writer:
Fannie Hurst, the “Sob Sister of American Fiction”

If chocolate-fudge fiction will sell the magazines, give ‘em chocolate fudge, say editors and publishers. Small wonder that American fiction readers continue bilious in their demands. Authors, meanwhile, who like sweet butter on their bread . . . continue to postpone that Big Idea, and American fiction passes by the wayside. (Hurst interview with Joyce Kilmer)¹

“Chocolate-Fudge Fiction”

While the careers and reception of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather offer important insights into the intersections and tensions between popular culture and modernism due to their bestseller status and the critical acclaim accorded to them by many of their peers, Fannie Hurst, who began as a short-story writer for numerous newsstand magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, is perhaps the best example of an early twentieth-century American woman writer whose career bridged the gap between serious literature and mass culture, placing her firmly in the category of the middlebrow. Wharton and Cather’s position in relation to modernism is tenuous; despite their attempt to assure their literary legacy by creating an alternate form of realism through their aesthetic of transmutation, they refused to utilize the most radical modernist narrative techniques such as stream-of-consciousness, they vociferously attacked the emerging aesthetic of high modernism, and

¹ The Hurst interview with Joyce Kilmer is quoted at length in Abe C. Ravitz’s *Imitations of Life: Fannie Hurst’s Gaslight Sonatas* on pages 20-23. However, his citation for the article is incorrect, and I was unable to locate the original appearance of the interview in the *New York Times Magazine*.

they repeatedly voiced their concerns about the decay of traditional culture in the post-World War I era. Unlike Wharton and Cather, Hurst did not denigrate the emerging narrative techniques we now deem “modernist”; in fact, she praised narrative experimentation and used a stream-of-consciousness technique in several of her fictions written during the 1920s. Her argument was not with modernism but with the very industries which made her so popular: the emerging film industry and the burgeoning newsstand magazines which launched her writing career. Her attack on “chocolate-fudge” fiction in the 1915 interview with Joyce Kilmer for the *New York Times Magazine* cited above, made before she had even published a novel, may be the result of an early realization that her growing connection to popular culture threatened her greatest ambition--to be considered an “important” writer. However, despite her initial support of modernism, her public comments about narrative experimentation grew decidedly more derogatory later in her career; several lectures she gave during the 1930s specifically critiqued those writers we now consider “high modernists.” This shift in rhetoric is accompanied by stylistic and personal ones as well; that is, Hurst began writing in a seemingly more traditional realist mode and became an outspoken commentator on social issues. Yet, Hurst also continued to condemn what she deemed lowbrowism: her fiction might appeal to the “masses,” but she obviously wanted her critics to understand that she felt her work transcended the merely “popular,” and upon a closer examination of her post-1920s fiction, we can see that she did not abandon the experimentation with

subjectivity which marked her earlier fictions.²

This anxiety about the effect of popular success on a writer's literary reputation haunted Hurst throughout her career. For instance, her autobiography *Anatomy of Me* (1958) describes an encounter with Willa Cather which occurred well after the publication of *My Ántonia* had assured that author's critical and popular success. Cather remarked, "the editor in me . . . likes your stories," a comment which Hurst interpreted as an acknowledgment of her popular appeal but as a denigration of her artistic capabilities (259). Her reaction to what may have very well been praise recapitulates the fear which reappears throughout Hurst's autobiography, that the literary critics and admired authors whose respect she desires view her only as a "popular" success. What Cather meant by

² For example, when Hurst spoke at a panel discussion about the film industry, she voiced her concerns not only about the often poor quality of literary adaptations but also about the casual readers of fiction:

. . . I have usually held the feeling when I saw one of my finished products on the screen, that the manuscript must originally have been read much as I once saw a short story of mine read in a Fifth Avenue bus. I was riding down town in an omnibus and I noticed the man in front of me was reading one of my stories in a current magazine, so enormously impressed I sort of moved around to an angle where I could watch him as he read . . . he read along down to the bottom of the page to "continued on page 257." Instead of turning to 257, he turned to the next page and there under the caption of "Duck Shooting as a Cure for Lunacy," he went right on reading without batting an eye." (unidentified ts. Box 45, folder 5)

Hurst also expresses concern about protecting authors' rights in the case of film adaptation, a concern she shared with Theodore Dreiser and other prominent writers. She then discusses a scene in a current film adaptation of one of her works which had been targeted by critics for its "vulgar sentimentality." However, she claims that the scene was not in her own text, and she was not informed by the film makers of the scene's inclusion. She felt that her "standing as an author, the name that I have carefully and laboriously tried to build up, is jeopardized and cheapened by having my work go out in that guise. . ." (correspondence from Theodore Dreiser dated Apr. 25, 1931, Box 122, folder 4).

her remark to Hurst is unknown, for Hurst did not ask her to elaborate and Cather did not bother to explain her rather cryptic words, but the comment reminded Hurst of a former schoolmate's belief that popular and critical success seldom coincide.³ Despite Hurst's financial success as an author who published stories, novels, and essays for over six decades, she obviously doubted her future tenure in the canon of American literature, a fear reflecting her belief that she, too, had produced the "chocolate-fudge" fiction she had denigrated so early in her career:

I was not a flash-in-the-pan or at least not a one-or-two-story author. My name had already taken root in the masses. But a kind of snide snobbery still lived with me. This mass business bothered me. Rather be a classical failure than a popular success. The phrase out of my college days stuck crosswise in my memory like a bone in the throat. Did popular success necessarily mean kiss-of-death to artistic achievement? I made no conscious effort for popular appeal. That, in a way, was even more disturbing. It meant that if I did not write 'down,' I was myself down.

(Anatomy of Me 247)

The comment from Cather obviously rankled, especially coming from a writer who, in Hurst's eyes, had achieved both "popular" and "classical" success despite her earlier

³ Mary Rose Shaughnessy describes Hurst's "popular" success in college as a writer (this is a bit exaggerated considering the number of rejection slips she received from literary magazines; Hurst in fact published many of her own stories since she was the editor of a school magazine), but Hurst was nonetheless rejected by her university's exclusive literary society. The president of the society reportedly stated the following: "I would rather be a classic failure than a popular success . . ." (22).

alignment with several magazine publications.

In this chapter I will focus on the two novels that seem to represent best the tension between “literary” and “popular” which marks Hurst’s opus: *Lummo*x (1923) and *Imitation of Life* (1933). At the height of her career, Hurst was rumored to be the highest-paid short story writer in America, but she also enjoyed critical acclaim for several of her novels published during the 1920s.⁴ Virginia Woolf’s 1925 essay for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, “On American Fiction,” names Hurst alongside Cather as a prominent American author, one whose work characterizes the newly emerging “American” voice in fiction.⁵ A review of *Lummo*x by the prominent critic Heywood Broun, who later became one of the Book-of-the-Month Club selection committee members, claims that Hurst is among the most important novelists of 1923. Yet, while her novels published after this period of critical acclaim sold well and she continued to publish novels well into the 1960s, her later fiction did not receive the critical appreciation her work from the 1920s did, perhaps prompting the notes of self-doubt found in her autobiography.⁶ None of her

⁴ Hurst began publishing fiction in the newspaper stand magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1911. According to Abe C. Ravitz, she was making \$5,000 a story in the pre-World War I days, before she ever even published a novel (18). Ravitz believes that her immense success was possible both because the editor of *Cosmopolitan* wanted to court Jewish readers and because at that moment, “the newsstand magazine proliferated, and the reading of short story fiction was at a zenith hour” (17-18). According to a letter from Harper and Brothers editor William Briggs, she received a \$2,500 advance for her first novel, *Star-Dust* (Box 137, folder 4).

⁵ A fuller discussion of the article by Woolf, including her criteria for “American” fiction, is included in the chapters on Edith Wharton and Willa Cather.

⁶ An example of the typical critical response to Hurst’s later work can be found in the transcript for a Union College Radio Show program, “Speaking of Books,” which aired a panel discussion on January 23, 1942, led by Granville Hicks. Hicks, Edward

novels is currently in print, and there is little scholarly analysis of her work despite the fact that her career bridges six decades and her fiction often reflects the most turbulent historical events and social issues of the day, including two world wars, the Great Depression, and the burgeoning feminist movement.⁷ Yet, the publication of her autobiography in 1958 indicates that she was, at that time at least, considered to be an author of sustained stature; in her autobiography Hurst writes about her works being taught in literature classes and published in numerous anthologies, and she mentions a

Justin, and Mary Margaret McBride, along with Hurst herself, participated in a radio broadcast debate about her most recent novel, *Lonely Parade*. Hicks and Justin lambasted the novel, criticizing the “thin” historical background (ts. 11, Box 63, folder 5). Justin claimed that “Miss Hurst has exaggerated [the female characters of the novel] beyond a reasonable degree,” and both he and Hicks felt that the novel was merely a “woman’s book” which they were uncomfortable discussing (6). McBride, however, defended the novel, and Hurst claimed that the men’s response to the novel was typical; they focused too much on “statistics” (the anachronisms of the novel, for example), while she was more concerned with the women’s personal experiences than the historical background (6, 13). Finally, Hurst condemns the literary critics who no longer support her work: “an author who gives his all is entitled from the public forum or from the private forum to a more thoughtful approach to a work which I repeat again, however futile it may seem to the gentlemen present, has been given forth in sincerity and with a certain respect for the audience . . .” (23).

⁷ Abe C. Ravitz’s *Imitations of Life: Fannie Hurst’s Gaslight Sonatas* argues that Hurst’s style in both her early stories and her fiction through the early 1930s is based on aesthetics learned from the silent cinema. He argues that with the coming of sound, her style became “outmoded,” and this technological shift is part of the reason her reputation declined in the 1930s and after. Susan Koppelman’s essay “The Education of Fannie Hurst” claims that several things are responsible for (or parallel to) the decline of her reputation: the Depression-era economic collapse and the rise of anti-Semitism prior to World War II, attacks by younger Jewish-American women writers who felt the need to destroy their predecessors (in a Bloomian model of literary antagonism), and “the assimilation of those who descended from the members of her original readership meant the loss of an audience who understood the social value structure in which her characters’ lives, choices, and relationships were embedded” (504).

long list of short stories published in the yearly compilation *The Best American Short Stories*.⁸

What has happened, then, since her death to cause her complete erasure from the canon of American literature despite her prolific output and celebrity?⁹ What does her career tell us about the fate of popular women writers in the American canon? Early in her career, critics recognized Hurst as a potentially serious artist. The 1928 Harper and Brothers' biography emphasizes Hurst's daring narrative techniques, and the discussion of her style therein and in the reviews of her work of the 1920s should make us ask why Hurst is usually classified today (if she is discussed at all) as primarily a popular writer who addressed women's issues, not as a modernist who was concerned with aesthetics. Contemporary discussions of *Lummo*x and other early works like *Appassionata* focus on the effective ways in which Hurst renders her characters, but discussions of her work after

⁸ The biographical sketch of Hurst in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* mentions that ten of Hurst's stories were included in the "Best American Short Stories" lists, and five were republished in collections. Also, twenty-four of her stories appeared in anthologies after their original publication (not including Hurst's own story collections) (Bice 408). The 1928 biography states that "the name Fannie Hurst jumped immediately, it might be said, into the enviable vocabulary of household words. It has remained so, indeed, with an enhancement as the years go by. Her work is in the curriculum of college courses, and the street-car conductor and the shop-girl recognize her by name" (Overton 11).

⁹ Hurst was a celebrity figure much the same as are today's popular actors and actresses. When a reporter learned about her secret marriage to pianist Jacques Danielson (which they had managed to keep secret for five years), the story made the front page of *The New York Times*. In 1926, a story about an anniversary trip made page 3 of the *Times*, and photographs, quotations, and updates appeared in *Time* and other popular publications throughout her career.

Back Street (1931) tend to focus on her reliance upon “stereotypes.”¹⁰ Perhaps Harry Salpeter’s designation of Hurst as the “sob sister” of American fiction in a 1931 *Bookman* review of *Back Street* signaled the crucial shift in the critical perception--from that of Hurst as a popular but daring painter of human nature to someone who pandered to the “chocolate fudge” tastes of American fiction readers--and so marked the moment when critics began to consider Hurst purely as a purveyor of middlebrow tastes. Is there, however, really such a drastic shift in Hurst’s style during the 1930s? Or, was there a change in critical perspective that radically affected the reception of her work?

“Poppy Seeds in Success”: Hurst’s Critical Reception

Until recently, then, Hurst has been essentially forgotten or dismissed. While *Lummo* did enjoy a brief republication in the late 1980s thanks to the “American Women Writers” series (it is again out of print), *Imitation of Life* (1933) is really the only Hurst novel which currently enjoys any critical attention. The novel was reprinted as part of the Perennial Library film series during the early 1990s, and the fact that these are Hurst’s only two novels to be selected in the last two decades for republication suggests the primary reasons that Fannie Hurst is remembered today. That is, a few critics discuss her

¹⁰ Mary Rose Shaughnessy’s analysis of Hurst focuses on the “myths” that she believes are prevalent in her novels: the myth of women’s passivity, the belief that love is the all-encompassing purpose of women’s existence, and the notion that suffering makes women more “powerful.” However, she refuses to acknowledge that while Hurst does depict suffering, self-effacing, and often inarticulate women who are afraid to assert themselves, these characters might offer a critique of such women, not an endorsement of them. Considering the fate of Ray Schmidt in *Back Street*, a woman who ends up starving to death after living in the shadows of her married lover’s life for over three decades, I have a hard time believing that Hurst meant us to see Ray as a model of feminine behavior, especially considering the speech she made about women and work in 1934.

work in relation to “women’s issues,” and both of these novels address the travails of working women, one an immigrant laborer and the other a struggling widowed mother. Most importantly, she is remembered as a writer of stories and novels which were turned into “women’s films” during both the silent and sound era.¹¹ *Imitation of Life* and its predecessor *Back Street*, two of Hurst’s personal favorites, are alone the sources of five Hollywood sound features. The second version of *Imitation of Life*, directed by Douglas Sirk in 1959 and starring Lana Turner, is responsible for keeping Hurst’s name alive today; there are numerous essays on the film because of the race issues raised by the “passing” subplot, the resurgent interest in mid-century melodramas, and the postmodern overtones of the complex metacinematic intertext created by turning Bea Pullman, waffle-queen, into Lora Meredith, a dazzling actress. However, the Sirk film is starkly different from both the Hurst novel and John Stahl’s 1934 film, which revision is much more faithful to its source; Sirk’s version even changes all of the characters’ names.¹²

¹¹ Mary Rose Shaughnessy’s bibliography lists twenty-seven films produced between 1918 and 1961 based on Hurst material (Cynthia Brandimarte’s dissertation mentions that 29 films were made). While Hurst did not write the screenplays for any of these films (and supposedly distanced herself from several that she felt were inadequate representations of her work), the immense popularity of the *Imitation of Life* (Stahl, 1934 and Sirk, 1959) and *Back Street* (Stahl, 1932, Stevenson, 1941, and Miller, 1961) adaptations has assured Hurst some place in cinematic, if not literary, history, especially with the recent revival of interest in melodrama. Interestingly, Hurst criticized cinema as a “destructive force” on American fiction in a 1915 interview with Joyce Kilmer for the *New York Times Magazine*.

¹² Mary Rose Shaughnessy’s synopsis of *Imitation of Life* shows the extent to which confusion between the novel and the film versions persists. Supposedly writing about the novel, she instead describes the plot of the 1934 film, in which Frank Flake’s character is named Stephen Archer, and the ending of the novel according to her finds a repentant Peola at her mother’s funeral and a maternal Bea banishing Stephen so that her

What little interest there currently remains in Hurst's fiction is largely connected to cinema studies, especially the Sirk film; ironically, however, the film industry could be held largely responsible for her decline in reputation during the 1930s as the "women's film" increasingly garnered negative criticism for pandering to a female middlebrow audience. In addition, the revisions both Stahl and Sirk made when translating *Imitation of Life* from the page to the screen added fuel to critics' charges about the novel's sentimentality, racism, and superficiality in theme and form.

To understand the changing attitudes about Hurst's fiction, we must first consider how she perceived herself as a writer. In her autobiography *Anatomy of Me*, Hurst chronicles her desire for recognition, her belief that her work is not worthy of recognition, and her distance from the literary luminaries of her generation. Hurst was born in 1889 in Hamilton, Ohio, and after her birth, she and her middle-class German Jewish parents lived in St. Louis. Her parents desired their daughter to marry well, and Hurst's lack of interest in developing her skills as a "lady" constantly frustrated her mother. However, her father told Hurst repeatedly that "knowledge is power," and against her mother's wishes, Hurst pursued a college (and even a graduate) education at a time when few "ladies" did so.¹³ This education allowed her to pursue her writing, something she had

daughter will not have to suffer his rejection. These are the narrative strands of the film, not the novel in which Peola never returns home and Frank marries Bea's daughter Jessie.

¹³ This "knowledge is power" comment is mentioned numerous times in Hurst's autobiography. Koppelman's essay details Hurst's education, particularly her tenure at the newly-established Washington University. Hurst enrolled as an education major, and according to her transcripts, did take the courses necessary for this major. Koppelman argues that Hurst probably took these courses to placate her mother, for teaching was seen

been doing since age fourteen despite her mother's denigration of this ambition, and she had her first piece published by the St. Louis *Reedy's Mirror* while she was in college. Much of what we now know about Hurst can only be reconstructed from Hurst's autobiography, newspaper articles, and interviews, since there are no full-length literary biographies. Susan Koppelman's essay "The Education of Fannie Hurst," Abe C. Ravitz's *Imitations of Life: Fannie Hurst's Gaslight Sonatas*, and Mary Rose Shaughnessy's *Myths about Love and Woman: The Fiction of Fannie Hurst* offer brief biographical overviews, but all agree that Hurst helped to fashion a "mythology" about her upbringing, presenting her parents and social background as opponents to her artistic growth; as with Willa Cather, such self-construction problematizes our ability to find any absolute "truth" about Hurst's artistic development.

The short publicity biography and "critical appreciation" of Hurst released by Harper & Brothers in 1928 reiterates a number of the "myths" Hurst constructed about herself; the text obviously aims to establish Hurst as an "important" writer, one who engages in experimental narrative techniques at the same time that she addresses serious social concerns.¹⁴ The biography emphasizes, as does her own autobiography written

as a reputable way for women to earn their living, serving also as a precautionary measure for support if one's husband died. However, literature and writing courses predominated her coursework, and her extra-curricular activities revolved around literary endeavors (yearbook editor, editor of a literary magazine).

¹⁴ The author of this biography is Grant Overton, although several other writers including Zona Gale and Kathleen Norris were recommended to Harper & Brothers (correspondence dated June 4, 1927, Box 137, folder 4). This anonymous biographical sketch with the appended reviews of her novels up to 1928 was released by Harper & Brothers, who published eleven of Hurst's seventeen novels. Obviously, the brief

thirty years later, the fact that her upbringing was not necessarily conducive to the creation of an artist who would wish to transmute the impressions of inarticulate characters like *Lummox*'s Bertha into a coherent form for her audience, and in the latter work Hurst continually struggles with her belief that she was "inadequate" in her ability to achieve such effects:

These murals and murals of faces riding the subway trains, jamming the elevators, the avenues, the lunchrooms, the slums were mines into which a writer must sink shaft. I cared about them, I felt about them. But here was that stubborn hiatus between the idea and the written word. The concept lively and boiling in my mind, the words coming in slow and painful trickle onto paper, there to torture with their inadequacies. (*Anatomy of Me* 148)

In order to understand her characters better, Hurst supposedly embarked on a kind of field research, and the biography details her desire to find out how others, especially lower-class women, lived.

For instance, after Hurst's graduation from Washington University, she worked in the shoe factory where her father was president in order to do such research. An interview with a newspaper writer resulted in an embarrassing (for her father) story on the working conditions of the female employees at the factory and consequently strained relations

biography was a publicity ploy, meant to position Hurst among the literary elite of the 1920s, but the laudatory reviews had all appeared elsewhere previous to their republication in the biography.

with her parents; this incident is probably partially responsible for her decision to pursue her writing ambitions in New York and her parents' allowing her to do so. Once in New York, Hurst embarked on a series of odd jobs to do further "research" for her stories. In her autobiography, she details walking in the city late at night, going to night court to watch prostitutes being arraigned, and taking odd jobs such as waitressing and acting so that she could come to understand how the "other half" lived. She admits that people often asked her "How do you know these folks you write about so well? Mama took pains to explain: You may be sure she does not know them from home" (*Anatomy of Me* 237). This relation of lived experience to her fiction may be part of Hurst's self-mythologizing, however, for in an *Arts and Decoration* essay from 1923, she claims that "the impulse to do a certain type of story comes and I depend more upon my intuition to lead me through it than I do upon concrete knowledge of a subject. Very often I find that a character or environment about which I know fewest concrete facts is the one that emerges most convincingly" (62).

While her novels and stories usually concerned "the masses," Hurst carefully kept herself apart from those she wrote about except when doing her "research"; however, she also distanced herself from the other writers of her generation and even her husband of thirty-nine years, with whom she maintained separate living quarters for over fifteen years. This isolation, she felt, was necessary for her writing, for she kept a strict routine of six-hour days, beginning at nine o'clock in the morning, through which to produce her

work.¹⁵ While her regimen suggests the work of an author who produced easily, Hurst instead describes the frustration of the writing process; out of six hours, she claimed, most of her work was “accomplished along about the last hour” (“The Author and Her Home Environment” 9). In fact, she spent more time torturing herself over the empty page than filling it: “The black stagnant hours of silence before the empty page! The slow, tortuous thoughts that won’t come through! Words that when they do come are too frail to bear the burden and crash down beneath it! The fumbling search for a stronger word! That dim, crowded chaos behind the eyes and the struggle to make the procession march out in some kind of order!” (9). These self-effacing remarks perhaps reveal her sense of her writing ability, even though her autobiography constantly focuses on her desire to be a “great” writer. She ends the book with the comment that, as of 1958, her “bright author’s dream is still unfulfilled” (367).

Her fear of “silence” on the page and her desire for a silent environment, while they may seem contradictory, are in fact closely related. In the *Arts and Decoration* essay detailing her home environment and her writing practices, Fannie Hurst describes the isolation she sought in the midst of Manhattan during the 1920s, a time when many authors in the city pursued each other’s companionship and inspiration, gathering, for instance, at the Algonquin Hotel and other such sites to discuss culture and politics and to trade barbs. The critic Heywood Broun, who wrote appreciative reviews of Hurst’s work,

¹⁵ In “The Author and His Home Environment,” Hurst claims that she usually needed a year and a half to two years to write a novel, six to eight weeks to write a short story (55).

in fact invited her one day to the Algonquin, but she never took him up on the offer: “I shied away. This was the glib, smiting-word-at-any-price set, for which I had no talent” (*Anatomy of Me* 225). She claims never to have sought out literary friendships, for her inspiration came not from the wits of the young generation of writers but from the “surging swarms” of people in the city:

The bluish dead-faced murals of people with the unseeing stares, sitting in rows in subways, were more eloquent, it seemed to me, than the processed epigrams of the wits of the Round Table could ever be. I had chosen my jungle or perhaps it has chosen me. Somewhere in there lurked for me some of the truths and the meanings or the meaninglessness of the way we are (*Anatomy of Me* 226)

While Hurst may not have wanted social interaction with the Algonquin set, she clearly wanted the approval of critics like Heywood Broun, and her narrative techniques of the 1920s are designed to win the praise of this group. For instance, in “The Author and His Home Environment,” she describes her new novel *Lummo*x as a radical departure from her earlier work:

For the last thirty months, however, I have been engaged upon a novel which I have just completed. It is entirely different from anything I have ever attempted. I have ventured out into polar seas and sometimes, during the writing of it, have felt as if I were floundering around without a compass. But finally I have come into the port of completion at last. It has not been easy, turning thus from a form of writing that has brought me

what success I enjoy, into these strange, new icefields. But whether the book sinks or swims, it has been an important period of apprenticeship in new endeavor. There is always the danger that there are poppy seeds in success. It will drug you if you don't watch out! (55)

***Lummo*x: The "Beams" of Gertrude Stein's Words**

*Lummo*x, Hurst's second novel, was probably her greatest critical success, and, ironically, it was published in 1923, considered a watershed year for modernism. A Heywood Broun review of the novel in *The New York World* claimed that it, along with Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Robert Nathan's *The Puppet Master*, was among those recent novels "which we have enjoyed most" (29). He calls *Lummo*x the most "thrilling" of these books because "again and again she packs every ounce of power at her command into a single phrase" (29). While Broun and other reviewers criticized Hurst's use of similes that were sometimes "far-fetched and ponderous," he acknowledged that her characterization of Bertha was powerful and that many of her phrases were "fine" (30).¹⁶ Grant Overton, author of the 1928 biography, also noted that Hurst experimented with textual styles: "She has written with a free, high hand, casting aside the security of past achievements to plunge daringly into the jungle of new style, method, and content" (11).

¹⁶ The novel was widely reviewed, with *Book Review Digest* listing eleven reviews for 1923, most of them were in major publications and most of them were favorable. *Bookman* called the novel "arresting and powerful" with "passages of great beauty," the *Boston Transcript* described the book as "seem[ing] to move to vast, unheard but clearly sensed rhythms" and a testament to Hurst's "true strength" as an author (*BRD* 254). An anonymous *New York Times Book Review* piece states that "with a diaphanous and almost mystic skill she has fashioned a heroic character from indifferent material" (255).

He continues by describing her as a “pioneer” in the “problems of articulation” which *Lummox* and her other fictions about “the masses” present: “She has long been adept in pushing the use of sensuous appreciations to the cliff edge where other writers dare not follow her” (21). Despite Hurst’s repeated insistence in her autobiography that she never modeled herself after a particular writer, a number of her contemporaries such as Heywood Broun pointed out *Lummox*’s stylistic evocations of Gertrude Stein, now considered one of the foremost modernist women writers. Interestingly, Broun also describes Hurst as the better writer of the two: “It is interesting to find how far that little Gertrude Stein candle has shed its beams. To us Miss Stein is the smallest of illuminations, but from Miss Stein came Dorothy Richardson, and from Dorothy Richardson came May Sinclair, and now we have Fannie Hurst, best seller, making her own contribution to the Stein tradition” (30). Here, Broun consciously places Hurst in a modernist lineage--notably a female one--and considers the offspring of Stein more important than Stein herself, a perception obviously altered by later literary history which erases Hurst as part of any modernist tradition.

While Hurst stated more than once that she did not emulate a particular writer or read certain writers for “inspiration,” *Lummox* does indeed demonstrate a rather calculated attempt to align herself with the cutting-edge narrative techniques of the modernist period.¹⁷ While Hurst kept her distance from many of the writers of her era, she

¹⁷ In the 1923 *Arts and Decoration* essay, she claims that reading other authors before she began writing for the day would cause “depression. A page of Milton would throw me into the throes of despair. After all, pretty nearly everything has been said so much better than I can ever hope to say it” (9, 55). In her autobiography, she states that

did not express the same disdain for modernist writing techniques that Edith Wharton and Willa Cather did. Hurst was twelve years younger than Cather, twenty-three years younger than Wharton, and these generational gaps reveal themselves in her responses to the modern world. While in many ways she held herself aloof from both modern society and modernist fiction, her references to modernism in the 1920s not only lack the venomous tone used by Wharton but actually express praise of experimental techniques. Once in *Lummo*x the characters discuss modern poetry, and while Mrs. Oessterich denigrates “free verse,” we are obviously supposed to see her character as a reactionary who keeps her daughters from “finding themselves.” In the *Arts and Decoration* essay, Hurst mentions her love of poetry, and while she claims that “I am conservative and unintellectual enough to prefer the work of Shelley and Edna Millay to the choppy prose of modern poetry,” she also admits that much of modern poetry is “virile and fine, so long as you do not call it poetry” (55). As the discussion of free verse in *Lummo*x, published the same year as this essay, testifies, poetry that does not confine itself to “faddism,” or “dithyrambic prose,” but instead “dares to liberate form and language” is “great” art (*Lummo*x 232-233). Finally, Hurst’s 1926 novel *Appassionata* mentions James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a novel “which seemed to have a sweet poison” (63).

“while constantly more or less in awe of other writers both past and contemporary, I do not recall that I ever consciously became the disciple of any one author; instead, following my own pen wherever it might lead me” (317). She mentions writers who were “in full flower” during her own career, including Cather and Gertrude Atherton (another very popular and prolific writer who has faded from literary history), but she distances herself from any “school” of writing. Perhaps this independence is part of her carefully cultivated mythology, much like her sense of isolation and her feelings of inadequacy.

Hurst's concern about the aesthetic construction of her characters thus coincides with her developing awareness of modernist experimentation. While none of her full-length novels is a *kunstlerroman*, *Lummox* is Hurst's obvious attempt to construct *herself* as an "artist" of the highest caliber. The novel is self-consciously stylized, using a stream-of-consciousness form absent from many of her later novels like *Back Street*. The Stein-like prose of *Lummox*, while painting a complex consciousness for the main character, Bertha, actually undermines the essential theme of the novel, the voicelessness of a person like Bertha; Hurst ultimately creates a voice for this character by rendering her thoughts in a poetic, if disjointed, prose narrative. The open-ended quality of the novel may hint that Hurst is uncomfortable with the novel's outcome, both in terms of plot structure (the seemingly "happy ending") and in terms of the message embedded in the novel: that if one only perseveres, one can survive even the harshest of circumstances.

Lummox details the life of Bertha, a Slavic woman who is orphaned at birth and raised by Annie Wennerberg, who runs a rooming-house on the waterfront of New York City. When Bertha is old enough, she ventures into the world of the kitchens and back-of-the-house servants' quarters of the city's elite. Hurst's interest in the working class, particularly immigrant women, is at the heart of this novel, although one keeps wondering why Bertha does not rebel against the working conditions of an eighteen-hour day, low wages, poor living quarters, and finally, the ingratitude of her employers. Over and over, Bertha must leave her job due to the heartlessness of her employers. First, she becomes pregnant after being seduced by the poet-son of the Farleys, her first live-in employers; she then leaves the Farleys to escape detection after Rollo refuses to accept

responsibility for her pregnancy. She unites the newlywed Musliners despite Edna's fear of her husband's sexual desire, euthanizes the elderly Mrs. Wallenstein so that she will not have to undergo the indignity of being banished from her son's house at the whim of his gentile wife, and she suffers an accusation of theft at the Oessterich home and is banished when her friend Helga's "collection" of the Oessterich's possessions is found in Bertha's room. Bertha must leave, then, the relative security of her jobs as a live-in cook and seek the unreliable offers of daily employment through agencies, enduring the menial drudgery of cleaning floors and scouring stairs. Finally, as her hair begins to gray and her back to weaken, she stumbles into a bakery shop near the beach and into a job for a widower and his four children. They welcome her into their home, and while it is clear that she is needed to clean the house and care for the children, at least it seems that the chores she has done her entire life will at least be appreciated here.

Abe C. Ravitz argues that Bertha's character is constructed primarily through visual images, a technique which he believes Hurst developed through the influence of silent cinema and a theory which again aligns her with popular culture. However, Ravitz never considers the relationship between this novel and the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique, which is also dependent upon the relationship between images, sensations, and the delineation of a character's consciousness. While Hurst's technique may have been influenced by the cinema and other visual art forms, the fact that the novel concentrates so much on the importance of "words" and their ability (or inability) to convey a person's thoughts, as well as the fact that Hurst was primarily a fiction writer, not a screenplay writer, means that we need to examine her construction of Bertha as one

of “words,” not just one of images. Hurst’s repeated emphasis on the power of words in her autobiography suggests a parallel between her and her protagonist, for both constantly struggle with the desire to find a mode of expression suitable for conveying their thoughts. Silent film is perhaps an apt metaphor for the frustrations invoked by this disjunction between thought and expression, for the words used in intertitles are laughably inadequate for describing the emotions of characters whose facial expressions must convey what they are feeling. For the 1928 treatment for a silent version of *Lummox*, Hurst’s introductory note emphasizes the importance of “mood” in the novel which must translate into the images on the screen if the film is to be a successful adaptation:

It [the screenplay] is not told in pictures but tries to suggest the key in which the story must be told. It is essential, in the opinion of the author, that both the director and scenario writer feel the mood of the story.

Lummox is the ‘Earth Woman’ by that same token she is closer to nature and spirituality. . . . She is filled with pity for that troubled world out there beyond the pale of her inner sanctity and tries to articulate with deeds and acts of sympathy that her lips are too dumb to utter . . . She creates beauty in the soul of a poet and in her son and figuratively speaking lays her wise and placid hands on those troubled ones who cross her path. Here is no conventional motion picture heroine. She needs to be told with placidity and beauty and understanding. She is no one woman. She is all women in

one. (*Lummo*x screenplay ts. 3)¹⁸

The fact that in early manuscripts of the novel Hurst calls Bertha “Saga” emphasizes her desire to make Bertha an “everywoman” at the same time that she is unique and even goddess-like. The novel’s narrative technique must invoke this odd combination of Earth Mother and working drudge, and Hurst attempts in *Lummo*x to render the thought processes of this inarticulate immigrant domestic laborer: “Yet sometimes, because of these great inner reaches of her, even the chimes arrived to her dimly. Muted melodies. Wanting-to-be-born thoughts. Bertha’s prisoners. She liked, after her day’s work was done, to sit with them. Little bells in lovely headache against her brow. Words” (4). Bertha’s desire for articulation mirrors the process repeatedly described in Hurst’s autobiography: “This struggle to catch the winged words that seemed to fly through my mind in flocks was almost as old as I was. It did not matter that once on paper they lost much of their iridescence” (*Anatomy of Me* 83).

This emphasis on “words,” as well as Hurst’s repeated attempts to render Bertha’s

¹⁸ The film version of *Lummo*x was released by United Artists in 1930 (Shaughnessy 150). A series of letters in the Hurst papers at the University of Texas suggests that project developers at several studios doubted that *Lummo*x would transform into an effective screenplay. Eugene Mullin, a representative at Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, commented that the novel would not translate into “screen popularity,” and he quotes two of his readers to support this assertion. One reader felt that Bertha’s working-class status and lack of “glamour” would make her an unappealing heroine: “Not until realism on the screen can be made attractive and popular is it possible to use a heroine of so humble social standing on the screen.” Another reader felt that Bertha was an “imperfectly conceived personality” who lacked “the compelling power needed to fuse the episodes into a single whole” (Aug. 30, 1923, letter from Eugene Mullin to Hurst’s publicist). These concerns about the “popular” appeal of the character and narrative are in striking contrast to the positive reviews the novel received.

consciousness to the reader, suggests that the novel is not merely a rendering of “images” inspired by silent cinema, as Ravitz argues. Hurst does often emphasize Bertha’s appearance, and these descriptions depend upon her ability to evoke images: “The great broad face. Pitched-tent cheek bones. The square teeth and flaring lips. The nose with the flanges spread like the fat haunches of a squatting idol” (10). However, these images are juxtaposed with poetic interpretations of her white body, and Rollo’s poem emerges from the inspiration her body gives him: “Hillocks of white breast. Flesh flowing like cream into them. Strength and length of femur under cotton skirts” (12). However, Hurst’s use of the stream-of-consciousness technique reminds us that Bertha is not only an inspirer of poetry, but someone whose own thoughts are poetic even if she cannot communicate those thoughts to others. When Bertha feels a life growing inside of her, knowing all the while that she cannot keep her child, she contemplates the link between life and death that the child represents:

There was a graveyard in lovely and impregnable tranquillity around Trinity Church, its silence louder than the typhoon of men that raged about it all day. Sometimes Bertha sat down against a headstone. Between two deaths. The little death before life that she was carrying. The tired death after life beneath the slabs. Presently the life that Bertha had under her heart would be born into life. The little life of a little death. And under the slabs the death of a life. Life of death. Death of life. A cycle of perceptions twirling slowly in her consciousness. Not thoughts, just a slow kind of dizziness. (54)

Hurst resorts to a Stein-like prose style in order to represent Bertha's consciousness as both eloquent and disjointed, for the narrative is a strange blending of poetic and fragmentary phrases. While this technique allows for a fuller elaboration of Bertha's consciousness, it also undermines the political efficacy of the novel's message: that Bertha is, in fact, voiceless and therefore subject to abuse by her employers.

Bertha's plight was, according to Hurst, inspired by the working women she saw every day in New York. The concern for the erasure of the women's identities came upon Hurst one day as she

wandered into a basement on east Fourteenth Street where two women, obviously Slavic, sat in the open doorway around a large carton filled with buttons of multifarious shapes and colors. Picked up by the handful, they were just a mass. But selected separately, each one claimed its identity In like manner, I had learned--subconsciously, I suppose--to sort faces. Faces in the crowd were no longer just faces melting like wax into one another. . . . It was out of this milling world of people with no faces in particular, that my *Lummox* began to take shape. She became the scrubwoman standing in a rain-sheltering doorway, waiting for a bus after a nightlong of swabbing up the million footprints in an office building. She became the woman with widespread knees and sagging breasts on a tenement stoop. She became a composite of many soils, of many climates,

of many lineages. (*Anatomy of Me* 276)¹⁹

This passage suggests that Hurst wishes to give women like Bertha an identity, but the buttons of the working women also provide a metaphor for her aesthetic, one similar to Wharton and Cather's use of transmutation, but at the same time, more experimental in its narrative technique. The prose of *Lummo*x seeks to provide Bertha with a voice as well. In a kind of reversal of *My Antonia*, *Lummo*x is comprised of Bertha's reactions to the people and situations which surround her, yet she never seems to have more than a sensual apprehension of circumstances that are often horrendous, particularly the conditions at Annie's rooming house. Unlike her friend Helga, who rails against the indignities of their working conditions and often berates Bertha for being so "unfeeling" about these circumstances, Bertha never seems to understand that she is being mistreated. Perhaps in an attempt to balance Bertha's inability to perceive the abuses she suffers, Hurst provides the novel with this character who does voice the concerns of the immigrant working woman, Helga.²⁰ At one point, the angry Helga discusses the "servant

¹⁹ Hurst obviously saw *Lummo*x as something unique. It is her only novel that she quotes from in her autobiography, and she sees the novel as marking her "complete breakthrough, by what might be termed the short method, from the circumscribed world in which I had been reared into a new social consciousness" (277). She later describes losing the manuscript when the woman typing the novel suddenly moved, leaving no forwarding address. While Hurst did eventually find the manuscript, she claimed that she could never have rewritten it: "To rewrite *Lummo*x from memory would have been as futile as to attempt to recapture a dream or a flash of lightning" (284).

²⁰ Interestingly, the screenplays for the two film versions of *Lummo*x omit Helga as a character, instead merging Chita and Helga into one character. Chita, whom Bertha manages to "save" from a life of prostitution in the novel, becomes the Helga character who comes to work for the Oessteriches, frustrated by her work as a prostitute. Helga is the most political voice in the novel, but it seems that the "fallen woman" scenario

problem” after a run-in with Mrs. Oessterich, for whom Bertha has encouraged her to come work instead of plying her body as a prostitute. Her anger focuses on her lack of “voice,” for “There’s nobody to get up and explain for us. The men don’t know. They get all their information from their women. That gives us a helluvachance, don’t it? And who is to dispute it all? We can’t. We ain’t got the voice or the language . . .” (220). Helga’s own lack of eloquence in this passage is a jarring reminder of what Bertha would sound like if she expressed herself verbally. Bertha, however, rarely says anything, and when she does, her speech is comprised only of fragments of phrases. She, like Helga, realizes the depth of her voicelessness, but her desire to speak stems not from the desire to defend herself but the need to find words to describe her complex emotions so that others can understand her. Helga’s notion of “personhood” is a more political and social construction, for it entails the comforts and respect accorded to those of the higher classes, but Bertha merely wants to be needed and recognized as a “person” by those who seek her comfort.

As if to underscore the problem of rendering someone like Bertha in a way that her readers could understand, the other characters in the story cannot even begin to grasp Bertha. Rollo only fleetingly “sees” Bertha’s white, large, strong body as poetic and not grotesque, as she later appears to him. Tellingly, Rollo, a poet, is the first person who inspires Bertha’s desire to be able to articulate herself: “She was bursting of music and the sound of the jeweled words and she wanted to run after him” (13). Rollo seems to

appealed to the film makers more than the workers’ rights issues that Helga represents in the novel (Box 30, folders 7 and 8).

read something deeper in Bertha, “a soaking kind of peasantry that flowed into him and made him want to write it out again in a meter that was like the clump of wooden shoes” (12), and, in fact, their night together inspires his only work of published poetry, *The Cathedral Under the Sea*. However, Rollo erroneously believes that the book is “his alone,” while Bertha understands that creation is a dual process: the child conceived that night belongs to them both (28). Of course, Rollo rejects this “creation” as unfit for him.

Bertha cannot keep this child, and soon after his birth, she signs adoption papers. She later lives with Willie, a drunken, impotent, abusive man, merely because he works for the family who adopted Felix, her son, and she wants to listen to this man detail the boy’s daily routine. Through Willie, she gives her son a battered concertina which is one of her few possessions and connections to the “old world,” and this gift results in his desire to produce the music that eventually (and unknowingly to Bertha) makes him a famed concert pianist. One of the Oessterich daughters, Olga, comments that Bertha “had the soul of a poet trapped in the body of a peasant” (282), and after reading *The Cathedral Under the Sea*, Paula Oessterich feels as if she has “known” the woman in the poem (234). Bertha does create, not only in the traditional sense of bearing a child but in fostering a talent which she herself has running through her own veins with no means to express it. Hurst’s repeated insistence that Bertha has poetry and music beating within her reminds us that circumstances have dictated that this laborer woman has no outlet through which to express herself. When she finally hears her son play at a grand concert hall (although she is unaware that it is him), her response to the beauty of his performance intimates her true nature: “As if the melodies of her heart were arteries and that running

of the keys out there the precious bleeding of them. The tears came out in dew along your eyes" (308).

This shift to "you" here and elsewhere in the novel is telling, for it reminds us that Bertha is being created by an omniscient narrator. Why does Hurst suddenly shift from the unobtrusive method used throughout most of the novel to referring to Bertha as "you" in these scenes? The first time Hurst refers to Bertha as "you" occurs when Bertha attends Rollo's funeral. After his marriage to a socialite, Rollo never again writes poetry. As Helga comments, "Thank God he made himself famous writing a book before she copped him. He'll never write another. He's married to one who takes all and gives nothing. She couldn't inspire a man to write an entry in the butcher book" (183). Rollo rejected Bertha after he had used her for inspiration because he chose to see her as most of society did, not as his poet's eyes had momentarily seen her. Adopting the view of society kills the poet within himself. Nevertheless, Bertha, on the fringes of the crowd watching his coffin being loaded into the hearse, feels that this moment is like "the last line of a sonnet": as Hurst writes, "You stood in the fringe that made the aisle through which the bier passed across the sidewalk, with a place nicked out of your heart" (235). This shift joltingly reminds us that Bertha is being "written" in this novel not only by her poet-lover but also by Hurst herself; there is a narrator shaping her thoughts for her and us, the "you" a reminder that undercuts the realism of Bertha's situation and turns her plight into an artistic creation, not a social problem needing a practical remedy.

This reminder of Bertha's fictive construction reiterates the fact that Bertha could not possibly articulate her poetic, fragmentary thoughts to another person; the author

must do this for us. Hurst merges author and character in numerous passages throughout the novel, as Grant Overton remarks in the Hurst biography:

Bertha, the Lummox, stands in the sailors' boarding-house; but it is Fannie Hurst, you feel, who notes the sharp, sour smell that would be too familiar to Bertha for *her* notice. In merging herself in her character (you say to yourself) Miss Hurst has forgotten that there is a Fannie Hurst--cannot quite perfectly separate the sensations of Fannie Hurst and Bertha. Only after a long reflection, perhaps, does the more subtle explanation occur: The passage is a sacrifice to our limitations as readers. Bertha cannot be rendered from within, with perfect fidelity, for then we should find her unrecognizable. Her perceptions, at the cost of some slight falsification, must to a certain extent be ours. . . . The sharp, sour smell is one of those recurrent identifications which the author *must* make to bring an alien personality within the reader's recognitions. (21-22)

This merging of the author's identity with the character's is one Hurst struggled with in her attempts to articulate not only a character's consciousness but the lives of the "masses" who inspired her work. Hurst herself claims that her primary problem in writing is harnessing the words to describe the characters and emotions which she wishes to describe. This is a problem evoked repeatedly in her autobiography and one which her novels often stress. Especially in *Lummox*, wherein the main consciousness of the novel is an immigrant laborer who has little command of English or any other language, we see Hurst struggling with the means to show both Bertha's inability to articulate her thoughts

and desires to those around her and how much there actually is inside of Bertha.

Repeatedly, we are told (by the narrators and particular characters) that Bertha's thoughts try to struggle into existence. Indeed, the very first page of the novel tells us that words were "frail beasts of burden" to Bertha, her "prisoners" which were "wanting-to-be-born thoughts" (2, 4). Here, we see a parallel between Bertha and Hurst herself; Bertha's struggle for articulation seems to be more specifically Hurst's own struggle to find the words to describe her character, again emphasizing the fact that Bertha is more an aesthetic creation than a social problem.

The difficulties of "seeing" and "expressing" merge in an important scene which has Bertha looking in on the lives of others, this time that of her son. As she looks from the street toward the window of her child's home, a scene reminiscent of the one concluding Olive Higgins Prouty's *Stella Dallas* (also published in 1923), she can only imagine "her boy shining up there in the window. Her boy on whose face she had not dared to look" (173). Later, when she imagines the birthday present she will give her son through Willie, she wishes she could "capture that color of moon into a balloon that might burst with a pop in the heart of the boy. She sat behind the muslin curtain, her mouth moving for the words that could bring this frail thought out without shattering it into the blunt grunting things she could say" (176). While Bertha is repeatedly faced with her inability to voice herself, she is, ironically, the most "articulate" of the novel because in not speaking, we have only her thoughts rendered by Hurst into poetic prose. Like *Stella Dallas*, who is satisfied to see her daughter through a window like a character in a movie, Bertha's life comprises a series of onlookings. Both Hurst and Prouty use these

novels to show that women who seem inarticulate, superficial, or like a “lummox” have more depth to them than most of us, but while Prouty uses another character, a woman who is the upper-class mother substitute for Stella’s daughter Laurel, to decipher Stella’s goodness for us, Hurst acknowledges that no one can really “see” Bertha. The Meyerbogens appreciate her for the same reasons that her former employers had: her work ethic, her maternal presence, even her silence and obedience. Yet, these qualities often ensure that Bertha, who refuses to stand up for herself, is ousted from these homes because she has “interfered” with the families, usually at their invitation--for instance, in Mr. Musliner’s request that Bertha “help” his wife overcome her fear of him or Mr. Wallenstein’s request that she care for his mother. The novel ends with the suggestion that Bertha has at last found a “home,” but while a number of critics talk about a “marriage” at the end of the novel, Meyerbogen clearly states that Bertha will be treated only “*like one of the family*” (326, my emphasis).²¹

Perhaps to remind us that Bertha is not really capable of articulating her happiness to others, the most eloquent expression of Bertha’s sense of “belonging” with the Meyerbogens is found not in the jumbled thoughts of her own mind but in the stick drawings done by one of the children, a “before” picture of the Meyerbogen family and an “after,” which includes a figure of Bertha looming beside the others. Bertha’s contentment with this domestic arrangement concludes the novel: “Gladnesses here with dimension. The treble shrilling of the children. Pretty leafage of peas up a stick. Clank.

²¹ Shaughnessy and Ravitz’s discussions of *Lummox* both assume that Bertha marries Mr. Meyerbogen.

Clank. Chimmie must be awake. Meyerbogen disappearing around the house with a sack of flour on his back. The tawny smell of the bread . . ." (329). The ellipsis which ends the novel is telling, for it suggests that Bertha's story may not be complete; while she may have found contentment and security in the domestic arrangement with the Meyerbogens, there may also be another crisis lurking around the corner.

The open-endedness of this ending is both a gesture towards the modernist discomfort with closure and the problem inherent in creating a "happy" ending for Bertha: such an ending undermines the political critique of women's oppression at the heart of the novel. Hurst does continue to use experimental narrative techniques in other novels of the 1920s, especially *Apassionata* (1926), but during the 1930s there is a transformation in her prose style, for she utilizes a more recognizably realist mode in *Back Street*, *Imitation of Life*, and subsequent novels, ones which demonstrate a growing concern with issues of middle-class women. This emphasis on women's problems probably stems from her belief in middle-class ideals of "progress," ones similar to those represented by nineteenth-century writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe; perhaps the growing social radicalism of the 1930s encouraged Hurst to believe that emphasizing social concerns over aesthetics could boost her reputation as an "important" writer. Hurst gave a speech in Hawaii during the summer of 1935 which seems to offer an explanation for her own turn away from narrative experimentation. She specifically targets modernist techniques as "faddish" ones which will not bear the test of time:

One may venture to predict that Becky Sharp gives evidence of more literary vitality than, let us say, Bloom, of James Joyce's *Ulysses* or the

Pigeons on Gertrude Stein's grass and that Reubens as a painter seems destined not to be ousted by a "Nude Descending the Staircase." Nor does there seem to be a danger that even our major lithographic chromos in poetry like "Snowbound" or "Evangeline" are going to be outstripped of their powers of survival by the contemporary school of modern poetic expression, which ambles, like the footprints of an inebriated baby chicken, down areas of white paper. (ts. 16-17)²²

This shift in emphasis from aesthetics to social concerns is one she maintains throughout the rest of her career. Yet, if Hurst's primary concern is being perceived as a "great writer," and not as a "popular" one, why did Hurst seemingly abandon her experimentation with her characters' subjectivities in her subsequent novels?

Imitation of Life: The "Passing" of a Popular Novel

I would argue that while the more "realist" narrative found in *Imitation of Life* seems to suggest Hurst's rejection of modernist experimentation as incompatible with social reform, this is in fact another of Hurst's self-constructed "myths." She mentions

²² Later comments by Hurst retain this critique of both readers and writers. In 1937, Hurst participated in a panel discussion chaired by Henry Seidel Canby at the *New York Times* National Book Fair. She commented that authors had an easier time having books accepted for publication, but she argued that this overproduction had caused a lapse in quality (ts. 6). The mass quantities of novels available also made book reviewing more central to the choices that people made, and Hurst felt that this lowered the quality of the readership: ". . . less and less, what with the aforementioned competitive forces complicating life, does the reader think for himself. He accepts opinions ready made" (7). At the *Boston Herald* Book Fair in 1943, Hurst makes a comment quite similar to ones that Wharton and Cather made during the 1920s: "Often only a hairline of demarcation between literary and journalistic writing. Journalism, dignified by its book covers, but its literary values as ephemeral as snow, crowds the bookshops" (ts. 5).

only three of her novels by name in her autobiography (*LummoX*, *Imitation of Life* and *Back Street*), and as E. Ann Kaplan and Laura Hapke's discussions of Hurst suggest, these are her most socially conscious novels, addressing the harsh fate of immigrant women laborers, the stresses of balancing a career and motherhood, and the dangers of women's economic dependence on men. These novels are important because of their concern with women's issues, but Hurst did not in fact abandon narrative experimentation for the sake of social reform. In a 1930 essay entitled "Whither Fiction?", Hurst asserts that most fiction does not "live up to its requirements as an art. *Art, in its highest forms, is not a mere imitation of life. It is rather a reaction and protest against it*" (ts. 10, my emphasis). While this comment indicates her growing interest in the political function of art, she also presumes that art must be a transmutation of life, not just an "imitation" of it. Her choice of this phrase as the title for the novel first published in serial form as *Sugar House* indicates that *Imitation of Life* is not only about the social problems of working mothers and racial prejudice but also that the aesthetic construction of these characters is paramount. *Imitation of Life* may appear less radical than *LummoX* in the delineation of Bea's consciousness, but, in fact, Hurst uses a quartet of female characters to create various fragmented subjectivities and again creates parallels between herself and her characters. Hurst's depiction of the incompatibility of a business and a personal life for Bea Pullman returns us to the conflicts expressed by Louisa May Alcott about the life of a female artist but updated for an era in which more women were experiencing the pull between the domestic sphere and the "outside" world. While *Imitation of Life*'s Bea Pullman is not an "artist" (although the 1959 film version transforms her character into an

actress), her business success mirrors Hurst's in the literary marketplace at the same time that her anxieties about this success echo Hurst's fears about her erasure from the canon.²³

While I wish to emphasize the aesthetic complexities of *Imitation of Life* because I feel that this aspect of the novel has been ignored repeatedly by its critics, I do not wish to downplay the social issues in the novel. During the 1930s Fannie Hurst became an outspoken supporter of women's rights as well as a critic of those women who had not capitalized on their new freedoms, including suffrage. Even so, her autobiography suggests a purposeful distance from the politicized segment of the women's movement, for she seems hesitant to accept Carrie Chapman Catt's request that she join "the movement" after women had gained the vote (245). While Hurst claims that she did not "want to be identified with a suffrage parade" and that she "had no intention of 'joining up,'" the thought that she now could "help elect Presidents" resonates with her (245). She was often asked to speak about women's rights at various engagements. During the Depression and World War II, Hurst was called upon to address the particular needs of women during these times of crisis, and in two speeches, "Are We Coming or Going?" (1934) and "A Crisis in the History of Woman" (1943), she notes that women must fight against that which chains them to the home: "The women and the men who realize the boon of fifty percent of humanity throwing intelligence and participation into the human

²³ Mary Rose Shaughnessy's book on Hurst claims that she was careful to distance herself from this commercial success: "This aversion to the marketplace was a special hang-up of Fannie Hurst. She became upset every time she was called a 'popular' writer, with the connotation of making money" (50). It is for this reason, Shaughnessy believes, that the women in her novels who achieve success must be stripped of their power so that they can "recover the lost magic of [their] femininity" (50).

pool are the white hope of better, happier and more interesting homes; are the ones who are desperately needed now at this moment of backsliding to help prevent us from having our hands unlocked from the rim of the life boats” (“Are We Coming Or Going?”160).²⁴ During the 1930s and 1940s, Hurst’s growing role as a speaker and essayist about women’s rights and World War II constitutes her as a public figure concerned about politics more than an artist concerned about aesthetics.

Since Depression-era art grew increasingly political, Hurst’s interest in politics might have strengthened her reputation as a “serious” artist; however, this is not the case. Critics increasingly attacked her work for its “sentimentality” despite her bitter portrayals of women’s subjugation; perhaps they could not take her fiction seriously because it concerned the plight of women. More importantly, critics ignored the aesthetic complexities of her work during this period. While her female characters are constructed out of social problems, Hurst continues to foreground modernist concerns about fragmented subjectivities in her fiction; as in Louisa May Alcott’s work, aesthetic and ideological issues cannot be easily untangled. Bea’s inability to fuse her maternal and domestic impulses with her more “masculine” drives for success and even fulfillment in the business world is embodied in Hurst’s representation of this character’s consciousness. Along with this particular split in Bea’s subjectivity, we can see her lack

²⁴ While Mary Rose Shaughnessy argues that Hurst’s personal life and her support of women’s rights is not reflected in her fiction, I would argue that Shaughnessy’s readings of Hurst’s work fail to understand the complexities of her critique of the middle-class woman’s plight. *Back Street* and *Imitation of Life* in particular present the sacrifices women make for their families and lovers, as well as the great personal costs to women when they let either the personal or professional dominate their lives.

of perception concerning issues of racial and sexual identity, anxieties which align Hurst with the female writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Perhaps a more careful consideration of the parallels between *Imitation of Life* and a novel such as Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) can help us to understand better the complex intersections between aesthetics and identity politics that have also problematized critics' ability to situate Harlem Renaissance women writers within the modernist paradigm.

In *Imitation of Life*, Bea Pullman is a recent high school graduate who, at the novel's opening, is reacting to her mother's death from cancer. Bea must take over her mother's role in the household, caring for her meticulous salesman father and their tenant, Benjamin Pullman, who has been living with them for over a decade. Mr. Chipley and Mr. Pullman decide that it is indecorous for him to continue living there after Mrs. Chipley's death unless Bea marries Pullman, which she does without hesitation despite the fact that she is not in love with him. She merely desires the comfort and security that she believes marriage will bring, although the shock of the more intimate side of marriage briefly obscures her conception of domesticity. She quickly becomes pregnant, but soon after this, her father suffers a debilitating stroke, and so he can no longer earn a living and is now at the mercy of her husband. Mr. Chipley is confined to a wheelchair, but his impotent rage causes him to lash out at his pregnant daughter. Bea's security is dealt a final blow when Mr. Pullman is killed in a railroad accident; left with little except a paltry settlement from the railroad company, Bea is forced to seek work despite the fact that she has no connections or job training.

The luck of her shared first initial with her husband, who merely placed "B.

Pullman” on his business cards, allows Bea to carry on his mail-order syrup trade; however, she needs someone to stay at home with her newborn daughter Jessie and her now child-like father. Enter Delilah, a widowed black woman with an infant herself. The woman needs food and shelter and offers to work for Bea for little pay in return for these creature comforts; as it turns out, Delilah also holds the key to Bea’s future success as the operator of a chain of waffle houses. Delilah’s talent as a cook combined with Bea’s intuitive business acumen create first “Delilah’s Delights,” candy made from the syrup, and next the “B. Pullman” waffle-house chain. Bea devotes her life to ensuring her make-shift family’s security, only to find one day that her daughter is grown, Delilah’s daughter Peola has left home so that she can “pass” in the white world, and Delilah is dead from a cancerous growth that, along with her heartbreak over Peola’s desertion, has slowly eaten away at her. Bea does not even have love to sustain her, for the young manager of her company whom she hoped to marry instead falls in love with her daughter; Jessie, then, has the life which Bea spent her entire existence making possible.

Since critics have so often focused upon the novel’s “racist” depiction of Delilah and Peola, I wish to open my analysis of *Imitation of Life* with a consideration of this problem. Sterling Brown’s condemnation of the novel and the 1934 film in the NAACP journal *Opportunity* stems from his belief that Hurst perpetuates the mammy and tragic mulatta stereotypes. Jane Caputi argues that Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, both of whom praised the novel to Hurst’s face, as well as Toni Morrison all “specified” on *Imitation of Life*, writing texts which either overtly parodied the race roles of the novel or more indirectly critiqued the racial types. Ironically, Hurst describes her pride in

Imitation of Life because it “was born of this [race] consciousness and quickly made into one of the first ‘race’ pictures” (339). While this novel is ahead of its time in many ways, *Imitation of Life* does bear traces of the less progressive ideologies of Hurst’s era. The racial stereotypes in the novel, common long before the *Gone with the Wind* era, have overshadowed the other issues at stake in *Imitation of Life*, primarily Hurst’s depiction of the conflicts between a business and personal life for a woman and her aesthetic representation of this conflict.²⁵

²⁵ Jane Caputi’s article details the controversies surrounding the reception of Hurst’s novel by the African-American community, including the Sterling Brown review of the 1934 film which drew a response from Hurst herself. She defended the film in an editorial letter published in the April 1935 edition of *Opportunity* (interestingly, she does not really address his criticisms of her novel, suggesting that the “racism” is evident only in the film’s alterations of her novel) in a letter to Brown and again in her autobiography, claiming that “the important social value of this picture is that it practically inaugurates into the important medium of the motion-picture, a consideration of the Negro as part of the social pattern of America life. Instead of concerning himself with the superficialities of idiom, and the shape of the cook’s cap, it does seem to me that your reviewer might have been awake to the larger social values of a picture such as ‘Imitation of Life’” (121).

While there are numerous discussions of the “race” issue in *Imitation of Life* and about the relationship between Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston in current research, none of the critics involved examines Hurst’s 1944 novel *Hallelujah!*, which work also depicts the relationship between a white woman and a woman of “dubious” racial ancestry. Although Hurst explicitly states that Oleander is not “negro,” the description of her is much like the portraits of Hurston common in the Harlem Renaissance era. One critic asked why Delilah could not have been more like Hurston; but in *Hallelujah!*, perhaps Hurst addressed this kind of criticism of racial “types.”

Much of the controversy surrounding *Imitation of Life* today seems to derive from the assumption of a number of critics, including Caputi, that Bea and Delilah’s relationship is based upon Hurst’s own association with Zora Neale Hurston, one described variously as premised upon patronage, friendship, or servitude. While most acknowledge that the relationship between the two was a significant one (Hurston writes about it in her own autobiography and in a 1937 *Saturday Review of Literature* article), Hurst never mentions Hurston’s name in her 1958 autobiography. An analysis of the writers’ relationship by Virginia Burke and a description of their correspondence by Gay Wilentz offer some reasons for this exclusion, including the charges of statutory rape

However, a closer examination of the novel's form reveals a complexity that transcends its stereotypes. Written a decade after *Lummox*, the novel seems less political in its concerns and certainly less radical in its textual style; in other words, it appears to be written more specifically for a "popular" audience and to use the conventions of melodrama in calculated ways. Certainly, the contemporary critical response to the novel was less favorable than that for *Lummox* had been, and there seems to be the suggestion in reviews that Hurst's novels of the 1930s were viewed as less complex than her work of the mid-1920s.²⁶ Yet, the conclusion of the novel, with Bea "losing" Frank to her young

leveled at Hurston around 1949 (Wilentz 37). The insistence of critics to read *Imitation of Life* as a biographical rendering of Hurst's encounter with the "Other" embodied by Hurston (and a racist depiction of the "Other" at that) reminds us of the problem of confusing biography and literary criticism. If Delilah is based on Hurston, why not say so in her autobiography? Hurston laughs at Sterling Brown's charges that she "furnished" Hurst with the material for the novel (there is a complex relationship between Hurston and the novel, as her letters to Hurst, her comments to Sterling Brown, and her autobiography attest), but if Hurst's relationship with Hurston helped to shape her growing "race consciousness" that she describes in her autobiography, why is this not explicitly acknowledged (278)? *Hallelujah!* offers another close relationship between a white working-class woman (Lily Browne) and a woman of lower class, one the narrator suggests is of mixed race (Oleander). Here, Oleander still represents the faithful "Other," but unlike Delilah, she lives a life separate from Lily's, is a realized sexual being, and accepts Lily's sacrifice for her when Lily chooses Oleander over her husband, Grant Sweetland. Hurst appears to be rewriting the relationship depicted in *Imitation of Life* in this novel written a decade later, in a way similar to that which Caputi describes Hurston doing in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. If Hurst is attempting to render a more egalitarian relationship between women of different races and classes, a relationship that she felt she could not explore in her autobiography for some reason, this later novel offers important insights into the racial issues that trouble so many readers of *Imitation of Life*. For these reasons, the later novel deserves closer attention.

²⁶ Reviews of *Back Street*, including the one by Harry Salpeter which dubs Hurst the "sob sister of American fiction," inaugurate the overtly hostile reception of Hurst's work. A *New York Times Book Review* article by Margaret Wallace is one of the more sympathetic (female reviewers always seem to find more depth in Hurst's work), but even

daughter, Delilah dead and buried in an elaborate, almost grotesque, funeral, and Peola, married to a white man, living in Bolivia, and sterilized so that her color will not return to haunt her in a child is less reactionary than tragic, demonstrating the horrors which arise when people refuse to see the world around them realistically. I would argue that *Imitation of Life*, much like *Lummo*x, is about the inability to “see” those in our society who lack a “voice.” Here, Hurst makes no attempt to render Delilah’s consciousness; she only presents Delilah’s “speeches” and Bea’s baffled reactions to her companion, but the entire novel is about Bea’s inability to perceive anything around her except her business: her sexual desires, with an implicit suggestion of lesbian desire, her over-idealization of her daughter Jessie, and the racist implications of her perception of Delilah.

Alice Childress, an African-American author, does raise the possibility that Hurst did not abandon the difficult questions about subjectivity which haunt *Lummo*x. She compares Bertha’s passivity and desire to help others with Delilah’s in her introduction to the 1989 republication of *Lummo*x for the American Women Writers series. She wonders what “Bertha would have felt if she could have met her dark counterpart, Delilah. How

she claims that “she has never drawn from [Hurst’s] vast and cleverly assembled knowledge any conclusions notable for their depth or validity” (9). A *Time* review offers only a brief summary of the novel and a biographical note which emphasizes Hurst’s popularity: “Long and often the recipient of editors’ rejection slips, she is now one of the best-paid writers in the U.S.” (56). The magazine reviewer seems unwilling to question the tastes of its wide readership. The *Imitation of Life* reviews, however, take on a more critical tone. The *Christian Science Monitor* questions the authenticity of Delilah’s character, and the *New York Times* states that “there is nothing duller than unopposed and unmerited success. The tragedy of Bea Pullman’s success, which would make a novel of itself, Miss Hurst barely touches in her last pages . . . Many other themes are picked up and tossed aside by Miss Hurst in the course of the novel, but none seems to enrich the recounting of Bea’s monotonous advancement in the acquisition of worldly goods” (7).

would they have regarded each other? Would Bertha be free of racism? Would Delilah be able to admire a white working woman to the extent she admired her middle-class mistress?" (xii). While many other African-Americans, both Hurst's contemporaries and the few who discuss *Imitation of Life* today, have denigrated the novel for its racist stereotypes, Childress' linking of these two novels in an introduction to what many see as Hurst's most sympathetic and socially conscious novel raises an important question. Hurst considered herself sensitive to the "race problem" as much as she did the problem of the working immigrant woman like Bertha. Hurst could know no more about the life of Bertha than of that of Delilah, but, in fact, if one looks at the form of the two novels, it becomes apparent that she was not trying to show Delilah's consciousness as she did Bertha's. *Lummox*'s form is a complex blend of stream-of-consciousness with an omniscient central consciousness, but one without the relatively knowledgeable (and sometimes intrusive) character's consciousness often used to structure a Wharton or Cather novel. Obviously, in *Lummox*, we are inside Bertha's mind, and the disjointed and abbreviated phrases which continually evoke Bertha's difficulty in articulating herself are reinforced by the few moments when Bertha actually speaks. However, the prose is also dense with images of the natural world, the Old World which haunts Bertha's "memory," and moments of insight about the people, supposedly more knowledgeable and articulate, who surround her. In contrast, while we hear Delilah's speech, we are never allowed access into her consciousness, only Bea's, and this seems to indicate that Hurst wants us to understand that the flawed or limited nature of Delilah's representation in the novel is the result of Bea's lack of understanding, not that of Hurst herself.

Unlike *LummoX*, *Imitation of Life* never attempts to describe how Delilah feels. We have only her dialect-laden dialogues, always made in Bea's presence. However, as Lauren Berlant's insightful essay on the novel and the two film versions points out, an early moment in the novel marks Bea as someone who lacks racial awareness. On her wedding night, she finds a pornographic picture propped on her dresser, one of her husband's things which has been moved into the room that day. Unable to recognize the staid (and much older) Mr. Pullman as someone who has ever experienced sexual desire, a misconception soon unraveled by the experience of her wedding night, she blames the girl who, "with what seemed actual malice," had placed the photo in plain view. "Those darkies. . . ." is her response, the only way she can make sense of the character of the man she is about to share her wedding night with, absolving him of eroticism while displacing it on the Other (41).

Another marker of Bea's inability to perceive the desires of herself as well as those of others occurs during an early moment in the novel which describes the death of Bea's mother and Bea's inability to perceive her mother and father as sexual beings (a problem which carries over to her own marriage). This moment situates Bea as a young, inexperienced woman from a lower-middle-class background who knows little of the world around her. Her high-school education has prepared her for little of life in the outside world, and her mother has not really prepared her, practically or psychologically, for marriage and domesticity:

If Mother could carry these things around in her head without ever seeming to have them there, surely she, Bea, with her diploma from the

Atlantic City High School fresh in its ribboned roll, must be capable of carrying on with at least equal efficiency. True, during Mother's lifetime, it had been her pride that Bea did not often set her nicely shod young feet into the kitchen. "Those things will come naturally enough when you get to them. I'd rather you spent the time practicing, or at your painting or burnt wood." (5-6)

On Bea's wedding night, she is haunted by her wish that her mother were there to explain "things" to her. The staid Mr. Pullman becomes animal-like (Bea imagines him as a "panther") after his possession allows him to express his desire for her. That she never returns his passion is evident: "The mystifying part of her relationship with Mr. Pullman was the sense of feeling external and non-participant to the spectacle of the supreme emotion flashing its strange, and she supposed sublime, impulse through so matter-of-fact a conductor as Mr. Pullman" (47).

While her husband's untimely death, the birth of their child Jessie shortly after his death, and her father's incapacitating stroke force Bea to shed her innocence and assume the role of breadwinner, her foray into the "man's world" of work is clearly something that she never would have considered if not for the circumstances necessitating it. While she never really loved or desired Benjamin Pullman, she clearly longed for home, maternity, and security:

Marriage established you. Gave you a sense of security and being cared for in a special private way that meant everything. That is, if the dear close snug things mattered a lot. They did to Bea. The inside of a married

woman's pretty house. The sight of a baby under a coverlet with a pink bow, in a perambulator. A husband unlocking the front door to his home. The silhouette of a housewife moving about her very own kitchen. (34)

Bea has clearly romanticized the concept of home and marriage, and when her husband's death shatters this world of security which she has built up for herself, she is forced literally to strip herself of her femininity and to enter the world of business. Her use of her husband's identity to carry on his mail-order syrup business allows her some measure of financial relief, but only when Delilah enters the picture can Bea stop worrying about her father and daughter. And, of course, it is Delilah's skill as a cook which propels Bea into the world of corporate success as the founder of a chain of waffle houses known as "B. Pullmans."

Bea's successful enterprise results from her ability to infuse an atmosphere of domesticity into her restaurants. Since Bea herself wants security, she creates the waffle business out of a desire to stimulate this home-feeling that she wants so badly: "Some people have talent for writing poetry or building towers or singing arias. Mine must be to surround people for a few moments out of a tired day with a little unsubtle but cozy happiness of body and perhaps of mind" (122-23). She even imagines her business sites as children: the first B. Pullman on the Atlantic City boardwalk is described as an ideal child (112) while the failed New York site is characterized as one "still-born" (130). However, her consciousness never really integrates the competing drives of domestic bliss and business success. While she becomes not only the owner of a successful restaurant chain but an entrepreneur who engages in real-estate deals, she never perceives

herself as the icon of female success that her business partner, Virginia Eden, assures her that she is. Featured in magazine articles on successful women and asked to speak at conventions, Bea has a difficult time coping with fame because this success constructs her as too unfeminine. While the 1959 Douglas Sirk film based on the novel transforms Bea into Lora Meredith, actress, in the novel Bea's growing celebrity in the public eye leaves her cold: "You left that sort of thing to the actresses and women who achieved the front pages through actions which invited notoriety" (148). She had never paid attention to the suffrage movement that had raged during her youth and the early stages of her business success, and, in fact, the juxtaposition of her wedding day with Woodrow Wilson's election and her lack of knowledge about politics emphasizes that if not for her absolute need to enter the business world, Bea would have had little to do with anything outside of the domestic sphere. She even sees her success in the business world as a threat to this sphere, for "everything outside the home was interference with the ordered rightness of the dear private things that mattered" (177).

The "home" established by Delilah and Bea is, in fact, a striking compromise of the nuclear family, for the male "head" of the household is an impotent old man who habitually vents his rage at Bea.²⁷ Delilah's presence seems to soothe him, and she talks to him as if he were another one of her children. Delilah acts as the caretaker for all in the

²⁷ During her pregnancy with Jessie, her father hits her with a rolling pin: "The ready beast of rage which seemed to crouch just beneath the surface of his dealings with Bea leaped at her then, and with his good arm Chipley lifted a rolling-pin which lay on the adjacent table and struck. It landed whack across her jawbone, horrifying him and causing her to cry out . . ." (52).

household, while Bea worries about the finances, constantly scribbling out new budgets on the backs of napkins. Taking up a man's position, Bea is constantly obsessed with survival, staying up late in the night worrying about her business plans:

Each evening, after a usual session of attempted entertainment of her Father, who could be so irate with her, and after moments with her child, whose bedtime usually overlapped her return, the figuring, once her household was in bed, began. The profit, gross, of each pound box of candy, multiplied by the number of boxes sold. From this total, deduction of daily expenses. Result, almost invariably, a minus quality that sent her to restless bed, tortured with the need and yet the inability to provide the necessities of that household. (86)

The stark business-like tone of this passage is similar to many others in the book, evoking Bea's obsession with the basic necessities of life, and it can be compared profitably to Bertha's fragmented raptures about the bliss of "words." Bea's own fragmented catalogues obsess over domestic and business details, expressing her frustrated inability to merge these two worlds. After her husband's death, she spends little time musing about physical desire or even her joy at motherhood. Jessie, while a beautiful enigma to her mother, is more simply a mouth to be fed. The rapture with which Bea had viewed motherhood, a dream which involved "nursery prettiness, adorable pastimes over a layette, hours beside a perambulator on a sunlit beach or retailing baby anecdotes to Mr. Pullman," shifts into a purely functional perception of needs and provision, for Mr. Pullman's death means that "there had been so little time for anything more than a

hurried realization that here was a mouth whose first quiver and howl had shaken the world with imperious demand to be fed" (88). Bea cannot afford any longer to romanticize motherhood, but her removal from the home allows her to romanticize her daughter, who becomes an abstract thing of beauty to Bea. A closer relationship with her daughter is always something she projects into the future once she has time to rest from the labors of her business. As she becomes an icon of the "New Woman," her desires focus more and more on the personal and domestic, for she cannot imagine continuing in her role as the head of a successful enterprise while enacting the role of wife and mother; thus, she plans to sell her business so that she can build a home in the Fishrow development that made her famous, to get to know her daughter after she returns from school in Europe, and, finally, to marry Frank Flake.

Hurst reminds us of Bea's inability to "see" anything but visions for her business at several moments in the novel, most critically during the developing romance between Jessie and Frank Flake, the young manager of Bea's business who is the first object of her own desire. Bea invests much in her love for Frank, thinking to herself that she desires him more than the adoration of those who admire her business success: "Women in business! What did they matter! Women in *love*! Ah, women in love!" (222). At the moment when she is declaring herself to Frank, Jessie enters the room and tells her mother of their engagement. Only these words can make Bea understand, for while the "brightness that lay on the face of Jessie" for the weeks prior to this revelation should have been "like a flood of brightness," "still she did not see" (281). Her inability to recognize the truth until it becomes inescapably present is one that haunts her to the ends

of the earth, where she travels to spread her waffle business, becoming more and more a “magnificent legend” and less and less a real person, much as she has constructed Delilah (282). Her failure to achieve more personal goals forces her back into the business she almost sells, and she increases the reaches of her business empire while Jessie sets up the home her mother had desired.

In the same way that Bea cannot integrate the domestic and business spheres, she cannot perceive Delilah as a person whose life extends beyond her duty to Bea. The “mammy” icon Bea creates to advertise her waffle business is, of course, the target of critics; that is, Hurst has fallen into racist stereotypes by presenting Delilah as an Aunt Jemima figure.²⁸ In many ways, Delilah is an icon to Bea herself, for she cannot “see” the real Delilah any more than the hordes who troop to the B. Pullmans, allured by the vision of the “mammy” in the window. Bea is so self-absorbed, mostly out of the necessity to survive, that she sees only those aspects of Delilah which suit her needs: the good cook, the maternal figure, the “mammy” who will sell the waffles, the profits of which art will make them secure. When she has the idea of putting Delilah’s face on the box of candy,

²⁸ Lauren Berlant’s essay describes Lora Meredith as the icon in the later film version of *Imitation of Life*, but I would argue that Bea becomes such an icon, even to herself, in the novel as well.. Another discussion about Delilah as an icon can be found in M.M. Manring’s *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (1998). This analysis of the Aunt Jemina advertising phenomenon surveys the use of the “mammy” stereotype in literature, and Manring claims that *Imitation of Life* “shaped the popular image of the mammy as black matriarch as much as any single work of this century” (34). While Manring acknowledges Delilah’s role as a figure of Christ-like suffering, he blames Hurst for representing her as “a spokeswoman for an old racial and gender order, particularly concerning the place of white womanhood” (37). Berlant also discusses Delilah as an “icon” inspired by Aunt Jemima.

we see her constructing the image that will prove so lucrative: “Delilah’s Hearts! Why not Delilah’s photograph, in her great fluted white cap, and her great fluted white smile on each box? Delilah, who, though actually in no more than her late thirties, looked mammy to the world. . . . Delilah beaming and beckoning from the lid. . . .” (82). Delilah actually protests this self-presentation, wishing to have a more “proper” photograph taken as a record for her daughter, but Bea believes that the effect of the first photo is perfect: “The heavy cheeks, shellacked eyes, right, round, and crammed with vitality, huge upholstery of lips that caught you like a pair of divans into the luxury of laughter, Delilah to the life beamed out of that photograph with sun power!” (84). Bea chooses to “see,” then, what she wishes in Delilah at this moment, just as she later chooses to ignore the signs of Delilah’s illness. In fact, both of these women become icons instead of real people, giving up personal relationships and, eventually, even their daughters. Bea loses Jessie because her daughter marries Frank, and Delilah loses Peola because of her blackness, for Peola’s desire to pass overtakes her love for her mother.

Peola’s fate is profoundly symbolic of the novel’s theme of “not seeing.” The problem of “seeing” is closely aligned with the problem of “passing” which pervades much of the last half of the novel. Peola leaves her mother and moves to Seattle, eventually meeting a white man whom she decides to marry. Peola willingly sterilizes herself so that she can protect her secret from him, but perhaps she feels less guilty about her deceit because he, too, is “maimed”—he has lost part of his hand and suffers from his having been gassed during the war. The couple’s removal to Bolivia so that he can work as an engineer brings out an interesting echo of a central theme in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,

published four years earlier. In that work, Irene Redfield consistently refuses her husband's request to move to Brazil so that he can practice medicine in an atmosphere that will not be saturated with racism. However, she longs for the middle-class respectability that will not be available there, and she frustrates her husband's one wish. South America is, ironically, the "Promised Land" in each of these texts, but in order for Peola to make it to this land, she must insure that she will not procreate, for her child could look more like Delilah than herself. "Passing" is, then, a tenuous proposition, and Peola's self-destruction is a palpable reminder of her desire to be all that Bea had wanted when she first married. Peola, too, yearns for security: "I want my happiness. I want my man. I want my life" (243). Yet, "A.M."s physical disabilities and his lack of knowledge about Peola's origins suggest that this model of domesticity is no more tenable than Bea's has been. If anything, Delilah was the only one who knew her man and the situation they had together; she never romanticized Peola's father, but she did acknowledge that he gave her the "man-lovin'" she (and every woman) should experience. Only Jessie settles into a marriage and family which seems "traditional" for that time, and while Bea tells us of the happiness of her daughter's union with Frank, this happiness comes at the cost of Bea's, sending the humiliated woman around the world to escape Frank's eyes, for he, unlike Jessie, "saw" her for what she really was.

The novel's ending, not surprisingly, has been read by feminists as reactionary, a sign that business success is not "enough" to fulfill women and that they need motherhood and a man to make them happy. This paean to domesticity has been the theme of recent films such as *Fatal Attraction* and *Baby Boom*, seen by Susan Faludi as

conservative backlashes to women's growing numbers in the work place and their growing satisfaction with a life outside of the home. However, reading this novel as a message to women that they should focus on the personal instead of the professional is problematic, especially considering the horrific results of Ray Schmidt's doing just that in *Back Street*, a novel published two years before *Imitation of Life*. Bea believes that she needs "man-lovin'" only because she is told so, over and over, by Virginia Eden, Delilah, and the newspaper reporters who ask her, fruitlessly, what her "recreational" life entails. Bea evidenced little need for personal entanglements, romantic or otherwise, when she was young, and her lack of response to her husband, while perhaps a result of his personality, can also be a sign that Bea is not suited for marriage or heterosexual desire.²⁹ Bea, however, believes in the ideal of marriage and maternity which her society endorses, and, ostensibly, she works so hard in order to attain her ideal. Both film versions of *Imitation of Life* revise the novel's ending, leaving open the possibility that the Bea will marry the man she loves; Jessie's infatuation with her mother's lover is shown to be just that. Such a revision suggests the discomfort that the film makers had with the novel's implication that Bea's romantic yearnings are only the result of society's imposition of a heterosexual norm. An examination of Hurst's draft versions of *Imitation of Life* suggests, in fact, that she originally intended a much more complex examination of Bea's sexuality, again suggesting a parallel with *Passing*.³⁰

²⁹ This is a theme Hurst explores more explicitly in the 1926 novel *Appassionata*.

³⁰ Deborah McDowell comments on the lesbian undertones in the relationship between Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in her introduction to the *American Women*

The early drafts of *Imitation of Life* are more explicit about Bea's comprehension that her relationship with her husband lacked sexual desire. When Bea recognizes her longing for Frank Flake (which she fails to acknowledge to him until it is too late), she thinks to herself, "Well, why not! The marriage with B. Pullman, she admits that now unashamedly, down in the stirred recesses of hers, had been a rather horrible effort to bestir herself out of a sleep from which she had never even emerged except . . . into the faint nightmare of the act of being a wife to him" (*Sugar House* ts. 216). When she tries to explain her feelings to Flake, the draft includes a passage which is much more explicit than that in the final version: "The house of me has never been opened. You [have] ripped up the blinds and let in the light. I want to lay with you Flake, to [love] with you to live with you to build into our future with you" (235). Here, Flake kisses her: "He [tore] into

Writer's edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Due to the powerful myth of black women's voracious sexuality, she argues, "Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen could only hint at the idea of black women as sexual subjects behind the safe and protective covers of traditional narrative subjects and conventions," but at the same time, the sexual revolution of the 1920s encouraged a "flirtation with female sexual desire" in their narratives (xiii-xiv). In *Passing*, McDowell proposes, the desire is potentially a lesbian one:

Larsen reopens the question of female sexuality in *Passing* with much bolder suggestions. While in *Quicksand* she explores these questions within the "safe" and "legitimate" parameters of marriage, in *Passing* she takes many more risks. Although Clare and Irene--the novel's dual protagonists--are married, theirs are sexless marriages. In Clare's case, the frequent travels of her financier husband and her fear of producing a dark child, explain this situation. In Irene's case, the narrative strongly indicates, her own sexual repression is at fault. It is significant that Irene and her husband sleep in separate bedrooms (he considers sex a joke) and that she tries to protect her sons from schoolyard discussions about sex. Having established the absence of sex from the marriages of these two women, Larsen can flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them. (xxiii)

it by rising, stooping for the act of lifting her half out of her chair [so] that her legs dangled, kissing her solidly, grindingly deeply into her [replaced with “the”] lips, releasing her a little roughly so that as [she] dropped back against her chair the upholstery rode her” (236). The final version lacks this physical intensity: “And on this morning, fairly crashing with the thunder of its burdens, Flake, in the instant before leaving, timing it so that the secretary to whom they had been dictating had scarcely more than closed the door, kissed her his good-by, this time against the lips” (*Imitation of Life* 257). The published version makes the kiss an efficient good-bye, a passing moment in a work-filled day, as opposed to the violent, sexualized kiss described in the draft.

Another desire which seems to be implied in the draft version is a lesbian one. When asked by a reporter about her “recreations,” Bea thinks about those with whom she spends her days:

Life--not just living, from day to day and loving and loving, as of course one did as part of that living. Jessica. Delilah. Father. Peola. The organization. Some of the dear girls connected with the main office. That lovely Mary Grady in the mail order department, who applied eagerly for the privilege of giving up her sundays [sic] and evenings for the purposes of going over the particular problems of this constantly growing aspect of the business, and who not infrequently spent the night in the apartment of eighty first street. (*Sugar House* ts. 148)

The draft implies an intensely personal relationship with Mary Grady, one not really necessitated by business concerns, a relationship which is, in fact, clearly sexualized by

the reference to Mary's spending the night at Bea's apartment. However, the published version erases Mary Grady completely and replaces her with Frank Flake:

Recreations? For years the majority of her evenings had been commandeered for the quiet intervals they afforded for going over her affairs, particularly of late, with Flake, on the occasions when he was in off the road, or in clearing up odds and ends of long accumulation with willing members of her growing staff: Miss Weems, Miss Lejaron, or any of a score of the competent ones with whom she seemed to have developed a talent for surrounding herself. (149)

The possibility of lesbian desire implied in the draft would explain Bea's disgust with her husband's animal sexuality as well as the violence of the forceful kiss Flake gives her in the manuscript version. However, despite the fact that Bea's most intense relationships are with women, she cannot acknowledge a lesbian sensibility, and, ultimately, this cannot even be implied in the final version of the novel.³¹

³¹ The reasons for Hurst's revisions are not clear since the correspondence in the Harry Ransom collection does not include discussions with *Pictorial Review's* editor about his cuts or changes in the novel. However, an undated letter from "David" (a friend as well as an editor) suggests that the novel did run into editorial intervention: "As an editor I am fascinated by taboo words. . . . Up to now, the best sample I have encountered was what *Ladies' Home Journal* did to make Seabrook's 'Jungle Ways' safe for the ladies. But the first installment of 'Sugar House' in *Pictorial* is a close second" (Box 154, folder 4). Despite these cuts, the novel still created a controversy. G. Donovan from Pasadena, California, wrote Hurst that s/he "started to read your book . . . and was shocked beyond question at the first chapter. There are some things *of life* which do not belong in stories, and the things you mentioned are the ones. The only place they fit is in a doctor's book. *Your* imagination may be clean, but many others are not. . . . I destroyed the book without reading further" (Box 154, folder 4). Evidently, even with the revisions the frank discussions about Bea's sexual inhibitions bothered readers.

In addition, the draft versions of *Imitation of Life* suggest that Hurst intended to render Bea's confused subjectivity in a more disjointed prose style than the one that appears in the published novel; however, the final version *is* more aesthetically complex than most critics have acknowledged. Tellingly, film studios encouraged by several successful film adaptations of her work sought rights to *Sugar House* after its appearance in *Pictorial Review*, but Charles Beahan of Universal Studios voiced his concern that the novel would have to be transformed in order to render it successful for film adaptation: "I believe that *Imitation of Life*, produced under our auspices with personalities like Irene Dunne in the cast and possibly John Stahl directing, cannot fail to attain a great measure of success. The story, as it stands, offers difficulties for pictures but it so happens that Mr. Stahl has an idea for the treatment that will make it a successful story for filming" (correspondence dated May 11, 1933). The film's emphasis on the romantic elements of the plot, as well as Claudette Colbert's dynamic performance as a completely self-assured Bea, undercut the uncertainties about sexuality, racial identity, and gender roles which permeate the novel. Thus, while the film versions of *Imitation of Life* are responsible for Hurst's lingering spot in the cultural history of the twentieth century, they are also palpable reminders of her erasure from the canon. Each film further transforms her narrative until, by the time of Sirk's adaptation, little is left of her novel.

In similar fashion, Hurst's novels have disappeared from library shelves and literary history. The concerns which Fannie Hurst voiced about "chocolate-fudge fiction," or the dumbing-down of fiction for public consumption, in her early interview with Joyce Kilmer re-emerge in the 1930s as she watches her novels transformed into films that

undercut the aesthetic and ideological complexities of her fiction, undermining the reputation she so carefully built during the 1920s. Her fears about her writing ability, as well as those about her place within the American literature canon, are paradigmatic of the modernist anxieties about the status of “culture” played out in Pound and Eliot’s work, but her explorations of female subjectivity have relegated her along with numerous other women writers to the sidelines of literary history, for while literary historians are interested in the “war of the sexes” played out in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” they are less interested in the battles women fought within themselves to understand better their own aspirations.

Conclusion **Modernism Revisited**

The dread of her eventual eradication from literary history that Fannie Hurst describes in her autobiography is a fear she shared with Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, and this fear is closely allied with their need to render their characters in such a way that their audiences could associate with them, distancing these authors from the alienated pose of the modernist artist. Only time will tell if the new models of modernism proposed by feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and anthologies such as Bonnie Kime Scott's will allow space for writers such as Hurst in the canon, as well as acknowledging Wharton and Cather's relationship to the evolution of a modernist aesthetic. While the goal of reevaluating modernist aesthetics in order to include avant-garde women writers is important, the continuing uneasiness about where to place more "traditional" writers like Wharton and Cather in relation to their contemporaries, as well as the dismissal of writers like Hurst from any canon whatsoever, suggests the need for something other than a "re-reading" of modernism in order to understand the relationship between these authors and their modernist contemporaries. Categorizing Wharton, Cather, and Hurst as middlebrow writers for a "popular" audience who are all outside of the emerging art world of modernism neglects their interactions with and reactions against the textual practices and ideological underpinnings of modernism. Hurst experiments with a modernist style, Wharton depicts the "young radical" author in two of her last novels, and Cather and Wharton both discuss and denigrate the changing aesthetic practices of the post-war period. These writers, then,

were well aware of the emerging aesthetic practices of the period and the connection of these practices to post-war radicalism, but they often consciously defined themselves as outside of this “art world” despite their realization that this artistic separation would, without doubt, undermine the critical reception of their work. Thus, each had a stake in elaborating and defending the mode of transmutation which they offered as their own contribution to the post-war world. However, the popular reception of their works, while keeping them in the literary forefront during their lifetimes, places these authors in a more perilous position in the long run.

Fannie Hurst’s career extended into the 1960s, and, thus, she was able to examine the continuing struggles over the middlebrow in twentieth-century America. She returns to the problem of popular culture and its middlebrow adherents in “Egg-Head,” an unpublished essay written toward the end of her life. This essay can be perceived as a response to the charge that her work--most often in its cinematic form--appeals only to an audience with middlebrow tastes, and while she is obviously disturbed by the fact that critics do not consider her opus “serious,” we can see her developing a defense of the audience who had responded positively to her work during the preceding six decades.

Picking up where the 1915 interview with Joyce Kilmer left off, she laments the continuing emphasis on the lowbrow in America, indicting the elements of contemporary culture which she feels are discouraging the pursuit of cultural achievement, particularly television. Yet, much like Edith Wharton’s positioning of Halo Spear as the guardian of high culture against the encroaching middlebrowism represented by Vance Weston, Hurst insists that the “little woman” (perhaps meaning herself as well) is actually responsible for

the perpetuation of the pursuit for cultural improvement in our country:

To the chagrin of the "little woman," who subscribes to the Book-of-the-Month Club and is taking painting lessons, her tired-business-man husband, immune to concerts and subscription lectures leaves her to go it solo, or with the wife of another tired business man. But despite this nation-wide cultural lag, creativity is alive and on the go across the land. Books, more numerous than notable, pour off the presses. Art has gone abstract, while those who understand or pretend to, talk a pretentious gibberish. . . . his wife, who semi-occasionally succeeds in inducing him to endure an evening of concert or opera, is pestered by a vague sense of frustration, an indefinable hunger for the cultures which play so slight a role in her experience. . . . All these roads lead to the dark desert of American low-browism. Meanwhile radio and television have become the greatest educational institutions in the history of the world, their enrollment, most of the human race, which with dreadful surety is deriving from them the dwarfed stature of its mass culture. . . . But you don't have to be a wise guy to get hep to the fact that the progress of American culture, however painfully, is slowly but surely on the move from low-brow, into middle-brow, into high-brow. ("Egg-Head" ts. 4-8).

While Hurst's ambivalent stance towards the methods of acculturation in 1960s America is apparent, she has faith that the pursuit of knowledge, gained from whatever sources, will lead to the betterment of American culture. More significantly, she seems confident that

the same women who have formed the cornerstone of her audience and thus been partially responsible for the critical devaluation of her work will lead the way to the “highbrow.”

The fact that the debate about middlebrowism continues to rage throughout the latter part of the century, with critics reinvoking the spectrum of terms for cultural allegiance in the case of new mediums such as film and television, is a testament to the strength of our continuing concern about the status of “culture” in our nation. In order to understand better exactly what our culture is, we must investigate all of its elements, not just the highbrow, in part because, as the careers of Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Fannie Hurst all demonstrate, there is no clear division between “high,” “middle,” and “low” culture. The authors I have chosen to discuss in this study attempted to understand the relationship between themselves and their multiple audiences, clear evidence that they believed their work did have a profound influence on their readers’ cultural sensibilities. But the yellowing and even crumbling pages of Fannie Hurst’s typed manuscripts and unpublished essays which are housed in the University of Texas, Austin, library are a reminder of the tenuousness of the cultural heritage of the early twentieth century, a moment when diverse elements came together to create a literary voice which could speak to the masses. Only those authors deemed “high modernist” or at least tangentially connected to a rebellion against modernist experimentation, such as Cather and Wharton, are considered worthy of study and preservation, while someone like Hurst who provides a clearer link between modernism and popular culture is deemed unimportant because of her broad appeal to a middlebrow audience.

Thus, we need to open up our understanding of modernism to the diverse narrative

techniques and audience tastes of the period so that we can develop a richer perspective about those authors we currently canonize and broaden our perceptions about a moment in history rich with cultural cross-currents. We may never completely understand why Wharton and Cather were so hostile to modernism when they, too, participated in the period's attempt to create complex voices for characters; although their aesthetic of transmutation may seem less radical than T.S. Eliot's voice for J. Alfred Prufrock or the multiple voices of *The Waste Land*, they, too, explore in complex ways the often fragmented nature of human subjectivity. However, they also wished to transform or to transmit the often marginalized or silenced voices of their female characters into coherent narratives. Ironically, Fannie Hurst participates in the modernist project more fully than do Wharton and Hurst, acknowledging, as she does, the impossibility of creating a completely coherent consciousness for characters like Bertha, Delilah or even Bea since they themselves are unaware of the complex forces and prejudices which shape them. Yet, her emphasis on women's issues--unlike that of Alcott or Wharton--seems to have relegated her to the dustbin of literary history. As her legacy disintegrates on dusty library bookshelves and in the rarely perused boxes at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, we must ask ourselves at what cost comes the rather organized conception of highbrow modernism we now celebrate, for this conception not only dismisses Hurst from the canon, it also diminishes our perception of Wharton and Cather, as well as our understanding of modernism itself.

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