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**RESISTING THE READINGS:
NEW FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES FOR
CATHER, WHARTON, AND FAUSET**

**By
Delecia Seay Carey**

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

RESISTING THE READINGS: NEW FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES FOR CATHER, WHARTON, AND FAUSET

By

Delecia Seay Carey

This study attempts to provide resisting readings of Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and Jessie Fauset, three American women writers who have been variously addressed by the feminist interpretive community. In addition to offering rereadings of selected works by these writers, the study seeks to propose new feminist interpretive strategies. It undertakes, that is, to use Cather, Wharton, and Fauset criticism as the basis for a critique of the limits of current feminist approaches to women's writing. While the study seeks to expose some of the blindspots of feminist critical practice in the field of American literary studies, its ultimate aim is to elaborate strategies whereby American feminist literary criticism might become more responsive to postmodern critiques of subjectivity.

The most important theoretical assumption of this study is that it is necessary for the feminist interpretive community to fully theorize its interpretive strategies and

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capitalize upon a self-conscious awareness of its own prejudices and assumptions by altering those strategies which, when carefully examined, prove to be detrimental to the goals of feminist literary criticism. In other words, as this study shall attempt to demonstrate, it is necessary for feminist literary critics to begin to read women writers resistingly in much the same way Judith Fetterley suggested in The Resisting Reader (1978) that women should read male writers. A resisting reading of Cather, Wharton, and Fauset reveals that the willingness to interrogate women writers and the texts they create does not conflict with the feminist commitment to attaining and defending equal rights for all women. Instead, it gives women the tools to more fully recognize their participation in their own oppression as well as in the oppression of other women. As this study demonstrates, the project of feminist literary criticism involves reading texts differently from how they have been read in the past. As a result, as members of the feminist interpretive community, we will be different because of our reading.

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1993

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Finally, I owe special debts and thanks to my parents, Bill and Nedra Seay, and my husband, Tom Carey. My parents sacrificed and invested in my education for many years to build the foundation that made this work possible. This dissertation represents, among other things, the achievement of the dreams they enabled me to have for myself. My husband's role in this project has been more immediate. I cannot thank him enough for refusing to think of me as anything but a professional. Tom's willingness to move one thousand miles from Mississippi, his ability to survive indefinitely on Chinese take-out, and his confidence in my ability to complete this study were essential to its success. I know I will spend the rest of my life buoyed by his loving encouragement, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

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PREFACE

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar--well-known editors of The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women (1985) and authors of a book on nineteenth-century women writers, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), as well as a two volume follow-up study of twentieth-century women writers, No Man's Land (1988, 1989)--show in great detail throughout their works the many ways women writers respond to the restrictions of their society by "subverting patriarchal literary standards" (1979, 73). In this respect the two are representative of a large number of American feminist literary critics of the past two decades. Their work to define a female literary tradition has been groundbreaking. Along with many other feminist literary critics, Gilbert and Gubar were responsible for the recovery of long neglected women writers. In addition, they developed interpretive strategies that enabled us to read and understand women writers in new and valuable ways. But their work, and that of many other feminist literary critics of their generation, has not been without major flaws. While admirable, the assiduous efforts of Gilbert and Gubar as well as most other American feminist literary critics to bring women writers "into the sisterhood" are also reductive.¹

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Gilbert and Gubar insist, for example, that the most important fiction of Willa Cather and Edith Wharton "dramatized their discontent with what they saw as a crippling but inexorable feminization of women" (1989, xii). Nevertheless, the two critics go on to assert that "despite all [the] evidence that Edith Wharton was neither in theory nor in practice a feminist, her major fictions, taken together, constitute perhaps the most searching--and searing--feminist analysis of the construction of 'femininity' produced by any novelist in this century" (1989, 128).

The chief problem with this analysis of Wharton, Cather, and other women writers--and a problem that is characteristic of much American feminist literary criticism--is its absolute insistence that every woman writer is a nascent feminist engaged in either covert or overt subversion of the patriarchy. Such a reductive clinging to the unified story of female oppression limits feminist literary criticism in significant ways. It becomes impossible to recognize, among other things, the ways in which women writers are products of as well as protestors against their society. A second significant flaw in No Man's Land--and other works like it--lies, not with the women writers Gilbert and Gubar include, but with the ones they omit. For example, in the almost 650 pages these critics devote to twentieth-century women writers in their two volume book, they mention Jessie Fauset, a Harlem Renaissance novelist of the same generation as Cather

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and Wharton, only once: they promise that she will figure in the third volume of No Man's Land, which has yet to appear. Like Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers, two other feminist critics writing in the late 1970s, Gilbert and Gubar employ interpretive strategies that are based on notions of personal experience. Such strategies apparently make it difficult for them to critique a woman writer unlike themselves (white, middle class, well educated). Women writers like Jessie Fauset thus become invisible in the new, feminist canon just as they had been in the old, traditional one. Critical blindspots such as these, which riddle American feminist literary criticism, constitute the subject of "Resisting the Readings: New Feminist Interpretive Strategies for Cather, Wharton, and Fauset."

In an attempt to understand how the interpretive strategies favored by feminist literary critics evolved, Chapter One, "The American Feminist Interpretive Community," examines the history of feminist literary criticism. Chapter Two, "Re-Reading the Feminist Interpretive Community," critiques the interpretive strategies employed by the feminist community and proposes new interpretive strategies that can be applied to women's writing in order to correct the problematic readings which continue to characterize feminist literary criticism. Chapters Three, Four, and Five use Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and Jessie Fauset as examples of the ways feminist literary criticism has

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historically dealt with women writers as well as examples of the way new interpretive strategies can revolutionize a feminist understanding of women writers and readers. In an attempt to provide resisting readings of these three important American women writers who have been variously addressed by feminist critics, this study offers rereadings of selected works by Cather, Wharton, and Fauset. As I conduct resisting readings of the texts, I attempt to resist not only the novels themselves, but also the previous readings of them. The study undertakes, that is, to use Cather, Wharton, and Fauset criticism as the basis for a critique of the limits of current feminist approaches to women's writing. While it seeks to expose some of the blindspots of feminist critical practice in the field of American studies, its ultimate aim is to elaborate new interpretive strategies whereby American feminist literary criticism might become more responsive to postmodern critiques of subjectivity.

Chapter Three begins by tracing the critical reception of Willa Cather in an attempt to demonstrate how interpretive communities that do not share a feminist commitment to what Elizabeth Meese has called the "discourse of liberation" have nevertheless shaped feminist readings of women's writing. For example, Cather's earliest critics were intent on proving her "Americanness" and focused most of their critical attention on her prairie novels. Given the claims of

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originality feminist critics often make, it is ironic that their selection criteria are so highly influenced by Cather's male critics from the 1940s and 1950s, who, like the feminist interpretive community, analyzed My Antonia more than any other Cather novel. A resisting reading of that novel reveals ways the feminist interpretive community has overlooked Cather's overriding concern with racial, national, and sexual "difference," and the way it stunts success in her fictional world. Moving on to her most neglected novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, a resisting reading illuminates equally disturbing aspects of Cather's oeuvre that feminist interpretive strategies have not allowed us to recognize.

Chapter Four, which takes as its subject Edith Wharton, begins with an attempt to demonstrate how the degree of acceptance afforded a woman writer by the male critical establishment influences her treatment at the hands of the feminist interpretive community. Unlike Cather, who was fully embraced, Wharton has always had an ambivalent relationship with the critical establishment. Consequently, feminist critics have found it slightly easier to resist her fiction. The chapter also further develops the idea that many of the interpretive strategies traditionally employed by feminist literary critics subvert, rather than promote, the feminist interpretive community's effort to contribute to the "discourse of liberation." For example, feminist Wharton scholars who persist in defining Lily Bart as a unilateral

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victim participate in the patriarchal gesture of denying female agency. By providing resisting readings of The House of Mirth and The Mother's Recompense this chapter demonstrates how postmodern critical strategies can successfully be appropriated for the feminist study of women writers.

Chapter Five is a study of Jessie Fauset, a woman writer whose name is seldom recognized despite the fact that she was one of the most important and influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance. As I have suggested, her neglect is due in part to the fact that the feminist critical community has not yet developed interpretive strategies that allow us to sufficiently examine the complicated interactions of race, class, and gender in the work of women writers. Thus, as this chapter demonstrates, the primary task of becoming resisting readers of Jessie Fauset lies in resisting the tendency to advocate connection between text or author and reader without questioning the assumptions such connections make about what constitutes women writers and women readers. This chapter provides resisting readings of four works by Jessie Fauset: The Sleeper Wakes, There is Confusion, Plum Bun, and The Chinaberry Tree.

The most important theoretical assumption of this study is that it is necessary for the feminist interpretive community to fully theorize its interpretive strategies and capitalize upon a self-conscious awareness of its own

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NOTES

¹In Feminist Literary History (New York: Routledge, 1988) Janet Todd observes this phenomenon in the treatment of Jane Austen by the feminist interpretive community: "In the beginning of the feminist critical enterprise there was considerable effort to bring Jane Austen into the useable female past . . . to bring her into the sisterhood" (100).

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Interpretive Communities

All readers, whether they acknowledge it or not, belong to at least one, if not more than one, interpretive community. The innocent, objective reader does not exist; "he" is a myth. Furthermore, no interpretive community stands alone, bravely and gloriously insulated from the literary heresies surrounding or preceding it. Rather, all interpretive communities are, at some level, related and indebted to each other. The American feminist interpretive community is especially interesting in this respect.¹ Feminist critics differ in their affiliations with other interpretive communities; hence, a single, monolithic feminist interpretive community cannot be said to exist. However, there are numerous similarities among American feminist literary critics, and this study will attempt to examine and critique the interpretive strategies shared by

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Coming into its own in the 1970s and closely connected to the socio-political women's movement of that era, feminist literary criticism has always purported to be unique and distinctive, a response and reaction to what it has described as the mainstream, patriarchal literary criticism that dominated English departments prior to its emergence. In many ways, feminist literary criticism was, and still is today, highly colored by its own unique agenda originating in that women's liberation movement. In other distinctive and relatively unexamined ways the feminist interpretive community inevitably carries within it many of the prejudices and assumptions of those interpretive communities out of which it arose and which have continued to influence it since its emergence.

For the purposes of this analysis I intend to rely on a definition of the term "interpretive community" that is as simple and as inclusive as possible.² It is my hope that in this way I will be able both to explore and to expose aspects of American feminist literary criticism which have remained hidden by less contextual studies without encountering some of the problems of vagueness or omission that a more complicated or exclusive definition of interpretive community might pose. An interpretive community is a group of readers who share similar ideological repertoires as well as similar

interpretive strategies. These three elements are interconnected and mutually constitutive: interpretive communities construct ideology, which constructs interpretive strategies, which in turn construct interpretive communities. I do think it is necessary, however, to regard interpretive communities as literally as possible. In her book Essentially Speaking Diana Fuss suggests that feminist critics need to "theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak and, simultaneously . . . deconstruct those spaces to keep them from solidifying" (118). In addressing the question of whether autonomous, individual readers (specifically in the case of this project women readers who are feminists) read ontological texts (specifically texts by women writers) I think it is imperative to begin by theorizing an essentialist space in which we are free to grant a priori status to both readers and to texts.³ Part of this project, however, will entail deconstructing that very space in order to reveal how feminist interpretive communities have operated on texts by women writers in the past as well as to indicate how, as feminist readers, we might begin to analyze such texts in the future.

Membership in an interpretive community is usually constituted by that group's self-definition and by recognition on the part of individual members that they belong. However, because all interpretive communities are not located within the academy and thus may not have

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developed the same sense of self-consciousness that literary scholars typically possess, this self-definition may not be constituted in a uniform way. In other words, according to my definition of interpretive community, women who habitually read nothing but romance novels clearly constitute an interpretive community in spite of the fact that unlike academicians they do not publish manifestoes or hold conferences. One general rule of thumb that is especially useful for identifying interpretive communities is to apply the criteria suggested by Janice Radway: members of an interpretive community all "select, use, and operate on printed texts in certain socially specific ways" (1984, 55).⁴ Hence, an analysis of an interpretive community will entail an examination of the social, historical, and cultural forces which shape the group. In addition, it is crucial to remember that an individual reader may belong to more than one interpretive community at a time. It is imperative that we acknowledge that individual interpretive communities do not and cannot operate independently of one another.

The fact that all interpretive communities are related will become a central feature in my analysis of how the feminist interpretive community functions. In speaking of language, M. M. Bakhtin claims that because it is not a "neutral medium" it cannot pass "freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions" (294). This is because before words are ever uttered they have been colored,

or as Bakhtin puts it "overpopulated," by the intentions of the people who have used the words in the past (294). The same may be said of the interpretive strategies employed by individual readers within interpretive communities. All readers encounter texts through the screen of the previous readings of those texts by members of their own as well as other interpretive communities. Even when a specific text has never before been read, its first readers encounter it through the grid of their own interpretive strategies and, perhaps to a lesser degree, those of other interpretive communities. Interpretive strategies are never neutral, and neither are they unique to their respective communities. Once again, Bakhtin provides a way for us to articulate this phenomenon: "There are no 'neutral' words and forms--words and forms that can belong to 'no one'; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents" (293). The same may be said of interpretive strategies and interpretive communities; private ownership of interpretive strategies by interpretive communities is as impossible as private ownership of words.

While we can certainly imagine an "Ur" interpretive community--the first readers of the first words--it is impossible to define their "intentions and accents." Nevertheless, all subsequent readers have brought with them, in some form or other, the interpretive strategies of that original community. In other words, at some point the

individual beliefs or ideologies of some members of the "Ur" community evolved so radically that they no longer found their former interpretive strategies acceptable. As a result, they formed a second interpretive community. This new community inevitably carried with it many "intentions and accents" appropriated from the "Ur" community. Thus, it becomes clear that Bakhtin's claim that the "word in language is half someone else's" can be extended to the interpretive strategies a community employs. Leaping many generations into the present, we can easily find contemporary examples of this phenomenon. The interpretive strategies of the deconstructive interpretive community did not spring like Athena from the head of Derrida. Rather, they evolved as Derrida and other critics like him seized upon the structuralist interpretive community's attention to binary oppositions and then attempted to demonstrate how such oppositions ultimately dismantle themselves. In some respects, one could object that the structuralist interpretive community already contained the deconstructionist interpretive community within it. The interpretive strategies employed by each group are quite different, however, and the self-definition of members belonging to each group are distinctive. We can therefore regard structuralism and deconstruction as two separate interpretive communities which nevertheless illustrate the connections between all interpretive communities.

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A second related objection to which these observations may give rise is that if all interpretive communities are connected, then we do not need to theorize them individually. It is important, however, to stress that while there are deep and profound similarities between interpretive communities, there are also radical differences which must be recognized because they lead to the significant differences between the interpretive strategies employed by members of each group. Even more importantly, it is clear that while these profound similarities between and among interpretive communities exist in theory, in practice they are seldom, if ever, acknowledged. Consequently, interpretive communities are incapable of fully theorizing their own interpretive practices because they are blind to their origins. I believe it is necessary to stress the interconnectedness of all interpretive communities because a failure to do so results in a false sense of isolation and uniqueness on the part of individual critics. Such insufficient theorization leads to textual readings that are unable to acknowledge many of the "intentions and accents" that produced them. For example, when feminist literary critics, ignoring completely the many fully developed immigrant characters in My Antonia, focus exclusively on Antonia and Jim Burden in their studies of Willa Cather's novel, they are unable to recognize the ways they are simply following in the footsteps of the New Critics who first called the novel a "masterpiece" in the 1940s.

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It is important that we view the interconnectedness of interpretive communities not as something to be overcome, however, but rather as something that, when recognized, will facilitate and enrich understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer articulates this beautifully in Truth and Method (1960, 1991):

The important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us. (297)

The more we illuminate the "continuity" of interpretive strategies between interpretive communities, the more fully we will understand our own understanding. Gadamer believes that readers bring their own biases, or what he calls "fore-meanings," with them to the texts they read, but he also realizes that each reading of a text is influenced by the readings that have preceded it. Consequently, although he does not utilize the term "interpretive communities" Gadamer is acutely aware of how all readings are interconnected.⁵ In Philosophical Hermeneutics (1976) he explains, "It seems to me that there can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future" (9). According to Gadamer, whether or not

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individuals have read historical (or traditional) texts, those texts have contributed to that person's identity. In other words, Gadamer argues that interpretive communities are products of the readings that have preceded them and are thus interconnected (1960, 340).

The feminist interpretive community has been especially guilty of failing to acknowledge its debt to other interpretive communities, and thus has sometimes failed to recognize its own interpretive strategies. One way contemporary feminist literary critics can avoid reproducing such failures is to utilize reader response criticism. Reader response criticism and Stanley Fish's theories of interpretive communities give us necessary tools for understanding how the feminist interpretive community operates. A common complaint about reader response criticism is that it is descriptive, in the sense that it attempts to explain what people do when they read, rather than prescriptive, in the sense that it tells us how we should read.⁶ But it is crucial to understand what we "naturally" do as we read as members of an interpretive community before we move on to try to develop a prescription for a better kind of reading. Otherwise we will never be able to correct any of the flaws already existing in our critical reading system. In the ensuing analysis I shall attempt to show that those flaws are legion, but correctable, in the feminist interpretive community.

American Feminist Literary Criticism

Analyzing the history of feminist literary criticism might seem a redundant task if one considers the many detailed books and articles on the topic that have emerged in recent years.⁷ Previous attempts to explore and define feminist literary criticism have made valuable contributions to our understanding of this movement, but these works have for the most part failed to situate feminist literary criticism within the larger critical culture. By examining the literary criticism written by feminists since the 1970s as the product of a feminist interpretive community, it is possible to look at such work contextually. In one of the first works of feminist literary criticism, Sexual Politics (1970), Kate Millett called for critics to take into account "the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced" (xiv). The time has come to take this project one step further and examine feminist literary criticism in the context of the social, historical, and cultural forces that shape it. If we look at feminist literary criticism as the product of an interpretive community, we will be able to recognize how the "intentions and accents" of the women's liberation movement as well as a variety of schools of literary criticism have shaped the interpretive strategies employed by the feminist literary critics who have, in Jonathan Culler's words, "mastered the system" (1975, 120).

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In the following pages, I shall attempt such an analysis. In order to contextualize my own critique of American feminist criticism I shall first briefly trace the history of its development.

The connections between the women's liberation movement and the feminist interpretive community were not openly acknowledged by most early feminist literary critics. Because Elaine Showalter has been involved in tracing the history of feminist literary criticism almost from its inception, it seems worthwhile to examine her construction of its development. Showalter divides feminist literary criticism into two branches: the study of literature written about women--"feminist critique"--and the study of literature written by women--"gynocritics" (1979, 128). While in "Toward a Feminist Poetics" Showalter acknowledges the importance of approaching women's literature with "historical awareness," she does not seem to admit to much "historical awareness" with respect to her own critical project. She briefly mentions that there are "activists" practicing feminist literary criticism, but she does not trace the connections between these theorists and the the women's liberation movement (1979, 127). Showalter thus effectively de-historicizes the project of feminist literary criticism, and most critics following her have perpetuated this blindness.

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literary criticism," like Showalter, she does not situate feminist literary criticism within its activist context in her attempt to describe its development (1980, 163). Rather, in "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism" (1980), she illuminates what she regards as the important achievements of the school. According to Kolodny, the most important achievement of feminist literary criticism has been to call into question "that dog-eared myth of intellectual neutrality" (1980, 163). Interestingly, while Kolodny seems unwilling to explore many of the assumptions and prejudices that shape feminist literary criticism itself and prevent it from achieving a so-called neutrality, she does suggest that feminist literary criticism is indebted to other critical methodologies. Kolodny calls for a constructive use of these other theories: "Our task is to initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism, responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none, recognizing that the many tools needed for our analysis will necessarily be largely inherited and only partly of our own making" (1980, 161). Ultimately, Kolodny's position, while not initiating a contextual exploration of feminist literary criticism, does suggest an early awareness of the usefulness of such a project.

In 1984 Elaine Showalter returned again to the subject of the history of feminist literary criticism in her essay

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"Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism." This essay is particularly interesting because of its attention to the "professionalization" of feminist literary criticism and because of Showalter's shift towards seeing feminist literary criticism contextually. Instead of posing a traditional approach to the study of its history, Showalter suggests that critics should emphasize the relationships between women which resulted in feminist literary criticism and implies thereby that the relationship between feminist literary criticism and the women's liberation movement which gave rise to it would be a fruitful one to explore (1984, 31). It becomes even more clear that this is her purpose when she describes the intimate relationship between her own activism and her literary criticism:

It was not until I joined the women's liberation movement in the spring of 1969 and began to teach a course on women and literature, that the personal became the critical, and that my passionate interest in women's writing began to define itself as feminist criticism. It was not isolation, discrimination, radical politics, the structuralist controversy, or an Oedipal rebellion against Cleanth Brooks that made women feminist critics, but the polemical force, activist commitment, powerful analysis, and sense of mutual endeavor that came out of the women's movement. (1984, 34)

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It seems reasonable to wonder why Showalter suddenly began to advocate an analysis of the relationship between the women's liberation movement and feminist literary criticism after ignoring that relationship for over a decade. The answer becomes obvious a few pages later when she observes, "If in its origins feminist criticism derived more from feminism than from criticism, we could argue that today the situation is reversed" (1984, 36). Showalter plaintively observes that some women (and even some men) are coming to feminist literary criticism without earning their union card through feminist activism. Showalter seems blissfully unaware that she is at least partially to blame for this state of affairs. Her insistence, and that of others like her, on suppressing the ideological connections between women's liberation and feminist literary criticism in the early articulations of feminist literary theory made it easier for other interpretive communities to appropriate the interpretive strategies of the feminist interpretive community. It also made it possible for feminists themselves to ignore important connections.

Pierre Macherey has observed that "the language of ideology" is always hidden in a literary text, and the critic's job is to look for the gaps and silences which are "eloquent by [their] very absence" (60). Certainly, as we look back with a critical eye upon the attempts of the American feminist interpretive community to articulate its

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history we cannot help but notice that, with the exception of Showalter's rather unusual essay, there is an "eloquent" absence of any reference to the women's liberation movement. This silence, it seems to me, points towards the powerful shaping force the ideology of women's liberation had upon feminist literary criticism. It was a power too strong to be articulated, a power which can only be revealed through its absence. Showalter, Kolodny, and other important feminists buried the connection between the women's liberation movement and feminist literary criticism at a time when many more people than today were openly hostile to the aims and ideology of women's liberation. These critics no doubt found it necessary to downplay the connection between feminist literary criticism and feminism. But by 1984, with an audience which was more aware of, and perhaps more sympathetic towards the women's liberation project, Showalter may have felt that she could address the connections more directly. Additionally, as she herself observes, by 1984 when "Women's Time, Women's Space" first appeared, feminist literary criticism had gained considerable status in the academy and could perhaps afford making its connections to a still somewhat unpopular and misunderstood political movement more overt. One of the goals of this study is to continue Showalter's efforts to foreground the way the women's liberation movement has shaped the interpretive strategies of the feminist interpretive community.

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Although many fine histories of feminist literary criticism exist, no critic has adequately contextualized the feminist interpretive community.⁸ If we are to forge ahead in the project of feminist literary criticism, we must adequately understand our past. In my quest to explore feminist literary criticism as the product of a group of readers who share similar ideological repertoires as well as similar interpretive strategies, I intend to emphasize what I consider to be the two most important facets of the feminist interpretive community: the political agenda that has shaped feminist interpretive strategies and the other interpretive communities which have influenced the criticism. I believe that more attention needs to be paid to how the women's liberation movement constructed the feminist interpretive community both in the early years when the connection was more overt and in more recent years when that connection has been, for various reasons which deserve exploration, more covert. In addition, as feminist literary critics, we must pay more attention to the identities of individual members of the feminist interpretive community. By this I mean our identities with respect to our traditional roles as lovers, wives, mothers, and caretakers; our radical efforts to revise or reject these roles; as well as our identities as professional readers, scholars, teachers, and critics. The way these roles shape the feminist interpretive community and the interpretive strategies it employs are crucial. We also

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need to explore how feminist literary critics are taught to construct their readings of texts and how our educational backgrounds shape our own community. In this way we will illuminate ways other interpretive communities shape the feminist one. We also need to think about how the feminist interpretive community "selects, uses, and operates on" texts. Why are feminists involved in the study of literature? What do we use texts for in both our classrooms and in our scholarship? What do we think texts can do? If we thoroughly understand these factors, we will be able to move forward and reshape the feminist interpretive community in such a way that we make productive and life-giving changes where necessary while still preserving the best and most essential features of the project of feminist literary criticism. Obviously, this is a complicated metacritical project.

The first step towards defining feminist literary criticism as the product of an interpretive community involves, it seems to me, identifying how individual members of that community construct their self-definition and recognize their common ties. In general, feminist literary critics possess a high degree of self-consciousness with respect to their unique academic project. However, they tend not to possess the same kind of awareness regarding the historical context of that project. Turning to some of their proclamations will, I believe, reveal not only the grounds

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for "the simple knowing" on the part of feminists that they are members of an interpretive community, but will also reveal some of the hidden ideological and critical constructs behind the interpretive strategies employed by feminist literary critics.

Kate Millett, one of the first practitioners of feminist literary criticism and the person to whom all historians refer as a foremother, does not use the phrase "feminist literary criticism" to label her project. She calls the as-yet unnamed theory "something of an anomaly, a hybrid, possibly a new mutation altogether" (xiv). Two years later in an anthology entitled Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives (1972), Susan Koppelman Cornillon does not name the new interpretive community either but observes that the essays contained in the anthology constitute "new forms of analysis" and "new directions for women in reading and understanding fiction" (x). In that same anthology, Fraya Katz-Stoker comes closer to naming and defining the feminist interpretive community:

In seeking to destroy patriarchal ideology in order to better the position of women in society, feminist criticism is a political act. Feminist criticism is a materialist approach to literature which attempts to do away with the formalist illusion that literature is somehow divorced from the rest of reality. (326)

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In a very short period of time feminist literary criticism was becoming defined as an alternative to other critical approaches--something radically different that could correct centuries of literary misreadings and literal oppression.

In 1975 Josephine Donovan edited an anthology entitled Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory. This collection of five essays was one of the first systematic and self-conscious attempts to define feminist literary criticism and articulate the direction such criticism was beginning to take. Donovan's position statement for the feminist interpretive community is clear and concise:

Feminists believe that women have been locked off in a condition of lesser reality by the dominant patriarchal attitudes and customs of our culture. We find these attitudes and customs reified in the institutions of literature and literary criticism. Feminist critics--like feminists in every area--are engaged in negating these reifications. (74)

As far as Donovan and the other critics collected in Feminist Literary Criticism were concerned, the project of feminist literary criticism was nothing more and nothing less than to effect a radical corrective of the position women hold not only in literary texts but also in society.

A decade after the appearance of Donovan's pioneering collection, Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn edited a collection of essays in which they wrote, "Feminist literary

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critics attend to the collusion between literature and ideology, focusing on the ways ideology is inscribed within literary forms, styles, conventions, genres and the institutions of literary production" (5). The emphasis in the self-definition has shifted in subtle ways away from the oppression of individual women to the more abstract concept of ideology. The essays collected in Elaine Showalter's 1985 anthology The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory posit several definitions of feminist literary criticism. Even the title of the collection is interesting in respect to its definition of the literary movement, as it seems to be differentiating the literary criticism contained in the book from that articulated a decade earlier by critics like Donovan. The major difference, it seems to me between Showalter's "new" feminist criticism and the "old" criticism of the 1970s seems to be its vocabulary rather than its substance. Whereas Donovan called outright for a "politically motivated" criticism, Showalter modifies her demands as she writes, "The task of feminist critics is to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate our intelligence and our experience, our reason and our suffering, our skepticism and our vision" (141-142).

In some respects one might say self-definitions of feminist literary critics in the 1980s grew more sophisticated as feminist critics adopted the language of

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more traditional critical schools. Feminist literary criticism of the late 1980s and early 90s has clearly moved farther and farther away, at least with respect to its public rhetoric, from the notion of "negating reifications" of the patriarchy to questioning, in Catherine R. Stimpson's words, "the very language in which we now articulate" feminist commitments (5). It has become increasingly more difficult to define or label the feminist interpretive community as the community itself has lost some of its earlier confidence in the ability of language ever to define or label. I believe, nevertheless, that such a project must be undertaken if feminist literary criticism is to continue to remain true to its original purpose.

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Feminist Literary Criticism and Women's Liberation

In order to clarify what that purpose is, we must examine the connections between feminist literary criticism and the women's liberation movement. A great deal of literature was produced in the late 1960s and the early 1970s dealing with the women's liberation movement.⁹ And since that time several informative histories have been written.¹⁰ In trying to capture the essence of that momentous period of change in the history of the United States, I shall rely in part on Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement (1970). Robin Morgan edited this anthology, wrote its introduction, and does an admirable job of analyzing a movement at whose center she exists. The central truth of the women's liberation movement is, according to Morgan, that "no matter what we are, say, do, or believe, there is no getting away from the shared, primary oppression of being female in a patriarchal world" (xxxv). The primary force for change in the women's liberation movement is personal experience: "Women's liberation is the first radical movement to base its politics--in fact, create its politics--out of concrete personal experiences" (Morgan xvii). The insistence that women rely on their own personal experience as an oppressed population echoes through Morgan's introduction as well as through all of the contributions to her anthology. She asserts, "We've learned that [concrete

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personal] experiences are not our private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman, and are therefore political" (xviii). Personal responsibility is crucial. In her ringing conclusion Morgan leaves no doubt that her goal is evangelical:

I hope this book means something to you, makes some real change in your heart and head . . . This is not a movement one "joins." There are no rigid structures or membership cards. The Women's Liberation Movement exists . . . in your mind, and in the political and personal insights that you can contribute to change and shape and help its growth. (xxxvi)

The repetition of the words "change" and "personal experience" in Morgan's introduction illuminates the core of the new feminism out of which feminist literary criticism arose.

The idea that "consciousness raising" and change are central to women's liberation emerges everywhere throughout its literature. In the introduction to Woman in Sexist Society (1971) the editors argue that "To recognize the political nature of woman's condition, to see that it constitutes one-half of a binding relation of power to powerlessness . . . is vital to any understanding of women's liberation and of the women's liberation movement" (Gornick x-xi). Recognition was to be immediately followed by revolution. In her book The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for

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Feminist Revolution (1970) Shulamith Firestone proclaimed the aim of the new feminism: "overthrow of the oldest, most rigid caste/class system in existence, the class system based on sex" (16). The women's liberation movement operated under several assumptions that were, at least in these early works, rarely hidden. First, feminists believed that women were systematically discriminated against under the male-dominated social system (patriarchy). Second, they agreed that this system needed to be changed.¹¹ Third, they maintained that before the system could be changed women needed to recognize their own personal experience of oppression. And, finally, feminists had faith that once recognition was sufficiently achieved, women could successfully overthrow the patriarchy.

There can be no doubt that the feminist interpretive community initially evolved through a connection between this political movement and literary critics. And many of the early feminist literary critics were fully conscious of these connections as they made them central to their literary criticism. In 1971 Lillian S. Robinson flatly observed, "Feminist criticism, as its name implies, is criticism with a Cause, engaged criticism" (21). In 1972 Nancy Burr Evans declared that women readers needed to move beyond "identification through mutual oppression" to "awakening" and "action" (311). Florence Howe's essay "Feminism and Literature" (1972) is a good example of the self-consciousness many early feminist literary critics possessed

with regards to their connections to the women's liberation movement. Howe draws upon the women's liberation movement's emphasis on personal experience as she states that the initial connection between feminism and literature exists "in our consciousness about our lives" (255). In an autobiographical sketch Howe traces a direct line between her "political consciousness" about her own life, her political activism on behalf of herself as well as blacks in Mississippi, her efforts to change her classroom, and the resulting literary criticism, of which this essay is a prime example (260). In an attempt to demonstrate the way feminist literary criticism functions, Howe describes a group of women reading Kate Chopin's novel The Awakening who come to "recognize their relationship to Edna and [draw] strength, not despair, from it" (274). The strength they draw, according to Howe, lies not merely in recognition or "consciousness raising," but also in the fact that "from a feminist's point of view, literature has a significant social function for the future" (267). This social function is to effect societal as well as personal change, a cornerstone of women's liberation thinking. Two ways Howe believes this change can be effected is by the discovery of more role models for women readers and by the creation of literary histories that include women (276).

Three years after Howe's essay appeared, Marcia Holly's important article "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a

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Feminist Aesthetic" was published in Donovan's collection, **Feminist Literary Criticism**. If anything, Holly is even more conscious than Howe of the connections between women's liberation and feminist literary criticism. Holly insists that "accurate criticism" can only be achieved after "consciousness-raising": "In order to recognize sexual stereotyping and authenticity in a literary work, we must first bring to a conscious level our own fundamental and perhaps erroneous beliefs about the nature, character, and destiny of women" (40). Before feminist critics can begin to examine literary texts, according to Holly, they must examine themselves. Holly is explicit about the political nature of "most thoughtful communication," including literary criticism. She insists that feminist literary criticism is not only political, but it is also revolutionary because it attempts to change society: "For this reason, our work has become integrally bound with our lives; and because we are involved in changing our lives, in discovering alternatives for women, our criticism is not abstract--it is immediate, concrete, emergent, even unpolished" (46). Like Howe, Holly believes that feminist literary criticism ultimately must help women achieve the goals of women's liberation. Another early feminist literary critic, Cheri Register, was even more blunt than Howe or Holly in her insistence that the women's liberation movement and feminist literary criticism are integrally related. Register suggests that the woman reader

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"compare the problems encountered by female literary characters with her own . . . explain similarities in terms of causes . . . and decide on appropriate political action" (24). Many early feminist literary critics shared the belief of Marxist critics that political action and change should be the ultimate goals of literary criticism.

A question we must ask, I believe, is why by the late 1970s feminist literary critics were no longer insisting in their writings that the work of literary criticism is to effect political change. The connections between women's liberation and feminist literary criticism seem to grow increasingly abstract, and the reason for this change is a matter of some contention among feminists as well as other literary critics. Toril Moi accuses Holly, a critic who deemed herself revolutionary, of being a naive humanist who cannot recognize her own collusion with the patriarchy (8). On the other side of the debate Nina Baym expresses her hostility towards critics like Moi and complains that "feminist theory addresses an audience of prestigious male academics and attempts to win its respect" (1984, 45). While both accusations are at least in part valid, the resolution to the debates taking place in feminist literary criticism between critics like Moi and Baym is complicated. While feminist literary criticism must always address the dual goals of illumination and change, it is important to recognize that this commitment can be expressed differently

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by different feminist literary critics within the feminist interpretive community. If we think of feminist literary criticism as the product of an interpretive community, we must realize that it has never operated in a vacuum. Rather, it arose out of other interpretive communities and continues to be influenced by them to this day. Like any other interpretive community, it too is constantly reshaping its interpretive strategies. It is not enough to restrict our analysis of the feminist interpretive community to questions of women's liberation. Early feminist literary critics as well as those operating today are much more than simply women with awakened consciousnesses. In order to fully understand how the feminist interpretive community functions we must explore some of the other aspects that construct it, including the ways in which other interpretive communities have shaped it.

Although the women's liberation movement has often been accused of being a movement of middle-class white women, from the beginning it did manage to encompass a certain amount of cultural and class diversity. While many black women directed their energies towards race equality rather than sexual equality, there was nothing inherent in feminism preventing minority women (or poor women) from recognizing their oppression under the patriarchy and thus participating in the political struggle to overthrow it. Feminist literary criticism, on the other hand, while it emerged as a result of

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the women's liberation movement, was not as egalitarian as its founding sister. In order to practice feminist literary criticism, critics had first to be trained literary scholars. This implies a certain amount of class privilege. Literary scholars typically have the means and the leisure to spend many years as students. Then after graduating, even feminist literary scholars usually spend their lives in the "ivory tower," somewhat secluded from the marches and picket lines of the women's liberation movement. Being paid to read books and talk about them constitutes a "privilege" of which most people in the world can only dream. We must always remember that literary critics, including members of the feminist interpretive community, belong to an elite class. As members of this elite class of literary scholars, many first generation feminist literary critics, including Florence Howe, Elaine Showalter, and Josephine Donovan, received doctoral degrees before they began to practice feminist literary criticism. It thus seems a worthwhile project to examine the other interpretive communities that influenced these early critics and then expand this exploration to include the interpretive communities that continue to influence the feminist interpretive community today.

Many of the early feminist literary critics received their formal academic training in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the New Criticism was firmly entrenched in the academy by this time, these young women were no doubt also

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taught by professors who did not subscribe to its tenets. Gerald Graff defines such pre-New Critical scholars by using Stanley Fish's adjective "anti-professional": "These anti-professionals looked back for inspiration to Victorians like Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, seeing literature as a moral and spiritual force and a repository of 'general ideas' which could be applied directly to the conduct of life and the improvement of the national culture" (6). Wayne C. Booth names this kind of criticism "ethical criticism" and calls it "the most important of all forms of criticism" (44). It is clear that at least some of the early feminist literary critics were practicing a kind of "ethical criticism." They too viewed literature as the repository of social norms, but they felt that these norms were badly in need of reformation. The primary objective of the feminist interpretive community, coming out of the women's liberation movement, was to change society. If these critics had seen literature as having no objective power, if they had not thought it could do something to influence the real lives of real women, they would not have concerned themselves with it. It is clear that at least the early feminist literary critics shared the Arnoldian confidence that literature influences and shapes the minds and consequently the behavior of those who read it. Unlike Arnold, however, they saw that the influence of literature could sometimes be negative.

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These feminist literary critics attributed their confidence in the power of literature to the way they had been taught to read. Marcia Holly writes, "Hadn't we been taught, after all, that literature is humanist, that it shows the authenticity of lives, of personal psychology, of social interaction?" (38). Susan Koppelman Cornillon agrees that readers "[look] to literature, and especially fiction, for answers, for models, for clues to the universal questions of who we are or might become" and suggests that feminist literary criticism is necessary in order to help women discover answers that are not always obvious in patriarchal texts (ix). Florence Howe goes so far as to suggest that "learning" is the fundamental purpose of reading literature (255). Speaking of Showalter, Moi observes, "she believes that a text should reflect the writer's experience, and that the more authentic the experience is felt to be by the reader, the more valuable the text" (4). This confidence that literature has power both to construct (false) realities and to change existing systems is an important aspect of all literary criticism evolving within the feminist interpretive community. Even the most postmodern or deconstructive feminist readings still contain traces of the "ethical critics'" confidence in the power of the text.

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Feminist Literary Criticism and Expressive Realism

Related, perhaps, to the impulse to grant texts power and authority inherited from the "Arnoldian" school of literary criticism is the impulse on the part of the feminist interpretive community to insist that texts display traits of "expressive realism." Because "expressive realism" is what Catherine Belsey calls a "commonsense position," it is difficult, if not impossible, to find any overt articulations on the part of feminist literary critics that they rely on this theory. Critics who possess expressive-realist presuppositions admire most works which depict life "truthfully"; for them the measure of a good work is how well it corresponds to the critic's own personal experience (Belsey 11). It is easy to see how the women's liberation movement with its emphasis on personal experience could translate itself into an expressive-realist approach to literature. For critics who subscribe to expressive-realist tenets, according to Belsey, "The text is seen as a way of arriving at something anterior to it: the convictions of the author, or his or her experience as part of that society at that particular time" (13). Quite often, for members of the feminist interpretive community, the text was seen as an instrument for understanding the reality of the position of women, either within the text or at the historical period in which the text was written or situated.

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Another unexpressed prejudice of the expressive-realist critics which the feminist interpretive community seemed to adopt was the tendency to see texts as single-faceted, expressing one solitary and coherent truth about the experience of women. Jonathan Culler calls this a tendency towards the "rule of unity" (1975, 230-38) and suggests that it causes readers to "naturaliz[e] the text and to ignor[e] or reduc[e] the strangeness of its gaps and silences" (232). Both the tendency towards "expressive realism" and the "rule of unity" emerge in the documents of early feminist literary criticism; several illustrative examples can be seen in the essays found in Donovan's collection Feminist Literary Criticism (1975). Marcia Holly asks that literature be "realistic," that it "go beyond inapplicable clichés to suggest authentic rather than apparent motivations" (43). As a result of this requirement, she also insists that literature must be analyzed "within the context of what is true about sex-traits and what are unthinking, myopic, and male-serving assumptions" (45). Cheri Register calls for a "prescriptive" feminist literary criticism that will "set standards for literature that is 'good' from a feminist viewpoint" (2). What is "good" (or "ethical") seems to be a story that illuminates the oppression of a woman under the patriarchy, and many feminist literary critics have worked diligently to demonstrate how often this pattern is repeated in literature.

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Feminist Literary Criticism and the New Criticism

Complicating and related to the feminist interpretive community's "anti-professional" prejudices and tendency towards "expressive realism" and the "rule of unity" was the strong presence of the New Critical interpretive community. Designed to counteract what critics saw as the excesses and "femininity" of the Arnoldian school, New Criticism explicitly contradicted many of the foundational tenets of the former school. And while the New Criticism itself ceased to be an "innovative and original School" by the late 1950s, it retained enormous power. As Vincent B. Leitch observes, "Often critics practicing New criticism . . . were unaware that they were doing so: the ideas and methods of the School had become so deeply embedded and broadly generalized among critics as to form the very essence of 'criticism'" (26). The feminist interpretive community was certainly not immune to New Criticism, and because its "ideas and methods" helped shape feminist interpretive strategies, they are worth a brief examination.

A concise and revealing analysis of New Criticism can be found in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (1974). There Cleanth Brooks sets forth the primary aim of this group of critics who hoped to "purify" literary criticism. According to Brooks, "the 'new critics' have characteristically attempted to deal with the literary object

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itself rather than with its origins and effects" (568). Brooks and other critics like him saw elements like the text's "origins and effects" as extrinsic to the study of literature and advised scholars to turn their full attention away from them and towards the "structure of a work" (568). In practice, the most distinguishing feature of New Criticism was its reliance on rigorous "close reading" of literary texts. According to Leitch, "the formalist readings of New Criticism reached completion when structural unity, balance, or harmony had been demonstrated. Numerous forces of tension, conflict, and divergence were processed to attain this moment of structuration" (31). Thus, the New Critics suppressed ambiguity in their readings as effectively as the most rigorous "expressive-realist" critic. Toril Moi has observed that "though American feminist critics from Kate Millett onwards have consistently argued against the New Critics's ahistoricism, this has not prevented them from uncritically adopting the aesthetic ideals of the very same New Critics" (47). This connection between the feminist interpretive community and New Criticism becomes particularly clear when one remarks, as does Moi, Annette Kolodny's recipe for a rigorous feminist aesthetic:

The overriding task of an intellectually vigorous feminist criticism as I see it, therefore, must be to school itself in rigorous methods for analyzing style and image and then without precondition or preconceived

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conclusions to apply those methodologies to individual works. Only then will we be able to train our students, and our colleagues, to read women writers properly, with greater appreciation for their individual aims and particular achievements (goals which I am convinced must structure any legitimate literary criticism, regardless of its subject). (1975, 50)

The political goals of the feminist interpretive community, however, were far removed from those of the New Critics. Within the category of "origins and effects" so despised by New Critics lie many of the things with which feminist literary critics are most concerned such as "sources," "social backgrounds," "the history of ideas," and "the political and social effects of literature" (Brooks 568). However, feminist literary critics were not overly concerned or cautious about appropriating the interpretive strategies of the New Critical community when necessary. And in many cases they were not even aware that such appropriations were being made. I believe it is only in retrospect that we can explore the ramifications of such adoptions, a project that will become clearer as I begin to explore feminist readings of Cather, Wharton, and Fauset in the following chapters.

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Feminist Literary Criticism and Postmodernism

These three strands--Arnoldian ethical criticism, expressionism, and New Criticism--are the most obvious examples of interpretive communities that shaped the feminist interpretive community from its beginnings. And in spite of the fact that these disparate schools actually contradict one another, they continue to shape the feminist interpretive community today. As the years have passed and other theoretical schools have taken center stage in the academy, they too have shaped the feminist interpretive community. Psychoanalytic criticism, Postmodernism, and French feminism have been particularly important. Charges like Nina Baym's in "The Madwoman and Her Languages" that feminist literary critics have merely adopted these new "isms" to impress male critics perhaps hold a grain of truth. Feminist literary critics, like all scholars, contend with the rigors of life in the academy, which include publication requirements. Scholarly journals publish "trendy," "current" articles; hence, some feminists may very well find themselves adopting critical stances they do not hold just to maintain their jobs. It is the nature of an interpretive community to adopt the best, or most useful, aspects of the ideas emerging within other contiguous communities. As Fish argues, interpretive communities never remain stagnant (1987, 429).

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One potentially important force shaping the feminist interpretive community is postmodernism. Interestingly, feminist literary critics have been rather slow to adopt this movement for their purposes. Although postmodernism by its very nature resists definition, it is important that we attempt to grasp its major tenets before exploring how it has already begun and might continue to influence the feminist interpretive community. Along with deconstructing the notion of truth, postmodernism calls into question the humanist confidence in subjectivity and the stability of the self. Just as truth is constructed, so is identity: "Human reality, for both sexes, is a construct" (Hutcheon 159). The radical potential of postmodernism for feminism is clear. As a construct rather than a "truth," patriarchy becomes immediately more vulnerable to deconstruction. And postmodernism gives us the vocabulary to describe the female subject as a "subject in history, subject to history and to his story" rather than as a universal subject (Hutcheon 177).

Feminist theorists have explored at length the potential of postmodernism for reshaping feminism.¹² Less attention, however, has been paid to how postmodernism can reshape the feminist interpretive community. Most postmodern feminists who analyze literary texts focus on contemporary texts which self-consciously address "the postmodern condition."¹³ Few have considered how we might apply postmodern analyses to modern or pre-modern texts by women writers or to ourselves

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as an interpretive community. One reason for this may be the power previous feminist readings of women's writing assert over the development of the feminist interpretive community. In addition, it is difficult to impose postmodern constructs on texts whose authors clearly possessed a modern or Enlightenment confidence in a unified subjectivity. Literary critics, including feminist literary critics, also may be reluctant to employ postmodern theories in their analysis because they erroneously believe that the postmodern project of questioning notions of "authorial originality and authority" eliminates the possibility of analyzing texts. But I believe the greatest reason for the hesitation on the part of feminist literary critics to incorporate postmodernism into their work is the difficulty many have in reconciling the feminist political project with postmodernism's skepticism about the centrality of individual experience. This issue must be addressed, rather than ignored, by the feminist interpretive community. As I turn to a critique of the feminist interpretive community and then eventually pose suggestions for ways to revise its interpretive strategies, postmodernism will play an increasingly central role in my discussion. What makes postmodernism especially important in an analysis of the feminist interpretive community is that it comprises a theoretical approach that can not only illuminate many of the flaws in the community as it currently stands but also open

the door for the kind of productive revisions that are necessary if the feminist interpretive community is to continue to thrive as a political and critical force in literary studies.

NOTES

¹The kind of feminist criticism to which I shall be referring throughout this dissertation is typically called "Anglo-American." However, as Janet Todd points out in Feminist Literary History (New York: Routledge, 1988) this is something of a misnomer when scholars make no references to British feminists in their examinations of Anglo-American feminism (73). Since I am dealing primarily with American feminists and since my goal is to contextualize these critics, I believe it is most appropriate to refer to the American feminist interpretive community rather than apply the more commonly used tag of "Anglo-American." When I do not specify "American feminism" or "American feminist interpretive community," it can be understood that this is the group to which I make reference.

²The term "interpretive community" as it is employed in this study is derived from Stanley Fish's definition in Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980). Fish claims, "interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies" (171). According to Fish this symbiotic relationship allows us to understand agreement: "members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals" (15). Members of an interpretive community are predisposed to arrive at agreement before they ever encounter a text because, as Fish asserts, "these strategies exist prior to the act of reading" (171). According to Fish, an interpretive community is made up of a group of individuals and the interpretive strategies they collectively employ.

³Of course, as Chris Weedon indicates in her book Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), it is important to remember that this "a priori status" is constructed in language: "Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation in language and language is not an abstract system, but is always socially and historically located in discourses" (41).

⁴In Reading the Romance (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1991) Janice Radway examines a group of habitual, "compulsive" romance readers. She has since described these women as members of an interpretive community in "American Studies, Reader Theory, and the Literary Text: From the Study of Material Objects to the Study of Social Processes," American Studies in Transition, ed. David Nye and Christen Kold Thomsen (Odense: Odense UP, 1985) 29-51 and "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading," Daedalus 113 (1984): 49-73.

⁵Steven Rendell suggests a connection between Fish and Gadamer in "Fish v. Fish," Diacritics 12 (1982): 49-56.

⁶Russell J. Reising argues the opposite in "Can Cultured Reading Read Culture?: Toward a Theory of Literary Incompetence," Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 10 (1991): 67-77. Reising objects that "For Fish, Culler, and Mailloux, the respective constructs of interpretive communities, literary competence, and interpretive conventions are not in any way natural or value-free, but are themselves constructs produced by and largely in the service of preserving or rationalizing a theoretical status quo" (69).

⁷See for example Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 144-167; Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Routledge, 1985); Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 125-143; Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 243-270; Elaine Showalter, "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism," Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 30-44; Janet Todd, Feminist Literary History (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁸Neither of the more important recent book-length studies of feminist literary theory--Toril Moi's Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Routledge, 1985) and Janet Todd's Feminist Literary History (New York: Routledge, 1988)--follow Showalter's somewhat tentative lead in examining the connections between feminist literary criticism and the women's liberation movement. These authors rather fall back on Showalter's earlier distinction between "feminist critique" and "gynocritics,"

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consequently erasing the social and historical forces shaping both branches of feminist literary criticism.

⁹See for example Jo Freeman, "The New Feminists," Nation 24 February 1969: 241-244; Casey Hayden and Mary King, "Sex and Caste," Liberation April 1966: 35-36; Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," New Left Review November/December 1966: 11-37; Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (New York: William Morrow, 1970). Important contemporary essays as well as an extensive bibliography can be found in Robin Morgan, ed., Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹⁰See for example Steven M. Buechler, Women's Movements in the United States (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1990); Marcia Cohen, The Sisterhood: The Inside Story of the Women's Movement and the Leaders Who Made It Happen (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988); Nancy F. Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1987); Sara Evans, Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Right's Movement and the New Left (New York: Knopf, 1979); Sara M. Evans, Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America (New York: The Free Press, 1989).

¹¹In Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), Alison M. Jaggar differentiates between four different versions of feminism: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism. These four types of feminism are most obviously different with respect to how they envision the changes society must necessarily make in order to accommodate feminism.

¹²See for example Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990); Elizabeth Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

¹³Hutcheon's book A Poetics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1988) is a good example of this as is her book Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1980). An equally fine example of a postmodern feminist literary critic dealing exclusively with contemporary texts is Elizabeth A. Meese's

book (Ex)Tensions: Re-Figuring Feminist Criticism (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990).

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CHAPTER TWO
RE-READING THE FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

Breaking the Connections:

Resisting Experience-Based Approaches to Women's Writing

The most important consequence of the intimate relationship between the feminist interpretive community and the women's liberation movement is the enormous emphasis early feminist literary critics placed upon personal experience. One of the rallying cries of the women's liberation movement was "the personal is political." However, a literary criticism based on personal experience does not necessarily lead to the kind of changes women like Robin Morgan envisioned. There are some severe problems with a theory that appeals to connections between "women's experiences" as they are expressed in a text and those felt by a reader. A feminist theory of women reading women's writing that advocates connection between text or author and reader without questioning the assumptions it makes about what constitutes women writers and women readers ultimately misrepresents every individual for whom it purports to speak. Postmodern feminist theorists remind us of one reason

uncomplicated connections like this cannot be made. Jane Flax speaks for many when she observes that "The single most important advance in feminist theory is that the existence of gender relations has been problematized. Gender can no longer be treated as a simple, a natural fact" (627). Acknowledging that "woman" is a socially defined term rather than a universal signified clearly will complicate any discussion of women writers, readers, or subjects, but a refusal to take our criticism in such a direction will ultimately curtail the feminist project by leaving many women out of the discussion.

As a consequence of acknowledging that "woman" is a socially defined term, critics are beginning to recognize that its definition varies over time. As a result of this realization some women's historians suggest that "social myths or stereotypes" may prevent us from understanding the actual behavior of women. Furthermore, these preconceptions prevent us from seeing that the signifier "woman" may have been "differently inflected," for example, for Victorians than it is for contemporary Americans (Greene and Kahn 17-18). According to Jane Flax, gender relations vary over time because "the structure of gender as a social category [is] shaped by the interactions of gender and other social relations," and these relations do not remain constant (624). Thus, it is deceptive to assume that "woman" is always understood in the same way. What defined a "woman" reader or

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a "woman" writer in the mid-nineteenth century may no longer apply to that category today. The feminist interpretive community, because of its desire to use literature to help women recognize their own oppression and then change their lives, often has suppressed or ignored aspects of traditional texts by women writers which precluded identification. In their desire to define relationships between women readers and writers or texts by women, they have neglected to consider important historical differences.

In addition to preventing readers from recognizing how their experiences did not conform to those of women represented in traditional texts because of the gaps between historical periods, the interpretive strategies of the feminist interpretive community have sometimes prevented readers from being able to see the variety of ways gender was experienced within the same historical time period. Categories like race and class interact with that of gender and cause it to be differently inflected for different people. Virginia Woolf considered the effect of poverty and wealth on the minds of women, and admitted that her experiences as a woman were highly colored by the fact that she had an independent income and a room of her own (4). Black feminist critics are quick to point out that their experiences as women should not be assumed to be identical to those of white women. bell hooks is representative of the many critics who argue that when the word "woman" is used it

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refers to white women, while the word "black" refers to black men (87-88). Valerie Smith points out that separating issues of gender, class, and race creates false dichotomies: "The meaning of blackness in [the United States] shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race" (47). Jane Flax observes that feminists often have difficulty recognizing differences between women, and illustrates this fact by contrasting Barbara Smith's understanding of "home" and that of some white middle-class women. Both groups erroneously assume the universality of their own conceptions (639). Ironically, reliance upon our own personal experiences often has blinded us to those of others. The powerful pull of the women's liberation movement's emphasis on personal experience has masked the crucial fact that different women, although they may live in the same historical period within the same society, experience being a woman differently.

Feminist critics since at least the early eighties have been alerting us to the dangers of refusing to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of the term "woman" and what we define as women's experience, although the connection between this experience-based critical tendency and the women's liberation movement has not been adequately explored. More recently, the discussion has shifted from a consideration of group identity to individual identity. Critics have been suggesting that individual women experience

and define their own positions as gendered subjects differently at different times in their lives. Nancy Fraser articulates this position in an essay entitled "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics" (1990). She contends that "no one is simply a woman." Rather, one has a multi-faceted identity which includes one's religion, race, class, political and philosophical ideology, and gender (84). When I am in church, the fact that I am a Christian may be more important to me than the fact that I am a woman, but when I try to justify to an unsympathetic course coordinator the inclusion of more female writers than male writers on my "Introduction to Fiction" syllabus, then my self-definition as a woman may play a dominant role. Furthermore, although I presently identify myself as a feminist, twenty years from now I may have gravitated to a theoretical or philosophical position in which my identity as a gendered subject is less important. To use Fraser's words, I am not--nor will I be--always a woman "in the same degree" (84). It is time for the feminist interpretive community to recognize how a fierce reliance upon a fixed and stable understanding of what constitutes "women's experience" and "women's identity" forestalls any discussion of the various facets of individual identity.

What the postmodern critique of feminism makes clear is that the feminist interpretive community cannot speak of "the woman reader" or "the woman writer" and assume that these

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phrases refer to some common experience of being a woman reader or writer. The fact that gendered identities are not stable either across or within seemingly related groups is the first major reason we should not try to make simple generalizations about the signs of gender in either individuals or texts. Because gender is a shifting, problematic category, it is naive to assume we will always be able to recognize its marks. A theory of reading that has as its foundation the relationship between the way the author experiences womanhood and the way the reader experiences womanhood will strangle any but the most narrow and self-serving readings of women's fiction. This method of reading restricts itself to only one aspect of the definition of the word "woman." As Judith Butler has observed, "By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism . . . opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation" (5). As will become clear when we turn to feminist readings of Cather, Wharton and Fauset, the feminist interpretive community is indeed guilty in many instances of "gross misrepresentation" with respect to women's experiences. I hope in the following pages to suggest some ways to reconcile the project of women's liberation with that of feminist literary criticism so as to correct some of these faults.

The women's liberation movement's emphasis on personal experience is not the only factor responsible for the

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restriction on the part of the feminist interpretive community to only a single aspect of the definition of the word "woman." The race and class privilege of many members of the feminist interpretive community has contributed to these exclusions. As I have already mentioned, most early feminist literary critics were white and middle class. Judith Butler provides an opening for a more elaborate discussion of the consequences of the exclusionary practices of such critics and how clearly it is antithetical to a feminist reading of women's writing. She observes that "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (14). Mary Jacobus supports this position with her suggestion that relying on woman's experience as the basis for a theory of reading creates an "illusory wholeness" that denies any differences between the gendered subjects on either side of the text (5). To put it bluntly, the phrases "woman reader" or "woman writer" as they are usually employed refer to a white, middle-class, heterosexual, college educated woman reader with a fixed and stable sense of self-definition corresponding to the fixed and stable way society has defined her. These phrases exclude race, class, and lifestyle preference as significant variables in feminist literary criticism. Jean E. Kennard suggests that by positing a

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monolithic reader feminist criticism "operates from a limited or inaccurate definition of its terms" (63). A middle class white woman who bases her literary criticism upon her own personal experience will produce middle class white readings of texts by women writers.

In the event that a member of the feminist interpretive community does venture outside of her own immediate personal experience, her fixed and rigid understanding can not only refuse to take into account the fact that a lesbian or black or lesbian black woman might experience gender differently from herself, but it might actually exclude those individuals from the category of woman altogether. In addition, on those occasions when the feminist interpretive community does take into account the fact that a black woman may experience gender differently, the tendency is to discuss black women as if they were all the same. In some ways it seems to be easier to impose a monolithic definition of race than it is to impose a monolithic definition of gender. We become imprisoned by our generalizations. The same holds true for the lesbian woman. There may be a thousand different variations and ways of identifying one's self as a lesbian, but if we talk about it in our literary criticism, there is only one Lesbian Woman. This situation has begun to be somewhat ameliorated with the movement of more minority women into the academy, but it is definitely something we must contend with when we read older works produced by the

feminist interpretive community. In addition, it is not merely the white, heterosexual, middle-class, feminist literary critic who must resist the shaping force of these early critics. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Five when I turn to black feminist studies of Jessie Fauset, the powerful force of mainstream feminist interpretive assumptions continues to influence, either directly or indirectly, all feminist literary criticism, including that by women who do not identify themselves as white, heterosexual, or middle class.

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Feminist Literary Critics/"Ethical Critics"

Another aspect of the feminist interpretive community that we must explore more fully is its characteristic leaning towards "ethical criticism." As Wayne Booth observes in The Company We Keep (1988), ethical criticism of literature "plays at best a minor and often deplored role on the scene of theory" (25). But from its inception feminist literary criticism has contained strong, if disguised, assumptions concerning the ethical function of criticism. At its most radical, this critical confidence in the power of literary texts has led to a kind of cultural imperialism in which the feminist interpretive community "bans" damaging texts. Pornography is an extreme example of this. Citing another example of feminist readers avoiding texts, Booth suggests that a woman reader might resort to "some feminist novelist of the 1980s" if she needed to find reassurance or reinforcements of her own beliefs rather than confront the challenges of ethical criticism (414). He seems to assume that a member of the feminist interpretive community will inevitably be forced by her ethical position to challenge and resist depictions of women which conflict with her political agenda. I think that when we consider how the feminist interpretive community has historically operated we can see that there are other alternatives to avoiding potentially challenging texts.

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It is the "ethical" bent of the feminist interpretive community that leads critics to search diligently, indeed almost desperately, for "good" role models. Using any critical means possible, feminist literary critics "make" every woman character in the texts by women writers aware of her oppression and engaged in active resistance to it. In a 1975 essay Cheri Register decreed that "a literary work should provide role models, instill a positive sense of feminine identity" (20). Janet Todd observes this phenomenon in the treatment of Jane Austen by the feminist interpretive community: "In the beginning of the feminist critical enterprise there was considerable effort to bring Jane Austen into the useable female past . . . to bring her into the sisterhood" (100). At times, when one looks at early American feminist literary criticism, it does indeed seem that the critics were able to view every woman writer as a nascent feminist and every woman character as a rebel against the patriarchy. This will become even more evident when we turn to critical studies of Cather, Wharton, and Fauset. It is important to remember, however, that it was at least partially the desire on the part of feminist literary critics, stemming from their relationship to the women's liberation movement, to empower women readers and help them change their lives that led them to commit what some of their harsher critics have called "anti-intellectual" critical acts. For these ethical critics, there was more to

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than its "literariness." Rather than possessing, I accuse, a "wholesale lack of theoretical (or literary) awareness" these critics possessed a (somewhat lacking today) in the meaning behind their critical project and in the value of the goals of their work. They were the consummate "ethical critics."

In addition to being "ethical critics," members of the American feminist interpretive community were primarily concerned with texts which lent themselves to an "expressive" critique and corresponded to Culler's "rule of three" when reading texts which might be viewed as problematic. These tenets, feminist literary critics employed various strategies that reduced the texts they analyzed to a single story. The story they inevitably uncovered in these texts was one of women's oppression. Their concern with reducing a text into a coherent whole was undoubtedly a reflection of their New Critical bent towards defining unified texts. The particular story they chose to uncover was supportive of their affiliations with women's studies.

The consequences of these interpretive strategies were important in the 1970s, but they also helped to shape feminist literary criticism today. These strategies based on the assumption that the experience all women have in common is their oppression tend to conceal any recognition of the varied ways women do exercise power in both fictional and

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material worlds. Ironically, feminist critics who define the female gendered subject as unilaterally oppressed participate in the very oppression they are trying to reveal.

Nancy Fraser addresses this point, insisting that the "right kind" of theory would give women a position other than that of mere passive victim. She argues that we need to understand how, although women are usually in subordinate positions, they still "participate in the making of culture" (Fraser 86). Jane Flax reminds us that while it is important to address how women are almost always involved in "relations of domination," if we focus entirely on women as victims, we find it easy to ignore the sinister implications of the fact that women are not always on the bottom in a "relation of domination" (642). The observations of both Fraser and Flax point towards Foucault and his theories on the operation of power. According to Foucault, the idea that power operates as a strictly repressive force is "wholly negative, narrow, [and] skeletal" (61). Foucault believes that power operates from bottom to top as well as from top to bottom. It is significant that so many feminist literary critics, not knowing the condition of all women's lives, are so eager to flatten them into one-dimensional objects of oppression. Although many women have certainly been oppressed in the material world, it cannot strengthen the feminist project to allow our uni-dimensional understanding of "woman" to contribute further to women's disempowerment.

Bearers of the System:

Identifying Multiple Subject Positions

In addition to disguising the way women can exercise power, the interpretive strategies of the feminist interpretive community that privilege the "rule of unity" prevent critics from recognizing the moments when women writers, women readers, or women characters move from being victims of the patriarchal system to being bearers of that system. Feminist critics frequently suggest that women readers internalize male reading strategies. Kolodny, Showalter, Gilbert, and Schweickart follow Fetterley in suggesting that women readers become "immasculated" when they employ traditional reading strategies in their encounters with male-authored texts.¹ In some respects all six of these important feminist literary critics seem to be agreeing with Nancy Fraser's suggestion that women are not always women "in the same degree" (84). All apparently believe that this internalization of masculine reading strategies is the natural result of being a woman reader in a society dominated by male readers and male texts. The implications of these observations are far greater than these critics have apparently recognized, and they point to another reason why the affinity on the part of the feminist interpretive community for "expressive realism" curtails feminist literary theory in unfortunate ways. First, notions that women

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readers internalize masculine reading strategies suggest that women readers have, as a part of their identity, masculine (or at least androgynous) characteristics. Second, it implies that women readers have no control over their initial internalization of these characteristics. Critical attention has usually focused on the critics' suggestions that corrective steps must be taken to overcome "immascultation." Women readers must attempt to eradicate their initial disposition to be male readers by becoming "resisting readers" and "[exorcising] the male mind that has been implanted in [them]" (Fetterley xxii). We ought not, however, to ignore the fact that "resisting reader" theories inadvertently break down the notion of "woman" as a unified subject. Although the idea of becoming "resisting readers" implies that women should attempt to retrieve their unified identity as "women," it also simultaneously suggests the possibility that women are not always in possession of unified identities. Furthermore, women's fractured identity lies, at least initially, beyond their conscious control. In short, we cannot posit a monolithic woman reader because, as Jonathan Culler notes, sometimes a woman reader becomes a male reader (1982, 50-51).

While Judith Fetterley and other feminist literary critics perhaps inadvertently point to the instability of the unified subject "woman reader," none of them take what seems to me to be the obvious second step. Surely if we agree that

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I can be more than one thing at once--a spouse, a teacher, a scholar, a daughter, a friend--and that in some of these roles my position as the gendered subject "woman" will be more dominant than in others, we must also agree that if I write, my writing will not always be based in my identity as "woman." If we cannot posit a single "woman reader," how can we be so sure that women's writing reflects some unified "woman's experience?" If women can read "male," then they surely can write "male" too. Women writers are members of the same society that pressures women readers to adopt "male" reading strategies. Writers internalize these pressures in the same way readers do.² It does not seem at all unreasonable to suggest that women write what we (in an age before our problematized definitions) could call "male texts." I do not think it is inconceivable that as a member of a patriarchal society, I have internalized some of those values. If we realize that there are many facets to the gendered subject woman, then we can also realize that a woman writer has the ability to write texts that simultaneously explore the effects of women's oppression and celebrate the instruments of that oppression. A woman writer can simultaneously be a feminist and a bearer of the patriarchy. Katherine Fishburn has asked whether it is not racist to ignore sexism in Richard Wright. In the same vein, I ask whether it is not sexist to ignore sexism or racism or any other manifestation of our patriarchal society in women's

writing. By looking only for signs of "woman's experience" in women's writing, we reduce the potential for women's writing to be seen as anything besides didactic lessons in oppression. Furthermore, we risk "connecting" with some aspect of our society as reflected in a text which we actually should "resist" if we are to further serve our interests as feminist literary critics. If imaginative literature does in any way reflect the material experiences of the author, then women's writing must bear the signs of the culture from which it emerges. It is absurd to assume that by some miraculous power women writers are able to fully resist the patriarchal society in which they write. Interpretive strategies which reduce women's writing to rebellious stories of oppression and resistance do just this.

"Female Ingenuity": A Study of Subtexts

A particularly clear example of the consequences of this kind of interpretive strategy is provided by Susan Lanser's essay "Towards a Feminist Narratology" (1986). Lanser examines "Female Ingenuity," a narrative poem by an anonymous woman writer that, when read straight through, seems to express the speaker's complete and utter happiness with her new husband.³ If one reads only every other line of the poem, however, it tells the story of the speaker's misery and oppression. Lanser demonstrates that "beneath the 'feminine' voice of self-effacement and emotionality . . . lies the 'masculine' voice of authority that the writer cannot inscribe openly" (349). Lanser also identifies a third text which connects the surface text and the subtext by showing how "the two versions reveal not opposing but related truths" (351). Ultimately, both the subtext and the surface text are illustrations of the "terrible contours" of a patriarchal society. The flaw in Lanser's reading is that it allows us to consider only the woman writer's protest against the conditions of a patriarchal society which clearly victimizes her. It privileges the subtext of protest and obscures any other subtexts.

The narrator of the poem Lanser examines complains to her friend that she has married an "ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and jealous" man who embarrasses her by his

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alcoholism and vile behavior (l. 13). She finds herself miserably trapped in this oppressive relationship. But the thing that makes this marriage most intolerable to her is the fact that her "former gallant lover is returned" (l. 35, 37). She writes, "I might have had him" (l. 37, 39). Another subtext which Lanser does not identify in this poem is the speaker's internalization of the very restrictions against which she protests. She is unable to envision happiness for herself which does not involve marriage. Lanser's assumption that the speaker is a unified subject whose identity is primarily constructed around her resistance to patriarchal oppression privileges the subtext of resistance over the subtext of internalization. Looking for only one subtext in the narrative has dangerous consequences. Clearly, if we "connect," even with the speaker's protest, we are agreeing that it is a shame she couldn't have married a nicer man. Unless we become strong, resisting readers we can not question whether the speaker in Lanser's poem ought to have had to marry at all. Perhaps, as members of the feminist interpretive community, we would like very much to believe that the writing of women is always a self-conscious protest against and deconstruction of patriarchal oppression. As Lanser's essay illustrates, however, our own prejudices regarding female identity, as well as the prejudices of the women writers we read, are simply too deeply ingrained to allow us always to tell stories that are consistent with the

feminist political project. As a feminist critic, Lanser was no more able to resist patriarchal assumptions than the woman writer she critiqued.

Moving Towards a Resisting Reading

Two feminist critics have examined women's writing as a simultaneous celebration and subversion of the patriarchy. The first, Janice A. Radway, writes primarily about popular romance novels. Her theories, however, are important and applicable to so-called serious literature as well. A sharp division between popular culture and high culture is as false a dichotomy as the one often made between women as readers and women as writers. Radway points out the critical consensus that romance novels "perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and structures . . . by continuing to maintain that a woman's journey to happiness and fulfillment must always be undertaken in the company of a protective man" (1983, 53). Apparently, critics have no problem recognizing that women romance writers celebrate patriarchal standards in their fiction. Yet these same readers seem to believe that more canonical women writers completely escape the taint of their society. It may be that since "patriarchal attitudes and structures" are less obvious in Wuthering Heights (1847) than in a novel by Victoria Holt, they are merely easier to ignore. Another equally reasonable possibility is that since a novel like Wuthering Heights was already at least moderately canonical before the advent of feminist literary criticism, critics worked harder to naturalize the text, so to speak, and by rigorously employing feminist interpretive

strategies bring Bronte "into the sisterhood." In any case, before Radway, romance novels lay beyond the realm of serious feminist critique.

The most interesting aspect of Radway's research lies in her consideration of the role of the romance reader. She suggests that the flaws in previous analyses of romance novels lie in the fact that the people who were doing the analyzing were not themselves romance readers (1983, 55). By considering the reader--her understanding of what is happening in the romance novel, and her motive for reading--Radway reveals a subversive element to these novels. There is more going on in a romance novel than merely the legitimization of the social order through a conservative "recommendation of conventional gender behavior" (1981, 141-2). On the basis of an extensive survey of romance readers, Radway concludes that women read romance novels because of a deep dissatisfaction with their own lives (1983, 68). If in reading romances women discover and are comforted by idealized, traditional marriages, this does not nullify the fact that romance reading is a protest against the material oppression these women experience (1983, 71). Radway concludes that we must consider how romance novels simultaneously reaffirm and question patriarchal institutions (1983, 72). When feminist critics read canonical women's writing they make a mistake that is the precise inverse of the one Radway observes in traditional critics of popular

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novels. That is, although feminist critics are quick to show how canonical women's texts question patriarchal assumptions, they ignore the reaffirmation of patriarchal assumptions that often accompanies that protest. Radway argues that popular women's writing is never simply patriarchal or feminist. The importance of her work is surely not limited to romance novels.

Miller is a second critic who pushes towards a more complex reading of women's writing that does not necessitate reading texts by women in a one-dimensional way. In her book Women Writing About Men (1986), Betsy Draine argues that Miller "neither reifies nor ignores sexual ambiguity" (167). Miller argues that women readers are caught in the confusion and androgyny which they practice in their daily lives as survival mechanisms. When the feminist critical community encounters women's writing, however, it is often "unable to see that women have necessarily written out of ambiguity" (2). She asks an extremely provocative question: "Can a woman be innocently a woman as she reads, or does she always know what she is doing?" (11). Although Miller never directly answers this question, she goes on to describe how women "write in themselves" and suggests that this may prevent them from directly expressing a vision that is purely their own (15). Miller then focuses on points in women's novels where female characters disrupt the narrative continuity. By introducing male heroes who do not conform to traditional

masculine standards, women writers are able to subversively express an alternative vision from the traditional male one. Women writers describe men "stripped of their stern swords and pens" and thus express their desire for an alternative experience (162). Miller complicates notions of gender in important ways, and her suggestion that women "carry men in themselves" is radical. But because she seems to imply that somewhere behind the text there actually does lie an "innocent" woman writer and reader, her reading is not as radical as it might be. Both Radway and Miller, nevertheless, explore reasons that interpretive strategies based in "expressive realism" and the "rule of unity" may be inadequate for the feminist interpretive community to employ when reading women's writing.

The Possibility of Reading

As I have demonstrated, the strong connection between the women's liberation movement and the feminist interpretive community contributed to the reliance of feminist literary critics on interpretive strategies that read texts as single-faceted, expressing only the solitary and coherent truth of woman's common experience as an oppressed group, implying, inevitably, that woman is somehow strictly "apart from" rather than being also "a part of" her society. And, as I have also shown, this practice ironically contributed to the oppression of many women whose liberation was originally envisioned by the women's movement. The attraction many feminist literary critics felt for such interpretive strategies, however, was not solely due to their affiliation with the women's liberation movement and their perceived role as ethical critics. The overlap of the New Critical interpretive community and the feminist interpretive community certainly strengthened the tendency on the part of feminist critics to suppress ambiguity and discern unity in every textual encounter. The "moment of structuration" which New Critics unceasingly sought can easily be seen to correspond to the feminist interpretive community's reduction of women's writing to the depiction of "good" role models and studies in female oppression. Early feminist literary critics were taught to read with this close attention to

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detail and with concern for unifying and suppressing ambiguity. Thus, the New Critics' affinity for close textual readings is apparent in the interpretive strategies of the feminist interpretive community, as is its reluctance to consider elements not represented directly in the text. Even those studies which intended to demonstrate a historical, politically radical reading of women's writing relied, as we shall see, on close textual readings as their primary means of argument and support. New Critical interpretive strategies were so powerful that they often effectively prevented feminist literary critics from turning away from the text itself in their readings. Thus, the fruitful realm of the gaps and silences of a text was all but ignored by the feminist interpretive community. This omission is especially problematic in a study of women writers, because so often meaning lies in what the woman author can not say because of class or race or gender constraints. And although most feminist literary critics voice dismay at the ahistoricism of the New Critics, they sometimes fall into the trap of viewing the literary work as an autonomous artifact. Even after New Criticism began to lose favor in the world of literary theory, it still continued to be employed, either consciously or unconsciously, by many literary critics.

Patrocinio P. Schweickart suggests that "the feminist story may yet end with the recognition of the impossibility of reading" (56). What a contextual analysis of the feminist

interpretive community reveals, however, is not the "impossibility of reading" but rather the impossibility of an "innocent" feminist reading, untouched by the overlap of other interpretive communities. What makes these overlaps so significant is not simply that they existed in the past, but that they continue to shape our literary criticism today. In other words, although we may now, in a more "enlightened" age of feminist literary criticism, recognize the blindspots of our foremothers and attempt to compensate for them in our own work, their concerns and their prejudices as shaped by the interpretive communities that influenced them continue to exert an influence on us today. Especially when we read texts by women writers who have been extensively examined by the feminist interpretive community, we will be reading through their (now recognized as) flawed grid. The aspects of texts upon which we decide to focus, and even the particular texts we choose to analyze, are in many respects influenced by these early American feminist literary critics, who were in turn influenced by many other interpretive communities. We cannot really escape the "intentions and accents" which produced their readings, but we can become more aware of them. As I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, we must become resisting readers, and sometimes what we must resist is our own feminist interpretive community.

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Postmodern reading theories point towards many of the difficulties inherent in traditional feminist interpretive strategies. Feminist literary critics, however, have sometimes been reluctant to consider incorporating postmodernism into their interpretive strategies because they are afraid that the conclusion that will be reached is that the entire project of reading women's writing is impossible. Just at the moment when women's writing is gaining legitimacy in the academic curriculum, postmodern approaches to literature seem to be directing us towards the conclusion that there is no such thing as women's writing. Along with Jane Marcus and Nancy Hartsock, suspicious feminists ask why it was not until previously silenced subjects gained the power of speech, and hence subjecthood, that the whole concept of subjecthood became suspect (Marcus 297, Hartsock 196). It seems to me that any feminist theory seeking to use postmodern ideas must address these legitimate and important objections. Clearly, the signifier "woman" has been unnecessarily restricted by being made to stand for a unified human being who is white, middle-class, heterosexual, and the possessor of a uterus. This fact, however, does not mean we must cease talking about women as reading subjects or writing subjects. Instead we must realize that subjecthood is a more complicated and multi-faceted issue than we have formerly taken it to be. At times, for political purposes, we may still find it necessary to essentialize and to base

our criticism on notions of "experience" that postmodernism would disallow. For as Diana Fuss has observed, "adherence to essentialism is a measure of the degree to which a particular group has been culturally oppressed" (98). As I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, however, there are ways the feminist interpretive community can reconcile its many political and aesthetic agenda in order to at once hold and deconstruct the essentialisms central to so much feminist literary criticism. As I hope to show, reading women's writing is not impossible, even if it is more difficult than we have been willing to believe.

I have chosen to examine the novels of Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and Jessie Fauset because criticism of their work represents the wide range of responses the feminist interpretive community has exhibited towards women writers. First held up by the mainstream critical community as a "great" American author, Willa Cather has been fully embraced by feminist literary critics. Edith Wharton's literary reputation was less secure than Cather's when feminist literary critics began to reread her in the 1970s. Consequently, as I shall demonstrate, her position within the feminist canon has been somewhat more ambiguous than Cather's. And Jessie Fauset was completely ignored by most interpretive communities until the 1980s. When feminist literary critics undertook to reread her, they rejected Fauset outright. Clearly, the reception of these three women

writers varies widely. Consequently, because the readings that follow are dependent on the readings that have preceded them, the kinds of resisting readings I will offer of Cather, Wharton, and Fauset in the following pages will also vary. These readings are not intended to replace older feminist readings. They are intended rather to stand beside previous readings in order to enrich and complicate them. This is an inherent feature of the model of resisting reading of women's writing that I hope to develop in what follows.

NOTES

¹Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 144-167; Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 243-270; Sandra Gilbert, "Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey," PMLA 93 (1978): 369-382; Patrocínio P. Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading," Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 31-62; Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978).

²Annis Pratt refers to something similar when she speaks of "textual ambivalences" in Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) 15.

³The poem "Female Ingenuity" was first published in Atkinson's Casket in April 1832. Lanser quotes the entire poem in her essay, and I have used her reprint as the text for my analysis.

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PART TWO
READING WOMEN WRITERS

CHAPTER THREE
READING WILLA CATHER

Willia Cather and the American Literary Tradition

Willia Cather's position as one of the most important American women writers is seldom disputed. In 1990 Cather was the only American woman to appear in the revised Great Books of the Western World (Encyclopaedia Britannica); fifteen books and more than fifty articles on Cather appeared between 1989 and 1990 alone. Occasionally critics have attributed Cather's prominence to feminist efforts at the recovery of women writers and canon reformation.¹ But, despite occasional lulls, Cather's literary reputation has never truly languished, and as Stephen L. Tanner observes, "renewed interest in Cather was well under way before 'canon' became a buzz-word" (232).² Feminist critics who approach Cather are not rescuing her from obscurity. Rather, they are encountering her through the screen provided by the many layers of traditional analyses preceding them. As I have

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argued, the overlap of other interpretive communities necessarily influences any feminist analysis. Consequently, before turning to an analysis and critique of the American feminist interpretive community's use of Cather, it is crucial that we briefly examine her original critical reception. Particularly central in this analysis will be an examination of the terms of Cather's initial "canonization," because those standards continue to shape in powerful and significant ways how she is read today.

It is true that almost from the time of her earliest publication some critics have described Willa Cather as a writer with a feminist agenda. In its 1913 review of Pioneers! the Boston Evening Transcript argues that the book is indirectly "an embodiment of the feminist theory" (E. U. S. 18). And one of the first books to treat Cather at length was Josephine Jessup's 1950 study The Faith of Our Feminists. Nevertheless, this strain of early criticism is a relatively minor one, and Cather herself disavowed any feminist affiliations (O'Brien 1987, 124-5). There is another strain of Cather criticism, however, that has had a much more powerful shaping force in her critical reception. For while early critics did occasionally note a feminist bent to Cather's writings, they were far more concerned with demonstrating how she contributed to a uniquely American literary tradition. Placing Cather in the mainstream of American literature, as it has traditionally been defined by

literary critics, has been a perennial concern of a significant portion of those scholars who seriously consider her work. As we begin to examine some of the early books and essays on Cather and then move forward to explore more recent critical accounts, it will become apparent that this concern was important not only in securing Cather's position in the canon of American writers, but also in determining her treatment by subsequent literary critics, including feminist literary critics.

It is important to recognize that the earliest reviews of Cather's work did not express a concern with locating her in a tradition of American letters. This is because in 1912 when Cather published Alexander's Bridge, and for at least the next decade afterwards, it was a matter of some contention whether there was even such a thing as American literature. In 1918 Van Wyck Brooks suggested in Letters and Leadership that America was on the verge of its own great art and philosophy but would not achieve it until "a race of artists, profound and sincere, have brought us face to face with our own experience" (127). The next year H. L. Mencken reviewed My Antonia (1918), claiming that America "may even be said to have no national literature at all" (138). But almost as soon as literary critics did begin to define a distinctly American literary tradition, they also began to associate Willa Cather with that tradition as one of its most representative practitioners. Most formal criticism on

Cather appeared after 1920. As her treatment at the hands of this initial interpretive community continues to shape contemporary readings of her work, it seems appropriate to begin my consideration of Cather with a brief exploration of dominant critical understandings of American literature followed by an assessment of the ways Cather has been regarded as conforming to that tradition.

Nina Baym's classic analysis of theories of American literature, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" (1981), traces the evolution of American literary criticism. According to Baym, "The earliest American literary critics began to talk about the 'most American' work rather than the 'best' work" (65). A standard of "Americanness," rather than a standard of "excellence" came to determine whether or not a work would be considered canonical: "Inevitably, perhaps, it came to seem that the quality of 'Americanness,' whatever it might be, constituted literary excellence for American authors" (Baym 65). This standard evolved gradually, but by the 1950s with the publication of works such as Virgin Land by Henry Nash Smith (1950), The American Adam by R. W. B. Lewis (1955), and The American Novel and its Tradition by Richard Chase (1957) it had solidified into what Baym calls the "myth of America." According to Baym this myth recounts "a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America" (71). The promise of America is very

simply the promise that an individual will "achieve complete self-definition" (71). One important ingredient in this quest for self-definition is the unsettled wilderness, because as Baym argues it is by asserting his identity upon the land that the American hero achieves the promise of America (71). In this essay Baym goes on to insist that women writers were unable to construct fictions which narrated the "myth of America" because of the "lack of fit between their own experience and the fictional role assigned to them" within the myth, namely that of "antagonists in a man's story" and the "virgin land" (75). Baym asserts that "If one accepts current theories of American literature, one accepts as a consequence . . . a literature that is essentially male" (65). Her argument at this point is based on the essentialist premise that a woman writer is trapped by her gender; she is always a woman "in the same degree." Consequently, the woman writer is prevented in some way from imagining herself or another woman as a participant in the "myth of America." Baym falls into the feminist trap I describe in Chapter One of assuming that women can only be protestors against the patriarchy. It is my contention, however, that the writings of Willa Cather embody the "myth of America" Baym has identified as characteristic of those (male) texts recognized as traditionally belonging to the canon of American literature. Furthermore, turning to early critical evaluations of Cather's work will demonstrate that

the grounds for her initial inclusion in the canon of American literature was her articulation of this very myth.

Bernice Slote suggests as much in the bibliographic essay published in Sixteen Modern American Authors (1974), a work in which Cather was the only woman writer represented. According to Slote, most of Cather's early critics were concerned with "her materials of the pioneer West and the individual, her type of realism, and her view of society" (41). Individualism is the focus of Carl Van Doren's 1921 assessment published in The Nation. He asserts that a central theme in Cather's fiction is "the struggle of some elect individual to outgrow the restrictions laid upon him--or more frequently her--by numbing circumstances" (92). The struggle to surmount the stifling forces of civilization as represented by "clumsy towns, obese vulgarity, [and] the uniform of a monotonous standardization" become the central concern of Cather's stalwart individuals, according to Van Doren (92). Lloyd Morris continues Van Doren's consideration of individualism in Cather's work in his North American Review essay "Willa Cather" (1924). Morris is one of the first critics to describe Cather as a distinctly American writer claiming, "Her preoccupation with the pioneer brings Miss Cather's work within the main trend of American literature during the past century" (641). Linking Cather's writings to those of Emerson and Whitman, Morris argues that

the work of these three Americans established a national philosophical and emotional direction:

It established the cult of the individual; it distinguished between individualism and egotism by formulating the democratic ideal; it taught the pioneer virtues of independence, self-reliance and perseverance; it substituted for the repudiated discipline of the past an epic vision of the national future. (641)

Describing her central theme as "the effort of the individual to overcome the obstacles offered by circumstance and to control or dominate environment," Morris clearly sees Cather as articulating the "myth of America" (644). A third critic who identifies in Cather many of the characteristics Baym has found to be representative of traditionally canonical American literature is Lionel Trilling. In a 1937 New Republic essay Trilling observes that Cather's primary concern is with "the tonic moral quality of the pioneer's life" and their "striving after new worlds" (11). Like Van Doren and Morris, Trilling recognizes Cather's concern with quest, but unlike them, he notes despair behind the dream of "pre-adolescent integration and innocent community with nature" (11). Trilling's analysis of the role of the wilderness or "frontier" in the quest Cather's characters make for independence is significant.

Van Doren, Morris, and Trilling are only three examples of the many early critics who identified a concern with

quest, individualism, and landscape in Cather's work. Their assessments appeared several years before these qualities were systematically codified by critics like Smith, Lewis, and Chase and accepted as the defining characteristics of American literature. But certainly these essays not only represent the growing desire of critics to identify qualities of "Americanness" in literary texts, but also point towards Cather's eventual status as a securely canonical author. And by the 1956 publication of Howard Mumford Jones' book The Frontier and American Fiction, Cather's position in the canon as a result of her articulation of the "myth of America" was clear. Jones argues that the frontier plays a central role in Cather's work, representing "timelessness" and a return to the "elemental" (95). Cather's frontiers also represent, according to Jones, "the stark power of individuality to shape itself" (91). Jones' assertion recalls Baym's claim that American literature as it has been traditionally defined offers, through the frontier, the promise that "a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition" (71). Clearly, Jones builds upon previous assessments of Cather to situate her work within the mainstream of American literature. And Jones' position is consistent with that of Cather's earliest critics who all saw her as representative of rather than rebellious against the main trends of American literature.³

Later critics have not always shared this early concern with situating Cather as an "American" author. One reason for

this is that once Cather was firmly established within the canon of American letters, it was no longer necessary to keep "legitimizing" her by proclaiming her "Americanness."

Nevertheless, Cather's position as a specifically American woman of letters continues to be a minor theme in her critical reception. Chief among these works are two essays by noted Cather critic John J. Murphy. In the first, "Willa Cather and Hawthorne: Significant Resemblances" (1975), Murphy asserts that, "As an American writer, [Cather] inherited the concerns, attitudes and material that make our greatest writers alike enough to define a national literature" (161). Much as Van Doren, Morris, and Trilling had half a century before, Murphy defines these American concerns as "the need . . . for a world of one's own making" (167), "alienation" (169), and "the Fall of Man" (174).

Murphy's second essay on Cather's position within the American literary tradition, "Nebraska Naturalism in Jamesian Frames" (1984), suggests that Cather embodied the literary ethos of her day. She fused the "romantic, adventurous material called for by the naturalists" and a "Jamesian perspective" to produce work that is representative of both of the dominant streams of American literature in the early twentieth century (232). Others who seek to show that Cather is representative of her age include David Stouck who recognizes "such perennial American themes as the romantic dream of success, the quest for an innocent pastoral retreat

and the idealization of male comradeship" in her fiction (1977, 259) and James Woodress who calls her "one of the most significant American novelists" (xiii).⁴ As we shall see in the next section, this dominant critical trend poses significant, but often unacknowledged, problems for the feminist literary critics who seek to show Cather's subversion of rather than her subjection to dominant trends in American literature.

The American Feminist Interpretive Community
Reads Willa Cather

The fact that Cather's early critics, as well as many of her later critics, clearly had no trouble identifying her as a participant in the dominant tradition of American literature is highly significant in light of her later treatment by the feminist interpretive community. Nina Baym and others have identified the traditional theories of American literature by which Cather has been so readily assimilated as "male." Consequently, many feminist literary critics who study Cather are concerned with showing that she actually does not conform to the standards of Americanness identified by Lewis et. al. Feminist critics, while desiring to confirm Cather's status as a major, canonical author, wish to do so on distinctively female grounds rather than the ones that have formerly been applied. Furthermore, feminist literary critics have exhibited a disarming level of ignorance with respect to both the ways their own readings are shaped by those of previous Cather scholars as well as ways their readings are shaped by their own political and aesthetic assumptions. It is to representative examples of such critical omission and commission that we shall turn our attention in the following analysis of the American feminist interpretive community's treatment of Willa Cather.⁵

Since the 1970s, feminist literary critics have been eager to bring Willa Cather "into the sisterhood." Both the feminist desire to claim Cather and the difficulties posed by such a task are clearly illustrated by Ann Douglas' essay, "Willa Cather: A Problematic Ideal" (1982). One thing that makes this essay especially important in a consideration of the feminist interpretive community's treatment of Cather is Douglas' open revelation of her interpretive strategies. Douglas clearly identifies the foundation of her feminist critique as the search for a connection between self and author. This connection should lie, according to Douglas, in the common emotions of "neurosis and alienation" resulting from woman's position as victim in a patriarchal society (15). And, as this brief survey of the feminist interpretive community's critical reception of Cather will reveal, many critics have indeed searched for this kind of connection with Willa Cather. Feminist critics often focus particularly on Cather's sexual ambiguity as a lesbian in a world that saw the love of women for each other as unnatural.

The second thing that makes Douglas' essay significant is her recognition that Willa Cather may not have held the position of a neurotic and alienated victim of her society: "The fact remains that Cather did not sleep with monsters, as Adrienne Rich has said a thinking woman must do. Cather was liberated from certain torture chambers which have confined her equally talented sisters" (15). Asking, "What right did

[Cather] have, a woman in this society, not to suffer?," Douglas concludes, "I [can] not call Cather my own" (15). The basis for Douglas' rejection of Cather lies in the fact that Cather does not share the crucial, common, "female" experience: "The only thing Cather failed to realize was the meaning of the oppression . . . We can and must complain that she has not herself fully experienced, explored, and documented the disease" (18-19). Douglas recognizes Cather's celebration of the freedom and power associated with being a woman, but she uses this celebration as the grounds for a rejection of Cather. Douglas points directly to what I believe is the central flaw in American feminist literary criticism. Clearly, there is a problem when, as feminist literary critics, our only options are either to identify neurosis and alienation and oppression in the women writers we study, or to reject these women writers outright. "Willa Cather: A Problematic Ideal" illustrates the need for a feminist literary criticism that will be more inclusive and less reductive, a literary criticism not founded in an appeal to some so-called "woman's experience," a literary criticism like the one that will result when we become resisting readers of women writers. That the feminist interpretive community badly needs such a reading theory is further illustrated by a consideration of some of the other feminist analyses of Willa Cather.

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Another work that reveals the flaws inherent in traditional American feminist literary criticism is Shirley H. Heller's, 20th Century American Women Authors: A Feminist Approach (1975). Demonstrating the dominant trend in feminist Cather criticism in the 1970s, Heller argues that "Her first three major novels placed Miss Cather among the early feminist writers" (29). Heller locates Cather's feminism in the heroines like Antonia Shimerda whom she describes as "an archetypal, earth mother depicted in mythic proportions with only the positive side of the archetype showing" (30, emphasis mine). Heller concludes, "Willa Cather's women all succeed in a man's world" (31). Heller's approach exemplifies the strong connections between women's liberation and feminist literary criticism. Clearly, a critic like Cheri Register who suggested in 1975 that "a literary work should provide role models, instill a positive sense of feminine identity" (20) would applaud Heller's analysis of Antonia Shimerda. Equally clearly, we must now reconsider this wholesale willingness to seek only a single story--that of a woman who struggles against oppression--in texts by women writers. This story reveals not only women's liberation's affinity for personal experience, but also feminist literary criticism's tendency to conform to Culler's rule of unity in the effort to produce "ethical criticism." Reducing our literary criticism to any of these approaches

severely curtails the potential meaning we can discover in the texts we analyze.⁶

As in all fields of American literature, there now exists a generation of Cather critics who have, from the time of their dissertations, approached the author from a feminist perspective. Briefly turning to an analysis of the critical career of two individuals, Susan J. Rosowski and Sharon O'Brien, will help to illustrate the trends in feminist Cather scholarship over the past twenty years. Susan J. Rosowski's essay "Willa Cather's Pioneer Women: A Feminist Interpretation" (1978) is particularly central to any consideration of the feminist interpretive community's treatment of Cather. Not only does this essay represent one of the earliest Cather publications by this influential feminist scholar, but it also confronts head on the dilemma faced by feminist critics who attempt to reconcile Cather's canonical status with their need to bring her "into the sisterhood." Rosowski, while perhaps not consciously aware of this dilemma, states the problem clearly:

Critics have long recognized the pioneer theme characteristic of Willa Cather; yet the significant fact that Cather develops this theme in a manner that runs against the main tradition of American literature has been virtually ignored. Put quite simply, this tradition is a masculine one, and Cather's most forceful

pioneers--Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda--are women. (135)

Rosowski's critical dilemma stems from the fact, illustrated earlier, that Cather achieved her initial recognition because critics perceived her to be depicting the (male) "myth of America." Her feminist commitments prevent Rosowski from acknowledging Cather's affiliation with this male story, while they simultaneously compel her to affirm Cather's position as the dominant figure in a newly configured canon. But Rosowski does not actually argue for new, female, terms of canonization. Rather than questioning the "myth of America" as a standard of literary excellence, Rosowski inserts a female character into the old, accepted, American story of "the frontier waiting to be tamed by the noble pioneering spirit" (136). Rosowski's approach clearly demonstrates how the overlap of an older, traditional school of literary criticism shapes the feminist interpretive community by continuing to dictate the terms of literary excellence. In addition, Rosowski's desire to illuminate Cather's portrayal of powerful female protagonists reflects the women's liberation movement and its commitment to a literary criticism of female empowerment. Seen together, these two impulses both reveal the powerful pull of expressive realism in literary criticism, and they also illuminate the inherent danger for feminist critics of searching for a single story in a text by a woman writer.

The single story we uncover may very well not be the one we actually want to tell.

Subsequent work by Rosowski and O'Brien continues to illustrate the difficulties faced by feminist literary critics writing out of a male-dominated critical culture. Other early essays by Rosowski suggest that Cather's novels can be viewed as bildungsromans that depict female characters who eventually reach a successful state of self-definition.⁷ O'Brien shares Rosowski's concern with identifying female heroes in her early work on Cather.⁸ Both critics initially relied on essentialist arguments and a commitment to expressive realism in their work, but by the late 1980s they took tentative steps away from such reductive approaches. Rosowski's 1986 book The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism illuminates the chaotic, gothic underside of the romantic imagination that can be found in Cather's novels. Rather than demonstrating how Cather conforms to already established literary traditions, Rosowski shows her re-inventing a literary genre "when resolution is thwarted and irreconcilables triumph" (207). Thus, this book leads away from simple readings that conform to the tenets of expressive realism and towards less reductive notions of women's writing.⁹ O'Brien also moves towards a plural perspective in her later Cather work, Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (1987).¹⁰ While she opens doors by suggesting that more than one story may get told in Cather's fiction, however, O'Brien

continues the long-standing critical trend of focusing on Cather's treatment of the "myth of America."¹¹

The consequences of this focus on the "myth of America" are significant. For while both Rosowski and O'Brien suggest that Cather imprinted a particularly feminine cast on the myth--thus making it tell a feminist story--their theories do nothing to address the fact that the myth itself, no matter its hero(ine), constitutes an imperialist tale steeped in Anglo-American, patriarchal values. Unknowingly demonstrating the strong influence of more traditional interpretive communities on their criticism as they continue to focus on the old myth, these feminists illustrate the power of the women's liberation movement's commitment to positive role models by refusing to consider or explore any of the sinister implications of Cather's re-telling the traditional, patriarchal story. Furthermore, the concentration O'Brien and other critics focus on those novels that most clearly fit within the confines of traditional American literature leads them to neglect Cather's other novels that present alternative versions of America. By refusing to locate Cather strictly within existing literary conventions and by suggesting that her novels might be read in more than one way, Rosowski and O'Brien indicate the critical potential of a resisting reading of Cather's fiction. Nevertheless, their work also clearly demonstrates the blindspots of current feminist interpretive strategies.

It is important to remember, however, that because one interpretive community builds upon another, any progress we make now in developing new strategies will only be successful because we stand upon the shoulders of these critics. We must acknowledge our debt, because while their work may indeed be flawed, our work could not exist without it. Critics like Rosowski and O'Brien establish the foundation for both the necessity of a resisting reading of Cather's fiction and the possibility of such a reading.

One of the only feminist critics to analyze Cather from a perspective that does not rely on essentializing, mythologizing interpretive strategies is Jane Rule. Rule's exploratory aim in her 1975 book Lesbian Images is, "to discover what images of lesbians women writers have projected," and she herself claims to have left analysis and judgment out of her text (3). What is most significant about her work is the fact that Rule is not as eager or as willing as many of her contemporaries to consider issues of gender in simple, reductive ways. For example, one of her chief criticisms of Freud is that he "did not examine the narrow conventional concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine,'" a fault I have shown to be common in much feminist literary criticism as well (35). Rule also feels no obligation to identify only positive female role models in women's writing: "I can expose the negative morality that is not only imposed from without but expressed from within a number of the brilliantly

articulate women I am about to discuss" (11, emphasis mine). The obligation to present only positive role models in her literary criticism is not one Rule acknowledges. She identifies the chief flaw in previous considerations of Cather to be the overriding concern of her critics to misread her novels in their obsessive attempts to prove Cather's lesbianism.¹² She argues against an essentialist approach which assumes first that Cather is a lesbian and second that as a lesbian she is incapable of imagining heterosexual relationships. Like O'Brien was to do ten years later, Rule objects, "What actually characterizes Willa Cather's mind is not a masculine sensibility at all but a capacity to transcend the conventions of what is masculine and what is feminine to see the more complex humanity of her characters" (80). In her refusal to essentialize and in her willingness to identify both positive and negative aspects in a text by a woman writer, Jane Rule is one of the very few feminist literary critics to successfully integrate some of the strategies the feminist interpretive community ought to employ as resisting readers. And she did so almost twenty years ago.

Another critic, writing fifteen years after Rule, also suggests some of the potential new interpretive strategies hold for the feminist interpretive community. In her essay "A Code of Her Own: Attitudes Toward Women in Willa Cather's Short Fiction" (1990) Jeane Harris objects to the trends that

have caused critics to "dismiss aspects of her personality too complex to fit into established categories of feminist literary criticism" (81). Harris' chief objection is that critics have ignored Cather's misogyny. Speaking of O'Brien, Harris observes that her "effort to make Cather 'fit' into a female literary tradition" is distorting and reductive. Speaking of Cather's short story "The Way of the World" (1898) Harris argues that it indicates "Cather's internalization of the male values and attitudes that permeated late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century America" (85). Through an examination of this and other short stories, Harris concludes that Cather's misogynist attitudes demonstrate that she does not "sit comfortably among other American women writers in a female literary tradition" (89). Harris' essay is important because it alerts us to the dangers present when we, as feminist literary critics, force Cather into an essential female literary tradition through our analysis of her fiction. But Harris does not provide a way for us as feminist literary critics to claim Cather as our own while simultaneously acknowledging aspects of her fiction that we cannot claim. Harris also does not recognize that Cather is not alone in her uncomfortable fit with what has been traditionally recognized as an American female literary tradition. Like all women writers, Cather is a participant in the very society against which she also sometimes protests. And a

resisting reading of women's fiction will allow us to
recognize all this and more.

Reading My Antonia

As a way of demonstrating both how the feminist interpretive community operates on specific texts and the new possibilities inherent in a feminist theory of resisting reading of women writers, I would like to turn to Willa Cather's novel My Antonia. This narrative is related from the perspective of Jim Burden, a middle-aged railroad executive remembering his childhood in Nebraska. Jim focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on his memories of a Bohemian immigrant girl named Antonia. In the end, Antonia remains in Nebraska where she is the mother of many children, and Jim lives, somewhat unhappily it seems, in the East. My Antonia appeared in 1918 and has received more critical attention than any other work in the Cather canon.¹³ John J. Murphy calls My Antonia "one of the two novels that establish [Cather] as a major American novelist of the twentieth century" (1989, 6). Robert Gregory refers to My Antonia as Cather's most solidly canonical novel (95), and David Stouck calls it "the novel most often considered her masterpiece" (1982, 224). Given the considerable critical attention focused on My Antonia, I believe it provides the best possible case study of how other interpretive communities have shaped the feminist interpretive community and its consideration of specific texts. Furthermore, the extensive consideration of My Antonia by the feminist interpretive

community itself provides ample opportunities for demonstrating the radical potential that resisting reading approaches hold for reshaping our understanding of women's writing.

The earliest reviews of this novel were almost uniform in their celebratory tone. Even H. L. Mencken, famous for his satiric, cutting remarks in Smart Set wrote, "Miss Cather, in 'My Antonia,' has written a better novel than any Englishwoman of like experience has written in ten years" (March, 138). A reviewer in The Nation deemed the novel "among the best of our recent interpretations of American life" ("Two Portraits" 523). In addition to their uniform praise for the novel, these early reviewers were united in their conception of the main subjects and themes of My Antonia. Observing Cather's focus on the western pioneers, Mencken asserts, "She discovers human beings embattled against fate and the gods, and into her picture of their dull struggle she gets a spirit that is genuinely heroic, and a pathos that is genuinely moving" (February, 144). Randolph Bourne titled his Dial review of My Antonia "Morals and Art from the West" and wrote, "This story lives with the hopefulness of the West" (5). And in his joint review of My Antonia and One of Ours (1923), Herbert S. Gorman observed that "Threading the book, almost as important as the tale, is the land" (7). From the first, reviewers focused on the aspects of this novel which conformed to the "myth of

America." And even today this perspective continues to remain central in most critical considerations of the text, including feminist critiques.

Literary critics, taking their clue from the reviewers, have continued for the most part to focus on Cather's treatment of the west and the "myth of America" in My Antonia. Most of the essays on this novel that appeared between 1955 and 1975 addressed Cather's manipulation of narrative voice and her use of setting. Consequently, these works devoted a great deal of attention to the narrator, Jim Burden, and his gradual self-discovery in the midst of the expansive western wilderness. One of the earliest critical essays on Willa Cather's My Antonia appeared in the American Quarterly in 1958. In "'My Antonia': A Frontier Drama of Time," James E. Miller explores the structure of the novel and finds that "It is in the drama of [Jim's] awakening consciousness, of his growing awareness, that the emotional structure of the novel may be discovered" (53). The struggle Miller identifies as central to the novel is the struggle "to re-create and assert existence" upon the land (53). It is the myth of America that he and many subsequent critics identify in My Antonia.¹⁴ In 1962 Robert E. Scholes uses R. W. B. Lewis' theory of the "heroic innocent" and his confrontation with the environment to explicate Cather's novel (31). And in his book The American Novel from James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner (1965) Wallace Stegner

identifies the theme of the novel as "the American orphan or exile, struggling to find a place between an Old World left behind and a New World not yet created" (41). According to Stegner, Cather's narrator, Jim Burden, carried the "quintessentially American burden" of imposing self upon the environment (47-8). This desire to read the novel as the story of an individual's struggle for control over the environment and the right to assert individual autonomy is also expressed by Terence Martin. Martin observes that "In Willa Cather's novels of the West, the land, raw and unsubdued, stands out as the initial force to be confronted" (87). Martin sees that confrontation between individual and the land as the central fact of My Antonia and argues that Jim attains a sense of self-definition by remembering his past: "From Jim we have learned of the land, the various people who work the land, and the change which the passing of a generation brings about" (100). Each of these critics is united in his perspective on the text; each focuses on Jim Burden, rather than Antonia, and each attempts to demonstrate how Jim's quest for identity through his relationship to the land exemplifies the rugged individualism characteristic of the "myth of America."¹⁵

When the first feminist analyses of My Antonia began appearing in the 1970s they were highly influenced by the prevailing critical concern with Jim Burden and the myth of America represented in the novel. This was an influence,

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however, that critics apparently seldom recognized and almost never acknowledged. Instead, these early feminist critics seemed to assume that merely turning attention away from Jim and towards Antonia would demonstrate that Cather's was a feminist novel, a fact that previous readers had been apparently unable to recognize because of their patriarchal bias.¹⁶ As we have seen, 1975 marked the year of Cather's first serious consideration by the feminist interpretive community. But there were occasional examples of feminist literary criticism appearing before 1975, and one of these was Blanche H. Gelfant's 1971 essay "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in My Antonia." Hers is clearly a feminist project, and she begins by suggesting that the novel is more than merely "a splendid celebration of American frontier life" (147). Significantly, her strategy is not as radical as it first appears. For, like most of the critics who precede her, Gelfant continues to orient her reading of the novel around the land and the efforts of individual characters to subdue it. The central difference between Gelfant's consideration of the westering myth in My Antonia and that of previous critics is that she is fully cognizant of the important connections between female sexuality and the fertile wilderness so central to the "myth of America."¹⁷ Coming as it did, before the feminist interpretive community was fully established, Gelfant's essay does not share the feminist concern with identifying positive role models in

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women's writing. Her essay does illustrate, however, the powerful shaping force of the concern with the "Americanness" of My Antonia. Gelfant's concern with the "myth of America" in the novel prevented her from considering other aspects of the text, and her desire to naturalize the text--make it conform to a unified story--prevented her from exploring ways Cather was possibly both celebrating and denigrating the American dream in her complicated novel.

Susan J. Rosowski and Sharon O'Brien deal extensively with My Antonia. In 1978 Rosowski suggested that Antonia transcends her "type" as a traditional pioneer woman to achieve "universal values characteristic of the most fully human activities" (142). And in 1981 Rosowski observes that although Cather presents Antonia as an "archetypal mother and muse," she also "gives her female character the strength to break through conventional roles imposed upon [her]" (270). In speaking of the conclusion of My Antonia in which Jim Burden transforms Antonia into an Earth Mother, Sharon O'Brien argues that this stereotype, in the hands of a woman writer, is affirmative rather than limiting (1982, 286-87). The political and critical frameworks of these scholars do not allow them to admit the possibility that the Earth Mother stereotype is just as limited in Cather's hands as in those of her male predecessors.¹⁸ Neither Rosowski nor O'Brien are able to construct critical paradigms that might allow us to "claim" Cather without having to insist that her novels

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always enact the affirmation of feminist values. But, as we shall see, a resisting reading of Cather's fiction will allow us to do just that.

After the mid 1980s, feminist literary critics began increasingly to focus upon sexuality in My Antonia. In addition, Cather's sexual orientation became a more important topic of consideration among scholars. Judith Fetterley's 1986 essay "My Antonia, Jim Burden and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer" is representative of the mainstream of Cather criticism since the early 1980s. In this provocative and insightful essay Fetterley graciously acknowledges her debt to earlier scholars, especially Gelfant. But she seems entirely unaware that she is also following in the footsteps of more traditional literary critics. Fetterley builds part of her argument upon the claim that Cather consciously decided to write My Antonia "as a man about men" and suggests that the book represents her "deep-seated resistance" to capitulation to convention (132). Like a significant portion of the scholars who have studied My Antonia, Fetterley focuses on the role of the landscape in the novel, and like many feminist critics who have wrestled with this complicated text, she narrows her consideration of the landscape to Cather's representation of Antonia as an Earth Mother figure.¹⁹ While, as we have seen, Rosowski and O'Brien found this figure to be an affirmation of female power, Fetterley argues that Cather presents Antonia as an Earth Mother figure

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at the end of the novel in order to attack that very image: "The text of My Antonia radically undercuts the premises of the image which occupies its center [the Earth Mother], thus calling into question the value of the very conventions it asserts" (136). Fetterley carefully traces a long series of moments within the novel in which women who do not possess conventional characteristics of female goodness, like Lena Lingard, succeed while the female characters, like Antonia, who are Earth Mothers, meet disappointment and disillusionment. The result is a deconstruction of the archetypal story: "the conventional enshrinement of the conventional image of the earth mother undermined by a critique of the premises upon which the convention is based; or . . . a patriarchal story co-existing with a feminist story" (138). So, like the others, Fetterley reveals the story of a woman writer who articulates the never ending female struggle against patriarchy and oppression. Part of becoming resisting readers involves a more aggressive effort to resist modeling our critical approaches after those who have gone before. For while they have certainly revealed significant and valuable aspects of the texts they read, they have also concealed other elements that a resisting reading can, as we shall see, uncover.

One critic, Katrina Irving, has already illustrated some of the possibilities inherent in turning our attention away from the standard subjects of literary criticism of My

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Antonia--the landscape, the narrator, and the Earth Mother characterization of Antonia. In "Displacing Homosexuality: the Use of Ethnicity in Willa Cather's My Antonia" (1990) Irving indirectly reveals the weaknesses of previous feminist approaches that have been incapable of reading those moments in Cather's fiction that stress something other than the already recognized paradigms. By considering issues of ethnicity and class, rather than gender and sexuality, Irving reveals moments in which "The discursive construction of Antonia is inseparable from her economic exploitation, and Cather repeatedly gestures to the economic imperatives behind the community's hegemonizing impulse" (91). Irving argues that Cather was attempting to "point out the ethno-centric assumptions of [the] midwest community" and that Cather's desire to deal with ethnicity "displaced" her own personal concern with homosexuality (92). Perhaps unfortunately, however, Irving declines to see the ethnic issues in the novel as important ones in their own right. Rather, she states, "I read Jim's oscillating attitude to Antonia as a repetition of Cather's own uneasiness with her female and lesbian self" (93). Because she refuses to consider that Jim's attitude towards the immigrant girl might represent a larger societal prejudice against the immigrants themselves, not just what they symbolize sexually, Irving's argument is not as original as it might be. But Irving's essay does suggest that there is more in Cather's fiction than simply

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Earth Mothers and disguised lesbians. Turning to a resisting reading of My Antonia will allow us to focus on those critical alternatives.

"A Painful and Peculiar Pleasure":

Towards a Resisting Reading of My Antonia

Before turning to a resisting reading of My Antonia, I think it is appropriate to review briefly what such a reading entails. One thing that feminist critics often neglect to do is define the project being undertaken. As Elizabeth Meese observes, it is essential that feminist literary critics begin by defining their basic goals and assumptions. As feminist literary critics we are, to use Wayne Booth's term, "ethical critics" who are attempting to participate in the ongoing feminist project of contributing to the "discourse of liberation." Ours must still be "criticism with a Cause." As we have found over the past twenty-five years, however, it is not enough--it is in fact dangerous--to restrict our literary criticism to the search for positive female role models and women authors or characters who resist the patriarchy. It is also dangerous to insist that texts by women writers tell only one story. In our important quest to change the material reality of women's lives through literary criticism, we have begun to realize that we cannot obscure the ways in which women contribute to their own oppression. Such concealment leads inevitably, if indirectly and unwittingly, to a celebration and perpetuation of anti-feminist values and ideas.

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In order to move beyond such reductive, and ultimately unproductive, critical approaches, we must become resisting readers of women writers. First, we must recognize and then resist the overlap of other interpretive communities into the feminist interpretive community when such overlaps negate our political goals. Second, we must resist the attraction of relying on Culler's "rule of unity" in our literary criticism and instead be willing to identify and accept the multiplicity inherent in texts by women writers. Finally, we must resist our own impulse to identify only our ideal selves in the texts by women writers that we read and critique. Applying these three steps to a reading of My Antonia will demonstrate the radical potential that a resisting reading of women writers holds for the feminist interpretive community.

Having received more critical attention than any other Cather novel, My Antonia seems an unlikely subject for a revisionary critic to address. But in spite of what has been said in the past, there is still a great deal left to consider about this complicated novel. In part this is because, as I have demonstrated, previous critics have concentrated on the same three aspects of the text: Jim Burden as narrator, the Land as subject, and Antonia as representative female character. These topics were selected for consideration by the novel's early reviewers and have continued to concern critics, including feminist critics, for seventy-five years. One of the first things we can do as

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resisting readers of My Antonia is turn our attention away from the traditional topics and focus on an aspect of the text that has been virtually ignored by all previous interpretive communities. One of the primary concerns in this novel is the position of immigrants in America at the turn of the century. Antonia, as I have said, is a Bohemian immigrant, and at least half of the other major characters in the novel are new arrivals to the United States. But, as immigrants, these characters have been ignored. The major reason for this critical neglect probably stems from the concern most early scholars had with issues of "Americanness" in texts by American writers. An extensive focus on those characters in this novel who are most clearly not American might detract from its "Americanness." And, as we have seen, even feminist literary critics followed the lead established by these early studies. Furthermore, feminist literary critics, perhaps unconsciously, found Cather's treatment of the immigrants somewhat difficult to "naturalize." As we shall see, it is impossible to read some of these passages and regard them as articulations of a feminist "ideal self." But focusing our attention on Cather's depiction of "foreigners" in My Antonia will reveal some important, and previously ignored, aspects of the novel that may eventually contribute a great deal to a feminist articulation of the "discourse of liberation."

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The first book of My Antonia, entitled "The Shimerdas," deals extensively with immigrants and their position on the Nebraska prairie. And while immigrants continue to appear throughout the novel, the tone taken towards "foreigners" is established early. With very few exceptions, all the "American" characters either disdain the immigrants or pity them. As the novel opens Jim, accompanied by a family employee named Jake, is crossing the country by train to live with his grandparents on their farm near Black Hawk, Nebraska. The conductor immediately informs them of a family in the "immigrant car" who speak no English and have a daughter Jim's age. Jim is too shy to visit the girl, and Jake approves of his decision, informing him that "you were likely to get diseases from foreigners."²⁰ Before we even see Antonia or her "foreign" family, the novel leads us to associate them with ignorance and disease. These associations continue throughout the text. On his first visit to Antonia's family, Jim is confronted with many things he does not understand. Antonia, so thankful that he has taught her a few English words, tries to give Jim her silver ring. He views this gesture as "reckless and extravagant" and is astounded at the behavior of "these people" (729). His description of Mrs. Shimerda's bread baking habits also serves to set the family apart as "other":

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The "we" in Jim's shocked description of sour dough bread baking customs designates other "Americans" who no doubt rely on more civilized leaven such as yeast. Furthermore, the Shimerdas are clearly associated with animals in his description, as they use a horse feed container for baking. Jim's Grandmother Burden shares his horror at the inability of these recent immigrants to conform to Nebraskan customs. On a later visit to their home she worries that they may be eating prairie-dogs and observes, "Where's a body to begin, with these people? They're wanting in everything, and most of all in horse-sense" (762, emphasis mine). Later, Jim is disconcerted when Mrs. Shimerda wraps food in a "quilt stuffed with feathers" to keep it warm (791). Neither Jim nor his grandmother are able to recognize the "horse-sense" of people who manage to make bread without yeast, eat meat without domestic animals, and warm food without fire. As readers, we are free to recognize the irony behind their pronouncements, but the sustained pattern of negative

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One of the clearest illustrations of this is the association made between the Shimerda's home and an animal's lair. Jim devotes considerable attention to describing his grandparents' beautiful home claiming, "ours was the only wooden house west of Black Hawk" (722). Their comfortable house is a sharp contrast to the Shimerda's dugout:

As we approached the Shimerdas' dwelling, I could still see nothing but rough red hillocks, and draws with shelving banks and long roots hanging out where the earth had crumbled away. Presently, against one of those banks, I saw a sort of shed, thatched with the same wine-colored grass that grew everywhere . . . then I saw a door and window sunk deep in the draw-bank.

(726)

Repeatedly, this house is compared to an animal's lair and its inhabitants to animals. Grandmother Burden calls it a "cave" and says, "It's no better than a badger hole; no proper dugout at all" (726). Later when Jim takes Antonia and her sister Yulka for a sleigh ride he observes that they were "glad to get away from their ugly cave" (753). Otto Fuchs, another Burden employee, reports that the Shimerdas "stick in that hole in the bank like badgers" (757). And even Antonia remarks that her sleeping quarters are "warm like the badger hole" (760). But the clearest evidence that

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the Shimerda's degrading living conditions are connected to their immigrant status, and are in some way what they deserve for being "other," can be seen through Jim's meditations on the prairie-dog town.

The prairie-dog town extends over ten acres, and dogs, brown earth-owls, as well as rattlesnakes inhabit the underground nests. The owls hold a special fascination for Jim and Antonia: "We used to wonder a great deal about these birds of subterranean habit . . . We felt sorry for the owls. It was always mournful to see them come flying home at sunset and disappear under the earth" (731). The comparison with the Shimerdas is obvious. Like the owls, they do not belong underground. And also like the owls, they are the objects of pity. But Jim's next observation is particularly startling for what it reveals about his attitude towards the unfortunate family: "But after all . . . winged things who would live like that must be rather degraded creatures" (731). Jim is completely incapable of seeing that the Shimerdas, victims of poverty and circumstance, do not deserve or desire to live in a cave, and his observations suggest that they, like the owls, are "degraded creatures." Otherwise, they would surely not consent to live in a hole in the ground.

A third instance in Book One that helps establish the frame through which immigrants are viewed in the novel is the confrontation between Jake and Ambrosch, Antonia's older

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brother. According to Jim, the result of this conflict was "a distinct coldness between us and the Shimerdas" (795). Jake, acting for his employer, Grandpa Burden, had loaned Ambrosch a horse collar. Asking Ambrosch to return the harness, Jake receives, instead of the object he loaned the Bohemians, "a collar that had been badly used--trampled in the dirt and gnawed by rats" (796). The two young men fight, and Jake knocks Ambrosch, unconscious, to the ground. Jim's description of the response of Antonia and Mrs. Shimerda is revealing: "They came on, screaming and clawing the air" (796, emphasis mine). The animal imagery continues as Jake calls out, "You're a damned ungrateful lot, the whole pack of you" (796, emphasis mine). He informs Jim, "These foreigners ain't the same . . . They ain't to be trusted" (796-797). And Jim assures him, "I'll never be friends with them again, Jake . . . I believe they are all like Krajiek and Ambrosch underneath" (797). Jim essentializes the Shimerdas and, by extension, all "foreigners." He eventually reconciles with Antonia and her family, but he also remembers her behavior in the weeks after the incident when, taunting the boys, she would "clap her hands and call to us in a spiteful, crowing voice" (797). This unflattering portrait of Antonia contrasts sharply with many of his fond memories, but it also serves to remind us that Jim cannot forget the animal-like qualities that lurk "underneath" his immigrant heroine. Because of its reliance upon notions of unified subjectivity,

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the feminist interpretive community has viewed "only the positive side" of Cather's portrait of Antonia. If, as resisting readers, we are willing to look for multiplicity in novels by women writers, we can recognize that Cather's portrait of Antonia, while in many respects positive, is not wholly so. Such a reading reveals Cather's position as subject to a society which held many negative notions about the foreign "other."

Another way the text systematically dehumanizes immigrants is by repeatedly associating "foreigners" with large families and the attendant sexual activity such families imply in an age before effective birth control. The text suggests that "these people" cannot control their sexual desires in an appropriate, "American" way. One of the first indications of this pattern occurs in Book One when Otto Fuchs, himself an immigrant and an employee of the Burdens, describes a "funny story" about some adventures he experienced on his passage to America. He was asked by a relative to look after a pregnant woman traveling to meet her husband in Chicago. Otto claims that the woman "played a sorry trick on him" by delivering three babies and that her fertility drew unwanted (and embarrassing) attention: "The first-cabin passengers, who made up a purse for the woman, took an embarrassing interest in Otto, and often inquired of him about his charge" (756). The interest of these wealthy passengers highlights the exotic aspect of immigrant

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sexuality represented by this fertile woman. Otto's "funny story" seems somewhat out of place unless viewed in the context of the many tales about immigrant fertility and sexuality appearing in My Antonia.

Jim is an only child, and many of the "American" couples in the novel such as the Gardeners and the Cutters are apparently childless. The only large "American" family in the novel are the Harlings; but, while Mr. Harling was born in Minnesota, his wife "lived in Christiania until she was ten years old" (807). Furthermore, the Harlings are among the wealthiest families in Black Hawk, well able to care for their large brood of children. Speaking of the Lingard family, however, who are Norwegian immigrants, Jim observes, "Chris Lingard was not a very successful farmer, and he had a large family" (817). Mr. Lingard's failure in America is linked to his failure to control the population of his family. When Lena, Tiny, Anna, and Jim go on a picnic together, the girls discuss the hardships of large families where there are always "plenty of live dolls to nurse" (863). And the "scandalous" story Jim relates about the "three Marys" further emphasizes the lascivious sexual behavior associated with "foreigners":

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friend, Mary Svoboda, who was similarly embarrassed.

The three Marys were considered as dangerous as high explosives to have about the kitchen. (840-1)

The "explosive" sexuality Jim and his community associates with the "foreigners" is simply one more way they discriminate and label.

Antonia herself is not protected from this designation. As she tells Jim, her parents' marriage was the result of illicit sexual activity. Before her marriage Mrs. Shimerda was a poor girl who worked for Mr. Shimerda's mother. Antonia suggests that the noble and the peasant became lovers and conceived a child: "They said he could have paid my mother money, and not married her . . . he was too kind to treat her like that" (861). Apparently following in her mother's footsteps, Antonia takes a lover; unlike Mr. Shimerda, however, Larry Donovan does not marry the pregnant young woman. Jim's response is telling: "I tried to shut Antonia out of my mind. I was bitterly disappointed in her. I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity" (894). He is actually unable to forgive Antonia for fulfilling his expectations, the expectations he has held since a child that "underneath" Antonia is like all the other "foreigners." Even in her later life, Antonia continues to conform to Jim's accepted notions of the behavior of "foreigners." Seeking news of his friend, Jim discovers that her marriage to a young Bohemian was what he might have

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predicted: "they were poor, and had a large family" (912). He stays away for many years claiming, "I did not want to find her aged and broken" (912). When he finally does visit Antonia, Jim is amazed and enraptured by her "ten or eleven" children. Her fertility, that aspect that once seemed so "disappointing" and "foreign," he transforms into her chief asset as he depicts her as the Earth Mother reigning in an Edenic paradise. Married and middle-aged, Antonia no longer threatens Jim.

It is significant that Jim realizes the magnitude of Antonia's accomplishment as a mother only when he sees her children spilling out of the "fruit cave," a structure reminiscent of Antonia's first home in America:

We turned to leave the cave; Antonia and I went up the stairs first, and the children waited. We were standing outside talking, when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment. (918)

The cave Jim describes is eerily reminiscent of the womb, as Antonia's children spring forth from its depths. Clearly the association between the Shimerdas' status as "degraded" immigrants, their first cave home, and Antonia's fruitful womb are strong. Throughout the novel human fertility has been linked to immigrants and the primitive sexuality Jim

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associates with them. It seems clear that whether we view the Earth Mother as a limiting or an affirmative archetype, we cannot forget the negative pattern associated with large families in this novel. It is one more sign of the "foreign" "other."

It is important, however, not to lose sight of the fact that there are many examples of immigrants in My Antonia who "rise above" the conditions of their nationality.

Significantly, these characters are always the ones who assimilate most thoroughly with the "American" community. Their assimilation is clearly represented by their mastery of the English language and by their financial success. In addition, very few of the "successful" immigrants have families. The first important example of a character who manages the transition from "foreigner" to "American" is Anton Jelinek. Like the Shimerdas, he is a Bohemian, and we first see him when he arrives to help the family after the despairing suicide of Antonia's father. Jim is struck by his assertive, mature manner as he strides into their kitchen, "a strapping young fellow . . . handsome, warm-hearted, and full of life" (781). The reason Jelinek did not visit the Shimerdas before their tragedy is because he has been busy earning money, eager to make his fortune in America. Significantly, he has also been working to erase the differences between himself and his neighbors: "Since winter began he had been going to the school by the mill, to learn

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English, along with the little children. He told me he had a nice 'lady-teacher' and that he liked to go to school" (781, emphasis mine). Ironically, although she is the appropriate age, Antonia is never allowed to go to school. But unlike the Shimerdas, whose only English lessons come from Jim, Jelinek is anxious to assimilate. Eventually, "Handsome Anton Jelinek" rents his homestead and opens one of the only two saloons in Black Hawk. Jim recalls that his establishment was "admitted, even by the church people, to be as respectable as a saloon could be" (849). And when Jim makes his pilgrimage back to Black Hawk many years later, Jelinek is still a successful businessman, still running his saloon, and, apparently, still childless (935).

Another major character in My Antonia who achieves the American dream is Lena Lingard. And, like Jelinek, she does so in part by remaining childless. One of the first statements she makes in the novel is, "I don't want to marry Nick, or any other man . . . I've seen a good deal of married life, and I don't care for it" (816). And, true to her word, she remains single her entire life. Lena apprentices herself to a dressmaker in Black Hawk and soon is, as the dressmaker had predicted, quite successful at her trade. She moves to Lincoln, establishes her own shop, and reunites with Jim who is there attending college. Lena has assimilated so successfully that Jim cannot recognize her: "She was so quietly conventionalized by city clothes that I might have

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passed her on the street without seeing her" (877, emphasis mine). Jim admires and respects Lena's success and views her in a way that he could never see Antonia: "It seemed to me wonderful that she should have got on so well in the world. Certainly she had no one but herself to thank for it" (878). Jim and Lena become lovers, although their affection for each other seems rather tepid. But their affair makes Jim's later declaration to Antonia, "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister--anything that a woman can be to a man," particularly ironic (910). Jim could never accept Antonia as a lover because, unlike Lena, she would always be a "foreigner" "underneath." One poignant illustration of this is Jim's comparison of the speech habits of the two young women:

Lena's talk always amused me. Antonia had never talked like the people about her. Even after she learned to speak English readily there was always something impulsive and foreign in her speech. But Lena had picked up all the conventional expressions she heard at Mrs. Thomas's dressmaking shop. (886, emphasis mine)

Lena's success at assimilation translates directly into financial success, and at the end of the novel she is the owner of an exclusive dressmaking shop in San Francisco. In many respects a "conventional," Americanized woman, Lena becomes wealthy and successful, while Antonia, still "foreign," develops into an Earth Mother. It is not

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Recognizing these two very different articulations of "women's experience" in My Antonia is an effective way to avoid reductively clinging to a unified notion of "women's identity." It is only by resisting the prevailing critical concern with Jim and Antonia that we are able to recognize this other narrative embedded in the novel.

The feminist interpretive community has allowed their concern with gender issues in My Antonia to obscure issues of race, nationality and class. In fact, however, issues of gender and nationality are completely entwined in this novel. Certainly, I think it is still difficult to determine whether Antonia constitutes a "positive role model." But I also hope I have sufficiently demonstrated that it is not necessary to codify her as entirely one thing or another. In fact, we should strive to make room for multiplicity in our criticism. It is important to be free to say that perhaps she is both positive and negative. Or, even more importantly, perhaps we must begin to consider her character, as well as all the other characters we encounter in women's writing, without relying on such binary notions as "positive" and "negative." If we do focus on nationality as well as gender, we are able

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to develop a different picture of her character and what Cather accomplished through it. There are certainly female characters in the novel who constitute "positive role models" in the old, feminist sense. Lena Lingard; Tiny Soderball, the millionaire land speculator; Mrs. Gardener, the hotel owner; and Frances Harling, the grain merchant all achieve undisputed success. And they all do so because they are either "American" or "Americanized" women. Significantly, in My Antonia there are no examples of unconventional immigrant women who have fully and successfully resisted the "oppressive patriarchy" and thus surmounted the constraints of their gender. It is time that we acknowledge the fact that one of Cather's messages in My Antonia is that only certain women, "American" Women, are capable of fully overcoming the restrictive circumstances associated with being a woman in a male society.

Cather's prejudices regarding "foreigners" are confirmed, in an unusual way, by her treatment of a black male character, Blind d'Arnault. An entire chapter of Book Two, "The Hired Girls," is devoted to Blind d'Arnault, a traveling pianist who has come to play in Black Hawk. In spite of the considerable attention Cather devotes to this character, literary critics have virtually ignored his presence in the novel. Feminist critics have been especially reluctant to consider this rather strange interlude both because it seems completely at odds with the rest of the text

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and because the stereotypes Cather relies on in her characterization of Blind d'Arnault are offensive to any reader committed to contemporary, liberal ideas of individual equality. Jim remembers Blind d'Arnault, as "a heavy, bulky mulatto on short legs" whose "white teeth" are "all grinning" in his "yellow face" (829). Further relying on negative stereotypes, Cather describes d'Arnault's voice as "the soft, amiable negro voice . . . with the note of docile subservience in it" (829). The adjective "docile" is used two additional times to describe d'Arnault in the seven-page chapter. He was "docile and obedient" as a child (830), and d'Arnault remains "docile and happy" as a old man when he departs from the crowd which has been listening to his remarkable playing in Black Hawk (834). Apparently unaware of the incongruous comparison, Jim also mentions that as he plays dance music on the piano the "docile" d'Arnault becomes transformed into "some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood" (834). Jim concludes that "To hear him, to watch him, was to see a negro enjoying himself as only a negro can" (832). The chapter is a painful one to read if one is aware of the power and the danger of such derogatory, stereotypical language. Cather certainly does not seem like a feminist "ideal self" in this chapter.

The one critic who does consider d'Arnault, John J. Murphy, focuses on the description of d'Arnault's first childhood encounter with a piano:

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Through the dark he found his way to the Thing, to its mouth. He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. Then he began to feel it all over, ran his finger tips along the slippery sides, embraced the carved legs, tried to get some conception of its shape and size, of the space it occupied in primeval night. It was cold and hard, and like nothing else in his black universe. He went back to its mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. He seemed to know that it must be done with the fingers, not with the fists or the feet. He approached this highly artificial instrument through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him.

(831-2)

Murphy concludes that d'Arnault illustrates powerful sexual currents underlying the text: "Here, through Jamesian sublimation, Cather follows Norris's dictum to plumb the mystery of sex and search the innermost temple of the soul of man" (1984, 236). I agree with Murphy's analysis, and I would go further in observing that d'Arnault's association with sexuality parallels the associations Cather makes between sexuality and the "foreigners" who people the novel. Sexuality is something exotic, primitive; ultimately, like

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d'Arnault's playing, it is "barbarous" and "abominable" (832).

There are several clear and specific ways in which Cather describes d'Arnault with the same language she uses to describe the immigrants. Examining these instances will help us understand this character as well as Cather's problematic use of the tropes of race and nationality in My Antonia, issues that have long been ignored by all interpretive communities. One thing the text emphasizes when describing immigrants is skin color. Jim's first description of Antonia emphasizes her dark skin and eyes: "[Her eyes] were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark color. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking" (727, emphasis mine). Years later, when Jim returns to visit Antonia he describes her as "a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled" (914, emphasis mine). I do not think it is too great a stretch to consider d'Arnault and his description as "yellow" with hair like "close-clipped wool" as related to Antonia. Both are identified as "foreign" by the sign of their physical appearance. In both cases, they are marked as permanently disfigured by virtue of their difference from the Anglo-American norm. Furthermore, it seems to me that both are exoticized: Antonia by her position as Earth Mother and d'Arnault by his position as African god. They are

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simultaneously objects of admiration and disdain, the only position Cather's text seems to leave for someone who is "other" or "foreign."

Another way the text distinguishes "foreigners" is by head shape; this seems to be a special concern of Cather's, but it is one that has never been remarked on by critics. The description of Blind d'Arnault's head is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of his characterization: "He had the negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool" (829). It is shocking that this insulting description of a black man with no brain has attracted so little attention. Has Cather mindlessly bought into the assumptions and prejudices of her society? Clearly she has in part. But we must turn to her description of the head shapes of the immigrants in the story to fully understand how this problematic trope functions in her work. Shopping in Black Hawk, Jim encounters Lena Lingard with her little brother Chris, the son of the unsuccessful Chris, Sr. The twelve-year old boy seems industrious and happy, as he has been working all fall in the Norwegian church to buy his mother a Christmas present. But Jim's description of the boy highlights the latter's difference, as he calls Chris "funny" and "square-headed" (821). Later, Jim's description of a Polish violinist whose affection for Lena rivaled his own also focuses on head shape: "His head was the shape of a chocolate drop, and was

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covered with dry, straw-colored hair that fuzzed up about his pointed crown" (889). Presumably, Jim considers this anomaly one reason the Pole is unworthy of Lena's love.

The emphasis on head shape becomes even more evident when Jim returns to Antonia's farm. Antonia tells him that one of the things that is most important to her is raising her children with "nice [American] ways," like those she learned at the Harlings. And one of the things she is most proud of is that "none of my daughters will ever have to work out," the standard occupation for immigrant girls (921). Jim confirms her success at raising "American" children when he observes that her two oldest sons are "straight, well-made fellows, with good heads and clear eyes" (922, emphasis mine). Jim reiterates this pronouncement later when he expresses his sorrow at leaving Antonia's second son, Ambrosch, "with his pleasant voice and his fine head and eyes" (935, emphasis mine). But Antonia has one son, her favorite, who is not "Americanized." Leo is the only child in the family who plays Mr. Shimerda's violin, and he plays Bohemian songs (923). Jim also notes a connection between Leo and his grandmother, observing that "His habitual skepticism was like a direct inheritance from that old woman" (925). Most significantly, however, this boy who is clearly the least "Americanized" of all Antonia's children is described in terms that loudly echo the description of Blind d'Arnault: "He hadn't much head behind his ears and his tawny

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fleece grew down thick to the back of his neck" (924). Just like d'Arnault, Leo's difference is marked by his head shape and hair texture: he has no room in his skull for a brain and his head is covered with something that resembles a sheep's skin. It is not enough to dismiss Jim's description of Blind d'Arnault as mere racism, although it is that. For these descriptions, while painful, also function to illuminate Cather's overriding concern with "difference" and the ways it stunts success in her fictional world. Ignoring these passages, as so many critics have done, obscures significant features of the work and stunts our understanding of it.

If we return, in light of Cather's treatment of immigrants and blacks, to her interpretation of the "myth of America" in My Antonia, her version achieves significant, and perhaps sinister, new meanings. On his first full night at his grandparent's farm, Jim attends family prayers and hears Grandfather Burden read from the book of Psalms. The one verse Jim quotes, "He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom He loved. Selah," is central (722). For although Jim claims he "had no idea what the word meant," it is clear to readers what the verse itself signifies. The "chosen people" in this novel are "Americans," and they achieve their success at the expense of immigrants who, by their very presence, are always a threat to that inheritance. This difficult balance is illustrated by the puzzling story Antonia tells the Harlings about the

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tramp at thrashing time. Antonia was driving a grain wagon for a Norwegian family and was approached by a tramp: "His toes stuck out of his shoes, and he hadn't shaved for a long while, and his eyes was awful red and wild, like he had some sickness" (825). The man asked for beer, and Antonia told him that the Norwegians did not have beer but that he could find some if he went to the Bohemians. The tramp complained angrily, "My God . . . so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy" (826). Instead of going off in search of beer, however, the man asked to help run the thrashing machine. But to the horror of the workers, the tramp proceeded to wave to Antonia and jump head-first into the powerful machine:

I begun to scream, and the men run to stop the horses, but the belt had sucked him down, and by the time they got her stopped he was all beat and cut to pieces. He was wedged in so tight it was a hard job to get him out, and the machine ain't never worked right since. (826)

The tramp's suicide can be seen as the angry response of a whole nation, "Americy," threatened by the powerful influx of "foreigners" who, in spite of all prejudice and discrimination, manage to survive and prosper and subdue the land.

In many respects My Antonia suggests that essentializing and mythologizing "these people" is a more acceptable alternative for "Americans" than jumping into the thrashing

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machine. But such a reading constitutes a vast oversimplification of the novel. To reduce the novel to a tale of midwestern prejudice and discrimination is not to become resisting readers. It is merely to replace one unified reading with another. In order to make such a claim, moreover, we would have to ignore instances when the views of Jim Burden, and thus the text, are highly enlightened and sympathetic towards the immigrants in the novel. We would have to ignore his claim, for example, that he "thought the attitude of the town people toward [immigrant] girls very stupid" (839). And we would be unable to acknowledge, among many other things, Jim's sincere admiration of Antonia's father: "There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of Antonia's father" (839).

It is moments like these that demonstrate the usefulness of postmodernism for feminist literary criticism. For we are not forced to choose a single subject position with which to identify either the characters in a novel or the author of a novel. We are no longer able to acknowledge only those aspects of the text which support our own critical agenda. For such a position would simply repeat the errors of previous feminist critics who were able to consider only the "feminist" agenda that the text clearly does incorporate. We must develop interpretive strategies that will allow us to acknowledge the moments in Cather's novel that do not

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represent our "ideal selves," indeed moments that represent anti-feminist, patriarchal sentiments. But we must also realize that such moments do not force us to throw the novel itself into the shredder. Our interpretive strategies must accommodate more than one method of reading. One way to do this is to recognize that we do not have to deny the many significant and revealing readings that previous interpretive communities have made of this text. As resisting readers, we are not necessarily attempting to replace those readings with our own. Rather, we are attempting to provide alternative strategies and readings that can stand alongside and enrich the current understandings of women's writing. That in itself will eliminate the danger of allowing Culler's "rule of unity" to dominate our criticism. As we move towards a resisting reading of My Antonia, it is my hope that we will acknowledge the importance of considering the text's attitude towards blacks and immigrants along with the many other important aspects critics have long recognized in the novel. Thus it will become evident that while Cather was protesting many aspects of her patriarchal society, she was also a product of that society, and she inevitably, if unconsciously, celebrated some facets of turn-of-the-century America that contributed to the oppression of women as well as men. If we are able to acknowledge the many and complicated facets of Cather, we will be better prepared to see those things in ourselves. The importance of approaching

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Cather and other women writers in this way becomes even more clear when we turn to a novel like Sapphira and the Slave Girl.

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Reading Sapphira and the Slave Girl

The transition from My Antonia, one of Cather's earlier and most critically acclaimed novels, to Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), her last and most neglected work, may at first seem an awkward leap. But a brief exploration of the critical reception of the later novel reveals a great deal about the operation of the feminist interpretive community. And, as I will demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, a resisting reading of Sapphira and the Slave Girl can illustrate both the importance of a feminist consideration of neglected texts by established authors and the potential of resisting reading to reshape our consideration of the entire canon of women's writing.

The only novel Cather set in the state where she was born, Sapphira and the Slave Girl takes place in Virginia during the years just before the Civil War. The novel recounts the story of Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, the slave-owning mistress of a small plantation, and her husband Henry Colbert, the rustic operator of a community mill. The "Slave Girl" of the title is Nancy Till, and one of her responsibilities includes cleaning the mill where Henry Colbert sleeps. Sapphira becomes jealous of the young woman and plots to have her seduced by one of Henry's nephews. But Sapphira's abolitionist daughter, Rachel, saves Nancy by sending her to Canada on the underground railroad. The novel

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concludes with a reunion between Nancy and her mother, Till, who remained in the service of the Colbert family after slavery ended. Already, through this brief plot summary, it should be clear that this novel is significantly different from My Antonia. Not only in its setting, but also in its driving, linear narrative, Sapphira and the Slave Girl seems unique. It has also received less critical attention than any other Cather novel, with the possible exception of Lucy Gayheart. Those assessments of the book that do exist suggest that critics have ignored Sapphira and the Slave Girl in part because they have been unable to identify Baym's "myth of America" in it.

In general, the early reviews of the novel were extremely favorable. It is important, however, to remember that by the time Sapphira appeared Cather herself was an American institution. Sixty-seven years old and the recipient of several honorary degrees as well as the Pulitzer Prize for One of Ours (1922), Cather had by this time achieved a stature comparable to Eudora Welty's in 1993. Thus, when a reviewer like Morton Dauwen Zabel for The Nation called the book one of Cather's five best it is fair to assume that his comments might in part be a tribute to the writer as well as the work (575). He was not alone in his apparent admiration for the novel. Another reviewer, Henry Seidel Canby, identified in Sapphira "that delicate yet powerful art of brief and significant narrative" and

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observed that "all that is needed is included, and all that is needless is left out" (5). The San Francisco Chronicle called Sapphira the equivalent of Antonia (Gunsky 14), and Mary Ross of the New York Herald-Tribune asserted that one of most admirable aspects of the text was Cather's true and honest depiction of black characters (1). In her essay for the Book of the Month Club News Dorothy Canfield Fisher called Sapphira "a lovely story of escape from human slavery, which is not only literally and factually true, but deeply and symbolically the truth" (284). James Woodress claims that the reviews of Sapphira pleased Cather more than any others she had received over her long career (1987, 488). But there was one dissenting, and as it turns out prophetic, voice among the major reviews of 1940-41. Writing in The New Yorker, Clifton Fadiman suggested that Sapphira would not become one of Cather's most enduring works because it is "designedly minor in tone and content" (104).

Fadiman's predictions were accurate, but it is important to realize that the main reason Sapphira was viewed as minor was because it was not perceived to address the "myth of America." Because Cather's final novel ranks last in the amount of critical attention it has received since those first euphoric reviews, it is an easy task briefly to survey all the significant essays and chapters devoted to Sapphira. Almost without exception all early critics of this novel, and many later critics, ignore the issues of race and class that

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are so central in any work whose main subject is slavery. A little over a decade after the novel's publication and four years after its author's death, David Daiches declared Sapphira below the standard set by Cather's earlier work (93). And E. K. Brown, while admiring some of the technical aspects of the novel, also ranks it as inferior to the prairie novels (259). In the first critical essay to appear on the novel, Paul C. Wermuth claims, "Sapphira and the Slave Girl lacks much of the vitality of its author's best books . . . it is largely a nostalgic picture of a long-vanished way of life" (7). John H. Randall joins the chorus, calling Sapphira an artistic failure (365). Lavon Mattes Jobes is less harsh in his University Review article, but the goal of his essay seems to be to encourage readers to reconsider this novel, which by 1967 had fallen into critical obscurity (77). In "Willa Cather's Last Four Books" David Stouck attempts to explain this obscurity by pointing to the new perspective Cather adopted in her later life. He writes that by the publication of Obscure Destinies in 1932 "the primary objective of [Cather's] writing is no longer self-expression but the desire to see human relationships from as many vantage points as possible" (299). This shift is a shift away from the rugged individualism characteristic of her early work, a characteristic that, as I have shown, earned Cather a prominent place in the canon of American literature. Because critics could not identify these characteristics in

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Cather's last novel, they either dismissed the work as inferior or otherwise ignored it.²¹

The first feminist assessments of Sapphira and the Slave Girl did not appear until the 1980s. And even then, they differed markedly from those of My Antonia. In "Reentering Paradise" (1980) Jane Lilienfeld focuses on Cather's relationship with her mother, identifying correspondences between Sapphira's relationship to Rachel and Virginia Cather's relationship to Willa (163). Lilienfeld suggests that in Sapphira Cather "fictionalized and thus worked through the patterns of dominance, rivalry, anger, and annoyance that had characterized her relations to Mary Virginia Cather. All the mother-daughter relations in the novel grow from these 'tangled strands'" (164). Focusing her critical attention squarely on the white women in the novel, Lilienfeld is able to ignore the issues of race and class which permeate the text. Eugenie Lambert Hamner shares Lilienfeld's concern with biography and, like her, she deflects attention away from the issues in Sapphira, such as racism, that might be inconsistent with a feminist world view. Hamner's essay focuses on identifying the child who observes the reunion between Nancy and Till at the end of the novel as she explores the ramifications of Cather's possible placement of herself directly into the text (352). In addition, Hamner identifies powerful female characters in the novel including Sapphira, Rachel, Nancy, and Till, ignoring

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"Sapphira and the Slave Girl: An American Gothic," the final chapter of Susan J. Rosowski's book The Voyage Perilous (1986), first appeared as a Great Plains Quarterly essay in 1984. Rosowski argues that the basic plot of Sapphira is that of a Gothic novel full of drafty manors, evil villains, innocent heroines, and valiant rescuers: "This basic plot is so firmly presented that we respond to it as Gothic, though we may not consciously recognize it as such" (236-7). Rosowski identifies the many contradictions in the text, including the "graceful facade of civilization" that disguises the "dark cruelty" of slavery and the ambiguous character of Sapphira who is both "kind" and "cruel" (234-5). Rosowski concludes that rather than being "escapist," the novel represents a "distinctly modern search for meaning in an estranged world" (239). But Rosowski's discussion deflects attention away from Cather's consideration of slavery and race in the text and instead focuses on the larger and somewhat more abstract question of evil. The ramifications of how Cather chose to represent and explore this issue are large ones that feminist literary critics would do well to explore.

By the mid 1980s critics were no longer eliding the issues of race, class, and gender in their discussions of Sapphira and the Slave Girl. This is due in part to the

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publication of Black and White Women (1985), an important book by Minrose C. Gwin. Gwin's aim is to reveal the "paradox of human pain and human connection in racial encounter" through an exploration of cross-racial relationships between women as depicted in novels and autobiographies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (5). Sapphira and the Slave Girl is one of five American novels she considers. Like Rosowski, Gwin locates Sapphira's ambiguity at the center of the text (132). Gwin suggests that it is Sapphira's "moral ambiguity" that "implies Cather's assessment of slavery as a complex, problematic phenomenon" (137). According to Gwin, Cather views freedom as a "mixed blessing":

Sapphira's peculiar brand of evil emerges from a union of her own egocentricity and the institution of slavery. That same union, Cather indicates, can also produce happy slaves and the comfort and ease of a traditional social order, which is not perfect but not totally repressive either. (147)

Gwin faults Cather both for neglecting to provide any fully developed characters besides Sapphira and for accepting unquestioningly the ambiguity of cross-racial female relations she depicts in Sapphira (148-9). It is difficult to speculate on the reasons Gwin was able to see the racist implications in the novel when so many feminist critics apparently could not recognize the power dynamics in the

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text. In part her subject, cross-racial relationships between women, led her to address aspects of the text previous critics could more easily ignore. In addition, Gwin was not a Cather specialist. Unlike Rosowski, Arnold, and others, she was not active in professional organizations, like the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, that are devoted to maintaining and promoting Cather's literary reputation. Perhaps it was easier for her to see the clay feet of the idol. In any case, after Gwin, it was no longer possible for the feminist interpretive community to ignore the way issues of race inflect issues of gender in Sapphira.

Marilyn Arnold addresses Sapphira in a 1987 essay entitled "'Of Human Bondage': Cather's Subnarrative in Sapphira and the Slave Girl." But despite the implications of its title the essay gives little more than a nod to the actual depiction of slavery in Sapphira. Arnold suggests that there are two levels to Cather's slave novel: the surface text, which constitutes a traditional "slave novel" depicting the necessity of ending an evil system, and the "underplot," which represents slavery as a symbol for the power of social customs and manners to enslave individuals (324). According to Arnold, "On this second level Cather sees the institution of slavery to be symbolic of a whole culture in bondage to its own artificial code of conduct, a code based on degrees of privilege that shackle everyone regardless of color or station" (325). By shifting her focus

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away from slavery in this way, Arnold's approach resembles Rosowski's. Slavery and race, when viewed as abstractions or symbols for something else, are shorn of their terrible power. The painful task of coming to terms with Cather's depiction of slavery is deflected; Arnold and others assume that Cather was far enough outside this system of caste and class to adequately critique it, and their assumptions obscure the evidence that she herself was a participant in the very system she attempts to critique.

Ann Romines views slavery in Sapphira as a symbol of the destruction of relationships between mothers and daughters and of the political powerlessness of women. She claims that "at the novel's center . . . is the conjunction of Sapphira's enormous power and her humiliating helplessness as a woman" (156). Romines equates Sapphira's passive aggressive manipulation of power with her slave women and their "covert" attempts to seize power. By her desire to identify an "essential woman" behind Sapphira as well as Nancy, Romines appropriates classic feminist interpretive strategies and consequently minimizes the struggles of both women, but especially of Nancy. Like Romines, Merrill Maguire Skaggs focuses on Sapphira and sees her as the central concern of Sapphira and the Slave Girl. Calling the novel "ideologically unconventional," Skaggs suggests that Cather "forces us to realize that Sapphira's sins and her virtues spring from the same self-confident dependence on herself,

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from her arrogant willfulness, and from her unfaltering courage and self-love" (177). Recalling Arnold's argument, Skaggs insists that the novel illustrates the enslavement of all its characters, blacks as well as whites (178). And she asserts that Cather constantly revised stereotypes and disappointed expectations in her depiction of black characters in the novel: "Most roles--social, sexual, or otherwise--are reversed in this novel" (175).

Significantly, after Gwin, the first critic to directly address slavery and race in Sapphira, rather than view them as symbols for something else, was British feminist Hermione Lee. Perhaps because she is not part of the American feminist interpretive community, Lee is free to acknowledge the painful and awkward aspects of Cather's treatment of slavery and race in Sapphira. Lee claims that "Built into Cather's domestic history of a particular West Virginian family, in the years leading up to the Civil War, was the ambivalence about slavery which her novel re-enacted" (358). Focusing on this ambivalence, Lee contends that "What interested Cather was the everyday life of a family for whom slavery was an existing circumstance" (359). According to Lee, Cather's focus was not on a war against slavery but on a war within a family (360). But Lee is not as willing as her predecessors to pass over the fact that in Sapphira Cather often appears to ignore the larger political issues of slavery. She observes that "Cather's treatment of her black

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characters is problematic" and makes for "embarrassing reading" (365). In addition, Lee suggests that for Cather the problems of the miller, Rachel, and Sapphira take precedence over those of Nancy and the other slaves, "which keep getting dissolved into picturesque pastoral scenes" (365). After reading the many essays and books that ignore or obscure Cather's treatment of slavery, I find Lee's conclusion refreshing:

Anyone who has read Toni Morrison's Beloved or Alice Walker's The Color Purple will find difficulty in tolerating Cather's version of black slavery as anything but a dated historical curiosity. Nevertheless, within the limits of her time and type, Cather was trying to make us aware of a monstrous double history. (365)

It is my contention, nevertheless, that using "the limits of [Cather's] time and type" as an excuse for her fiction is an extremely irresponsible position for a feminist literary critic to take. Through a resisting reading, I would suggest we can address these limits thoroughly and directly without having to reject the author or her work.

There are at least three reasons why the feminist interpretive community has neglected Sapphira and the Slave Girl. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the fact that Sapphira was ignored by the interpretive communities preceding feminism. These critics were uninterested in analyzing a Cather novel that so fully refused to be read as

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an enactment of the "myth of America." Feminist literary critics unconsciously allowed themselves to be influenced by the judgments of these scholars whose agenda were, ironically, so different from their own. In addition, Lee recognizes the novel's "embarrassing" depiction of black characters. Most feminist critics who did address the novel managed to deflect attention away from these painful moments in the text, but many apparently chose to ignore the text instead. Finally, the feminist interpretive community has neglected this novel for the very reason one of its first critics, David Stouck, identified: "As a result we see the characters as complex individuals, neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but engagingly and sympathetically human" (1973, 300). In other words, the novel itself wholly and completely resists Culler's rule of unity. As Rosowski, Lee, and Gwin have suggested, Sapphira as well as many of the other characters in the novel are ambiguous. It is virtually impossible to naturalize the novel in the way typically favored by feminist literary critics. There are simply no characters in the novel who can easily be seen as "positive role models." But for this very reason it is high time that the feminist interpretive community turn its attention to this, Cather's last novel. As resisting readers we will be able to identify many ways our study of this text can contribute to the "discourse of liberation."

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Towards a Resisting Reading of Sapphira and the Slave Girl

The task of resisting the work of previous interpretive communities is not as arduous for readers of Sapphira and the Slave Girl simply because there is not as much to resist, but there is much in the novel itself that a feminist critic must resist. And those feminist critics who have analyzed the novel have often, for this very reason, been free to explore aspects of the text which they might ordinarily have ignored. One aspect of the text that I consider central, and which has received considerable attention, is Sapphira's ambiguous character. It is important that feminist critics acknowledge that as a fictional character Sapphira does not represent a "positive role model" in the old, feminist sense. We must also recognize that Sapphira's ambiguity does not disqualify her or the novel from feminist consideration. Sapphira's ambiguity has already been touched upon by Rosowski, Gwin, and Lee. But one thing that has been insufficiently recognized, even by these three critics, is the extent to which Sapphira's "admirable" characteristics--her strength, courage, and self-confidence--are dependent upon her ownership of other human beings.

Book One of the novel is titled "Sapphira and Her Household," and in it Cather goes to great lengths to establish Sapphira's character as neither entirely positive

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nor entirely negative. One of the most effective means for accomplishing this end is the sustained pattern of contradictory descriptions and adjectives concerning Sapphira that appear within the first few pages of the novel. By resisting the feminist interpretive community's affinity for readings that rely on a fixed and stable understanding of women's identity, we can recognize the multiple subject positions Sapphira holds. Sapphira appears at breakfast with her husband and her voice is described as "mild," "bland" and "considerate."²² Very quickly, however, it attains an "icy quality" as Henry Colbert contests her plan to sell Nancy (781). During the same conversation Sapphira smiles "tolerantly" and laughs "discreetly," but eventually the reader is told that "Her small mouth twisted mockingly" (782). It is when her absolute right to control her property--to sell Nancy--is disputed that her negative characteristics are revealed.

In addition to her facial expressions and voice, Sapphira's ambiguity is emphasized by her physical appearance. Cather informs us that Sapphira had once been "a very active woman" and a "zealous" manager of the farm, but is now confined to a wheelchair. Significantly, readers are not informed of her disability until after the entire breakfast conversation between Sapphira and her husband is concluded. The contrast between this strong, apparently self-assured woman and her physical condition shocks readers

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when, in the next-to-the-last paragraph of the chapter, we realize that Sapphira cannot walk:

Presently she rang for old Washington. When he came she said nothing, being lost in thought, but put her hands on the arms of the square, high-backed chair in which she sat. The old man ran to open two doors. Then he drew his mistress's chair away from the table, picked up a cushion on which her feet had been resting, tucked it under his arm, and gravely wheeled the chair, which proved to be on castors, out of the dining-room, down the long hall, and into Mrs. Colbert's bedchamber. (782-3)

This paragraph masterfully manipulates the reader's response. For we are first impressed with the authority of this woman who by a mere gesture can send an "old man" scurrying. He runs to open the doors, pull out her chair, and pick up her footrest. Our expectation is that after he tucks the cushion under his arm Washington will step aside as Sapphira sweeps out of the room, but Cather's phrase, "which proved to be on castors," disappoints this expectation. Instead of the dignified exit we anticipate, we see an invalid unable to control her movement. But there is another kind of power Sapphira exerts in this scene that can be easily overlooked. For just as we recognize the fact that she can and does control "old" Washington by mere gestures, we must also acknowledge that this power stems from her position as a

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white woman who owns the black man who serves her. Sapphira attains her stature and dignity strictly through the power she exerts over her slaves, both male and female. This proves true throughout the novel, and it is the single most important aspect of the "ambiguity" with which we as resisting readers must come to terms.

Cather introduces the "slave girl" Nancy in the second chapter of "Sapphira and Her Household," and, not surprisingly, uses this introduction as another opportunity to illustrate Sapphira's ambiguity. Sapphira's daughter Rachel Blake pays a visit to her mother and discovers her cruelly exercising her authority over the enslaved young woman: "As she went down the long carpeted passage toward Mrs. Colbert's bedchamber, she heard her mother's voice in anger--anger with no heat, a cold, sneering contempt . . . Then came a smacking sound, three times: the wooden back of a hairbrush striking someone's cheek or arm" (784). When Rachel enters the bedroom she discovers Nancy "crouching beside [Sapphira's] chair;" Sapphira immediately dismisses the woman saying, "You may go now. And see that you come back in a better humour" (785). In the ensuing conversation between Rachel and Sapphira she is described as "affable," "pleasant, very attractive," "courageous," "mischievous," and "quite gracious" (786-7). She asks Rachel about the health of one of their elderly slaves and compliments her daughter for the many acts of kindness she has shown to the "common

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folks" of their community saying, "Well, you've surely been a good friend to them, Rachel" (787). But the entire scene is ambiguous, as Sapphira's pleasantness is undercut by her violence. Clearly the source of Sapphira's authority lies in her ownership of black humans. While merely by stepping out of her reach, Nancy could have avoided being struck by her owner, the terrified woman remains "crouching" within range of the wooden hairbrush. It becomes clear that at least part of the reason Sapphira can continue to be gracious and kind to others is because of the power and authority she retains as slave owner, a power represented by the cowering Nancy. By resisting the impulse to reduce our feminist readings to the unified story of female powerlessness, we are able to interrogate Sapphira's use and abuse of authority. Sapphira's power as a woman is dependent upon the powerlessness of others.

Her ambiguity and its source are fully demonstrated by Rachel's description of her mother's treatment of her slaves. As an abolitionist who owns no slaves, Rachel's feelings are not mixed: "How she hated her mother's voice in sarcastic reprimand to the servants! And she hated it in contemptuous indulgence" (854). Confined to a wheelchair, Sapphira's voice is her most powerful vehicle of control. She can speak with indulgence, but scorn for those who obey her words underlies them. Rachel senses the paradox represented by Sapphira's treatment of her slaves and their continued

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apparent respect and affection for her. But neither she, nor apparently Cather, is aware of the powerlessness of those humans whose lives are conscripted by a system which denies them the capacity to resist. Later Rachel recalls that "she had seen her mother show shades of kindness and cruelty which seemed to her purely whimsical" (899). This "whimsy" is Sapphira's chief characteristic, but a close examination of the text makes it clear that, whether or not it was Cather's intention, Sapphira's ability to be kind rests upon her authority to be cruel.

The overt statements about slavery in the novel consistently support the position that it is a moral wrong which must be eradicated. But these proclamations are frequently undercut by the suggestion that slavery is not entirely bad. Thus, the ambiguity of Sapphira's character is extended to an ambiguity concerning the central topic of the novel. In Book Three, for instance, Mr. Colbert, a devout Christian, spends a great deal of time worrying about the morality of owning slaves. After the funeral of Jezebel, the oldest Dodderidge slave, Mr. Colbert agrees with the pastor that "for her, certainly, her capture had been a deliverance" since it allowed her to become a Christian (838). In general, however, "he hated the whole system of slavery" (838). Colbert decides to buy his best worker, Sampson, from Sapphira and send him north "a free man" (839). Significantly, Colbert's decision is fraught with

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contradictions. He chooses Sampson to free because "of all the negro men on the place, Sampson . . . was the only one who might be able to get work and make a living out in the world" (839). The implication that most blacks are inferior humans is further supported by Cather's description of Sampson's physical appearance: "His head was full behind the ears, shaped more like a melon lying down than a peanut standing on end" (839). Harking back to the description of immigrants and blacks in My Antonia, this reference to head shape suggests that while Sampson has a brain behind his full, melon shaped head, his peers possess little in their peanut heads. Finally, the text suggests that even the noble Sampson does not really need freedom. The narrator states that "he broke down" and begins listing numerous excuses why he does not want his freedom. Sampson's list of objections is interesting because it reveals the powerful force of a Bakhtinian hybrid construction in this complicated novel:

But when it was his turn to speak, he broke down. This was his home. Here he knew everybody. He didn't want to go out among strangers. Besides, Belle, his wife, was a slack worker, and his children were little. He could never keep them in a city as well off as they were here. What ever had put such a notion in Mister Henry's head? Wasn't he real smart about his work? Belle, he knew, wasn't much account to help down at the house, but she was good to the chillun, an' she didn't do no harm.

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Anyhow, he'd a'most sooner leave the chillun than leave the mill, when they'd got everything fixed up so nice and could bolt finer white flour than you could buy in town. (839)

Many of Sampson's "arguments" against freedom are replete with the sentiments of anti-abolitionists. It is hard to believe that any black man would have suggested that his children were better off enslaved than free, much less that he was almost more attached to his workplace than to his family. Cather's naive insistence on viewing slavery in its most romantic light is made evident by this kind of reliance on stock cliches. Colbert accepts Sampson's rejection of his offer of freedom, and "there it ended" (839).

Like her father, Rachel Blake does not fully support slavery. Thinking about the system and puzzling over her mother's "inconsistencies" such as her "indulgence," "affection," and "patience" with the slave as well as her commitment to caring for their physical needs, Rachel nevertheless concludes, "It ain't put on; she believes in it, and they believe in it. But it ain't right" (900). Because Nancy's position as a slave "ain't right" and makes her vulnerable to the lecherous Martin Colbert, Rachel asks her father to help the young woman escape. Ironically, Henry Colbert, while recognizing that Nancy is attempting an escape for the preservation of her virtue, suggests that if she attains freedom she will immediately become a prostitute: "A

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pretty girl like her, she'd be enticed into one of them houses, like as not" (903). Incapable of viewing the black woman as anything other than a sexual object, Henry suggests that freedom will "ruin" Nancy in several respects: "She was to go out from the dark lethargy of the cared-for and irresponsible; to make her own way in this world where nobody is altogether free" (904). The problems of freedom will be, in Colbert's view and apparently in the view of the text, worse in many respects than those of slavery.

Two remarkable passages deserve analysis because of what they reveal about Cather's understanding of the dynamics of slavery. As the first character to alert Henry Colbert to the danger his nephew poses to Nancy, Sampson tells him, "I'm 'fraid Mr. Martin worries Nancy a right smart" (883). This revelation is extremely disturbing to Colbert because Nancy is his favorite: "Never before had anyone divined all his little whims and preferences, and been eager to gratify them. And it was for love, from dutiful affection. She had nothing to gain beyond the pleasure of seeing him pleased" (885). By insisting on viewing Nancy's work as a gift of love, Cather obscures the extent to which it is enforced labor, the result of slavery. Nancy may have nothing to gain by pleasing Henry Colbert, but she has a great deal to lose should she displease him. The life of every individual slave is fully and wholly dependent on the whim of the master. The text makes it clear that without Henry Colbert's strenuous

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objections, Sapphira would have already sold Nancy to another family. Nevertheless, Cather often presents Nancy as a voluntary servant rather than a slave. Earlier in the novel Henry becomes angry because Sapphira had ordered another slave, Bluebell, to clean his room at the mill instead of Nancy. This substitution makes him appreciate Nancy: "He had never realized, until Bluebell took her place for two days, how much love and delicate feeling Nancy put into making his bare room as he like it. Even when she was scarcely more than a child, he had felt her eagerness to please him" (815). One disturbing thing both of these very similar passages allude to is the vulnerable position a female slave maintains with respect to her master. Although apparently innocent of all the charges Sapphira makes about his relationship with Nancy, Colbert still thinks of her as a lover. She "divines" his desires and is "eager to gratify them" (885). Nancy puts flowers in Henry's copper tankard because that is his desire; at least unconsciously he knows that she would be in no position to prevent him from deflowering her should he so desire. It is not love that makes Nancy such a faithful servant, nor would love make her succumb to the sexual advances of either male Colbert. Nancy's condition as an enslaved woman, unacknowledged by the text, results in her submissive behavior. Maintaining an ambiguous stance on slavery in Sapphira and the Slave Girl

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and refusing to recognize many of its horrors allows Cather to obscure some of the true evils of the system.

Minrose C. Gwin complains that none of the characters in the novel except Sapphira are fully developed, the black characters least of all (143). But turning our attention to these black characters reveals some interesting similarities to Cather's treatment of the immigrant other in My Antonia. For like the immigrants in My Antonia the "admirable" black characters in Sapphira and the Slave Girl are those who have become "Americanized," thus revealing Cather's incipient racism. Jezebel, Tap, Sampson, and Till provide the major examples of this phenomenon, but the novel is filled with countless other characters who demonstrate by their example that the more fully "white" (both physically and emotionally) the character, the more successful that individual will be within the world of the novel.

Jezebel and Tap are among the most fully unconventionalized black characters in the novel, and they both die during the course of the narrative. While Jezebel is the matriarch of the Dodderidge slaves, she nevertheless consistently manages to disappoint expectations that she conform to Anglo-American behavioral patterns. Book Three, "Old Jezebel," is devoted to her story. Cather first describes her as looking like "a lean old grey monkey" with "grizzled wool" and a hand like a "cold grey claw" (825, 827). Like d'Arnault, she does not appear to be fully human,

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and the story of her capture and early life confirms this. Captured in Africa as a young woman, Jezebel came from "a fierce cannibal people" (828). One of her first actions as a slave was viciously to "[snap] like a mastiff" and bite through the thumb of one of her captors (829). Cather continues to imply that Jezebel is more animal than human: "Anatomically she was remarkable, for an African negress: tall, straight, muscular, long in the legs. The skipper had a kind of respect for a well-shaped creature; horse, cow, or woman" (830). The qualifier "for an African negress" implies that in general black women are poor physical specimens, and the references to animals locates her solidly as less than human. Her first owner has her sleep in a barn because "her personal manners were too strong for even a Dutch farmer's household," and once she is employed by Sapphira she does not work in the house or kitchen (831). Instead, she works outside, with the men and the animals, managing the gardens. But the clearest indication of her unregenerate nature lies in the request Jezebel makes to Sapphira on her deathbed. When asked if there is anything she might want to eat Jezebel responds, "No'm, I cain't think of nothin' I could relish, lessen maybe it was a li'l pickaninny's hand" (827). Still a cannibal at heart, Jezebel rebelliously informs her mistress that she has not, to the end, allowed her identity to become erased. It seems that, almost as a consequence of this refusal, she dies of self-induced starvation.

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Although the most obvious example, Jezebel is not the only character in Sapphira to refuse to be "Americanized." Tap, one of the mill hands, is another character who resists becoming conventional, and as a result he ends his life dangling from a scaffold. In the last chapter of the book the child narrator describes him stereotypically as "the jolly mill boy with shining eyes and shining teeth" (936). Throughout the novel he is depicted as conforming to the stereotype of the "good darky." One of Tap's responsibilities is to organize the bearers who carried Sapphira's chair when she left the house. According to Cather, "he loved to wait on ladies" (825). Cather describes him as a clown when, on Christmas morning, he expresses his appreciation for the "strong toddy" Sapphira serves the slaves: "Tap, the mill boy, smacked his lips and said: 'Miss Sapphy, if my mammy's titty had a-tasted like that, I never would a-got weaned'" (900). Significantly, this minstrel character is incapable of adjusting to life after the Civil War. The child narrator observes, "People said he hadn't been able to stand his freedom" (936). After drinking too much in a bar, Tap accidentally kills a man by striking him with a billiard cue. He is condemned to death and hanged: "Mrs. Blake and Till always said it was a Yankee jury that hanged him; a Southern jury would have known there was no real bad in Tap" (936). The text actually suggests that a Southern jury would have assumed that neither Tap nor the

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black man he killed were fully human and thus his crime could not be considered capital.

Sampson, on the other hand, is a man. And it is clear that what allows him to achieve his fully human status are those characteristics that make him similar to Henry Colbert, his owner. Cather describes Sampson as "a tall, straight mulatto with a good countenance, thoughtful, intelligent" (839). He possesses the physical characteristics the text associates with whites, and he is never described in animalistic or otherwise stereotypical language. In addition to his good head shape, he possesses a "manly, responsible" demeanor (839). In spite of the fact that he refuses the freedom Mr. Colbert offers him, Sampson does not behave in a submissive way. After Nancy's screams alert the slaves to Martin Colbert's failed attempt to rape her, Sampson approaches the scene of the assault "looking about him,-- looking at Martin Colbert, which it was not his place to do" (880). Sampson does not submit to the "place" allotted for blacks in this text, and for that the narrative rewards him. Till tells her daughter that after the War "Mr. Henry got Sampson a wonderful good place up in Pennsylvany, in some new kind of mill they calls roller mills. He's done well, has Sampson, an' his children has turned out well, they say" (935). Sampson is conventionalized, and like Anton Jelinek he "makes good" in the white world.

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Without a doubt, the most successfully conventionalized character in the novel is Nancy's mother, Till. Significantly, one of the first direct statements about Till is that "she was not, under any circumstances, a gay darky" (817). This negative definition functions in two ways. First, it establishes the fact that in general the text regards blacks as "gay darkies." But it also makes clear the fact that Till herself does not fit this or any of the other negative stereotypes associated with blacks in Sapphira. As a child, Till watched her mother, dressing for the slave's New Year's party, catch on fire and die. Mrs. Matchem, the Dodderidge's British housekeeper, took and raised the child after her mother's death. The consequences of her upbringing are profound: "Till was devoted to [Mrs. Matchem]; strove to imitate her in speech and manner" (817). Till never stops imitating white people, and she is always more strongly identified with whites than blacks. When her husband arrives barefoot to drive Sapphira to town, Till complains to her mistress, "When I seen him wrigglin' his old crooked toes yonder in the gravel, I was that shamed!" (797). And when Nancy is frightened by Martin Colbert's advances she does not tell her mother because "Till had been a Dodderidge before ever she was Nancy's mother . . . Anything that made trouble between her and the Mistress would wreck the order of the household" (899). It is this order that Till values above anything else. In the epilogue Till appears to have retained

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her "place" in the family and continues to be Rachel Blake's servant. She treasures the tokens of the family's esteem such as a gold brooch given to her by Henry Colbert which contains locks of his and Sapphira's hair (937). And she lives to see her daughter's successful return.

Till's daughter Nancy is the only character in the novel who moves from an unconventionalized to a conventionalized status. As I have mentioned, our initial view is of her crouching in total submission beside Sapphira's chair. In the first half of the novel she is almost always described as either weeping or on the verge of tears: "She was not courageous" (803). Connected to her lack of courage is her inability to tell the truth. Cather writes, "If she felt a reprimand coming, she sometimes lied . . . She didn't tell falsehoods deliberately, to get something she wanted; it was always to escape from something" (803). Not only does Cather associate her with dishonesty, but she also implies that Nancy is irresponsible and foolish. On the morning that Martin Colbert tries to rape her, Nancy has abandoned her responsibilities and gone cherry picking: "She loved to pick cherries, and she loved being up in a tree. Someway no troubles followed a body up there; nothing but the foolish, dreamy, nigger side of her nature climbed the tree with her" (878). This is evidently one of the passages that Hermione Lee was thinking of when she said Cather's treatment of black characters can be embarrassing. But rather than simply

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ignoring this passage or excusing it as the expressions of an elderly woman, we can look at how it functions fictionally within the text. And what it does is set this young woman with her "soft darky laugh" aside as other because she does not conform to the accepted, white, "American" standards of the text. That these standards structure the canon of acceptability becomes evident when Nancy reappears in Book Nine, "Nancy's Return." The child narrator watches Nancy descend from the stage coach and describes her as "a woman in a long black coat and black turban" (931). Significantly, this is one of the first times in the text that a black female has been described as a "woman" instead of a "girl" or "darky" or "servant." The narrator is impressed both by the opulence of Nancy's black silk dress and gold watch chain and by the precision of her beautiful speech (933). The extent to which Nancy has become conventionalized becomes clear when Till exclaims, "Nancy, darllin', you talks just like Mrs. Matchem, down at Chestnut Hill! I loves to hear you" (934). Till, who could not bear to help her daughter when she was a "dreamy nigger," is captivated by the "tall, gold-skinned woman" who returns to her.

As the most successful character in the text, Nancy illustrates the power Cather invests in conforming to an Anglo-American model. Cather's racism, then, does not extend to demonstrating that no black characters can rise above the oppressive conditions of slavery. Rather, she views those

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characters who most effectively embrace white, Anglo-American values and characteristics as capable of making the transition to success and freedom. It is important that as resisting readers we acknowledge this. For Cather makes a mistake similar to the one feminist critics make when they insist on defining an essential woman. Her apparent inability to view anyone who is not white and American as human can alert us to the danger of refusing to acknowledge those women unlike ourselves as women. Previous feminist readings of Sapphira have disguised the ways in which women characters in the novel are both victims of and bearers of the patriarchal system in which they live. Becoming resisting readers allows us to see the multiple subject positions they, and Cather, occupy.

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¹See for example Jeane Harris, "A Code of Her Own: Attitudes Toward Women in Willa Cather's Short Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies 36 (1990): 81-89.

²Sharon O'Brien traces Cather's critical reception in "Becoming Noncanonical: The Case Against Willa Cather," Reading in America: Literature and Social History, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 240-258. While O'Brien does note the important role feminist literary criticism has played in shaping Cather's critical reception, like Tanner she does not attribute her canonical status solely to feminist literary critics. In addition, O'Brien's concern in this essay is to demonstrate Cather's fluctuating canonical status as one example of the ways "a male-dominated publishing and critical establishment was attempting to reduce her stature" (250). It is my contention, however, that more important than those forces which attempted to reduce her status are the ones which regarded Cather as a representative of the American literary tradition and ensured her continued position as an important and respected author in the canon. I see O'Brien's essay as another example of the preference the feminist interpretive community has for viewing women writers primarily as victims.

³This becomes even more evident when we turn to the early books on Cather, which began appearing in the 1950s. The first book length study of Cather was published in 1930. In Willa Cather (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1930) Rene Rapin concludes that Cather's work is "classical." In Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1951), the first book to consider Cather's entire career, David Daiches is eager to situate Cather within the larger American literary tradition. Daiches argues that "rugged individualism" is centrally displayed in Cather's novels: "She found it in nineteenth-century pioneers, eighteenth-century Catholic missionaries, and seventeenth-century French Canadians" (187). He contends that like other American novelists Cather wrote about the pioneers, and that "She was interested in the quality of their imagination, in the passion and brilliance of their ideal, in their discriminating acceptance of a vision, as well as in their

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will power and endurance" (188). Daiches concludes, "she remained an American novelist" (189). The first biography of Cather, and the only biography authorized by her estate, E. K. Brown's Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), also demonstrates a concern with identifying Cather's "Americanness" in her treatment of individualism: "She limited herself to a narrative of people seeking to master their environment, to farm-folk or missionaries or colonists, or, at the opposite pole, to artists (and mainly singers), seeking in their fugitive world to maintain their integrity amid the tensions of modern life" (331). Edward and Lillian Bloom also regard Cather as belonging to the "great tradition of American writing" and the "main stream of great American literary achievement" which included Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and James (Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1962: 237, 250). The Blooms argue that what unites these writers is their "earnest, mutual concern for the realization of an American destiny," expressed most clearly in Cather's case as she regarded the frontier "as a reaffirmation of traditional American values" (238, 244).

More recently, the trend in American literary scholarship has been towards redefining those characteristics of American literature that have generally been accepted since the 1950s. Interestingly, while the terms of the definition seem to be undergoing change, Willa Cather is still regarded as a representative American writer. One example of this can be found in Conrad Eugene Ostwalt's book After Eden: The Secularization of American Space in the Fiction of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell UP, 1990). Ostwalt argues that in the late nineteenth century the American dream was undergoing a radical transformation from an "agrarian and blessed state" to a secular, industrial state. Consequently, the old American dream of possibility and opportunity was no longer relevant to the American imagination. Ostwalt locates Cather, along with Theodore Dreiser, at the center of an artistic effort to reconcile the old American dream with the new American reality: "Cather and Dreiser are important because they were both affected by and participated in the process of world destruction and reconstruction--in the redefinition of American space from sacred to secular" (31).

In sharp contrast to Ostwalt, Tom Quirk identifies a completely different common denominator in the American literature of the early twentieth century. In his book Bergson and American Culture: The World of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1990) Quirk argues that the French philosopher Henri Bergson and his recommendation to "take life by storm" led to a new sense of "vitality, optimism, confidence, progress, and hope"

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in American popular rhetoric and thought (1). Quirk identifies a Bergsonian point of view in Cather, suggesting that this places her, along with Wallace Stevens and others, at the center of a distinctly American literary movement.

A slightly more traditional approach is Jo Ann Middleton's in Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990). Comparing Cather to Hemingway, Joyce, and others, Middleton argues that her use of omission and discontinuity places her within the mainstream of modernism (10).

What all three of these 1990 books have in common, despite their obvious dissimilarities, is the effort to situate Cather within the mainstream of a literary movement. And with the exception of Middleton, this movement is a distinctly American one. These critics, like Cather's earliest, seek to demonstrate that she is more alike than different from her (mostly male) contemporaries.

⁵A sharp distinction can be drawn between the treatment of Willa Cather from a feminist perspective in works that appeared before the modern women's liberation movement and her treatment in works appearing after 1970. Two of the most representative pre-women's liberation feminist analyses appear in Margaret Lawrence's The School of Femininity (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1936) and Josephine Lurie Jessup's The Faith of Our Feminists (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950). Lawrence's goal is to examine women's writing appearing after the "feminist revolt," which she identifies as taking place at the end of the eighteenth-century. Lawrence suggests that "After women have put down all the pent-up sorrows of womanhood in a world made for men by men; and after they have satisfied themselves that they can hold whatever they want to get in that world, we shall be racially much further on" (11). She argues that Cather is one of the first post-feminist writers because her work is "totally free from the abiding sense of injustice . . . It is free from a depressing sense of its limitation as feminine writing, and is also free from a subconscious effort to be masculine" (357). As astonishing as her claim might appear to Cather's later feminist critics, Lawrence asserts, "[Cather's] is the work of a woman sure of herself as a woman in a land in which it is not difficult to be a woman" (357). No longer having to contend with the petty indignities of sexual injustice, Cather is, according to Lawrence, "the great artist American women writers have produced" (357).

Josephine Lurie Jessup also identifies in Cather's work the story of woman triumphant, and her message of triumph, like Lawrence's, is not one a contemporary feminist is likely to embrace. According to Jessup, "As it appears in modern fiction, feminism is an expression of woman's desire 'to be herself'; that is, to measure attainment irrespective of

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sexual function" (10). Like many contemporary feminist literary critics, Jessup locates Cather's feminism in her "desire to exalt her own sex" (74). However, Jessup also regards Cather as having accomplished this through her depiction of strong female characters most noted for their emasculatory power: "Throughout Willa Cather's novels, no circumstance is so variously detailed as the plight of a superior man in the marriage trap" (60). Jessup's celebration of Cather's feminism reeks strongly of anti-feminist acceptance of negative female stereotypes. Ultimately, neither Jessup nor Lawrence are concerned with uncovering the kind of strong, independent women later feminist critics sought in Cather's work. This is because these two critics, unlike their successors, were not a part of an organized political and literary movement committed to "negating the reifications" of patriarchal attitudes and customs reflected in texts as well as in society.

⁶Even in the their most recent essays, feminist critics continue to follow traditional patterns as they approach Cather. Warren Motley suggests in "The Unfinished Self: Willa Cather's O Pioneers! and the Psychic Cost of a Woman's Success," Women's Studies 12 (1986): 149-165, that readers respond to Cather's heroines because they are "eager to find strong, independent women in American literature" (149). Analyzing the character of Alexandra in Cather's 1913 novel O Pioneers!, Motley suggests that hers is not the triumphant success most critics have identified in the novel. At one point Motley seems to suggest that Cather is embracing and celebrating the patriarchal values of "power and autonomy" in the novel (149). However, his basic premise is hardly radical, as he concludes that Alexandra's unhappiness lies in her failure to reach and celebrate her essential female nature, "emotions and sexuality" (149). Once again, his is a return to the reductive criticism of essentialism and expressive realism. Like Motley, C. Susan Wiesenthal reduces Cather's novel O Pioneers! to the story of female sexuality struggling to achieve autonomy in a male world. In "Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's 'O Pioneers!' and the Era of Scientific Sexology," Ariel 21 (1990): 41-63, Wiesenthal concentrates on depictions of "'deviant' female sexuality" in O Pioneers!. She argues that after an initial rebellion illustrated by the loving friendship of Alexandra and Marie, two female characters in the novel, Cather eventually submits to "the established sexual prejudices and stereotypes of her day" by concluding the novel with a conventional marriage (60-1). Like most other feminist literary critics, Motley and Wiesenthal are primarily concerned with demonstrating how either the author or her characters are victims of the patriarchal system. And, of course, their approach conceals

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⁷"The Novel of Awakening," Genre 12 (1979):313-32, represents Rosowski's attempt to fit Cather into a different literary tradition, that of the bildungsroman. But here too her efforts are thwarted by essentialist assumptions as well as by an attempt to consider Cather through the grid of already established literary conventions. Rosowski argues, "The direction of awakening follows what is becoming a pattern in literature by and about women . . . The protagonist's growth results typically not with 'an art of living,' as for her male counterpart, but instead with a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations" (313). This critical approach is limited because it presumes that the experience all women have in common is their oppression under the patriarchy. Equally limited is Rosowski's argument in "Willa Cather's Women," Studies in American Fiction 9 (1981): 261-275, where she suggests that while "cultural myths" work to prevent the female characters in Cather's novels from integrating their personal (feminine) selves and their imaginative (masculine) selves, the women do eventually succeed in integrating the "ideal growth of the two selves" (261-2). Heller's phrase "Willa Cather's women all succeed in a man's world" (31) also seems to underlie Rosowski's apparently more sophisticated early essays.

⁸O'Brien's 1975 dissertation, "Stronger Vessels: Willa Cather and Her Pioneer Heroines," Harvard U, 1975, argues that the female characters in three of Cather's early novels represent new and powerful role models for women as these characters achieve self-definition through connection to the land, art, and the family.

The same year her dissertation was completed, O'Brien published an important essay called "The Limits of Passion: Willa Cather's Review of The Awakening," Women and Literature 3 (1975): 10-20. Her analysis of Cather's scathing review of Kate Chopin's The Awakening suggests that Cather's denouncement stems not from misogyny (as it might seem to a reader unfamiliar with the reviewer's gender) but rather from Cather's awareness of the limits heterosexual passion places upon women in a patriarchal society (14). Because of her awareness of these restrictions, O'Brien maintains, Cather consistently depicted in her own writings sexual passion that resulted in self-destruction (19). By constructing Cather as a unified subject, aware of and resistant to her own oppression under the patriarchy, O'Brien misses the opportunity to illuminate the more complicated ways her identity was constructed by her society.

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In "Mothers, Daughters, and the 'Art Necessity': Willa Cather and the Creative Process," American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982) 265-298, O'Brien is especially interested in demonstrating that Cather is not "the unwitting captive of male views of women" (267).

⁹The trend is continued in Rosowski's "Writing Against Silences: Female Adolescent Development in the Novels of Willa Cather," Studies in the Novel 21 (1989): 60-77, which suggests that Cather was doing more than simply giving her female characters "qualities ordinarily reserved for men" (63). According to Rosowski, Cather "revised the terms of [female] development and changed the metaphor for describing it" (63). By showing that Cather is writing a new and different story that is not centered in female oppression under the patriarchy, Rosowski ventures into territory feminist critics had abandoned since the women's liberation movement. However, the radical potential of Rosowski's argument is somewhat reduced as she returns to old standards of criticism and concludes, "Again Cather rewrote our national myth and placed female creativity at its center" (68).

This tentative movement towards new standards of criticism is also demonstrated in one of Rosowski's most recent essays, "Willa Cather's Subverted Endings and Gendered Time," Cather Studies, vol. 1, ed. Susan J. Rosowski (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1990) 68-88. Rosowski suggests that Cather invites the reader "to take his or her place in the ritual of storytelling" and thus provide alternate endings which "offer symbols and, through them, meaning of another order" (86, 81).

¹⁰Another example of this kind of thinking is O'Brien's "The Thing Not Named: Willa Cather as Lesbian Writer," Signs 9 (1984): 576-599. O'Brien's essay is one of the first, and most important, works to break the genteel tradition of refusing to name Cather a "lesbian." But what actually makes this essay radical is her suggestion that, while Cather's sexual orientation should play a role in a feminist analysis of her work, to read her novels as simply the story of one woman's struggle with an oppressive patriarchal society that names same-sex love unnatural is reductive:

Noting that Cather uses male masks is important, but on what grounds do we assume that a male character is not "really" male but female? To argue that most of her male characters engaged in love affairs are not male at all . . . is to question the writer's ability to transcend self, gender, and sexuality by adopting other selves; it is also to assume that, because Cather was a lesbian, she was encoding a lesbian attachment whenever

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she was writing of heterosexual love--a rigid and reductive view of her fiction. (597)
Clearly, O'Brien recognizes that Cather is capable of telling multiple tales.

¹¹O'Brien argues that Cather "in granting a female character the ability to grow her own fruit . . . revises the myth of America, man's creation of an Edenic, gardenlike realm from an untamed wilderness . . . she rewrites the literary genres most often used to tell that story, pastoral and epic, by placing a woman at the center of the narrative" (1987, 432).

¹²The chief target of Rule's attack is John Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960).

¹³The extraordinary amount of critical attention focused on this book is best represented by its treatment at the hands of Chelsea House. Two volumes of critical essays on My Antonia have been edited by Harold Bloom: Antonia (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991) and My Antonia (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987). Bloom has edited one other volume on Cather which also includes some essays on the novel: Willa Cather (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985).

¹⁴Miller's critical position culminates in his 1974 essay, "My Antonia and the American Dream," Prairie Schooner 48: 112-23, rpt. in Willa Cather's My Antonia, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 99-117. Miller begins his analysis by stating that like Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, Cather's My Antonia is "a commentary of the American experience, the American dream, and the American reality" (99). In speaking of the American dream, Miller is clearly referring to the same dream to which Nina Baym refers: "[My Antonia] is, in some sense, about a national experience--the frontier or pioneer experience--and its rapid diminishment from the national memory" (101). Miller argues that Cather questions some of the fundamental principles of that dream in the text, but he does not conclude that she has deconstructed the dream. Rather, hers is an exploration in which the narrator retraces the steps of the dream: "Jim is in search of the American past, his past, in an attempt to determine what went wrong, and perhaps as well what was right, with the dream" (101). For in the final analysis, none of the characters actually fulfills the American dream, according to Miller (103). In contrast to the arguments of his earlier essay and those of other scholars, Miller does not determine that My Antonia depicts the happy achievement of the "myth of

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America." Rather, he sees the novel as an account of the empty reality behind "the lost promise, the misplaced vision" in Jim Burden's life (108). According to Miller, Cather's novel offers the possibilities of the American dream without explaining its apparent failure. But Miller apparently still believes that Cather revered the potentials offered by the dream (108).

¹⁵The book-length studies of Cather appearing before 1975 dealt extensively with My Antonia and generally followed the same critical approach as the journal essays and reviews. David Daiches analyzes the novel in a chapter titled "Decline of the West" and concludes that, although the book is flawed, it tells of "salvation" attained by "rooting . . . in the American soil" (Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1951: 56). John H. Randall calls My Antonia an "agrarian idyl" and claims that "its real subject is man's right relation to nature" (The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960: 148). Edward and Lillian Bloom assert that the land itself is a refuge for the "righteous pioneer" and functions as Cather's "principal symbol": "Miss Cather's attitude toward the land [in My Antonia and O Pioneers!] is one of almost pious exaltation, for she sees it as a place of communion for idealistic pioneers" (Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1962: 27). James Woodress' comments in his first book on Cather are probably the most representative. (James Woodress has written two book length studies of Willa Cather. The first, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art [New York: Pegasus, 1970], was part of the Pegasus American Author series. The second, much longer work, Willa Cather: A Literary Life [Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987], is the closest we will probably ever have to a definitive biography.) Writing in 1970, Woodress called My Antonia "Willa Cather's greatest work" and referred to Antonia as "the madonna of the Wheat Fields and the embodiment of the American westering myth" (179-80). This concern with locating My Antonia within the mainstream of American literature was not a minor one. And the success that Woodress and others had in their attempt to establish the novel's "Americanness" is illustrated by its continued dominant presence in the canon of American literature from the time of its initial publication.

¹⁶Interestingly, in his 1975 American Literary Scholarship essay David Stouck observed that "Willa Cather for the most part resists feminist critics" ("Fiction: 1900 to the 1930s," ed. James Woodress [Durham: Duke UP, 1975] 271). But only four years later he remarked, somewhat disparagingly, in the same publication that "there is usually

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a feminist reading of Cather to report on" ("Fiction: 1900 to the 1930s," American Literary Scholarship, ed. James Woodress [Durham: Duke UP, 1979] 234).

¹⁷Gelfant argues that Jim Burden is afraid of sex. In addition, he is unable to achieve the larger and perhaps more significant mastery of the land that sex with a woman represents. Consequently, "Jim sublimates by traversing the country, laying it open by rail; and because he sees the land grow fertile and the people prosper, he believes his story to be a celebration" (150). Jim's story in My Antonia is not a celebration. Rather, according to Gelfant, it is a depiction of the failure of the American dream. Significantly, Gelfant suggests, but does not claim outright, that the dream has failed because it is inseparable from "normal [heterosexual] sex," something that is "barred from [Cather's] fictional world" (147).

¹⁸Another feminist critic who considers Cather's use of the Earth Mother stereotype in My Antonia is Deborah G. Lambert. Her 1982 essay, "The Defeat of the Hero Autonomy and Sexuality in My Antonia," American Literature 53 (1982): 76-90, Rpt. in Willa Cather's My Antonia, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), represents a different approach to this topic than the one taken by Rosowski and O'Brien. Instead of demonstrating how Cather revises this limiting type and transforms it into a feminist story of affirmation and power, Lambert maintains that My Antonia's conclusion constitutes a "betrayal of female independence and female sexuality" (131). Lambert arrives at this conclusion after arguing at length that Cather's status as a professional woman and a lesbian placed her in such severe conflict with her society that she was forced, as a way of self-preservation, to deny both her "womanhood" and her lesbianism. These "painful denials," Lambert argues, make themselves apparent in her fiction through celebrations of the Earth Mother, "one of our most familiar stereotypes, one that distorts and reduces the lives of women" (131). Lambert points towards Jim Burden, the male narrator of My Antonia as Cather's "way out of facing great anxiety" because it provided a conventional, male way to view her fictional world that was not in conflict with larger social dictates. Much like Douglas' essay, which appeared that same year, Lambert's suggests that the fact that Cather did not (or could not) write novels depicting oppressed women who triumph after painful struggles makes it impossible for feminist scholars to "claim" her novels. But unlike Douglas, Lambert does locate within Cather's own life a bitter and unceasing struggle against a patriarchal society that could recognize neither her professional success nor her personal desires. By turning to this personal struggle and searching for its

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signs in Cather's fiction Lambert continues the feminist literary tradition of reducing women's writing to a unified account of that all-powerful story of women's oppression, struggle, and sometimes survival. It is important that we not lose sight of the fact that Lambert's thesis, while apparently at odds with those of O'Brien, Rosowski, and others, continues to impose the tale of a woman--in Lambert's case the author rather than her characters--engaged in a valiant, if not always victorious, battle against the patriarchy.

¹⁹Cather herself claimed in an interview with Rose Field that the presence of the landscape had nothing to do with My Antonia's greatness: "That it was powerfully tied to the soil had nothing to do with it. Antonia was tied to the soil. But I might have written the tale of a Czech baker in Chicago and it would have been the same" ("Restlessness Such as Ours Does Not Make for Beauty," rev. of My Antonia, by Willa Cather, New York Times Book Review 21 Dec. 1924: 11). Clearly, it is not a good idea to take Cather's words too seriously; she was known to deliberately mislead critics. But I think it should also be clear that returning faithfully like lemmings to the critical assessments of other interpretive communities can mislead us as feminist literary critics.

²⁰Willa Cather, My Antonia, 1918 (New York: The Library of America, 1987, vol. 1 of Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories, ed. Sharon O'Brien, 3 vols., 1987-1992, 707-939) 716. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

²¹By the mid 1970s Sapphira's status as an inferior work was generally accepted, and the critical tone shifted away from attack and towards reclamation. Critics used the novel to demonstrate and support their various agenda, none of which included identifying the text as representative of mainstream American literature. Significantly, very few of these essays approached Sapphira from an overtly feminist perspective. Two critics, Paul Borgman and Richard Giannone, analyzed the novel from a Christian perspective. Borgman saw it as Cather's finest representation of the perfect union of hope and faith: "Sapphira and the Slave Girl is a subtle and finely wrought dramatization of [God's] love" ("The Dialectic of Willa Cather's Moral Vision," Renaissance 27 [1975]: 148). And Richard Giannone identified a three part movement in the novel from enslavement to liberty ("Willa Cather and the Unfinished Drama of Deliverance," Prairie Schooner 52 [1978]: 28).

In her biographical reading of the novel, Marilyn Arnold links the disappointments and tragedies of Cather's life in

the late 1930s to the "escapist" tone of Sapphira a novel which "repudiates the present and settles for order and peace alone" ("Cather's Last Stand," Research Studies 13 [1975]: 246). Rather than judging the novel in a negative way because of what she identifies as its escapism, however, as many earlier critics had, Arnold concludes that Cather's insistence on placing order and peace at the center of the text is Sapphira's chief asset.

²²Willia Cather, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, 1940 (New York: The Library of America, 1990, Vol 2 of Willia Cather: Later Novels, ed. Sharon O'Brien, 3 vols, 1987-1992, 775-939) 781. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

CHAPTER FOUR
READING EDITH WHARTON

Edith Wharton and the American Literary Tradition

In general Edith Wharton's critical reception can be said to be more mixed than Cather's. While many critics have claimed for her the status of a "great" American novelist, others deemed her second rank and suggested that her work would not survive the test of time to become "classic." The primary reason for this ambivalent response lay in the fact that Wharton's novels were not viewed as depicting the "myth of America" that had begun to be regarded as the chief characteristic of "great" American literature.

The most important consequence of the mixed reception Wharton's work received at the hands of its initial interpretive community is her subsequent treatment by the American feminist interpretive community. Since the 1970s most feminist critics have focused on demonstrating how Wharton's fiction reflects feminist values and a feminist agenda. Like Cather's feminist critics they concentrate on the female characters in her novels and attempt to reveal the many ways these characters struggle against the patriarchal

society's constant efforts to thwart and oppress them. In other words, these feminist critics work diligently to bring Wharton "into the sisterhood," much as their colleagues had with Cather. There is, however, a significant minority of feminist critics who are reluctant to admit Wharton into the "sacred sorority." These critics do not hesitate to illuminate Wharton's anti-feminism and point towards ways she negates rather than reifies a feminist agenda in her writings. Interestingly, Wharton's anti-feminism is no more blatant than Cather's, yet the feminist interpretive community has been almost completely unable to address aspects of Cather's work that are difficult to reconcile with the political agenda of feminism. It is Wharton's relatively tenuous status as a canonical figure that allows the feminist interpretive community to question her position as a feminist writer. Because Cather was commonly regarded as the foremost American woman writer of her era, there is much less at stake when critics reveal the faults in Wharton's attitudes and treatment of women than there would be if such a gaze were turned to Cather. Ironically, the standards of a previous interpretive community, which caused critics to reject Wharton for not depicting the "myth of America," shape the feminist interpretive community. Unconsciously, critics have been enabled by Wharton's lesser status to interrogate her in ways impossible with Cather. Although Wharton's rejection by her initial critics allows feminist critics to be more

critical of her, it also leads some of them to ban her from the feminist canon. Unfortunately, the interpretive strategies of the feminist interpretive community have yet to evolve to the point where, in spite of revealing flaws in a woman writer's treatment of women in her fiction, it is nevertheless possible to "claim" that writer for feminism. But employing a resisting reading will allow us as feminist literary critics to surmount the obstacles posed by essentialist assumptions and binary readings of women's writing and consequently "claim" any woman writer, including Edith Wharton, for feminism.

Although she was not universally admired, during her lifetime Edith Wharton was often referred to as one of the most important American novelists of her era. In 1916 Henry James, who by then was well-respected as a literary critic as well as a novelist, neglected to mention any American writers except Edith Wharton in the chapter of Notes on Novelists entitled "The New Novel" (353-356).¹ While his opinion may have been influenced by the fact that he and Wharton had grown to be close friends by this time, it was one shared by many Americans. Yale professor Henry Seidel Canby wrote in Definitions: Essays in Contemporary Criticism (1922) that her work is "a credit to American literature" and "a fruit of our soil" (216). And five years later William Lyon Phelps declared in Twentieth Century American Novels (1927) that "By common consent, Edith Wharton stands at the head of American

contemporary writers of fiction; and her career is almost synonymous with the century" (12). But perhaps the greatest testimony to Wharton's central position in the literary world of the early twentieth century is her popular success. In 1906 Wharton earned about \$27,000 from royalties on The House of Mirth (Joslin 1987, 194), a sharp contrast to the \$2,000 Cather earned in 1918 for My Antonia (Woodress 1987, 300). Wharton's novels were always widely reviewed, and there were seldom any negative responses.² Reviewers like R. D. Townsend often placed Wharton "among the leaders in American fiction" (119). But this position of leadership was not an unquestioned one.

E. K. Brown, Cather's first biographer, was also a Wharton scholar, and his ambivalent response to her work illustrates the difficulties Wharton posed to literary critics of the early twentieth century.³ In an essay entitled "Edith Wharton," Brown clearly expressed his admiration of Wharton, praising her "severe truthfulness," "conscious artistry," "penetrating exploration of character," and "clarity of . . . social observation" (65, 67, 70, 71). But it is Brown's criticism of Wharton that is most revealing because it points towards the reason for her marginal status in the American literary canon. For Brown finds Wharton's chief fault to be her failure to accurately portray American life: "her direct knowledge of America was slight; and she had not opportunities for enlarging it . . . Nor was her

point of view, her essential and natural point of view, a fruitful one from which to survey the American scene" (69). In spite of the fact that Wharton "overcame the huge deficiencies of her knowledge remarkably well," Brown concludes that "little of [her performance] will endure" (70, 72). This critical tendency to equivocate with respect to Wharton's literary worth based on the inauthenticity of her portrait of America contrasts sharply with the high praise accorded Willa Cather. As we have seen, Cather received accolades precisely because of the supposed accuracy of her depiction of American life. Wharton's rejection on the grounds that she failed to depict the "myth of America" was not limited to E. K. Brown's assessment.

As early as 1915 Robert Herrick had objected that "there is little of importance" to be found in Wharton's attempts at "painting in our national canvas" (41). Assuming that the chief task of an American novelist is representing America, Herrick deems Wharton a failure because "She has rarely caught [America's] more significant notes or tried to peer beneath its obvious superficialities, nor has she been warmly charmed by its kaleidoscopic glitter" (42). One of the most influential American literary scholars of the early twentieth century, V. L. Parrington, echoed Herrick's complaints: "She has done notable things, but she has paid a great price in aloofness from her own America. There is more hope of our literature in the honest crudities of the younger naturalists

than in her classic irony; they at least are trying to understand America as it is" (154). And immediately after her death critics like Wilson Follett tempered their praise of her oeuvre with complaints that she would have been a better novelist had she understood American life more fully. Follett suggests that most of Wharton's work "will not today bear rereading" because the author had never truly made "the discovery of America" (2). He regrets that she never attempted "larger ventures upon a more rugged terrain" (14). Wharton's failure to depict the "rugged individualism" and thus the "myth of America" that was required by American literary critics ensured her marginal place in American literary history.

And that her place was indeed marginal, at least until the advent of feminist literary criticism in the early 1970s, is nowhere more evident than in Alfred Kazin's important 1942 volume, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature. Appearing less than ten years before Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land (the 1950 work Nina Baym cites as initiating the critical movement towards identifying "essential Americanness" in American literature), On Native Grounds clearly participates in that influential movement. In his preface Kazin asserts, "our modern literature in America is at bottom only the expression of our modern life in America" (viii). And in his discussion of Willa Cather, Kazin praises, as had so many of her critics,

her ability to "see in the pioneer society of the West a culture and distinction of its own" (250). Cather receives some of Kazin's highest praise as he calls her a "consummate artist" and admires the "strength" and "radiant craftsmanship" of her work (257, 255). Wharton, on the other hand, was the object of Kazin's strictest censure. Declaring that "a great artist, even a completely devoted artist, she never became," Kazin cites Wharton's chief fault as being her lack of understanding of American society: "She had no conception of America as a unified and dynamic economy, or even as a single culture" (82). Rather than viewing her work as the product of a literary movement, which would have given it literary worth, Kazin declares it to be a purely individual product of "many personal maladjustments" (77). Something purely personal could never, in Kazin's estimation, have national significance. It becomes clear then that the very category which served to gain for Willa Cather her canonical status--her "Americanness"--helped to relegate Wharton to the periphery of American literary history.

Interestingly, Wharton was herself aware of this movement in American literary criticism and as much as predicted her fall from national prominence in a 1927 essay ironically entitled "The Great American Novel." In one respect Wharton's essay appears to be a direct response to and a bitter complaint against the objections critics like Herrick and Parrington had made concerning her neglect of the

American scene. She declares, "literary criticism in modern America is a perpetual incentive to standardization" (243). In other respects, however, the essay emerges as a perceptive analysis of the trends in American literary criticism that were beginning to take shape at this time. Wharton introduces the essay by observing that the term "American novel" has increasingly begun to appear in reviews and advertisements. She goes on to remark that in such a context "American novel" designates "much narrower social and geographical limitations" than the mere country of origin of an author (229). Wharton is precise, if somewhat bitter, as she enumerates the requirements of the "great American novel":

The novelist's scene must be laid in the United States, and his story deal exclusively with citizens of those States; furthermore, if his work is really to deserve the epithet "American," it must tell of persons so limited in education and opportunity that they live cut off from all the varied sources of culture which used to be considered the common heritage of English-speaking people. The great American novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually. (230)

Edith Wharton had good reason to know that these were the expectations of literary critics.

Those critics who faulted her for failing to depict the "real life" of the country often singled out Wharton's 1911 novel Ethan Frome as an outstanding exception to her general neglect of authentic Americans. The novel is certainly not typical of Wharton's fiction. It is set in the rural New England village of Starkfield and recounts the story of three inarticulate and poorly educated individuals--Ethan Frome, his wife Zenobia, and their servant Mattie--as they struggle against their own desires as well as the "cold" and "starved" winter environment of Starkfield. Robert Herrick argued that alone of all Wharton's novels Ethan Frome "betrays the secret of her true power" (41), and E. K. Brown thought the novel would be one of her few enduring works. Wilson Follett paid it his highest tribute, calling Ethan Frome "an authentic American classic" (2). Wharton was undoubtedly considering critics like these when she wrote in her autobiography, "I am far from thinking 'Ethan Frome' my best novel, and am bored and even exasperated when I am told that it is" (209). But as she makes clear in "The Great American Novel," while she did not accept or condone the critical standards beginning to dominate American literature in the early twentieth century, Wharton had a good understanding of what made Ethan Frome more acceptable to American literary critics than any of her other novels.

There is another factor contributing to Edith Wharton's relative critical neglect that, while no doubt related to her

refusal to depict the "myth of America," deserves separate consideration. And that factor is the content and tone of many of the early book-length studies of her work. As was the case with Cather, the first book-length study of Wharton to appear was in the Modern American Writers series edited by Ernest Boyd. But unlike Renee Rapin's analysis, which refers to Cather as a "great" writer who possesses "sustained power [and] breadth of vision and of compass" (1), Robert Morss Lovett's book Edith Wharton (1925) focuses far more on Wharton's limitations than her accomplishments. Lovett finds it "regrettable" that Wharton was so alienated from her "native land" both physically and in her writings (7). And he concludes, "She lacks the power of imagination to follow the leadings of her experience and the phenomena of her environment into other fields, to transpose the themes of her chamber music into larger harmonies and discords of the full orchestra" (86). To paraphrase Lovett's dense and flowery prose, Edith Wharton is not a great writer. The second book written in English on Edith Wharton was Percy Lubbock's biography, Portrait of Edith Wharton (1947). The influence of this book on Wharton's literary reputation cannot be underestimated. In her examination of the Wharton papers at Yale, Katherine Joslin discovered letters between Lubbock and Wharton's literary executor, Gaillard Lapsley, that indicate that both men believed that Wharton was in danger of disappearing immediately from the literary consciousness of

the nation. Joslin suggests that the biography Lubbock wrote supported this low opinion of its subject: "With Lapsley's blessing on Lubbock's pronouncements, Edith Wharton emerged after her death as a marginal writer and woman" (194). The most remarkable aspect of Lubbock's portrait is its absolute refusal to seriously address Wharton's status as an artist. In the introduction Lubbock unaccountably insists that "any critical handling" of the books would be inappropriate (v). And in his conclusion he suggests that it is merely the size of her oeuvre, rather than its quality, that earns her the title of writer (240). Other Wharton scholars have pointed to the significance of Lubbock's "portrait." R. W. B. Lewis observes that "the book's most striking characteristic . . . is the subtly distributed malice towards its subject, a careful muted downgrading of Edith Wharton as a human being and a writer" (516). Wharton's negative reputation endures. More recently, the feminist scholar Susan Goodman indicated the difficulties she has encountered in her attempts to counter some of the long-standing assumptions about Wharton that were established by Lubbock's biased account (26, 31, 164 n.8).

Two other books on Wharton that appeared relatively early both classified her as a novelist of manners. In Edith Wharton: A Study of her Fiction (1953) Blake Nevius suggested that while she was an undoubted master of the form it was nevertheless mastery of only a minor genre (9). And Marilyn

Jones Lyde focused exclusively Wharton as a novelist of manners in Edith Wharton: Conventions and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (1959). But perhaps the most significant early contribution to Wharton scholarship, after Lubbock's biography, was Irving Howe's collection of essays published in 1962. This collection is remarkable in part because of the large number of negative essays that appear in it. In addition to an essay by Q. D. Leavis that concludes that Wharton was not a great artist (88) and an essay by Lionel Trilling that refers to Ethan Frome as a "factitious book" (137) Howe selected for inclusion in this volume the essays by Brown, Parrington, and Kazin to which I have already referred. His collection is quite unusual; no writer deemed worthy of a collection of critical essays devoted to their work has ever been more disparaged in such a volume than Edith Wharton. Thus, twenty-five years after Wharton's death a student turning to her would discover in the local research library few, if any, books to indicate that she was a worthy subject for consideration. This is in marked contrast to what such a scholar would discover on Willa Cather. Twenty-five years after her death Cather had been the subject of six significant and highly complimentary critical studies, two favorable memoirs, and one collection of extremely laudatory critical essays.⁴ The significance and impact of the contrasting critical reception of these two writers will

become evident as we turn to the feminist interpretive community's consideration of Edith Wharton.

The American Feminist Interpretive Community
Reads Edith Wharton

The fact of Edith Wharton's marginal status in the American literary canon has enabled some members of the feminist interpretive community to interrogate her work in ways that were impossible with the more canonical Willa Cather. Nevertheless, the large majority of feminist literary critics who began to seriously consider Edith Wharton in the 1970s have been intent on bringing her "into the sisterhood" by demonstrating how her work depicted feminist concerns. For these critics the largest difference between Wharton and Cather lies in their respective depiction of female characters. Because there are few, if any, female protagonists in Wharton's work who obviously appear as role models for feminist readers, the tendency has been for feminist critics to focus on the ways Wharton demonstrated the insidious and powerful hold of the patriarchy over women. Thus the feminist interpretive community has hailed Wharton's work not because it provided examples of women who triumphed over the oppressive constraints of the patriarchy (as Cather's work has been viewed) but rather because it demonstrated the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of such a triumph. As I explained in Part One, this kind of critical approach poses some significant dangers for the feminist interpretive community. Interpretive strategies

that reduce the position of all women represented in a text to that of victim actually contradict many of the stated aims of feminist literary criticism. This critical position ironically, and I believe unintentionally, supports the very system feminist literary critics are trying to reveal and change. As I argued in Chapter Two, feminist critics who define the female gendered subject as unilaterally oppressed participate in the very oppression they are trying to reveal. As we turn to some specific examples of feminist literary critics who have worked to bring Wharton "into the sisterhood," I will demonstrate more fully how many of these efforts actually have deconstructed themselves.

As was the case with Cather, one of the first sustained treatments of Wharton from a feminist perspective came from Shirley H. Heller.⁵ Heller's 1975 discussion of Wharton is particularly interesting because it illustrates the difficulties her novels pose to an interpretive community torn between the desire to identify positive female role models in women's fiction and the desire to locate feminist explorations of patriarchal power in the work of women writers. Heller attempted to do both. Heller claims that Wharton is "firmly in the feminist movement" because of her depiction of women characters: "Edith Wharton was an early feminist novelist whose heroines have white goddess characteristics and are elevated above the men and the society around them" (21). But she also recognizes the fact

that Wharton's women characters are often defeated by that very society and its "male-oriented" social conventions. Speaking of the heroine of The House of Mirth Heller observes, "Innately a strong, beautiful woman, Lily is destroyed through excessive role-playing in the only role society valued or offered the woman for fulfillment" (23). Heller's conclusion foreshadows that of most other feminist literary critics. For her ultimate argument is that although Wharton desired for her female characters to attain liberation and happiness, she could not imagine a way for them to achieve this status under their patriarchal society.

Margaret B. McDowell's assessment of Wharton's female characters in her essay, "Viewing the Custom of Her Country: Edith Wharton's Feminism" (1974) emphasizes this aspect of Wharton's fiction. McDowell suggests that Wharton's feminism is "implicit rather than explicit" (523). She suggests that Wharton's feminism consists primarily in asking questions about women's role in society rather than in providing solutions, alternatives, or role models for women (529). McDowell argues that there are some women in Wharton's fiction who revolt against social patterns and grow beyond them, but many more fail to do so (530). McDowell, like Heller, sees that the alternatives for women in Wharton's fiction are few and grim: "Repeatedly she questions the validity of a woman's submitting to the restrictions imposed upon her in a male-oriented society. But Wharton's final

comment on woman's relationship to her world would seem to be that she purchases freedom at great risk within a relatively static society" (538). Both critics, by suggesting that Wharton primarily conceives of her women characters as victims and by locating her feminism in that very perception, are reifying rather than negating patriarchal critical constructs. Furthermore, they miss the opportunity to creatively interrogate Wharton's apparent acceptance of her society's view of women as object in and victim of the patriarchy. Their assumption that Wharton's depiction of woman as victim constitutes a protest against the system that victimizes her deserves some reconsideration. And McDowell and Heller are simply the two earliest feminist critics in a long line of scholars who adopt such interpretive strategies.

In an aptly titled essay, "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton" (1989), James W. Tuttleton complains about "the appropriation of Mrs. Wharton by the sorority of feminists" (10). Tuttleton perceives "a new battle developing for control of Wharton criticism" as increasingly more feminists publish books and essays on this important writer (10). Tuttleton objects to this "takeover" because, as he sees it, "Mrs. Wharton's fiction does not serve very well to buttress the ideology of a feminism engaged in an attack on men, their domination, and cruelty, on marriage as such or on the so-called patriarchy" (11). As childish as his complaints may seem, it is at least clear that Tuttleton

is correct in his observation that feminist scholars are increasingly the dominant voices in Wharton criticism. Within ten years of the publication of R. W. B. Lewis's biography in 1975, four important, book-length, feminist studies of Wharton were published. A brief survey of these works will illustrate, contrary to Tuttleton's claim, the value and significance of these feminist voices. But it will also show that Tuttleton is in many respects accurate when he points to the uniformity of the feminist song.

The most important feminist analysis of Edith Wharton is Cynthia Griffin Wolff's 1977 book A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton. This book is a combination of literary criticism and psychological analysis, and it is central not only to Wharton criticism, by virtue of what it reveals about her life and art, but also to feminist literary criticism in general, by virtue of being an exemplary model of feminist psycho/literary biography.⁶ The basic question that concerns Wolff is what compelled Edith Wharton to write, given the fact that the conditions of her society "positively discouraged" any such activity (5). Wolff suggests that Wharton's entire life was characterized by an unceasing struggle against the restrictions imposed upon her by this same patriarchal society. She further argues that these restrictions were most clearly represented by the forbidding presence of Wharton's mother, Lucretia Jones: "[Wharton's] anger toward Mother had inspired her not with active

rebellion but with its opposite, excruciatingly strict rules to govern what it was allowable to say and even to think" (53). According to Wolff, it was only through painfully struggling to achieve independence from repressive social forces (represented most clearly by her mother) that Wharton was able to become a writer. And even then, as Wolff demonstrates through elegant readings of her novels, Wharton continued to explore the consequences of being a woman in a society so effectively designed to thwart female ambition: "She summoned up worlds of fiction that articulated the feelings and conflicts that had been so unprofitably pushed aside; and as she worked with those fictional worlds--shaping them, giving them order, making decisions about them--she slowly learned to master her problems" (54). But Wolff's readings also demonstrate that while Wharton may have personally "mastered" the problems presented to her by her society, she rarely depicted women in her fiction who managed to do likewise.

This tendency to view Wharton's work as the articulation of the unfortunate position of women in a male dominated society continues in the three other books published on Wharton in the early 1980s. In Edith Wharton's Argument with America (1980) Elizabeth Ammons argues that Wharton's entire oeuvre demonstrates her insightful awareness of the constricted lives women are forced to lead in American society. Ammons addresses the fact that Wharton's heroines

never seem to be allowed to achieve either conventionally happy endings or the happy ending that was beginning to become a possibility for New Women in American society. According to Ammons, Wharton's refusal does not represent a "reactionary" or "unconcerned" attitude. Rather, in Ammons's view, it represents Wharton's conviction that the conditions of American society offered no possibility of happiness for American women: "The culture, in Wharton's opinion, offers them no means of realizing their dreams. Lily Bart, Justine Brent, Mattie Silver, Sophy Viner, Charity Royall: all end up in bondage to the past not because Edith Wharton was cruel but because the liberation, the 'progress,' that America boasted of for women was, in her view, a mirage" (48-9). Ammons sees Wharton as interrogating her society in her fiction and ultimately concluding that it destroys the women who inhabit it, hence her "argument with America."

Like Ammons, Carol Wershoven explores the representation in Wharton's novels of ways women are thwarted and oppressed by a society whose rules all favor masculine autonomy and feminine dependence. In The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (1982) Wershoven analyzes Wharton's fiction to demonstrate how "the woman in society is . . . trapped--by rules (such as the double standard) not of her own devising, by a materialism that makes her only the chief ornament in her husband's establishment, and by a society that encourages her to remain a child, 'innocent' of reality and protected

from life" (16). Wendy Gimbel further emphasizes the victimization of female characters in Wharton's fiction in Edith Wharton: Orphancy and Survival (1984). Gimbel goes so far as to suggest that there is no possibility for women in Wharton's fictional world ever to overcome the conditions in which they are trapped: "The victim is the woman, the passive creation of the patriarchy. Whatever individual talent the female may have, it is not strong enough to withstand the powerful force which demands her continued infantilization" (10).

In an essay entitled "Muzzled Women" (1987) the well-known novelist and feminist philosopher Marilyn French also notes Wharton's seeming reluctance to depict female characters as anything other than victims of their patriarchal society. French's response is interesting, as she expresses feelings of outrage because Wharton refuses to grant her female characters the kind of autonomy that she herself experienced in life. I introduce French at this point because her essay reveals some of the latent essentialist assumptions in the work of other feminist critics who center their analysis on Wharton's depiction of woman as perpetually oppressed. Asking the question, "Why have so many woman authors helped to preserve the built-in constrictions all women suffer from, the sense we have that we can have one thing or another but not both and certainly not three or four of the things we dearly want," French

betrays her assumption, and that of many other feminist literary critics, that the most basic component of female identity consists of an innate sense of inferiority and suffering (223). And while French faults Wharton for relentlessly focusing on female victimization (unlike Ann Douglas who, it will be remembered, used much the same logic to condemn Cather for refusing to view women as victims) she nevertheless confirms this as an innate, essential feature of women.

French, Wolff, Ammons, Wershoven, and Gimbel are united in their insistence that Wharton's fiction articulates, first and foremost, the unified story of woman's oppression under the patriarchy. And while, as their eloquent and persuasive readings demonstrate, this is by no means a minor or insignificant aspect of Wharton's oeuvre, their readings also illustrate some of the dangers inherent in interpretive strategies that completely reduce women's writing to this unified story. For such interpretive strategies obscure the many other stories inhabiting a Wharton novel, some of which support, rather than reveal and critique, the society so central to Wharton's "argument with America." A resisting reading of Wharton allows us to examine the alternative stories her novels tell, but before turning to the texts themselves I think it would be useful to look at some of the feminist critics who have broken away from the dominant

position of viewing Wharton's work as the articulation of the story of female oppression.⁷

One of the first feminist critics to challenge this dominant critical position was Lois A. Cuddy in her 1982 essay "Triangles of Defeat and Liberation: The Quest for Power in Edith Wharton's Fiction." Cuddy argues in this essay that if one considers all of Wharton's novels it becomes evident that her women characters evolve from female dependence to female superiority (18). Cuddy's position is interesting because in moving beyond the "woman as victim of the patriarchy" interpretation and suggesting instead that woman is victorious over the patriarchy Cuddy is aligning herself more with the feminist critics of Cather than those of Wharton. Speaking of Wharton's heroines Cuddy asserts, "Always the social outcasts, these women nevertheless evolved from positions of terrifying vulnerability [The House of Mirth], to tenacious self-interest [Ethan Frome], to the masterful self-assurance, assertiveness, and independence of the modern woman [The Age of Innocence]" (25). I would like to suggest that by 1982 when this essay first appeared Wharton had finally, by virtue of the Lewis and Wolff biographies as well as Ammons's excellent critical study, reached a level of canonical stature approximating that of Cather's. Thus, it is possible that some feminist literary critics felt a sense of urgency to bring Wharton "into the sisterhood" in new ways that would allow them to identify

positively instead of negatively with her women characters. It perhaps became important, therefore, to develop new interpretive strategies that would allow for different kinds of readings, such as that produced by Lois A. Cuddy.

Another critic who engages in a similar reconsideration of Wharton is Frances L. Restuccia. In "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)" (1987), Restuccia suggests that it is possible to view even Wharton's seemingly most thoroughly oppressed female character, Lily Bart, in a positive light. Significantly, Restuccia is aware of the danger of reductive feminist readings that simplify women's writing to the story of women's oppression: "one must beware of the inadequacy of even 'feminist' readings of Lily Bart that stress single-mindedly her ontology as an art object as they resemble tellingly (disturbingly) the Lily Bart perceived by Lawrence Selden--practitioner of the law" (224). Restuccia argues that Wharton's feminism in The House of Mirth (and, implicitly, in her other novels) lies not merely in her depiction of Lily's position as victimized object of her patriarchal society, but also in Wharton's refusal to define her heroine in a fixed, phallogocentric way:

Wharton's feminism, then, reflects a tension very much alive in contemporary feminist theory: the apparent incommensurability of a social, humanist feminism that advances a position (in this case, women who yield to "'the temptation to be a beautiful object' . . . [are]

destroyed by the consequences of that temptation," as Judith Fetterley writes),⁸ and a more literary feminism that refuses definable positions for their masterliness, wishing to maintain perpetual openness and inaccessibility. (224)

Thus, Lily becomes admirable and strong because she refuses to be defined. Restuccia cites an important sentence from The House of Mirth to support her argument, one that bears repeating: "Misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one" (qtd. in Restuccia, 224). Restuccia's reading of The House of Mirth is in many senses a resisting reading because it refuses, in her words, to "ascribe clear, single meanings to things, to wash away their ambiguity" (227). And Restuccia is joined by other feminist literary critics who are reluctant to accept the traditional readings of Edith Wharton.

One of the most important, and most radical, of these renegade feminist literary critics is Julie Olin-Ammentorp. While far from questioning the significance of the work conducted by Wolff, Ammons, Fetterley, and others, Olin-Ammentorp observes that "the work of these feminist critics . . . raises issues of the limitations . . . of current feminist literary criticism" (237). One of the most important questionable assumptions Olin-Ammentorp locates in feminist Wharton criticism is the implication that Wharton

herself "was a kind of inherent feminist" (237). Observing the common feminist effort to find evidence of Wharton's own feminism in her depiction of women characters who are unjustly bound by the restrictions of a patriarchal society, Olin-Ammentorp rightly reminds us that such single-minded concerns can cause feminist critics to "overlook" other important aspects of Edith Wharton, such as her apparent misogyny (237). Olin-Ammentorp also objects to the kind of interpretive strategies that allow critics to ignore Wharton's treatment of male characters: "A re-examination of Wharton's fiction . . . demonstrates that the social structures of Wharton's fictional world cause male waste as much as female" (238). Olin-Ammentorp considers at length the male characters in The House of Mirth in order to support her claim that Wharton saw equally the dangers society posed for men and women. Her conclusion is that feminist literary critics have failed to consider the full complexity of Edith Wharton. Like Restuccia, Olin-Ammentorp challenges the feminist tendency to settle for single-dimensional understandings of female identity, and as such her analysis also takes steps towards becoming a resisting reading.

At this point it seems reasonable to ask why some feminist literary critics of Wharton have managed to break out of the essentialist traps characteristic of much feminist literary criticism while feminist critics of Cather have been, for the most part, unable to initiate such important

critical steps. I would argue that Wharton's status as a less solidly canonical figure than Cather has allowed her to be more easily embraced by feminist literary critics who wish to challenge traditional readings of her work. It is easier to be a resisting reader of Edith Wharton than of Willa Cather because in Wharton's case there is less to resist. In addition, a less affirmative explanation of this trend in Wharton criticism may be the fact that since the "voice of the fathers" as represented by such critics as Parrington, Kazin, and even Brown, has to some extent rejected Wharton, feminist literary critics are unconsciously willing to risk not fully bringing Wharton "into the sisterhood." Critics like Olin-Ammentorp can afford to point out Wharton's misogyny, thus risking that Wharton will prove an unacceptable member of the feminist canon, because she has already been deemed unworthy of belonging in the masculine canon.

Since 1990 several new books analyzing Edith Wharton from a feminist perspective have appeared, and it is apparent that many of these works break old trends and take steps towards a resisting reading of this important woman writer.⁹ Susan Goodman refuses to reduce Wharton to either the complete champion of women or their utter enemy in her 1990 book Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals. Instead, she suggests that it is important to reconsider aspects of Wharton's identity that have traditionally been viewed as

"mutually exclusive" (2). In Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld (1991), Candace Waid also refuses to view Wharton in the context of binary oppositions and instead argues that "a consideration of Wharton's ambivalent view of women must take into account her preoccupation with writing and the very possibility of the woman writer" (4). And, finally, Gloria C. Erlich returns to the subject of Edith Wharton's sexual identity in her 1992 book The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton to argue that "interrelated identity systems--the filial, the sexual, and the creative--are reflected in Wharton's work" (xi). What all three of these works have in common, despite their disparate conclusions, is the refusal to conform to the old models of literary criticism or to be trapped by essentialist notions of identity. It is approaches like these that, when fully realized, will propel feminist literary criticism into a new era.

Reading The House of Mirth

The House of Mirth (1905) is the logical place to turn to examine the various ways different interpretive communities have treated Edith Wharton's individual works. Critics are unanimous in declaring it Wharton's first important book, and despite the fact that her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Age of Innocence (1920), was more highly acclaimed at the time of its publication, The House of Mirth has always received more critical attention than any of her other works. Julie Olin-Ammentorp calls it Wharton's "best-known as well as . . . most astutely criticized" novel (237). The House of Mirth covers two years in the life of a young woman, Lily Bart, who is a high society New Yorker living at the turn of the century. Twenty-nine years old when the novel opens, Lily does not possess an income that will allow her to continue to live the high-stakes life she enjoys. Throughout the course of the novel, however, she rejects each of the many options presented to her that would allow her to remain in her social milieu, and in the end she dies alone in a shabby boarding house from an overdose of chloral. Like Cather's My Antonia (1918), The House of Mirth had been the subject of considerable critical attention before it became the focus of feminist analysis. Consequently, an examination of the novel's critical reception provides a good opportunity to explore ways the feminist interpretive community has been

influenced by the overlap of other interpretive communities. Furthermore, as a resisting reading will demonstrate, in spite of the many valuable interpretations that have appeared over the years, the potential usefulness of The House of Mirth for feminist critique is far from exhausted.

The initial reviews of the novel were not as uniformly favorable as those of My Antonia. However, as Deborah Lambert notes in an essay entitled "The House of Mirth: Readers Respond" (1985), reviewers were generally consistent with respect to what they considered the central topics of the novel. Critics focused primarily on "the novel's implicit morality . . . the character of the protagonist, the structure, and the narrative stance" (Lambert 72). One of the most striking characteristics of the reviews is their effort, either implicit or explicit, to define The House of Mirth as a society novel, a novel of manners. Calling the book "one of the few novels which can claim to rank as literature" the reviewer for The Saturday Review labeled The House of Mirth "a biting criticism of modern civilisation" (313). In a review published in The Critic, Mary K. Ford declared the novel to be a "brilliant social satire" (311). And in "Mrs. Wharton's Latest Novel" The Independent's reviewer proclaimed that The House of Mirth "is a story of society life, its refined ferocities, its sensual extravagances, its delicate immoralities and, above all, the tragedies which underlie its outward appearance of mirth and

prosperity" (307). In every case, while reviewers of The House of Mirth often, as Lambert observes, commented on the character of Lily Bart or the structure of the novel, considerably greater weight was devoted to comments on Wharton's representation of manners, of what Lionel Trilling has called "a culture's hum and buzz of implication" (1957, 200). Even today this emphasis has continued to characterize criticism of The House of Mirth.

It is ironic that while almost all early reviews noted Wharton's thorough examination of a segment of American society, she was nevertheless denigrated, both before and after the publication of The House of Mirth, for not being "American" enough. In a letter to William Crary Brownell, one of her editors at Charles Scribner's Sons, Wharton complained bitterly of what she regarded to be unfair criticism of her work: "I have never before been discouraged by criticism . . . but . . . the assumption that the people I write about are not 'real' because they are not navvies and char-women, makes me feel rather hopeless. I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to, which is surely better than doing cowboys de chic" (91). If her novel was as thorough a consideration of the New York upper class as almost every critic claimed, then it was certainly in that respect "American." But what is equally clear about American literary criticism is that in order to be classified as "American," novels must be about a certain class of

individuals who are actively pursuing the "myth of America." Had Wharton consented to write about "cowboys de chic" her literary reception would no doubt have been entirely different. As it was, by writing about what she knew, she relegated herself to the category of novelist of manners rather than American novelist. But to be fair, it must be said that she herself contributed to this evaluation with the comments she made about The House of Mirth in her autobiography, A Backward Glance (1934). In speaking of the genesis of the novel, Wharton wrote that once she had decided on her subject she was puzzled as to how to develop that subject into a novel of significance:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world," any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. (940)

Thus, when literary critics proceeded to read The House of Mirth almost exclusively as a novel of manners they were following not only the lead of Wharton's early reviewers, but her own lead as well.

Two of the most influential early critical assessments of The House of Mirth were republished in Irving Howe's 1962 collection of Wharton essays. In "The House of Mirth Revisited" (1962), Diana Trilling considers Wharton's status as a securely upper-class woman and asserts that "Her social position enabled her not merely to bring the fact of high society into literature in all its concreteness and authenticity . . . but also made it uniquely possible for her to perceive the complex and subtle interplay between our personal destinies and the destiny foredained [sic.] by our particular social situation" (104-5). Trilling reiterates her assessment of Wharton as an exemplary novelist of manners later in the essay when she argues that The House of Mirth "is nothing if not a novel about social stratification and the consequences of breaking . . . taboos" (105). Trilling's conclusion is that Lily's death demonstrates "the absolute power of society over the life of the individual" (117). In "A Reading of The House of Mirth," which was first published in 1962 as an introduction to the novel, Irving Howe confirms Trilling's assessment and observes that "Each step in Lily's decline allows Mrs. Wharton to examine the moral ugliness of still another segment of the wealthy class" (123). Both of these early critics, and most who followed them, regarded Wharton's novel as a critical, yet fair, exploration of the patterns of behavior which regulated the lives of a specific class of people. In other words, they classified the work as

a novel of manners.¹⁰ This classification was solidified in 1975 with the publication of Gary H. Lindberg's book Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners. Arguing that "Edith Wharton's major subject is the impact of social organization, an issue closely allied with the thematic base of the novel of manners," Lindberg suggests that Lily Bart's primary function in The House of Mirth is as a "social product" (12, 122).

When feminist literary critics first began to turn their attention to The House of Mirth in the mid 1970s, they did so without questioning its designation as a novel of manners. Most feminist critics agreed that the novel was an exploration of the relation between the individual and society. Feminist critiques of The House of Mirth as a novel of manners differed from previous readings primarily because of new efforts to demonstrate ways the novel revealed how society, because of its patriarchal basis, was particularly dangerous for women. The first important feminist analysis of The House of Mirth was Cynthia Griffin Wolff's essay "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death" (1974). In this essay Wolff explores how late nineteenth-century social attitudes about female beauty and women's role in society structured Lily's life and eventually led to her death. According to Wolff, the widely held view of woman "as an essentially 'artistic' creation, worthy of representation and innately disposed to 'appropriate' behavior" prevented Lily from achieving a well

developed self-image (324). Wolff suggests that the last scene of the novel in which the dead Lily is beautifully displayed demonstrates Wharton's realization of "the psychological distortions, the self-alienation, that a woman suffers when she accepts the status of idealized object" (338). It is interesting that, while Wolff's is clearly a feminist analysis, she does not point fingers at the patriarchy or suggest that Lily has no responsibility for her own fate. According to Wolff, if a woman had "significant real life roles to play" she would probably not be overly influenced by the "aesthetic-moral" ideology of her society (324).

In "The Temptation To Be a Beautiful Object: Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth" (1977) Judith Fetterley develops the feminist implications of Wolff's argument in a different direction. Fetterley suggests that while The House of Mirth is certainly a novel of manners, it is one that focuses specifically on the gendered implications of social regulations:

Lily's experience is not simply the result of her being a member of a particular socio-economic class at a particular point in time; it is equally the result of her being a member of a sexual class. The tragedy of Lily Bart is peculiarly the tragedy of an upperclass woman faced with "the temptation to be a beautiful

object," which such a society presents to its women, and destroyed by the consequences of that temptation. (200)

Fetterley identifies the basic "hum and buzz" of Lily's society to be patriarchal privilege and the corresponding female objectification and oppression. Another feminist literary critic who adopts Fetterley's stance is Cathy N. Davidson who argues that in The House of Mirth "Women . . . are constrained not just by the dubious beauty ethic of society but also by the prevailing double standard of the time" (10). In "Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in the House of Mirth" (1980) Joan Lidoff declares, "Lily is an inevitable victim of destruction by social institutions' collective necessities" (519). In another feminist essay, Carolyn L. Karcher compares The House of Mirth to The Wings of the Dove, a novel by Henry James, and suggests that such a comparison reveals Wharton's aim, which was "to explore the factors that restrict women like Lily to dependent roles and condition them to regard themselves as 'beautiful objects' destined for male consumption" (232-3). Fetterley, Davidson, Lidoff, Karcher, and--to a lesser extent--Wolff are engaged in similar critical efforts.¹¹

These feminist literary critics attempt to build upon past studies of The House of Mirth as a novel of manners as they utilize existing interpretive strategies to construct new readings of the novel. And while their readings are insightful and significant they adequately interrogate

neither the extent to which the novel promotes (in addition to protesting) a patriarchal ethos, nor the possibilities it provides its women characters to surmount the constrictions of their society. Perhaps the most obvious reason feminist literary critics have been unable to analyze the extent to which the novel itself supports the society that destroys Lily Bart is that the political constructs of feminism make it very difficult to accommodate a woman writer whose texts do not promote feminist values and goals. It is apparently always necessary to bring women writers "into the sisterhood" in some direct way. Another reason feminist literary critics have been unable to read Lily as anything other than the victim of her society is that the critical framework provided by viewing the novel as a novel of manners does not allow consideration of the importance of individualism in The House of Mirth. Interpretive strategies that allow us to consider the importance of individualism in the novel will reveal alternatives for women that remain hidden under the existing critical framework. A resisting reading of this novel, as I shall demonstrate, will enable us to understand more fully the true complexity of The House of Mirth. But before turning to the text, I would like to examine some recent feminist interpretations of The House of Mirth that begin to incorporate the kind of strategies that are needed to revolutionize feminist literary criticism.

I have already mentioned one of the most important revisionary feminist readings of The House of Mirth, Frances L. Restuccia's 1987 essay "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)." Objecting to the constant feminist characterization of Lily as a unilateral victim, Restuccia notes moments in which Lily betrays her perfect understanding of the operations of her society and observes, "If Lily is victimized, she is intelligent about it" (226, emphasis in original). Restuccia goes on to note that the constant emphasis on Lily's victimization constitutes a "reductive approach" because "Wharton offers a proliferation of clues that Lily eludes triumphantly her male observers' attempted encapsulizations of her" (226). What Restuccia refers to as Lily's "freedom from definition" constitutes her resistance to the patriarchal society in which she lives and its continual efforts to "fix" her as victim (229). In resisting the feminist interpretive community's affinity for readings that reduce female characters to the status of victim while simultaneously refusing to adopt the alternative feminist tactic of viewing female characters as all-powerful avenging angels, Restuccia produces a new kind of reading. Another feminist critic who employs similar interpretive strategies is Elaine N. Orr. In her essay "Contractual Law, Relational Whisper: A Reading of Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth" (1991) Orr focuses on negotiation. Orr suggests that "the conflicts in which [Lily] is engaged may not be as fated or

predetermined as previous readings have suggested," and goes on to examine ways Lily manages to explore alternatives to the "great gilt cage" of her existence (55). The most comforting alternatives Lily discovers in the text, according to Orr, are encounters with other characters, "sometimes physical holding and sometimes a mental awareness of identification with others" (56-7). Lily's discovery of "a different way of being and relating" is the feminist subtext Orr identifies in The House of Mirth (63). Like Restuccia, Orr resists the impulse to read Lily as feminists have always read her.

New feminist readings of The House of Mirth are also suggested by two recently published books to which I have already referred. Susan Goodman suggests that the most important scenes in the novel take place outside of the high society world of the Trenor set and depict Lily's increasing awareness of the power of female community: "Lily's economic and social descent . . . marks her closer identification with her own sex; and though her world is restricted, it offers more opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth" (49). As Lily outwardly appears to be more of a victim of her society she gains an inner strength that allows her to recognize its corrupt values. Goodman argues that "Wharton's indictment of society is not a comprehensive criticism of the lady . . . Rather than banish the 'lady' to another land . . . Wharton believes society should redefine her" (60).

Candace Waid proposes that Lily Bart "figures the predicament of the woman artist as the novel tells the story of a crisis about the place and the possibility of the woman writer" (17). In her analysis of the woman writer in The House of Mirth Waid focuses on illicit love letters written by Bertha Dorset that wind up in Lily's hands and become one way she can extract herself from the grinding poverty facing her at the end of the novel. Lily refuses to use the letters, and Waid demonstrates that the novel poses only two undesirable alternatives for a woman writer: "The novel imagines two untenable places for the woman writer: the defiled underworld of experience and writing represented by Bertha Dorset, and the literal death that results from Lily Bart's refusal to use the power in her hands" (49). Both Goodman's and Waid's books are limited in ways that Restuccia's and Orr's essays are not because the former critics are too committed to demonstrating the unified story they identify in The House of Mirth, although the story they find differs in significant ways from the usual feminist one. But if our resisting readings are to be truly productive, they must also resist the impulse to view women's writing in simplified, reductive, or binary ways. The following reading of The House of Mirth attempts to do just that.

"She Had Saved Herself Whole":

Towards a Resisting Reading of The House of Mirth

Viewing Edith Wharton's novel The House of Mirth

exclusively as a novel of manners obscures some significant subtexts embedded in the work. As with any reading designed to uncover a single unified meaning, such interpretive strategies collapse contradictions within the text that may actually negate, or at least complicate, the interpretation being promoted. As we have seen, every feminist reading of The House of Mirth accepts Wharton's claim, and that of her earliest reviewers, that this is a novel in which the "hum and buzz of implication" of upper class society at the turn of the century is held up for viewing and dissection. Whether feminist critics argue that Lily is the powerless victim of her society, or that Lily manages to find some measure of power within her society through human connections, they agree that Lily's position as a character struggling to maintain her position within that society is indeed, as Wharton had claimed, the center of the text. And while their analyses are certainly not without merit, it is my contention that other, equally valuable, interpretations could be developed if the feminist interpretive community would resist the powerful shaping force of almost 100 years worth of readings that assume The House of Mirth to be a novel of manners. Should we be able to develop alternative

critical frameworks with which to approach this novel, we would also be able to recognize other important stories embedded in the text.

It is more complicated than one might imagine to simply decide to impose a new and different critical construct upon a text, especially one that has been as thoroughly examined as The House of Mirth. For the instinctive response of any member of an academic interpretive community, including even me, is, "But The House of Mirth is a novel of manners. What else can it be?" At that point it is essential that we remind ourselves as literary critics that categories like "sentimental novel," "bildungsroman," and "novel of manners" are descriptive labels created by critics and then attached to specific texts. A text itself is never intrinsically one or the other category. But once we, as literary critics, do attach a label to a text the label becomes a critical construct that makes it extremely difficult for us to recognize aspects of the text that do not conform to our understanding of what its definition constitutes. For example, Moby-Dick has long been classified as an adventure novel about a man struggling to achieve a sense of identity independent of traditional societal expectations. Gene Patterson-Black suggests that critics commonly assume that "Melville's chief interest was in melodramatizing philosophical questions into a tediously studied 'quarrel with God'" (108). But it would certainly be possible, and I

believe fruitful, to resist this critical construct and argue instead that Moby-Dick is a novel of manners. In this way we could explore how Melville depicted in a highly realistic mode the subtle interactions, the "hum and buzz of implication," of a whaling ship society. The famous sperm squeezing scene or even Captain Ahab's rousing speech might be read in new, productive, and interesting ways if we were no longer bound to view them as representations of a metaphysical search for identity or God. This is not to say that such a reading would negate the previous ones that have stood for many years. It is simply to illustrate how powerfully critical constructs shape our interpretive strategies and interpretations and to suggest the productive possibilities of employing various different interpretive strategies as we attempt to read and understand women's writing.

A discussion of Moby-Dick may still seem out of place in the middle of a study of reading women writers, but there is another reason I introduce Melville's classic American novel at this time. For I would like to propose that in resisting the interpretive strategies that have formerly been employed to read Edith Wharton's novel The House of Mirth, we adopt instead the critical constructs that have most often been used to read Moby-Dick, Huckleberry Finn, or The Great Gatsby--all universally recognized American novels by male novelists. If we orient our interpretation of The House of

Mirth towards demonstrating ways the novel, in Nina Baym's words, narrates Lily's struggle, "untrammelled by history and social accident," to achieve "complete self-definition," we will be able to recognize some important new elements of this much studied novel. A reading of The House of Mirth as an adventure novel will not replace readings of it as a novel of manners. Rather, the two readings will stand alongside of each other, as they must, because each necessarily informs and is informed by the other. I think it will be possible to see that individualism is as important to The House of Mirth as society and community are. Lily's struggle to define herself independent of her society's requirements and expectations eventually constitutes the kind of rugged individualism rarely identified in women's writing. But a resisting reading will also demonstrate that, at least in this text, Wharton's view of female society is as negative and misogynistic as Melville's, Twain's, or Fitzgerald's.¹² The important difference between Wharton and these male writers, and one that will emerge in this reading, is that unlike them Wharton imagined both her rugged hero and the "encroaching, constricting, destroying society" against which she struggles in feminine terms. Her vision is ultimately more complicated and conflicted than theirs, but it is no less significant. As the following analysis shall demonstrate, applying postmodern notions of subjectivity to

The House of Mirth can be extremely useful because it allows us to recognize this very conflict.

The first chapter of The House of Mirth establishes Lily's position as a stalwart individual searching for a self-definition that is independent from the definition established for her by her society. Lily initially appears at Grand Central Station where Lawrence Selden notices that "She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street."¹³ From the beginning, Wharton establishes her female hero as separate from rather than connected to others. This separateness is further emphasized by the ensuing conversation between Lily and Selden as they share tea. Lily asks Selden whether he minds having less money than his friends and often "being tied down" by his financial circumstances, circumstances that he shares with Lily. When he responds that he often minds "horribly," she asks, "But do you mind enough--to marry to get out of it?" (12). Selden immediately laughs and declares, "God forbid!" Lily's evaluation of her own situation, as opposed to Selden's, illustrates both her understanding of and her disdain for the role she is expected to play in their society:

"Ah, there's the difference--a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses." She surveyed him critically. "Your coat's a little shabby--but who cares? It does n't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one

would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop--and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership." (12)

As Restuccia has observed, in this "feminist moment of lucidity" Lily demonstrates her insight into the workings of her society (226). And for the rest of the novel she conducts a systematic campaign to establish a self-definition independent of the one that is expected of her. Each time she makes a decision, it is motivated by her desire to break the bonds that tie her to her "encroaching, constricting, destroying" society. Lily, like American heroes from *Leatherstocking* to *Huckleberry Finn*, is engaged in active resistance to established conventions.

Unlike that of *Leatherstocking* and *Huckleberry Finn*, however, Lily's resistance is not immediately obvious. For she does not, like them, strike off into the wilderness, but remains for most of the novel in the midst of the very group her behavior continually repudiates. After leaving Selden, Lily boards a train bound for Bellomont, the country home of her best friend Judy Trenor. Also on board and bound for the same destination is an extremely wealthy but dreadfully dull young man, Percy Gryce. With the expertise of a

professional, Lily "organize[s] a method of attack" and proceeds to seduce Percy Gryce into believing in "the advantage of always having a companion to make one's tea in the train" (20). It certainly appears that Lily is accepting Selden's advice to "take the plunge" and get a husband. She tells her friend Judy Trenor that "Mr. Gryce and I are getting to be very good friends," and Judy assumes that Lily intends to marry Percy Gryce (47). But between Lily's first meeting of Mr. Gryce on the train and the continuation of their "courtship" at Bellomont, Wharton provides the reader with some additional information about Lily's character that makes her eventual rejection of Mr. Gryce understandable.

Lily is an orphan; she is as personally unconnected to the society surrounding her as she was to the masses of people at the train station. Furthermore, she recognizes the vacuity of their existence and can imagine alternatives that would not involve marriage to a man like Percy Gryce. Wharton informs the reader that "She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself" (40). After one week at Bellomont when Lily is certain of her ability to entice Mr. Gryce into a marriage proposal, she gazes upon the members of the house party as they are gathered for dinner and realizes, "How dreary and trivial these people were! . . . She saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she

saw the poverty of their achievement" (57). The next day Lily deliberately takes a series of steps that effectively eliminates the possibility of permanently aligning herself with this group through marriage to Percy Gryce.

After convincing the conservative Mr. Gryce of her faithful church attendance and promising to accompany him, Lily leaves Mr. Gryce standing at the altar, so to speak. Her absence is no accident. Lily dresses in a "grey gown of devotional cut" and borrows a prayer-book from her hostess, but then she stops to consider the implications of her actions. With a "smothered sense of resistance" Lily realizes that should her plan succeed she would have to go to church with Percy Gryce "every Sunday," and after considering all the other social obligations that marriage to Gryce would entail she decides not to attend church (59). Going instead in search of Lawrence Selden, who had arrived at Bellomont the night before, Lily discovers him in close conversation with his former lover, Mrs. Dorset, another wealthy member of their "set." Lily leaves the couple alone, but she is quickly followed by Selden who asks her to accompany him for a walk that afternoon. Although she has already promised her afternoon to Mr. Gryce, Lily "excused herself from the walk [with Gryce] on the plea of a headache: the horrid headache which, in the morning, had prevented her venturing to church" (69). She spends the afternoon with Selden. The consequences of her decision are severe: Mrs. Dorset, angered

by Selden's obvious attraction to Lily, tells Percy Gryce "horror" stories about Lily's past, and, "thoroughly frightened," he "run[s] straight home to his mother" (79). Feminist critics usually interpret this incident as either an example of the extent to which Lily is the victim of an uncaring society, or as one in a long series of unfortunate incidents in which Lily, unable to decide what she wants, is punished for her indecision. But I think there are many things in the text that point to this incident as a deliberate gesture on Lily's part explicitly designed to sever the ties between herself and the society she clearly recognizes as corrupt.

The conversation between Lily and Selden on their afternoon walk verifies her agency as well as her conscious effort to achieve self-definition through a rejection of her society. Wharton's description of Lily's emotions as she sets off with Selden is significant: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears" (67). Lily is not unconscious of the grim possibilities life within her society provides, nor is she unconscious in her efforts to escape them. When Lawrence Selden tells her, "My idea of success . . . is personal freedom," Lily responds eagerly (70). She tells him, "that's just what I've been feeling today," and it is clear that her gestures have indeed all been designed to allow her to

achieve the self-definition that will accompany the attainment of "personal freedom" (71). Selden asks Lily whether she has ever considered the fact that marriage to a wealthy man would actually make her unhappy, and Lily answers, "Often and often . . . But it looks so much darker when you show it to me!" (74). As their conversation continues and becomes more intimate, they discuss the possibility of marriage to each other. Most critics suggest that Lily refuses Selden's offer of marriage because he is not wealthy enough to support her, but a close examination of the passage reveals that Selden neither offers marriage, nor does Lily refuse him. When she asks him "Do you want to marry me," he responds, "No, I don't want to--but perhaps I should if you did!" (76). Rather than being an example of Lily's selfish desire for a wealthy husband, I think this conversation demonstrates her fuller awakening to the possibilities of the "personal freedom" that she continues to pursue throughout the novel. She is determined to escape the "prison house."

Lily's escape route is somewhat circuitous. She does not take direct steps to sever her ties with her destructive "set" but rather deliberately engages in behavior, like leaving Percy Gryce waiting at the church, which ensures that she will gradually become further separated from the life she despises. Knowing that Judy Trenor disapproves of Carry Fisher, the divorcée who borrows money from her husband, Lily

nevertheless asks Gus Trenor to help her out of financial difficulties by managing her inheritance (87). Lily accepts large sums of money from him, which she pretends to believe are dividends from investments he had made on her behalf. She also develops a friendship with George Dorset, a married man who has been made miserable by his wife's unfaithfulness (124). Lily then appears at social events with individuals who are less than highly respected by the upper class society, the "new money" Wellington Brys and the Jewish businessman Simon Rosedale (118-19). Lily makes no great effort to hide her actions, and they do not remain unnoticed. Her cousin Grace Stepney takes it upon herself to report Lily's infractions to her wealthy aunt, and Mrs. Peniston's reaction is illustrative of the magnitude of Lily's rebellion: "There remained in her thoughts a settled deposit of resentment against her niece . . . It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about" (133).

Lily, for her own part, "knew that people were beginning to talk of her; but this fact did not alarm her as it had alarmed Mrs. Peniston" (136). She continues to "let herself be talked about" in increasingly more obvious ways that have the simultaneous effect of sealing her estrangement from society and of allowing her to identify more fully with Selden's "republic of the spirit." In what is certainly a pivotal scene in the novel Lily poses in a tableau vivant at a party given by the socially marginal Wellington Brys. She

impersonates Reynolds's "Mrs. Lloyd," and the line between herself and the painting she mimes is indistinguishable: "She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself" (141-2). Several spectators voice their appreciation of Lily's display but suggest that it reflects an unbecoming lack of modesty. Ned Van Alstyne declares, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there is n't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (142). And Gus Trenor, complains, "It's not her fault if everybody don't know [what an outline Lily has] now . . . Damned bad taste, I call it" (146). But for Lily the unconventional display of herself "divested of the trivialities of her little world" gives her "an intoxicating sense of recovered power" (142, 143). It is for her a decisive act of "personal freedom."

The last and most decisive step Lily takes towards achieving self-definition is her decision to accompany George and Bertha Dorset on a Mediterranean cruise. As one of her friends informs Lawrence Selden, the reason Lily has been asked to accompany the Dorsets is common knowledge: "When Bertha wants to have a good time she has to provide occupation for George . . . The Silverton affair is in the acute stage: it 's necessary that George's attention should be pretty continuously distracted. And I'm bound to say Lily does distract it" (197-8, emphasis in original). Lily is a

willing participant in a corrupt scheme that she certainly knows even from the beginning will serve to further separate her from her society. As she acknowledges after it is over, "She had been perfectly aware from the outset that her part in the affair was . . . to distract Dorset's attention from his wife" (237). Lawrence Selden realizes the sense of deliberateness with which she approaches her task when he sees her with the Dorsets, and he thinks that she seemed to be "poised on the brink of a chasm" (200-201). And when Mrs. Dorset disappears with her lover and does not return until dawn, Lily, not she, is the one to fall over the brink. For Mrs. Dorset publicly accuses Lily of wanting to marry George Dorset in order to deflect attention away from her own infidelity, and she banishes Lily from the yacht. This accusation is made in the presence of Dabham, the gossip columnist for the "Riviera Notes," and news of it reaches America even before Lily returns home where "she was publicly branded as the heroine of a 'queer' episode" (245). The most significant consequence to Lily of being turned off the Dorset's yacht is that Mrs. Peniston disinherits her and leaves Lily only ten thousand dollars upon her death. The accumulated result of Lily's many deliberate deviations from the confining requirements of her society is poverty. And it is clear from the comments she makes to Gerty Farish that she realizes perfectly the significance of her exile: "I shouldn't have minded [being snubbed], you know, if I'd got

the money . . . it would n't have mattered, because I should have been independent of them" (235). In actual fact, however, her disinheritance does give her the kind of independence she desired when she spoke to Lawrence Selden about the "republic of the spirit." Because as he told her, and she well knows, "it 's as hard for rich people to get into as the kingdom of heaven" (72).

Resisting previous feminist readings that view Lily entirely as victim allows us to see that she holds multiple subject positions. Judith Fetterley has suggested that "Lily's situation can best be described as a complex set of double binds the end result of which is powerlessness, paralysis, and death" (205). And many other feminist readings see her "fall" as the unfortunate result of her status as the passive victim of an inhumane society rather than the result of deliberate action on Lily's part. But one thing that points to the latter interpretation is Lily's astute awareness of the consequences of being "talked about" coupled with her relentless determination to make herself the subject of gossip. In the first chapter of the novel Lily refuses to accompany Selden to a restaurant because it is not an appropriate action for a "jeune fille a marier" (4). And later in the novel she tells Gerty Farish that "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for" (236). But Lily persistently allows herself, in fact encourages herself, to be talked about, and the result is her

exile from the world that so thoroughly constricts her "personal freedom." For the rest of the novel, Lily avoids the "encroaching, constricting, destroying" society from which she had so successfully separated herself. Although faced with the difficulties of having a small income and no vocation, Lily gradually becomes more comfortable with the "personal freedom" she has gained. Lily attaches herself as a companion to Mrs. Gormer, a woman of the "social outskirts," but finds that even that environment is "only a flamboyant copy of her own world" and soon grows dissatisfied. She moves from this position to one as a private secretary to Mrs. Norma Hatch, an even less socially acceptable individual. Lily discovers an increasingly astute ability to understand herself and the role she had abandoned as she encounters these alternative groups: "For a moment she found a certain amusement in the show, and in her own share of it: the situation had an ease and unconventionality distinctly refreshing after her experience of the irony of conventions" (290). But even the society of Mrs. Hatch ultimately proves too falsely confining, and Lily eventually takes a job trimming hats for a milliner.

At this stage in her life, Lily has finally reached the level of self-knowledge that is required of those belonging to the "republic of the spirit." Her journey away from the stifled confines of the society represented by the Dorsets and the Trenors can be compared to Huck Finn's trip down the

Mississippi or Nick Carraway's trip to New York City. It is a slow, gradual journey ending in an awareness not only of self but also of those aspects of society that must be resisted in order for self to be fully realized. The self-definition she attains over the course of this journey, however, is not liberating in any conventional feminist sense. In her deliberate campaign to liberate herself from the society she despises, Lily discovers that she, unlike Huck or Nick, can find no other satisfying life. Lily concludes that "Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (316). Sadly, she sees her future "stretched out before her grey, interminable and desolate" (317). Rather than face this desolate future or return to the now unacceptable life of her past, Lily is led by her final achievement of "personal freedom" to commit suicide.

It is important to recognize that Lily did indeed have the opportunity to return to the society she had previously rejected. For it is only through her final renunciation of this group that the full significance of her "personal freedom" can be appreciated. Simon Rosedale, a man just beginning to infiltrate the "society" Lily despises, had long been one of her most ardent suitors. After Lily returns to America, he renews his offer of marriage under the condition

that she blackmail Mrs. Dorset with the letters she wrote to Lawrence Selden when they were lovers. (Lily bought the letters from Selden's housekeeper who mistakenly believed they were written by her.) Although Rosedale loves Lily, he only wants a wife who will "be of use" to him in his eternal struggle to be accepted by "society." Lily at first refuses his suggestion "with a promptness of scorn almost surprising to herself" (275). But as the reality of her poverty begins to grind upon her, she reconsiders her decision and decides to use the letters to force Mrs. Dorset to re-admit her into society, thus allowing her to marry Rosedale. On her way to Mrs. Dorset's house, Lily stops to visit Selden, and the conversation that passes between them confirms Lily's full membership in the "republic of the spirit."

Lily begins their conversation by referring to their first important discussion at Bellomont in which Selden spoke to her of the importance of "personal freedom." She tells him, "I have never forgotten the things you said to me at Bellomont, and . . . sometimes when I seemed farthest from remembering them . . . they have helped me, and kept me from mistakes" (323). In truth, each of her actions since that time was designed to help her achieve the kind of "complete self-definition" they discussed, and at this point in her life, Lily simply wants Selden to acknowledge and appreciate her efforts: "She felt that she could not leave him without trying to make him understand that she had saved herself

whole from the seeming ruin of her life" (323, emphasis mine). And Selden does seem to understand as he tells her, "The difference is in yourself--it will always be there" (324). Lily tells Selden that she is planning to leave "the Lily Bart you knew" there with him as she goes on to repudiate all that old self stands for, but then she realizes that such a step is impossible for her: "She understood now that she could not go forth and leave her old self with him: that self must indeed live on in his presence, but it must still continue to be hers" (326, emphasis mine). Before walking out of Selden's apartment for the last time, Lily very consciously and deliberately throws Mrs. Dorset's letters into the fire. Although Lily entered Selden's apartment intending to destroy herself by giving up the valiant battle she had fought against society, she leaves with her self-definition still intact.

In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" Nina Baym does not suggest that women writers are incapable of inscribing the "myth of America." But she does argue that "When a woman takes the central role, it follows naturally that the socializer and domesticator will be a man" (74). In Wharton's novel The House of Mirth, however, the "encroaching, constricting destroying" society is represented, as it is in male myths, in feminine terms. The social system in The House of Mirth is maintained by women who vigorously enforce its every petty rule. Judy Trenor,

who abandons Lily after she borrows money from her husband; Bertha Dorset, who publicly accuses Lily of unspeakable infractions; and even Carry Fisher, who eventually "cuts" Lily because of her association with Mrs. Hatch, all represent as well as enforce the social codes. The only characters who seem to consciously recognize the codes and also suggest alternatives to them are men: Lawrence Selden and, to a lesser extent, Simon Rosedale. To use Baym's words, "the role of entrapper and impediment . . . is reserved for women" (75). I think it is important that as resisting readers of the novel we acknowledge that there are aspects of this text that reinscribe patriarchal constructs with as much rigor as any Mark Twain novel. Lily's death is a difficult thing to reconcile with any feminist reading, but I would like to suggest that it is the inevitable ending available for a female hero whose must successfully struggle against other women in order to claim her own identity. As I have already suggested, Wharton's was a conflicted vision. She was writing from within a literary tradition and a society that accepted universal notions of women that did not accommodate a feminist vision. She herself was not able at all times to resist this ideology. This does not, of course, make her text useless for feminist inquiry. But it is something that as feminist literary critics we must acknowledge. For if this is an action of which Wharton was

capable, we should realize that we ourselves can fall into the same trap.

Reading The House of Mirth as an adventure novel about a woman character's struggle to achieve "complete self-definition" constitutes a resisting reading. It is, I believe, the kind of reading Nancy K. Miller refers to as an "overreading" (1986, 272).¹⁴ Ironically, it brings Wharton back into the fold of the great American novel, the very place from which she has so long been rejected. But it is important to emphasize that this is not a reading designed to replace the readings of Lily Bart and her novel that already exist within the feminist interpretive community. Rather, if we place it along side these readings it will allow us to recognize ways we, as an interpretive community, have been too eager to employ Culler's rule of unity. I think it also reveals how our notions of gendered subjectivity easily can deny Lily agency and reduce her to the simple status as victim of her patriarchal society. We can see the conflicts within American feminism between emphasizing women's community with each other and women's independence from men. A resisting reading prevents us from being able to ignore the fact that, at least in The House of Mirth, women are as responsible for the status of their society as the men who supposedly control it. By acknowledging the many texts in The House of Mirth resisting readers are able to see that the

novel is more than simply an account of the story of female oppression.

Reading The Mother's Recompense

Like Willa Cather, Edith Wharton did not publish her first novel until she was almost forty years old; she continued publishing novels until The Gods Arrive appeared in 1932 when she was seventy.¹⁵ (Cather was sixty-seven when her last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, was published.) Also like those of Cather, Wharton's earlier novels receive considerably more critical attention than the ones she wrote towards the end of her life. It is commonly assumed that the quality of Wharton's fiction steadily declined as she grew older both because her mental powers diminished and because her charity work in France caused her to be increasingly in need of money, which she supposedly earned by pandering to the literary tastes of the masses. But as Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, this view is somewhat oversimplified (1977, 343). It does seem, however, that these assumptions have effectively prevented literary critics from turning their attention to her later novels, even novels like The Mother's Recompense (1925) that have much to recommend them to a literary readership. Only three articles have ever been published on this novel, and many authors of critical studies on Wharton either fail to mention The Mother's Recompense, or refer to it only in passing. In the following pages I shall attempt to summarize what little critical attention has been devoted to The Mother's Recompense before turning to an

exploration of how it can be useful for feminist literary criticism. For just as looking for only one story in women's writing can unnecessarily restrict feminist literary criticism, reading only a few selected texts by women writers (texts that have been selected by interpretive communities other than our own) can provide us with a false understanding of women writers and the novels they create.

The Mother's Recompense recounts the story of Kate Clephane, a woman who has left her little daughter and overbearing husband to live a life of freedom and passion on the French Riviera. As the novel opens, Kate's grown daughter, Anne, has invited her mother to return to New York. Kate happily assumes the role of "mother," until she discovers that her daughter has become engaged to one of her former lovers, Chris Fenno. Devastated, Kate tries to prevent their marriage without confessing the reason for her objections to Anne, but she eventually gives in to Anne and returns to the Riviera to resume the life she had abandoned for her daughter. Although there were a few negative reviews, most agreed with Louis Bromfield who thought The Mother's Recompense one of the best novels published in 1925 and praised the "technical skill" of Wharton's narrative (3). Several critics called The Mother's Recompense Wharton's best novel since The House of Mirth, and the reviewer for The Bookman, John Farrar, referred to it as "the best of all her novels" (70).¹⁶ As I have said, however, this tone of praise

has not continued to characterize criticism of The Mother's Recompense.

Typical of the harsh reception of the novel is Margaret B. McDowell's assessment of it as "inconsequential" and "inferior" (1976, 41, 142). But perhaps more telling than what critics have said about the book is the fact that many have failed to mention it at all. Blake Nevius essentially ignores The Mother's Recompense, and it merits only one paragraph in Geoffrey Walton's book Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation (1970). None of the critics in Howe's collection of essays mention the novel, nor does Gary H. Lindberg; Grace Kellogg refers to it only briefly in The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work (1965). Even today, such reputable critics as Candace Waid do not mention the book. An observation Marilyn Jones Lyde made in 1959 sheds some light on this surprising omission, however. In Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality Lyde comments that "The Mother's Recompense is the only [Wharton] novel with a contemporary setting in which the moral dilemma is completely independent of the social milieu" (162). For critics who were accustomed to labeling Wharton a novelist of manners The Mother's Recompense, with its obvious emphasis on individual rather than social morality, does indeed pose some problems. Rather than finding a new critical construct with which to approach the novel, most critics simply ignored it.

R. W. B. Lewis was the first critic to devote significant attention to The Mother's Recompense, and since the publication of his biography of Wharton in 1975, most critics who consider her entire oeuvre at least mention the work. Lewis called the novel Wharton's "most finely wrought of a series of dramas about parents and children," and he asserts that it is "very handsomely done and comprises a searching and subtle portrayal of . . . acute human issues" (464, 523). Interestingly, every critical consideration of The Mother's Recompense written since 1975 is either explicitly feminist or is obviously informed by feminist literary theory. For those critics who do consider the novel, there is very little debate concerning the "human issues" that are at stake in The Mother's Recompense. Not surprisingly, given the title of the novel and the fact that the entire story is narrated from Kate Clephane's point of view, she has been the central focus of every critical examination of the text. And while critics have not always agreed about the position Wharton takes towards her main character, they are united in searching for the meaning of Wharton's novel in that character and her role as "mother." Many critics are divided as to whether Kate's refusal to tell Anne of her affair with Fenno and her consequent return to the Riviera constitutes a defeat or a victory for Kate in her search for her identity as a mother, but this nevertheless

remains the central issue in their consideration of the novel.

The earliest considerations of The Mother's Recompense tended to focus on whether Wharton judged Kate to be a good or a bad mother. Wolff is typical of this school, as she argues that Kate is a woman who is desperately in search of an identity but incapable of finding it because of her flawed character: "Determined to launch into every day as if it were her first . . . Kate has no sustained grasp upon her past; and with no coherent sense of the past, she cannot keep track of the present" (359). Wolff argues that in coming to America to resume her role as Anne's mother, Kate believes that "She was born into selfhood" (364). But, according to Wolff, her "insatiable needs" cause Kate to invest too much of her self in her daughter and the role of "mother," thus poisoning the possibility that she will ever be able to truly embrace the role (369). Wolff argues that Wharton uses Kate and the issue of motherhood to demonstrate "the disintegration of individual character" (370). Elizabeth Ammons also argues that Wharton's depiction of Kate is intended to alert us to the irreparable flaws in her character and to her fundamental inability to be a good mother. Ammons insists that the novel illustrates Wharton's belief that "women are meant to be mothers" (162). She argues that Wharton approves of Kate's lonely return to the Riviera as "the mother's recompense for abandoning her child

and leading a promiscuous life" (163). Constructed in the late seventies and early eighties, the readings of both Wolff and Ammons are, I believe, examples of the interpretive strategies available to feminist literary critics who belong to an interpretive community that asserts that a chief function of feminist literary criticism is to illuminate the positive role models provided by women's literature. Clearly believing that Kate Clephane does not exhibit any positive characteristics, both of these critics are led to argue that Edith Wharton, the woman writer, renounces this obviously unappealing character.

An alternative to arguing that Kate Clephane is depicted as a bad mother in The Mother's Recompense recently adopted by some feminist literary critics is the argument that motherhood itself is depicted as bad in the novel. In Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton (1990), Mary E. Papke suggests that in The Mother's Recompense "Wharton focuses on the complex desires which constitute motherhood in conflict with the even more complex desires which delimit individuation" (158). Papke argues that Kate leaves Anne and returns to the Riviera when she discovers that she cannot maintain herself as a mother because "a mother is denied a self, a past, or a desire beyond that of maternal love" (161). Gloria Erlich also argues that motherhood cannot provide any of Kate's most basic needs, and so she renounces it in favor of "an

unanchored life . . . with a trusted woman servant" (147). Neither Papke nor Erlich share the confidence of the earlier feminist critics of this novel that motherhood represents the peak of achievement for a woman in Edith Wharton's fictional world.

Some feminist literary critics have gone even farther in suggesting that Kate Clephane's is a successful quest for self-definition. In one of the three published articles to have appeared on The Mother's Recompense, Adeline Tintner argues that "Kate Clephane's difficulty in The Mother's Recompense was going back to something she had really elevated herself out of" (149). Tintner suggests that Wharton viewed Kate's refusal to be defined in terms of the "traditional roles of wife and mother" as an "accomplishment" (149). Kate's attempt to resume those roles fails because she cannot sacrifice her own identity: "[Kate] goes back to the life that she had made for herself, a life divorced from all aspects of her marriage, both the motherly aspects and the wifely aspects. Her recompense is that she is given back her own life" (151). In an essay which she claims is meant to be "different from but complementary to" Tintner's, Keiko Beppu argues that the anger and pain Kate feels when her daughter announces her intention to marry is "an indication of the pain of severance the mother feels at the time the child becomes free of the parent" (166). Beppu suggests that Kate is not prepared for this pain because her experience

with motherhood is so recent: "The fact of marriage is the bone of contention, not necessarily the man involved: it means the transferring of the daughter's love to someone else" (166). When Kate returns to the Riviera, she has a fuller sense of her identity because she now understands "the whole spectrum of female experience, which most importantly includes a full knowledge of what motherhood means in light of her own life" (167). Like Tintner, Beppu reads The Mother's Recompense as an affirmative articulation of a woman's search for and discovery of her own self.

In marked contrast to these two essays is Lev Raphael's "Shame in Edith Wharton's The Mother's Recompense" (1988). Raphael's thesis is that "Kate's return to France is anything but positive and hopeful because it caps a lifetime marked by hiding, silence and flight . . . what dominates her entire life, is shame" (188, emphasis in original). Raphael's argument is similar to those put forth by feminist critics who argue that Lily Bart is the helpless victim of her society. He suggests that Kate's behavior indicates that she has some deep and unspeakable wound in her past, and that her sense of shame is deepened by her flight from her husband and daughter as well as by her affair with Chris Fenno (192). Raphael's reading, by reducing Kate Clephane's story to a single unified meaning, effectively eliminates the possibility that there is more than one narrative in Wharton's novel: "Kate Clephane has never been deeply

understood as a woman crippled by internalized, unconscious shame, and driven into lonely exile and silence, and that lack of understanding has hindered an appreciation of Wharton's real achievement in The Mother's Recompense" (200-1).¹⁷

The most significant factor hindering a fuller understanding of women's literature is the repeated effort by feminist literary critics to view texts by women as telling only one story. But this is not a mistake made by Susan Goodman in Edith Wharton's Women (1990). Goodman observes that The Mother's Recompense has "many layered meanings," and her excellent chapter on the novel makes no effort to reduce those meanings to a single interpretation (109). Goodman suggests that there are a great many questions the text deliberately leaves unanswered, or answers ambiguously, and she implies that the novel's meaning lies in its refusal to simplify (113). In considering the novel's ending, always the center of every analysis, Goodman argues that "Wharton's [rebellion] against the three rules of domestic fiction: women must marry if they are not to be parenthesized; husbands by definition hold the balance of power in the family; and a woman must use her influence to acquire power," results in her inability to discover a "satisfactory alternative for disposing of Kate" (119). By viewing the novel as an effort to unwrite the conventions of women's fiction--as, that is, a metafictional text--Goodman denies us

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the "peculiar pleasure" of being able to read it as a traditional, single dimensional text. And that is one of the goals of developing resisting readings of women's fiction.

**"Rewarded for Having Given Up Her Daughter":
Towards a Resisting Reading of The Mother's Recompense**

One interesting aspect of the critical reception of Wharton's novel The Mother's Recompense is the fact that, although all critics seem to agree with Lewis that it is a novel about "parents and children," no critics pay even the slightest attention to the child, Anne Clephane. Susan Goodman calls Anne the "heroine" of the text, but her entire analysis centers around the mother, Kate, as do those of every other critic who considers The Mother's Recompense (14). This restricted approach to the novel is no doubt due in part to the affinity of the feminist interpretive community for reducing the texts of women writers to a unified story. By focusing on only one of the two important women characters represented in the text, it is possible to argue that the novel represents a single, fixed truth about women's experience. Focusing critical attention on the character of Anne Clephane as well as her mother complicates any understanding of the novel. For whether or not one argues that Kate Clephane constitutes a self-defined, independent woman by the end of the novel, her daughter clearly represents a radically different kind of female experience. We must develop interpretive strategies that will make it possible to view the daughter alongside the mother, thus allowing us to reach a fuller understanding of

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what Wharton might have been saying about women in her text. Such a resisting reading will allow us, among other things, to understand how the character of Anne Clephane both informs and is informed by that of Lily Bart. Viewing together The House of Mirth and The Mother's Recompense, two novels written twenty years apart, can demonstrate more fully why it is important that feminist literary critics resist the impulse to consider only canonically accepted texts by women writers.

If, by turning our attention towards Anne, we resist the feminist interpretive community's unified concern with only the character of Kate in The Mother's Recompense, we will, ironically, discover more important facets of the mother's character. Anne Clephane is her mother's recompense because she is a young woman who has successfully achieved all the dreams that her mother never managed to fulfill. Anne is also living proof to her mother that the decisions and sacrifices she had made by abandoning her husband and daughter were justifiable. From her first appearance in the novel, Wharton describes Anne as assertive, independent, and self-actualizing. Upon the death of her grandmother she sends a telegram telling her mother, "I want you to come home at once. I want you to come and live with me."¹⁸ The words "I want," repeated twice, and "at once" are entirely characteristic of this young woman who does not hesitate to assert her desires and does not doubt that they will be

fulfilled. When Kate steps off the ship and is greeted by her daughter, she is struck by Anne's height and her self-possession. Anne's most prominent features are her "awful brows," which remind Kate of her forbidding mother-in-law, and her voice, which although not "unkind" or "cold" is "constrained" (574). After formal greetings and introductions are exchanged, Anne's first direct statement to her mother is, "I'm not a handful now to any one but myself-- I'm in my own hands" (575). And for the rest of the novel Wharton portrays a young woman who not only assumes authority over herself, but also exercises it effectively to achieve her own desires.

One technique Wharton uses to characterize Anne is to carefully describe the spaces she inhabits. Anne takes her mother up to her rooms, which had formerly been her nursery, and Kate is struck by the design of her "den." It is a "sober handsome room" decorated with modern paintings, pottery, and armchairs in which there is "an ungirlish absence of photographs and personal trifles" (577). Kate contrasts the room to the "pink and white trifles congesting her maiden bower," and thinks that Anne's efforts reflect a marked departure from the norm: "'It's all your own idea, isn't it?' she asked, almost shyly" (577). And Anne is pleased to respond affirmatively. It is soon clear that even this personal space is not enough to satisfy Anne's desire to mark out her own space. Fred Landers, a friend of the family

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and Anne's guardian, warns Kate that Anne intends to set up her own studio where she can paint and be independent. He tells Kate, "In the end Anne invariably gets what she wants" (582). At first Anne does not allow her mother to see the studio, but when she opens it for her "studio-warming" Kate discovers an oversized version of her "den": "It looked more like a great library waiting for its books than a modern studio" (613). Significantly, when Anne falls in love with Chris Fenno, their courtship is carried on in this studio rather than at the family home. Like Anne, Lily Bart had expressed a desire to decorate her own space; in her first conversation with Lawrence Selden she told him jokingly, "It must be pure bliss to arrange the furniture just as one likes" (7). Sadly, Lily does not achieve this goal, and as readers we must question why one heroine should succeed so magnificently where the other fails. Anne seems never to have been trapped by the society that Lily must so aggressively resist. The former's freedom is in many respects earned by the fact that her mother refused to be so confined, while Lily's mother instructed her that her most important role was to use her beauty as a tool to solidify her position in society (The House of Mirth 35). Significantly, Kate's rebellious defiance of convention helps to earn her daughter the privilege of personal freedom.

Wharton clearly describes Anne's artistic ability and her sense of vocation as a way of emphasizing her

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independence and agency. When Kate first sees Anne's "den," she admires a painting of a magnolia branch without realizing that her daughter is the artist:

She went up to it, attracted by its purity of colour.

"I like that," she said.

Anne's eyes deepened. "Do you? I did it."

"You, dear? I didn't know you painted . . . I mean, not like this. It's very broad--very sure. You must have worked . . . "

The girl laughed, caught in the contagion of her mother's embarrassment. "Yes, I've worked hard--I care for it a great deal." (578, emphasis in original)

Anne's art is not simply a hobby. Once she establishes her studio, she works there every morning and sometimes into the afternoon. And her mother discovers that after a "good day's work" her eyes are sometimes "still turned on her inward vision" (621). Anne is a woman with a vocation at which she excels. Unlike Lily Bart, who is a failure at her efforts to learn "the delicate art of shaping and trimming the hat," Anne's work is something of which she can be proud and something that others admire. While Lily was taught by her mother to view herself as "a moment's ornament" (Wharton's original title for The House of Mirth), Anne's mother showed her by her own example that women are to live for something other than merely conforming to society's expectations of them.

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Anne is anything but decorous, as she demonstrates both by her appearance and by her voice. Kate remembers how as a young woman her hair was painstakingly arranged for her before she appeared in public when her maid, "with cunning fingers, dividing and coiling the generous ripples of her hair . . . [built] nests of curls about the temples and in the nape" (600). In her present life, deliberately freed from those oppressive restrictions, Kate's hair is arranged more simply. Her daughter, although she has Kate's "own hair," has never succumbed to the dictates of a society that expects her to be "a moment's ornament." She wears her hair always "clasped in close braids" (614). Anne also never forces her voice to conform to societal expectations. Wharton calls it "decisive," "firm," "and obstinate," as Anne orders her mother to rest after her arrival (588). Later Anne "decrees," "exclaims," and "shrills" (670, 694, 727), and it is clear throughout the novel, as Wharton informs the reader, that "Anne evidently did not expect to have her decision[s] questioned" (588). This self-confidence and the corresponding ability to speak out is not something that Anne has had to earn. Rather, as Anne tells her mother, it is the fortunate result of being abandoned as a child: "My life had been rather lonely, but it had been very independent too" (695). Ironically, therefore, the act that was shameful to Kate because "a mother couldn't confess, even to her most secret self, that she had willingly deserted her child,"

actually earned for that child the very personal freedoms for which the mother herself had struggled (561).

This becomes most clearly evident in Anne's aggressive pursuit of Chris Fenno. Six years before the novel takes place Kate Clephane had a love affair with Chris. After he ends their relationship, Chris becomes a soldier and is seriously wounded at Belleau Wood. In the best tradition of sentimental fiction, Anne nurses him in a convalescent hospital in New York where they fall in love. As soon as Chris discovers that Anne is Kate's daughter, however, he leaves. But as he later tells Kate during a painful conversation, Anne "won't give up" (658). Anne's inflexible determination to have her own way regardless of appearances is never more evident than in her relationship with Chris Fenno. After Anne and Chris are reunited for the first time, she tells her mother, "I want you to be happy with me, darling. I'm going to marry Major Fenno" (649). Kate is anything but happy, but she is also unwilling to confess to her daughter the reason for her dismay. Instead, she goes to Chris and tells him that unless he promises to break the engagement she will tell his mother the whole sordid story. The next day Chris sends Kate a telegram that states simply, "I am going" (662). As I have noted, much criticism of The Mother's Recompense attempts to determine why Kate objects so strenuously to her daughter's fiancé. Although that is an interesting question, exclusive attention to it obscures the

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equally important fact of Anne's relentless, and successful, quest to marry the man she loves.

After the engagement is broken, Anne and her mother travel together. Kate recognizes her daughter's deep pain as "her soul seemed to freeze about its secret," but she is also confident that Anne will recover (665). She underestimates Anne's determination, however. Believing that the reason Chris refuses to marry her is because of her wealth, Anne tells her mother, "I want to make over all my money to you . . . I don't want it--I hate it!" (666). Kate is shocked by this "wild revolt" because she realizes that it signifies the depth and determination of Anne's love for Chris: "She sat looking down at the bare brick floor of the room, and at Anne's two feet, slim and imperious, planted just before her in an attitude of challenge, of resistance" (668). Anne challenges and resists every force that attempts to thwart her desires, and Kate is forced to recognize her own "rage" and "reserves of violence" in her daughter (668). Ironically, considering the fact that she herself had disregarded public censure, Kate tries to convince Anne not to lower herself to begging for Chris' return. Anne's response illustrates how well she has already learned her mother's lesson: "My pride? What's pride, if one cares? I'd do anything to get him back" (669).

Kate discovers the truth of Anne's declaration when Anne tells her mother that she had gone to Baltimore immediately

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after she received the letter from Chris breaking their engagement. She has also written him four letters, the last one informing him that her mother has agreed to assume the inheritance. Chris remains impervious to her pleas, however, and she tells her mother, "It was not the money; he has told me so. I've had a letter . . . I'm dismissed" (672). But then Anne discovers that Kate was the person responsible for causing Chris to break the engagement. She turns on her mother like a "blanched Fury" and declares her independence from any form of parental control:

You don't know me; you don't understand me. What right have you to interfere with my happiness? Won't you please say nothing more now? It was my own fault to imagine that we could ever live together like mother and daughter. A relationship like that can't be improvised in a day . . . You must leave me to manage my life in my own way. (675)

Although it is clear to the reader, Anne is unable to recognize that her very ability to manage her own life is the result of the fact that her mother "gave up all [her] rights" over her (675). Through Anne's character, Wharton explores the consequences of a society in which no one can exercise "rights" over a woman's life. Anne Clephane has the "right" to her own body and life, and she exercises this "right" by choosing to marry Chris Fenno, just as her mother had exercised similar "rights" by choosing to become his lover.

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Anne's determination is emphasized throughout the rest of the novel. Leaving her mother in New York, Anne retreats to her Aunt's Long Island home for an extended visit. Fred Landers tells Kate that "To be so savage with you she must be pretty well determined to have him back" and reminds her that opposition "will only make Anne more determined" (679, emphasis mine). Anne sends her friend Nollie Tresselton to Kate to intercede on her behalf, and Nollie tells Kate that Anne "means to" see Chris again (682). And when Chris himself confronts Kate, he tells her that they must face Anne's "absolute determination" (688, emphasis mine). The word "determination" is repeated three times during their conversation, and Chris leaves telling Kate that Anne has decided to marry him and that she should acquiesce to her decision or risk never seeing her daughter again. Kate goes to Anne and recognizes immediately her daughter's determination:

It was clear that no compromise would be of any use. Anne had obviously imagined that her mother had come to forgive and be forgiven, and that Chris was to be included in the general amnesty. On no other terms would any amnesty be accepted. Through the girl's endearments Kate felt, as never before, the steely muscles of her resolution. (695)

As a young woman who does not "expect to have her decision[s] questioned," Anne is a formidable opponent, even for the

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mother who first modeled such assertive behavior. Realizing that while Anne claimed to want both her mother and Chris, "she wanted Chris Fenno infinitely the more," Kate announces the engagement and gives the bride away at the wedding (704).

In a sense, my reading of Anne's character runs the risk of being a traditional feminist "positive role model" analysis. On one level I am pointing out the characteristics of Anne that mark her as a rare female hero, one who decides what she wants and pursues it until she is successful. As I have already pointed out, there are dangers to this kind of reading. Susan Goodman has observed that The Mother's Recompense is a many layered novel (109), and a reading like mine--if it were allowed to stand alone--would certainly obscure all but one meaning. There is more to this novel than just Anne's admirable assertiveness, and it is essential that as resisting readers we admit other narratives that can complicate and enrich our understanding of the text. One way of doing this is to remember the readings that, instead of focusing on Anne, explore what the novel is saying about her mother. But it is also important to recognize that even if we only consider my reading of Anne we must acknowledge the issues that may prevent us from accepting outright her status as feminist hero. Wharton's portrait of Anne Clephane in The Mother's Recompense should lead us to question Ammons' assertion that the elderly author had no confidence in the possibilities America offered its New Women (49). On the

other hand, I believe the possibilities Wharton granted Anne Clephane in her novel are sufficiently limited to lead us to wonder about the extent and quality of her liberation. For just like the author of "Female Ingenuity," Edith Wharton seems incapable of imagining true happiness for women that lies outside of marriage. If we focus our readings strictly on Anne's "absolute determination," we can easily miss the fact that what she is absolutely determined to do is get married and voluntarily subject herself to the kind of life her mother had fled--a life that her mother remembers as "unnatural . . . horrible, intolerable and unescapable . . . desolate and unavoidable" (708). As resisting readers we must question whether Anne's ending is any "happier" than Lily's, whether her self-definition or her "personal freedom" is any more secure. Fortunately, as resisting readers, we are also able--are indeed required--to allow for multiple voices in women's writing.

NOTES

¹Robert Herrick noted this distinction in his New Republic essay ("Mrs. Wharton's World," 13 Feb. 1915: 40-2). Not sharing James's high opinion of Wharton, Herrick ironically observed, "The experts have told us again and again that Mrs. Wharton's touch is the deftest [sic.], the surest, of all our American manipulators in the novel form" (40).

²See for example Rev. of The House of Mirth, by Edith Wharton, Review of Reviews Dec. 1905: 757; Rev. of The Reef by Edith Wharton, New York Sun 23 Nov. 1912: 13; Rev. of Summer by Edith Wharton, New Republic 14 July 1917: 311; Carl Van Doren, rev. of Glimpses of the Moon by Edith Wharton, Nation 2 Aug. 1922: 128; R. D. Townsend, rev. of Glimpses of the Moon by Edith Wharton, Outlook 20 Sept. 1922: 119.

³Brown's book, Edith Wharton: Etude Critique (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1935), was a revision of his Sorbonne dissertation and is written in French. It was the second full-length study of Wharton to be published. The essay "Edith Wharton," to which I refer here is based on the earlier book.

⁴Renee Rapin, Willa Cather (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1930); David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1951); E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); John H. Randall III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960); Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1962); James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (New York: Pegasus, 1970); Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1953); James Schroeter, ed. Willa Cather and Her Critics (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1967).

⁵Josephine Jessup also treated Wharton from a supposedly feminist perspective in The Faith of Our Feminists (New York:

Richard R. Smith, 1950). According to Jessup, Wharton's work revealed "woman struggling neither to be man's peer nor his master but to exist as an independent entity" (98). Her novels are feminist successes because "Edith Wharton assigns the real gains of character to women. The men, fickle in love and wavering in purpose, show only a steadfast puerility" (16). Few feminist critics have followed Jessup's lead in arguing that Wharton "attempts to show woman preeminent, man trailing at heel" (14).

⁶Ten years after the publication of A Feast of Words, Sharon O'Brien was clearly following Wolff's example when she wrote her widely acclaimed biography of Cather, Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

⁷For other examples of feminist literary critics who read Wharton primarily as articulating the story of female oppression under the patriarchy see Elizabeth Ammons, "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art," American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1982) 209-224; Elizabeth Ammons, "The Business of Marriage in Edith Wharton's The Custom of the Country," Criticism 16 (1974): 326-38; Suzanne Poirier, "The Weir Mitchell Rest Cure: Doctor and Patients," Women's Studies 10 (1983): 15-40; Judith P. Saunders, "Becoming the Mask: Edith Wharton's Ingenues," Massachusetts Studies in English 8 (1982): 33-39; Mary Suzanne Schriber, "Convention in the Fiction of Edith Wharton," Studies in American Fiction 11 (1983): 189-201; Mary Suzanne Schriber, "Edith Wharton: The Female Imagination and the Territory Within," Gender and the Writer's Imagination: From Cooper to Wharton (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1987) 157-186.

⁸Judith Fetterley, "'The Temptation To Be A Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth," Studies in American Fiction 5 (1977): 200.

⁹For examples of other recent works on Wharton that begin to incorporate (but to a lesser extent than Goodman, Waid, or Earlich) revisionary interpretive strategies see David Holbrook, Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man (London: Vision Press, 1991); Katherine Joslin, Edith Wharton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Mary E. Papke, Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); Lev Raphael, Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

¹⁰Other early Wharton critics who explored The House of Mirth as a novel of manners include Louis Kronenberger, "Edith Wharton's New York," The Michigan Quarterly Review 4 (1965): 3-13 and Michael Wayne Vella, "Technique and Theme in The House of Mirth," The Markham Review 2 (1970): 17-20.

¹¹For other examples of feminist analyses that view The House of Mirth as a novel of manners see Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth," PMLA 100 (1985): 783-792; Elaine Showalter, "The Death of the (Lady) Novelist: Wharton's House of Mirth," Representations 9 (1985): 133-49, Rpt. in The House of Mirth: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1990.) 320-339; C. J. Wershoven, "The Awakening and The House of Mirth: Studies of Arrested Development," American Literary Realism 19 (1987): 27-41; Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart," ELH 59 (1992): 713-734.

¹²In No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century 2 vols (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1988-89), Gilbert and Gubar argue that while Wharton sometimes appeared to hate women, what she actually hated was "what women had been made to become" (vol. 1, 128).

¹³Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, 1905 (New York: The Library of America, 1985, vol. 1 of Edith Wharton: Novels, ed. R. W. B. Lewis, 2 vols., 1985-1990, 1-347) 3. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

¹⁴Nancy K. Miller calls for a feminist practice of "overreading" which will tear the text away from the external realities upon which it is constructed and in terms of which it has already been read in "Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and The Critic," The Poetics of Gender, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 270-295. As critics, Miller argues, we can resist those aspects of a text by a woman writer which seem to reinscribe the traditional narrative, and "discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity" (272).

¹⁵Wharton's last novel, The Buccaneers, was unfinished at the time of her death; it was published posthumously in 1938.

¹⁶For examples of other favorable reviews of The Mother's Recompense see "The Mother's Recompense," rev. of The Mother's Recompense, by Edith Wharton, Times Literary Supplement 14 May 1925: 332; Louise Maunsell Field, "Mrs. Wharton Pictures New York Society of Today," rev. of The

Mother's Recompense, by Edith Wharton, Literary Digest International Book Review 3 (June 1925): 463, 466; and Percy Hutchinson, "Mrs. Wharton Brings 'The House of Mirth' Up to Date," rev. of The Mother's Recompense, by Edith Wharton, New York Times Book Review 26 April 1925: 7, 21.

¹⁷As a gay man and a Jew, Raphael perhaps conducts his reading from within an interpretive community that, while differing in significant ways from the feminist interpretive community, also stresses constructs of oppression and victimization.

¹⁸Edith Wharton, The Mother's Recompense, 1925 (New York: The Library of America, 1990, Vol 2 of Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings, ed. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, 2 vols, 1985-1990, 551-765) 558. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

CHAPTER FIVE

READING JESSIE FAUSET

Jessie Fauset and the American Literary Tradition

After considering two of the most well-known American women writers of the twentieth century, it may seem a somewhat unexpected move to turn to a neglected writer like Jessie Fauset. But my decision to include Fauset in this study was a deliberate one, and it ultimately proved to be a productive choice. Because of her neglect by virtually all reading communities, I find myself doing a different kind of reading of her work, a reading which responds less to previous critiques and more to the novels themselves. The readings posited in the following pages will provide the context for further resisting readings when Fauset is embraced more fully by the feminist interpretive community. Deborah McDowell testifies to the extent of Fauset's obscurity as she tells the sadly amusing story of her experience when she informed her friends of her work on this Harlem Renaissance writer. They asked, "Who is he?" (1990, ix). My own experience has been somewhat similar. Because my colleagues know that my present work is with women

writers, they do not question Fauset's gender, but they are surprised to discover that the Harlem Renaissance boasts a woman novelist other than Zora Neale Hurston.

The question of why Jessie Fauset belongs in a study of early twentieth-century women writers is not one that I am the first to address. In "New Literary History: Edith Wharton and Jessie Redmon Fauset" (1987) Elizabeth Ammons suggests that "Jessie Fauset stands as one of Edith Wharton's most important peers and inheritors" (207). The central issue Ammons addresses in this essay and in her 1992 book Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century is what can be learned by eliminating standard categories of literary periodization and instead taking the work of women writers "as the starting point for literary history at the turn of the century" (1987, 208). Ammons points out the many biographical similarities between Wharton and Fauset to suggest how various existing critical constructs have falsely divided our consideration of these two women writers (1992, 141-2). She goes on to note the corresponding similarities in the fiction these women produced and argues that "Fauset's critique of the economics of marriage for women, of fairy-tale illusions of love and salvation, of mother-daughter conflict and alienation, of the tension between class and gender for women, all bring to mind Wharton" (1987, 211-12). But Ammons' critique is not limited to identifying only the similarities between these two women

writers, and she proposes that race alters the treatment and the perception of many "fundamental issues" in the work of Fauset and Wharton (1987, 212). She concludes that if feminist critics as an interpretive community resist the impulse to separate the work of black and white women writers, we will consequently recognize the destructive habit of "setting up . . . race bound paradigms as universals, a procedure which then . . . defines out of existence . . . everything which does not fit" (1987, 215). Ammons' conclusions suggest that if feminist critics employ new interpretive strategies which no longer define Fauset "out of existence" her fiction will be regarded as valuable on its own as well as valuable because of how it forces us to reconsider women writers like Cather and Wharton.

But if we are to work towards a reconsideration of little-read women writers, we must not underestimate the importance of making available information about them and their work. If a literary figure like Fauset is to emerge from obscurity, it will in part be because we have provided information to answer some of the most basic questions like, "Who is [she]?" Let me begin by answering just such a question.

Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961) was one of the most important and influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance. In her role as literary editor of The Crisis from 1919 to 1926 Fauset fostered this nascent movement by publishing such

writers as Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. In his memoir The Big Sea (1940) Hughes refers to Fauset as one of the people who "midwived the so-called New Negro literature into being" (218). At the same time Fauset was "midwiving" the Harlem Renaissance by publishing the work of others, she was also participating in it by producing her own creative works. She was a prolific writer, publishing poems, book reviews, essays, and fiction. Her fiction first appeared in The Crisis in 1912, and she continued to write both novels and short stories until the publication of her last novel, Comedy American Style (1933). Some critics such as Wilbert Jenkins suggest that Fauset's non-fiction writing is actually more important than her fiction (14). And certainly her voice was an important one, especially during her Crisis years. Cheryl A. Wall calls The Crisis "the most influential black periodical in the country" and maintains that "under [Fauset's] direction, The Crisis gained a reputation for literary excellence that paralleled its eminence in social and political affairs" (156).

But Fauset did not restrict her Crisis writings to literary themes; she was also concerned with blacks in other countries, black women, and black education. She sounded distinctly ahead of her time when she complained of the shortage of positive black role models available to children: "There are no pictures of colored fairies in the story books or even of colored boys and girls. 'Sweetness and light' are

of the white world" (qtd. in Aptheker, 357). Fauset's answer to this dilemma was to create, with the help of W. E. B. DuBois and Augustus Dill, a children's magazine called The Brownies' Book. Its dedication, written by Fauset, speaks to its admirable goals:

To children, who with eager look
Scanned vainly library shelf, and nook,
For History of Song or Story
That told of Colored People's glory,--
We dedicate the Brownies' Book. (qtd. in Sylvander,
115)

This "remarkable publication" ran for twenty-four issues, and according to Fauset's biographer she wrote "hundreds of signed and unsigned stories, poems, dialogues, biographies, [and] articles" that appeared in the children's journal (Sylvander 115). To an even greater extent than Cather or Wharton, then, it is important that we recognize the many ways Fauset's direct influence extended beyond the world of Letters. At the same time, however, it is clear that when she is remembered today it is most often as a novelist, and it is to her fiction that I shall now turn.

Fauset told an interviewer in 1932 that "the first publisher to see the manuscript [of her first novel, There Is Confusion] explained as he rejected it, 'White readers just don't expect Negroes to be like this'" (Starkey 219). In the preface to The Chinaberry Tree (1931) Fauset stated that her

fictional goal was to depict "something of the homelife of the colored American who is not being pressed too hard by the Furies of Prejudice, Ignorance, and Economic Injustice" (ix). Carolyn Sylvander argues that these fictional goals prevented Fauset from being accepted by the American publishing establishment (73). Clearly, racism shaped her critical reception in ways unknown to Wharton and Cather. Turning to the reviews of her second novel Plum Bun (1929) we can get a better picture of some of the forces contending against Fauset as she attempted to establish herself as a black woman novelist. Reviewers writing in the black press seemed as concerned as Fauset herself to emphasize the authenticity of her characters as well as of the portrait of black life she presented in the novel. The reviewer for The Crisis praised the novel because it "talks about the kind of American Negroes that I know" ("The Browsing Reader" 125). This reviewer goes on to observe that Plum Bun "will not attract those looking simply for the filth in Negro life, but it will attract and hold those looking for the truth" (138). Writing for Opportunity, another black journal, Gwendolyn Bennett also stresses the "truth" of the novel's portraits asserting, "I'll wager that Miss Fauset could match every incident in her book with one from real life" (287). But Bennett does concede that the book may not be "convincing to members of the white race" (287). And, judging from its reviews, it was not. The reviewer for the New Republic called the novel

"melodramatic and unreal" (235, emphasis mine). This reviewer, it seems, was most incensed by Fauset's efforts to portray what Bennett had called the "ordinary well-bred Negro of intelligence and education" (287), as he complains that Fauset has "disdained all use of dialect" and "discarded . . . the full rich idiom of the colored race" (235). In the New York Herald Tribune Books V. F. Calverton also objected that Plum Bun was unrealistic: "The characters are obvious types, and unfortunately are seldom remarkably real and convincing" (14, emphasis mine). Just looking at the reviews of this single novel, it quickly becomes evident that Jessie Fauset was, from the first, embraced in quite different ways by two separate interpretive communities: the white literary establishment and the black literary critics.¹ This dual reception has continued to influence her literary reputation, much as Wharton's reputation was affected by her mixed reception. The obvious, and important, difference between the two is that while Wharton's depiction of "America" caused the split among her reviewers and early critics, Fauset's portrait of "black America" divided her reviewers.

The peak of Fauset's literary reputation, at least until the late 1980s, is probably best represented by William Stanley Braithwaite's 1935 Opportunity article, "The Novels of Jessie Fauset." Braithwaite claimed that Fauset belonged in "the front rank of American women novelists in general" and compared her to Jewett, Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow,

among others (49). He sidestepped this compliment, however, by also asserting that "If my claim is extravagant . . . I am quite willing to take an immediate chastisement, and leave to posterity the relish of honoring with reiterated quotation this morsel of critical extravagance" (49). Braithwaite's slight equivocation concerning Fauset's literary merit was magnified many times over by the literary critics who, soon after Fauset stopped writing novels, began attempts to codify and define the Harlem Renaissance as a literary movement. Most critics found little of worth in the fiction of Jessie Fauset, their assessments sounding more like her reviews from the white, mainstream press than those from Afro-centric publications.² One of the first works to dismiss Jessie Fauset appeared only three years after Braithwaite's exuberant essay. In The Negro in American Fiction, Sterling Brown calls Fauset "sentimental" and argues that despite her claim to the contrary she is an "apologist" (142). In The Negro Novel in America (1958) Robert A. Bone classifies Fauset as a novelist of the "Rear Guard," a novelist whose primary interest was white opinion: "They wished to apprise educated whites of the existence of respectable Negroes, and to call their attention . . . to the facts of racial injustice" (97). He dismisses her work as "sophomoric, trivial and dull" (101). This sentiment is echoed in Black on White (1966) by David Littlejohn who says that nothing Fauset wrote "rises above the stuffy, tiny-minded

circulating-library norm," and calls her novels "vapidly genteel lace-curtain romances" (51). Unlike Littlejohn and Bone, Nathan Huggins does not resort to name-calling, but he too shares their low opinion of Fauset (146-148). Hiroko Sato goes so far as to assert, "Jessie Fauset is not a great writer. She is not even a good writer" (82), an assessment shared by David Levering Lewis who argues that Fauset's fiction relies on "melodrama . . . artifice . . . overwrought prose and romantic development of plot" (235). The overwhelming sentiment of these critics seems to be that Braithwaite's praise was indeed overly extravagant.

Since these particularly critical assessments of Fauset's contribution to American literary history come, for the most part, from within the African American interpretive community, race cannot be said to be a direct factor in her dismissal. But it is quite clear that Fauset's poor critical reception has a great deal to do with gender and class. Writing in Black on White David Littlejohn explains what makes black fiction written since 1940 superior to the work produced by Fauset, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, and others:

The newer writers are obviously writing as men, for men, however much they may take their characters and issues from the worlds they have known best; and not as middle-class Negroes for middle-class Negroes and the occasional white curiosity-seeking slummer. (49)

Clearly, writing as a "man" and avoiding the middle-class as the subject of one's art would be a difficult thing for a black woman writer simply because those women who were privileged enough to write usually came from the middle class. And, as it will be remembered from the Plum Bun reviews, these women were writing in an era in which verisimilitude was still a highly valued literary attribute. The critical standards of the interpretive community that set out to define the Harlem Renaissance seemed to effectively exclude women writers. There were, however, some voices to counteract the dominant ones. Writing in 1965 Hugh M. Gloster called Fauset's work "one of the major achievements of American negro fiction" (139). And in From the Dark Tower (1974) Arthur P. Davis asserted, "An unusual woman in several respects, [Fauset] made a small but significant contribution to the literature and to the intellectual climate of the New Negro Renaissance" (94).

All critics, whether they vilify or valorize Fauset, agree that she relies on formulaic narrative strategies in her fiction. These formulae include that of the novel of manners, the romance, and the classic fairy tale. The central plot of all of her novels (except Comedy American Style) as well as most of her short fiction is an expression of what Colette Dowling has termed "the Cinderella complex."³ In general, the central character of each work struggles to achieve independence and self-mastery. At the conclusion of

each text, however, she marries and looks forward to a life in which she will be, in Dowling's words, "nurtured and cared for and kept from harm's way" (15). This plot appears to be so dominant in Fauset's fiction that it seems virtually impossible for any interpretive community, including the feminist community, to avoid viewing her texts through the romantic critical paradigm.

The American Feminist Interpretive Community
Reads Jessie Fauset

Since the 1980s Fauset has regained, to some degree, her status as a significant novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, and her literary reputation has benefited most from feminist efforts at the recovery of women writers and canon reformation. Carolyn Wedin Sylvander has written a biography, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer (1981), which deals extensively with her fiction, and Deborah E. McDowell has edited a critical edition of her novel Plum Bun (1928, 1990) and is in the process of preparing an edition of The Chinaberry Tree (1931). Fauset has not, however, been fully embraced by the feminist interpretive community. Barbara Christian, one of the first of the new generation of re-readers of Fauset, leads the attack in Black Women Novelists (1980) as she argues that Fauset's stories "become bad fairytales" because she "[accepts] the literary conventions of the nineteenth-century black novel" that include a resolution through marriage (43). Hazel V. Carby continues Christian's critique in her book Reconstructing Womanhood (1987):

Fauset adapted but did not transcend the form of the romance. It is important that her work did reveal many of the contradictory aspects of romantic conventions of womanhood, but her imaginary resolutions to what were

social contradictions confirmed that women ultimately had to be saved from the consequences of their independence and become wives. (168)

As a result of her inability to "overread" Fauset's fiction, Carby cannot see any way that Fauset's conventional plots subvert the romantic ending. Instead, Carby sees Fauset's conventional plots as a reflection of her conventional personal ideology and dismisses her on grounds that sound suspiciously like those cited by David Lewis and others who repeatedly mention Fauset's "melodrama . . . artifice . . . overwrought prose and romantic development of plot" (235).

Other feminist literary critics sound a similar cry. In her introduction to Fauset in The Gender of Modernism (1990) Cheryl A. Wall claims that the form of the sentimental novel prevented Fauset from conveying "the truth she wanted to tell" (158). Apparently, Wall believes that superficially happy endings in which "the still courageous but chastened heroine finds happiness with a protective yet more understanding hero" cannot reveal anything "true" about the experiences of black women in early twentieth century America (158). Although Deborah E. McDowell is one of Fauset's foremost defenders, and she believes that Fauset's novels depict "the black woman's struggle for democratic ideals in a society whose sexist conventions assiduously work to thwart that struggle" (1985, 88), she nevertheless objects to Fauset's use of the sentimental form. Despite her

recognition that "writers often employ literary and social conventions that function as a mask behind which lie decidedly unconventional critiques," McDowell does not see how the marriages with which each novel ends could function as a critique (1990, xxi). Instead, she concludes that Fauset "[retreats] to a traditional value system" and "must be finally seen as a traditionalist regarding women's roles" (1985, 98). And Mary F. Sisney observes that Fauset's novels are regressive as they "focus on marriage as a means for the black woman to establish and maintain her place in society" (173).

Why, we are led to ask, have feminist literary critics, including black feminist literary critics, found it so difficult to "claim" Jessie Fauset? What has prevented feminists from rushing headlong to bring Fauset "into the sisterhood," as they have Cather and even Wharton? This is an important question and one that must be addressed if we are to understand more fully how interpretive communities, particularly the feminist interpretive community, operate. The first reason I would suggest for Fauset's half-hearted reception by the feminist interpretive community lies in her outright rejection by the male critical establishment. Although this claim may seem paradoxical, its validity becomes evident if we consider how similar the complaints of Christian, Carby, Wall, and McDowell are to those of Brown, Bone, Littlejohn, and Lewis. All single out Fauset's

romanticism and her failure to resist (overtly at least) convention.

Why the overlap of this masculine interpretive community would have such a powerful shaping force on the feminist reception of Fauset, when similar complaints elicited no such rejection from Wharton's feminist critics, is a curious question. Even the harshest Wharton critics grant her some measure of respect, if not admiration. In contrast, Fauset criticism is often quite disrespectful in tone. Perhaps unconsciously, feminist critics have been influenced by this barrage of negative criticism. Secondly, those male critics who rejected Fauset were ostensibly conducting a radical act of canon revision through their inclusion of black male writers in the American literary tradition. While some feminist literary critics like McDowell are aware that "Black women writers . . . have frequently been excised from [critical works] on the Afro-American literary tradition by Black scholars, most of whom are male," the influence of such excisions is apparently difficult to resist (187). Perhaps it is made more difficult by the power and by the good intentions of black male scholars like Lewis and Huggins.

But an equally important explanation for the lukewarm critical reception accorded Jessie Fauset by the feminist interpretive community is the fact that interpretive strategies do not exist that will allow feminist critics to accommodate sufficiently the complex interactions of race,

class, and gender in the work of black women writers like Jessie Fauset. Barbara Smith insists that "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (170). The overlap of white feminist literary criticism--with its insistence upon identifying only a single story in the work of women writers--prevents black or white feminist literary critics from identifying subtexts of race, class, and gender in the work of black women writers. As I have shown, ignoring such factors in the work of white women writers like Cather and Wharton is destructive; it is even more imperative I think that feminist literary critics, whether white or black, learn to recognize such interactions in the work of black women writers. Doing so would, I believe, enrich our understanding not only of Jessie Fauset, but also of white women writers like Cather and Wharton. For as long as feminist critics continue to use the old critical constructs of romance novel and novel of manners to read Fauset's novels, they will persistently run up against what appear to be her regressive narratives. By becoming resisting readers of Fauset, however, it is possible that we will find it much easier to "claim" this woman writer as we learn ways to accommodate her conservatism along with her radicalism.

In becoming resisting readers of Jessie Fauset, it seems reasonable to begin by addressing her reliance upon the formulaic fairy tale/romance plot and her seeming capitulation to the traditional ending of love and marriage. One approach to resisting this critical construct would be to eliminate it altogether as we did with The House of Mirth, and instead view the novels through the prism of a different narrative paradigm. As resisting readers, however, we can also accept existing narrative paradigms and work to discover alternative texts that may get told along side of the old stories. Should we adopt such an approach with Fauset, we could consider the fairy tale/romance plot as a metafictional device.⁴ If we make a conscious effort to understand the many and complicated ways that race, class, and gender "inflect" each other in Fauset's work, we will be able to reconceptualize the romantic narrative paradigm she uses.

It will become clear that this critical construct functions in many ways. Not only does Fauset's use of the fairy tale/romance plot reify the patriarchy, but it also provides a radical critique both of the fairy tale/romance plot itself and of a society that provided few other paradigms for middle class black women. Part of recognizing Fauset's metafictional critique of the ending involves understanding the social and historical context of her life as a middle-class black American woman in the early twentieth century. Understanding what life was like for Fauset and her

contemporaries, especially in relation to their ability to conform to either of the prevailing stereotypes pertaining to women of their era--that of the "new woman" and that of the "angel of the house"--is crucial to understanding her critique of the romantic ending. Although, as I will demonstrate, Fauset was fully capable of imagining an alternative to the love and marriage ending, she was acutely aware that in her own life, as well as that of other black middle-class women in the early twentieth century, such an ending was also a fairy tale. In her famous statement about writing as re-vision, Adrienne Rich observes, "until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (35). A resisting reading of Fauset's fiction demonstrates that she understood the assumptions of her world far more clearly than critics usually recognize.

The theories of the feminist narratologist Rachel Blau DuPlessis can help us as we formulate interpretive strategies with which to approach Fauset as resisting readers. DuPlessis describes how some women writers are able to exploit the connection they see between their lives and the narrative conventions with which they must contend as they create. In Writing Beyond the Ending (1985), DuPlessis suggests that early twentieth-century women writers, because they had reached the point where as a social group they could successfully challenge the hegemony of the patriarchy, began to develop narrative strategies that destabilize the

conventional plots. The most powerful of these strategies is "writing beyond the ending": "Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative" (5); that is, women writers began to develop alternatives to the traditional romantic ending: they wrote "beyond" it. In contrast to the novelists DuPlessis discusses, Fauset has been most harshly criticized, in her day as well as ours, for not "writing beyond the ending." She refused to allow her characters to achieve the alternative endings to the romance plot described by DuPlessis, such as successful careers. Fauset's unwillingness to do so was not entirely a regressive acceptance of "traditional values;" it was also a comment on the fact that, as a middle-class black woman, she and most of the characters she wrote about were not in a position to "write beyond the ending," much less live beyond it.⁵ In what follows I shall argue that it is our persistent refusal to take into account the distinctive way race and class inflect gender that prohibits us from seeing how Fauset's endings are anything but traditional. If we are to understand the alternative ways Fauset's endings function, we must develop strategies that allow us to view them as metafictional devices.

Fauset's use of the romantic ending functions as a metafictional device in two ways. First, a close examination of the representation of class, race, and gender in the

subtexts of Fauset's novels reveals a harsh critique of the romantic ending: it is almost always impossible for a black woman to achieve it in the fullest sense, and it is evidently an unsatisfactory ending for those black women who do achieve a version of it. Furthermore, if one examines the romantic surface text in light of the subtext, it becomes evident that Fauset is also criticizing the society that does not provide many alternatives to the romantic ending for black women. By applying Susan Lanser's technique of narrative analysis to Fauset's novels, we will be able to see how the romantic plot and the disguised protest against that plot both function to reveal how class, race, and gender operate, in Elizabeth Ammons' words, "as systems of oppression and silencing in Afro-American women's lives" (1987, 211). Thus, in her "construction of a fictional illusion" through the use of traditional narrative techniques and in her "laying bare of that illusion" through the deconstruction of those techniques, Fauset uses the romantic ending as a metafictional device (Waugh 6).

Because so little criticism has been generated regarding Jessie Fauset, it is not necessary (it would, in fact, be impossible) to devote more than a brief paragraph to the critical reception of her individual novels. And because, as I mentioned earlier, one of the foremost tasks facing feminist critics who truly desire canon reformation is the dissemination of information regarding "minor" women writers,

I shall consider more than two works by Jessie Fauset. Through an analysis of one novella, The Sleeper Wakes (1920), and three novels, There is Confusion (1924), Plum Bun (1928), and The Chinaberry Tree (1931), I hope to demonstrate how the fairy tale/romance plot functions as a metafictional device in Fauset's fiction.

"Living in Some Sort of Story":

Towards a Resisting Reading of The Sleeper Wakes

One easy explanation for Fauset's persistent habit of concluding her novels with fairy tale marriages is that she was not progressive enough to imagine any alternatives other than marriage for her female characters. Christian, Carby, Wall, and McDowell imply that such is the case. However, a brief analysis of her first long work of fiction, the novella The Sleeper Wakes (1920), proves that Fauset was fully capable of "writing beyond the ending." As Deborah McDowell notes, Fauset "inverts the classical ending" in this story about a young woman's search for happiness (1985, 89). The Sleeper Wakes tells the story of Amy, a young mulatto girl who, according to the narrator, "was always living in some sort of story."⁶ With those words, Fauset immediately draws our attention to the fact that this is a tale about a woman who sees herself as enacting narrative paradigms. The "fictional illusion" is instantly exposed in this story which is so clearly about, in Nancy K. Miller's words, "the plots of literature itself" (1985, 357). The story in which Amy lives is that of the classic fairy tale, which, in fact, is "the only reading that had ever made any impression on her" (169). Eventually, she leaves her guardians, the Boldins (like most fairy tale princesses she is an orphan), moves to New York City, gets a job as a waitress by "passing" for

white, and waits "happy in the expectation of something wonderful, which she knew some day must happen" (170). Of course, since she is living in a story, something does happen. She marries a wealthy, powerful, white man named Stuart James Wynne: "Wynne loved her, and he could secure for her what she wanted. 'And after all,' she said to herself once, 'it really is my dream come true'" (178).

It is easy for us to accept Fauset's next step as she deconstructs the "happily ever after" ending. She has already established the fairy tale as a metafictional device, and merely goes on to demonstrate how impossible it is for a black woman to live happily in that story. Wynne, it turns out, is a violent bigot. Amy eventually tells Wynne that she is black in an effort to protect a servant whom he has threatened to lynch. Her plan backfires as Wynne divorces her. Although Wynne continues to support her, Amy (still "passing") begins to work as a designer for a modiste; she intends to donate her earnings to the Red Cross. Later, Wynne entreats her to return to him as his mistress, and the narrator informs us, "At these words something in her dies forever, her youth, her illusions, her happy, happy blindness" (271). After her metamorphosis, Amy works very hard to pay Wynne back all the money he had given her. She realizes that her independence gives her "a curious sense of freedom . . . a feeling that at last her brain, her senses were liberated from some hateful clinging thralldom" (272).

Once Amy pays back "her sorry debt" she decides to return to the Boldins, embrace the black race, and "set up an establishment of her own" to design clothing for white women (274). The conclusion of The Sleeper Wakes demonstrates that Amy has learned the hard lesson Mr. Boldin tried to teach her as a child: fairy tales are "not always true to life" (169). By causing Amy's story to end with the hope of happiness and success through independent female achievement, Fauset demonstrates her ability to "write beyond the ending."

Although several critics, including Deborah McDowell, have remarked on how Fauset does subvert the romantic plot in The Sleeper Wakes, none have used the novella as a tool for illuminating Fauset's longer works. It is important, however, to consider this story in relation to the rest of the Fauset canon, especially with respect to her use of the romantic ending. This story's alternative ending can help us recognize that Fauset's later decision to conclude her novels with marriage was a calculated, conscious one rather than an unconscious acceptance of tradition. It makes it easier to see how we can justify "overreading" these novels in an effort to discern Fauset's metafictional critique of the ending. McDowell's question, "What accounts for Fauset's retreat to a traditional value system after clearly promising the opposite?" is still central (1985, 98). McDowell herself provides a partial answer to this question by suggesting that in her novels Fauset was led to conclude with traditional

love and marriage endings because of constraints placed upon her by the major (white) publishing firms (1985, 99). A more complete answer to this puzzling question only becomes clear, however, through an analysis of the surface texts, subtexts, and connection texts of the novels in light of the historical and cultural factors influencing black women's lives in the early twentieth century. It will, I think, become clear that Jessie Fauset demonstrated through her fiction how the romantic ending was no more false to the experiences of black women than its alternatives and how, in fact, because of the social situations with which they were faced, it provided the only realistic, if partial, avenue to happiness available to many women.

"I'm Just Miss Nobody":

Towards a Resisting Reading of There is Confusion

Fauset's first full-length novel, There is Confusion (1924), can in some respects be read as a continuation of Amy's story in The Sleeper Wakes. At the conclusion of that story Amy sets out to become a "citizen of the world," an independent career woman who runs her own business and stands on her own two feet. The two main characters in There is Confusion, Joanna and Maggie, each embark on similar quests. Deborah E. McDowell argues that in this novel, which ends in the marriages of both Joanna and Maggie, Fauset "curiously repudiates" the position she had hinted at in The Sleeper Wakes, that "marriage can work to limit women's possibilities for self-realization and autonomy" (1985, 93). One critic, Joseph J. Feeney, does recognize a critique behind Fauset's conventional plot in There is Confusion as well as her other novels. In "Black Childhood as Ironic" (1980) Feeney observes, "Fauset ironically undercut the romance-plots in her four novels" (65). Significantly, however, Feeney does not recognize the central role gender and class play in Fauset's ironic subversion of the romance plot. He views the "counterstructure" in Fauset's fiction strictly as a critique of the prejudice and lost opportunities experienced by black Americans in a white society (1979, 372). Thus, Feeney, like

Fauset's other critics, misses a central aspect of her critique.

On the surface, the routes Joanna and Maggie take to achieve their dreams of success and happiness are quite different. From the time she was a little girl Joanna was determined to "be a great woman": "With Joanna success and distinction were an obsession. It never occurred to her that life was anything but what a man chose to make it, provided, of course, he did choose to make it something."⁷ Maggie, on the other hand, decided when she was a teenager that "one avenue of escape lay through men" (58). Joanna sets about achieving her ambition through long hours of practice and dance lessons. Her goal is to become an artist and to "get on the stage" by mastering and getting around the prejudice she knows she will face. She outlines her plan for her boyfriend, Peter, saying, "First, I'm going to get my training up to the last notch, then I'm going to watch for an opportunity and squeeze in" (98). Maggie is equally confident that she knows how to reach her goal. She believes Henderson Neal when he tells her, "I can take care of you-- you and your mother, too and I can dress you pretty, like you'd ought to be, and with money and fine clothes you can do a little lordin' on your own" (90). She marries him because "he would place her on a pedestal" (90). But through the course of the novel both young women are disappointed with

the direction their lives take as a result of their early determination and decisions.

Joanna discovers that it is not as easy as she had hoped to master the prejudice of her society. She feels disappointed and disillusioned: "She had been so sure. Her art was so perfect, so complete that even Bertully, cynic though he was, believed that in her case the American stage must let down the bars" (147). Bertully, her dancing teacher, takes Joanna to three theater managers trying to get her a job, but they all refuse her because of her race. Eventually, however, she does get a chance to dance on stage at the District Line Theater. The theater is producing a show called "The Dance of the Nations" which depicts dancers from different foreign nations. Miss Sharples, a member of the theater's board, explains to Joanna, "When it came to America we had to have two or three dances represented, one for the white element, one for the black and one for the red" (226). Joanna is needed to represent the "colored American" because the woman representing America "lays down on her job" when it comes to that dance (227). Joanna is a great success, and when the white woman quits Joanna adopts her role as well, dancing in a mask. The show moves to Broadway, and, "Joanna found herself becoming a sensation" (232). Although she has finally achieved her dreams, Joanna is unhappy:

For in spite of her vogue, her unbelievably decided success, Joanna frequently tasted the depths of ennui. She saw life as a ghastly skeleton and herself feverishly trying to cover up its bare bones with the garish trappings of her art, her lessons, her practice, her press-clippings. (233)

The "Dance of the Nations" goes on the road before it finally closes, leaving Joanna to wait until the next opportunity arises. The next opportunity, surprisingly, is marriage to her long-time beau, Peter Bye, who tells her, "I'm afraid you'll have to give up your career, dear Joanna" (284). Joanna, now a "shameless apostate," agrees telling him, "my creed calls for nothing but happiness" (297).

Maggie's route to happiness seems quite different from Joanna's, although as I have said the novel concludes with both their marriages. She discovers that Henderson Neal is a gambler, and, disenchanted with the pedestal, she divorces him. Left on her own in Philadelphia, Maggie embarks on a career working for Madame Harkness. This character is no doubt modelled after Madame C. J. Walker, the first black woman millionaire. Walker became wealthy by developing and selling hair care products designed especially for black women. Maggie tells Peter, "She's made me supervisor of three of her branch stores, here in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. I have my little home here, my salary's good. I make more than enough to live on" (137). Still

believing that the only way for her to "be" somebody was marriage "with a man of distinction," Maggie attaches herself to Joanna's temporarily estranged boyfriend, Peter (204). Eventually, however, she realizes that this was also a mistake. Maggie tells herself that she has decided to "be what I want to be without depending on anybody" (256), and tells a friend that she wants to do something "very different that will take me as completely out of myself as though I had been transposed to a fourth dimension" (258). Her friend sets her up with a job where she can be truly happy for the first time in her life. She goes to Europe to help run a leave-center in France for black soldiers. Feeling needed and useful, Maggie discovers "a new sense of value" through serving others (259). After the war, Maggie marries her first love, Joanna's brother Philip Marshall. He had been gassed during the war, and Maggie devotes herself to him because, as she tells him, "nothing would please me more than to nurse you" (266). She stays with Philip until he dies, "supplying and anticipating his wants and radiating an ineffable peace" (288).

The surface text of There is Confusion seems to show Fauset retreating "to a traditional value system after clearly promising the opposite" as McDowell accuses her of doing (1985, 98). However, examining the subtext of the novel in light of the social and historical conditions of black working women in the early part of the twentieth

century reveals that what Fauset is actually doing is using the romantic ending as a metafictional device to criticize a society which does not allow black women to find meaningful, emotionally satisfying work outside the home. What needs more clarification is why Fauset was unwilling to conduct a more overt critique of traditional narrative structures by "writing beyond the ending" as so many middle-class white women writers were doing in the early twentieth century. According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, the women who were able to fictionally depict alternative endings had "the economic, political, and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the 'couverte' status, and their access to vocation" (4). As a middle-class black woman in America in the early twentieth century Fauset had less economic, political, and legal power than white women with similar educational and class backgrounds. She, along with most other black woman in the country, especially had no power to control her "access to vocation." A brief examination of Fauset's employment history reveals how little control she had over her own professional life in spite of the fact that she was a well-educated, middle-class woman who entered the work force just as life as a "new woman" was becoming a recognized alternative to marriage for many white women.

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Cornell University in 1905, Fauset returned to the city where she grew up,

Philadelphia, and tried to get a teaching job, but no school would hire her. Speaking of this incident Fauset said, "When I graduated from [Cornell], I found the high schools barred to me because of my color. Philadelphia, birthplace of Independence and City of Brotherly Love--I have never quite been able to reconcile theory with fact" (qtd. in Sylvander 34). She eventually went to Washington D.C. where she taught at Dunbar High School for fourteen years. Years later, in spite of the fact that she had a bachelor's degree, master's degree, and seven years experience as the literary editor of The Crisis, when Fauset began to look for a new job as a publisher's reader she indicated that she would be willing to work at home "if the question of color came up" (Sylvander 65). Another job Fauset considered taking at that time was that of a social secretary. Apparently, none of these were realistic options, and eventually she went back to teaching and continued to teach from 1927 to 1944. Of course, there were some middle-class black women who did achieve successful professional careers, but these women were the exception rather than the rule.

While Fauset certainly experienced the constraints of being a black working woman in America, she no doubt realized that her situation was fortunate compared with that of most black working women of the period. In 1920 38.9 percent of black women worked, while only 17.2 percent of white women worked (Giddings 196). Of these working black women, 85

percent performed agricultural or domestic labor as opposed to about 25 percent of white working women (Aldridge 5). Only 1.5 percent of all working black women held professional and technical positions in 1910, and by 1940 the number had risen to only 4.3 percent (Aldridge 6). Even the most well-educated black women found that the career options open to them were limited. As Bonnie Thornton Dill observes, "racial discrimination constricted work options for Black women in such a way as to seriously undercut the benefits of education" (141). According to Paula Giddings, many black women working in manufacturing in New York City in 1919 had been schoolteachers in the South (144). This is not to say that there were no examples of successful black businesswomen. As I have already mentioned, Madame C. J. Walker became the first black woman millionaire, and when she died in 1919 she stipulated that her hair products company always be run by a woman (Giddings 188). Examples like this are rare, however, and Fauset definitely realized that a black woman in America stood a very slim chance of becoming a Madame Walker, or even a Jessie Fauset. The vast majority of black working women between 1910 and 1940 were employed as service workers, as agricultural laborers, or in low-level manufacturing jobs. Not only were these jobs financially unrewarding, but they were usually also emotionally unrewarding. A close examination of the subtext of There Is

Confusion reveals Fauset's protest against the inability of black women to challenge their "access to vocation."

Both Joanna and Maggie are dissatisfied with their experiences as working women in America, and it seems that their unhappiness is primarily due to the kinds of jobs they hold. Joanna's only real success comes when she adopts the role of an "exotic" black woman; the white audience is interested in her primarily because to them she is a "new and original plaything" (231). And she becomes a star only when a mask allows her to be transformed into a "typical" white American (232). Even though she has achieved her dream, Joanna is unhappy. In part this is because she continues to struggle with racial oppression. Fauset writes that although her face appears on advertisements for the show she is "never alone," and although writers take photographs of her and her sister they are "never published" (231). But an even greater reason for her unhappiness seems to be the empty sense of futility she experiences:

What she did want, she decided, was to be needed, to be useful, to be devoting her time, her concentration and her remarkable singlemindedness to some worthy visible end. After all, she had worked hard and striven tremendously--to be what? A dancer. (236)

Ultimately, Joanna's career of entertaining white people is only a small step away from that of an old time minstrel, and

certainly does not seem to her to have a "worthy visible end."

Maggie is not really happy in her job with Madame Harkness, but, ironically, she is happier than Joanna who had higher expectations of her career. In a 1918 article on Harkness' prototype, Madame C. J. Walker, George S. Schuyler observed that she gave "dignified employment to thousands of women who would otherwise have had to make their living in domestic service" (qtd. in Giddings 189). Even after succeeding as a supervisor for Madame Harkness Maggie claims, "I'm just Miss Nobody" (258). But she does feel like she is engaged in dignified work with a "worthy visible end" when she goes to France to cheer and nurture the brave black soldiers who were completely segregated from all the pleasures wartime Europe could offer them. Unfortunately for Maggie, the war doesn't last forever, and she is faced with the prospect of returning to the same kind of life she left.

On the other hand, the male characters in the novel work at jobs where they feel they are making a genuine contribution to society. Many, including Peter, are doctors. Before the war Philip founded an organization that sounds remarkably like the N.A.A.C.P. He tells his family, "White and colored people alike may belong to it . . . but it is to favor primarily the interests of colored people" (129). Like DuBois, he edits his organization's magazine, "The Spur." This kind of satisfactory work is denied the female

characters in There is Confusion just as it was denied most black women of the early twentieth century. Maggie's marriage to Philip is merely her attempt to extend beyond the war the only satisfactory work she had ever experienced: "She did not want him to be ill, but she adored his weakness, it gave her her first chance to wait on him, to mother him" (263). Joanna marries Peter because she had begun to feel that "life . . . was not a matter of sufficient raiment, food, or even success. There must be something more filling, more insistent, more permeating" (233). Unable to discover this "something" in her line of work, she concludes that she might discover it to be found in "the essential, delightful commonplaces of living, the kernel of life, home, children, and adoring husband" (274). The fact that both of these female characters get married at the conclusion of the novel is not an indication that Fauset thought that a woman could not achieve a sense that her life was leading to a "worthy visible end" without marriage. Rather, it is an indication of her realization that a middle-class black woman, because of the employment opportunities available to her, might not be able to do so. Thus, I think the romantic ending of this novel serves as a critique of the society which allowed so few options for black women. Further evidence of this becomes clear when we examine the connection text of There is Confusion.

A minor female character in this novel, Vera Manning, illustrates clearly how effectively race prevents black women from finding emotionally satisfying work. Vera grew up with Joanna, but after they become adults she decides to "pass." It seems that her primary reason is financial because she is working in an office where she would not be welcome if her race were known. Ironically, she took the job because her plans to marry Harley Alexander, a young dentist, fell through. Vera tells Joanna, "You can't imagine--I couldn't--the almost unlimited opportunities that these people have for work, for pleasure, for anything" (200, emphasis mine). It is interesting that the first thing she mentions is the freedom to work where she wants to. Years later, Joanna runs into Vera again. This time Vera tells her how, still "passing," she was able to go to Arkansas and conduct an investigation for a newspaper about racial discrimination. She tells Joanna that she felt like "a ministering angel": "Oh, I hated myself for having spent all those foolish months, years even, away from my own folks when I might have been consecrated to them, serving them, helping them, healing them . . . I tell you I feel as though I had found a new heaven and a new earth" (270-271). Ironically, Vera is only able to find meaningful work when she is perceived as a white woman. Significantly, she plans never to marry.

Vera is the connection text between Maggie and Joanna's attempts to find meaningful work and their eventual

capitulation to marriage. In her "passing" she emphasizes the fact that the option of meaningful work is really only available to middle-class, well-educated white women, or women who seem to fit that description. Even Joanna had the most success when she danced in a white mask. Thus it is apparent how the subtext--Fauset's revelation of the limited, unfulfilling options available to black women who work outside the home--is an instance of the surface text--Fauset's depiction of women who marry in an effort to achieve happiness and a "worthy visible end." Only a middle-class, white woman can become the "new woman" of the early twentieth century and achieve independence and a sense of self-worth through work. Amy from The Sleeper Wakes has no idea what future awaits her as a black dress designer, although she succeeded when she was "passing." Reading The Sleeper Wakes in the light of There is Confusion, it seems that Fauset is "second guessing" Amy's confidence that she will become a "citizen of the world." She will always be a black woman first, and in the world of this novel as well as Jessie Fauset's world, that means certain exclusion from the working world of America in the early twentieth century. This connection text emphasizes the harsh critique behind the ending in Jessie Fauset's novel There is Confusion.

"She Saw Her Life Rounding Out Like a Fairy Tale":
Towards a Resisting Reading of Plum Bun

Fauset's second novel, Plum Bun (1928) also employs the romantic ending as a metafictional device to critique the society which has established that narrative paradigm as the standard for all women. While it has received more critical attention than There Is Confusion, critics have not generally appeared to recognize its subversive message. Cheryl A. Wall calls it Fauset's most successful novel (1982, 83), and she argues that Plum Bun "reveals a sophisticated understanding about the politics of race and gender" (1990, 158). But Wall, along with McDowell and others, sees that the form Fauset chose--the sentimental novel--did not allow her the leeway necessary for a full indictment of the oppressive systems of her society (1990, 158). Critics have noted, however, Fauset's depiction of the the seductive and appealing nature of the fairy tale. According to McDowell, "It is apparent even as early as 1920 that Fauset was aware of how folk literature--particularly fairy tales--serves to initiate the acculturation of children to traditional social roles, expectations, and behaviors, based on their sex" (1985, 89). While my examination of There is Confusion reveals that the female characters marry in an effort to discover "something more fulfilling, more insistent, more permeating" than what they were able to discover at work, the

surface text of Plum Bun shows that the female characters marry because they have been so effectively paralyzed by the fairy tale that they cannot really imagine a life that exists beyond the ending. Furthermore, the subtext reveals that the conditions that might make it possible for a woman to begin to imagine an alternative to marriage and the romantic ending are not available to middle class black women in American society.

If There is Confusion is the story of Amy's life after she embarks on her voyage as "citizen of the world," Plum Bun returns to the first half of The Sleeper Wakes.

Significantly, and perhaps sadly, by the end of the novel, the characters in Plum Bun do not seem to possess even Amy's initial confidence that marriage will make all their dreams come true. They have experienced too many disappointments to fully believe the fairy tale, but have not experienced what it would take for them to abandon it. Racism prevents black women from full participation in the fairy tale, yet, as the subtext reveals, since they have few other realistic options they continue to cling to the romantic ending as a solution to their empty, unhappy lives. This message, embedded in the subtext, that the romantic ending will not satisfy or fulfil the female characters, lends an even more ominous tone to Plum Bun than to There is Confusion or The Sleeper Wakes. Fauset deconstructs the ending without replacing it with any

alternative. Her vision as well as her critique is harsh indeed.

Like There is Confusion, Plum Bun tells the dual story of two young women and their search for happiness. And, like that novel, the two women in Plum Bun both marry at the conclusion of the text, although they have traveled distinctly different paths in their route towards the ending. The two women are sisters, and the oldest, Angela, has only one ambition: to "find and frequent" the "paths which lead to broad thoroughfares, large, bright houses, delicate niceties of existence."⁸ The younger sister, Virginia, "meant some day to invent a marvellous method for teaching the pianoforte" (13). They grow up in a happy, conventional home on an "unpretentious little street lined with unpretentious little houses, inhabited for the most part by unpretentious little people" (11). In the midst of all this unpretentious littleness, however, the girls are constantly being infected by Amy's sense that "something wonderful" will happen to them. And the chief means for this infection is the fairy tales around which they learn to structure their lives. Their own mother interprets her life as a fairy tale. She was working as a lady's maid and felt threatened by the advances of her mistress' lover; the coachman rescued her and saved her honor by delivering the mistress' messages to the unwelcome paramour himself; they married and forever more "to her he was God" (33). Not only do Angela and Virginia hear

their own mother's fairy tale, but they also listen to her read the classic stories. Their mother concludes each reading with, "And they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me" (33). Never exposed to African American folklore, which might have offered them other templates, the girls learn important and indelible lessons about life through Anglo-American versions of fairy tales.

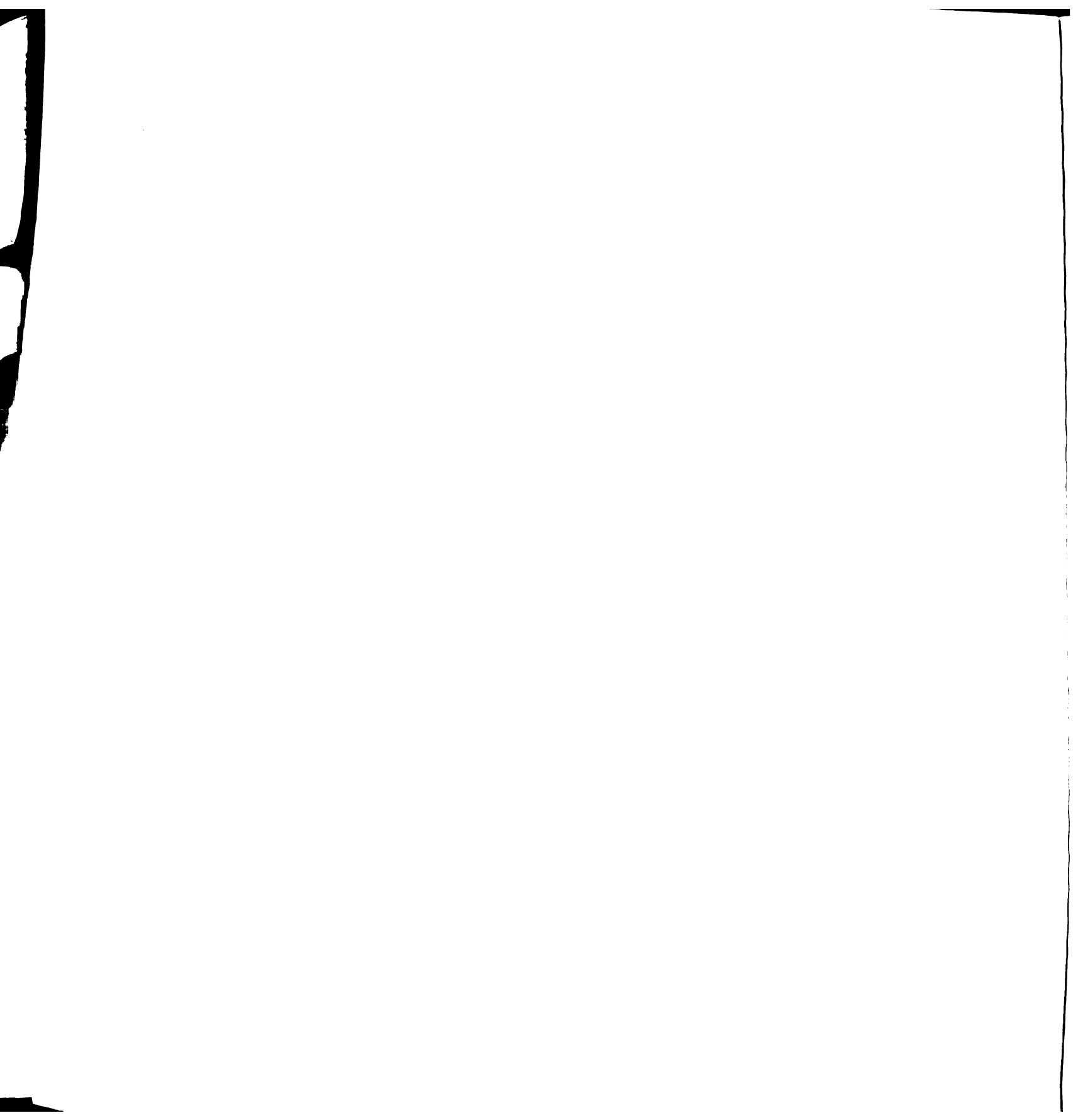
According to Bruno Bettelheim in his book The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1976), fairy tales always convey the same important message to children: "that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence--but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious" (8). The surface text of Plum Bun tells the story of two women who wholeheartedly believe in the "happily ever after" ending, but the subtext reveals that gender, race, and class prevent them from finding happiness because of their inability to relinquish their confidence in the romantic ending. Feminist critics have examined how damaging it can be for a woman to identify with the story that most fairy tales tell. In most classic fairy tales women are portrayed as either passive princesses or wicked old witches (Segal 185). Like Bettelheim, feminist critic Marcia Lieberman agrees that children learn important lessons from fairy tales, but she

maintains that what female children learn is that "submissive, meek, passive female behavior . . . is rewarded" (390). Looking at Lieberman and Bettelheim's arguments it is easy to conclude that female children learn from reading fairy tales that if they are steadfast and dedicated in their struggle to remain meek, they will be rewarded no matter what obstacles they encounter along the way. The reward waiting for them is marriage to a prince. Karen E. Rowe sums up this position when she claims, "fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our 'real' sexual functions within a patriarchy" (239). A black woman who has internalized this dual lesson of dependency and perseverance is doomed to failure, as Jessie Fauset demonstrates in Plum Bun. On the other hand, however, as Fauset also demonstrates, she has fewer options for achieving alternative endings than those available to many white women of the early twentieth century.

The constricted possibilities for black women in Plum Bun, as in life, have as much to do with class as with race and gender. The two sisters in the novel have been perhaps more deeply affected by the middle-class values around which they structure their lives than they have been by their racial identity. Like Fauset, these young women find that middle-class values and expectations limit their options in significant ways. Elizabeth Ammons observes that the script

for Fauset's life was set by her class as much as by her race: "The standard expectation for a woman of her background and upbringing was to be a teacher, the only profession truly open to black women at the turn of the century, and to become active in race work and the club movement" (211). These expectations are clearly the ones held for Angela and Virginia, the two sisters of Plum Bun whose parents want them to become school-teachers, although "neither of them felt any special leaning toward this calling" (34). And when Angela finds her first teaching job, she discovers that she "loathe[s] teaching little children," just as she had anticipated (48). But Angela also discovers that her happiness is not actually a concern of the world she is expected to inhabit.

An examination of the surface text of Plum Bun reveals the extent to which Angela Murray and her younger sister Virginia have internalized the romantic myths provided by the fairy tales which surrounded their young lives. The surface text also shows how disillusioned the girls are when these myths conflict with the class expectations and race restrictions they face. Angela is especially unhappy with her life and tells her sister that she is convinced that her race is preventing her from getting "all the things I want most" (78). Their parents having died, the sisters split their inheritance and Angela takes her share to New York City where she plans to "pass" as white and take lessons to help



her become an artist. She quickly decides that in order to acquire the things she desires--friendship with clever people, art, travel, and influence--she must marry a white man. Steeped in the lore of the fairy tale, Angela tells herself, "Marriage is the easiest way for a woman to get those things, and white men have them" (112). Angela meets two eligible men, Anthony Cross and Roger Fielding, and she sets her cap for Roger because Anthony, as an artist, cannot offer her the financial security she believes she needs. Roger is attracted to her, and she believes he wants to marry her: "She saw her life rounding out like a fairy tale" (131). After discovering that Roger is a bigot she breaks off with him, only to reconcile when she realizes how much she desires his wealth and prestige. Like Amy, she believes that his prejudice will change. But instead of asking her to marry him, Roger asks Angela to become his mistress. At first she resists, but eventually Angela and Roger become lovers. Although "no young wife in the first ardor of marriage could have striven more than she to please Roger," he soon loses interest (226). When they separate, Angela tells herself that it is nothing to her because "she had never loved, never felt for him one-tenth of the devotion which her mother had known for her father" (232). But she never ceases to believe that such a love awaits her.

Once Roger leaves, however, Angela realizes that "Roger's passing meant the vanishing of the last hope of the

successful marriage which once she had so greatly craved" (233). Her inheritance running out, Angela takes a job as a fashion illustrator. She welcomes this opportunity to start her life over again in a place where she could "form ties which might be lasting," unlike the ones she formed with Roger. She begins to think of marriage to Anthony Cross, her first New York suitor, as the answer to her dreams. Her experience with Roger has in no way diminished her expectations of the rewards associated with the romantic ending:

But now she saw [marriage] as an end in itself: for women certainly; the only, the most desirable and natural end. From this state a gifted, an ambitious woman might reach forth and acquit herself well in any activity. But marriage must be there first, the foundation, the substratum. (274)

She confesses her love to Anthony, but he tells her they cannot marry because he is engaged to another woman. As it turns out, this other woman is Angela's sister, Virginia. Anthony and Angela also both discover that each has been "passing." Angela leaves New York for France where she intends to complete her studies to become a great portrait painter, and after several months Anthony follows her there where, presumably, they marry.

Angela's sister Virginia plays a relatively minor role in the novel, but she does help us understand Fauset's



critique of the ending. Like Angela, Virginia cannot imagine her life without a husband. From the time she was a very young girl she dreamed of marriage to Matthew Henson in spite of the fact that "he distinctly was not as handsome as her father" (49). Believing himself to be in love with Angela, Matthew barely notices Virginia until Angela leaves for New York City. After her sister's departure he mistakes Virginia's love for sisterly admiration and never acts on the strong feelings he develops for her. Virginia leaves Philadelphia and follows Angela to New York because she believes Matthew does not care for her. In New York Virginia attaches herself to Anthony, not because she loves him, but because, as she tells Angela, "I'd hardly have thought about Anthony or marriage either just now, if I hadn't been so darn lonely" (355). But, unable to think about life by herself, Virginia tells her sister, "I want a home . . . a home with husband and children and all that goes with it" (355). She wants these things so badly that she is able to consider marriage to Anthony even though she still loves Matthew more. The important thing, it seems, is not whom one marries but merely that one marries. Eventually, Virginia marries Matthew, leaving Anthony for Angela.

Thus, it seems that the novel ends on the same note of "happily ever after" as many fairy tales. The girls have achieved the only option, aside from the classroom or the club room, that is available to them as middle-class, black

women. An examination of the subtext, however, reveals three things. First, the young women, because they are black women, are not allowed by their society to explore options for personal fulfillment and authentic living that lie outside of marriage and the romantic ending. These restrictions are magnified for them in part because of their middle class status. Second, the men these black women marry, because of their race, are prevented by their society from assuming the role of the prince who can rescue the princess from the most besetting dangers of her world. In the case of Virginia and Angela these dangers are those associated with being black in white America. Finally, the novel poses no real hope that Angela and Virginia have found what they, along with Amy, Joanna, and Maggie, have been searching for: a sense of fulfillment and self-worth.

When Virginia and Angela attempt to find jobs in the Philadelphia public school system, they meet the same kind of opposition that faced Jessie Fauset. As Fauset informs the reader, "although coloured children may be taught by white teachers, white children must never receive knowledge at the hands of coloured instructors" (Plum Bun 48). There are not enough "coloured" schools, and Angela remains unemployed for a while as she waits for a job. And just as she expected, Angela hates teaching little children, although she thinks she might enjoy teaching drawing to adults (a job that would be closed to her because of her race.) Her sister fares no

better. Virginia longs to teach music, but as Angela informs her, "You know perfectly well that there are no coloured teachers of music in the public schools here in Philadelphia" (34). In leaving Philadelphia Angela demonstrates her willingness to consider an option other than the romantic and middle-class ending, and her sister, in following her later, shows that she too is open to change. But Angela's only work is as a fashion illustrator, and she loses that job when she discloses that she is black. This experience leaves her feeling disillusioned and seems to push her farther towards thinking about marriage as her only option. She tells Virginia, "When I begin to delve into it, the matter of blood seems nothing compared with individuality, character, living" (354). But Angela realizes that racism can keep her from discovering her own talents and abilities when she and another black woman are denied the passage money they were to have received in order to travel to France and study art. Virginia does succeed at finding "friends, occupation and security," but she does so only by remaining inside the insular world of Harlem. These women simply don't have the options to live "authentically" that are available to Carlotta Parks, Martha Burden, Paulette Lister, and the other white women in the novel. And those opportunities that Angela does manage to grasp, such as her job and her scholarship to France, are denied to her when she discloses her racial identity.

Another even more damaging aspect of the world revealed by the subtext is the fact that the men Angela and Virginia eventually do marry are inherently incapable of enacting the role of "prince" in their society. They cannot protect the women from the most dangerous thing they must face: prejudice. Early in the novel Matthew takes Angela to the movies at a theater where they had formerly been admitted without encountering the "difficulty in the matter of admission" that they frequently experienced as black patrons in Philadelphia theaters (74). The usher, while willing to admit Angela because she appears to be white, tells Matthew that he cannot go in the theater. He is completely powerless in the face of this attack and the couple attempts a dignified retreat. Angela is fully aware of the humiliation he has endured: "She was very kind to him in the car; she was so sorry for him, suddenly conscious of the pain which must be his at being stripped before the girl he loved of his masculine right to protect, to appear the hero" (76). Later in the novel Fauset reveals that Anthony has experienced a similar, although more violent, version of this revelation of helplessness. When he was a small boy his mother, who appeared white although she was married to a black man and was of Brazilian ancestry, offended a white man by refusing his sexual advances. The man returned with a lynch mob, burned Anthony's father's house, and murdered his father in an attempt "to teach this man their opinion of a nigger who

hadn't taught his wife her duty toward white men" (289). The little boy learns quickly that "there's nothing too dastardly for [white Americans] to attempt where colour is involved" (286). And he learns also how incapable he is of protecting the women he loves when his mother marries a white man because, as she tells him, women "must take protection where they [can] get it" (290). So, although Angela and Virginia continue to have faith that marriage will be a refuge for them, the subtext demonstrates that (if they marry within their race) their handsome princes will be unable to perform the fairy tale's sacred duty of protecting the princesses.

And, at least unconsciously, the women realize that they will not find what they are looking for in marriage. This is the most devastating, and the most subtle, aspect of Fauset's critique of the ending. In spite of the fact that Virginia, and especially Angela, have discovered that they will probably never be able to achieve their career ambitions, the mere fact that they retain them preserves for them a small sense of dignity and self-worth. At least they have the potential for happiness. But they both recognize too well the rules of romance. At one point, referring to Anthony, Angela proclaims that "At the cost of every ambition which she had she would make him happy . . . He should be her task, her 'job,' the fulfillment of her ambition" (293). Angela worries that "Life" will be cheating Anthony if Virginia marries him without loving him, but does not seem to

recognize what Fauset so clearly points out: she and her sister are cheating themselves out of "Life" through their complete willingness to erase themselves for others. Angela seems to take one final step towards independence when she goes to France to study art, but her step is foreshortened by the arrival of Anthony. His appearance on her doorstep as a "Christmas gift" from Virginia and Matthew concludes the novel, but my personal response to his appearance is a disheartened sense that Fauset is showing us that Angela's life is over now rather than just beginning. The old fashioned "THE END" has an ominous connotation.

This connotation is compounded when we consider briefly the connection text of Plum Bun. A minor character in the novel, Hetty Daniels, again gives us the perspective we need in order to examine the connection between Angela and Virginia's headlong quest for husbands and the equally dismal alternatives that await them if they choose not to marry. Through Hetty, Fauset demonstrates that, given the conditions of their lives, no matter which direction Angela and Virginia choose, the conclusion is "THE END." Hetty began her association with the Murray household as a maid; she cleaned up on Saturdays and scrubbed the front steps. After Angela and Virginia are orphaned, she begins to live with them "in the triple capacity, as she saw it, of housekeeper, companion, and chaperone" (65). Although Hetty reports to have had more beaux than Virginia and Angela put together,

she refused to become attached to any of them: "I never listened to none of the' talk, jist held out again 'em and kept my pearl of great price untarnished" (66). Hetty aggressively endorses middle-class expectations for women's behavior, but the only reward she receives for her virtue is an "unslaked yearning" (66). Angela loves to draw her, but realizes that all her portraits reflect Hetty's deep and abiding unhappiness. Her empty life and frail consolations serve as objective correlatives for Angela and Virginia. This example of what life without the fairy tale is like for middle-class black women is not appealing to them, despite their innate realization that the fairy tale is not an ideal which they will ever achieve. It is this lack of acceptable options that Fauset once again decries in her subversive, metafictional romance. Speaking of Angela early in the novel, Fauset observes, "But she was young, and life would somehow twist and shape itself to her subconscious yearnings, just as it had done for her mother" (57). This novel truly illustrates how strong are the subconscious yearnings instilled in young girls as they read and hear fairy tales.

"Give Me Peace and Security, A Home Life Like Other Women":

Towards a Resisting Reading of The Chinaberry Tree

In her third novel, The Chinaberry Tree (1931), Fauset reveals another powerful subconscious force which served to constrict the lives of middle-class black women in early twentieth-century America. Centuries of slavery and oppression had succeeded in solidifying the image of the lascivious, immoral black woman in the imaginations of most white Americans. According to Minrose C. Gwin, "The ideals of sensibility and virtue were incompatible with the slave woman's experience" (42). Perversely, as Hazel Carby and others have noted, the sexual stereotypes originating in slavery continue to dictate the representations and perceptions of black women even up to the present day (22). Black women are constantly excluded from what Carby terms the "dominant codes of morality" (39). In 1902 a piece appeared in The Independent in which the author asserted, "I sometimes hear of a virtuous Negro woman, but the idea is absolutely inconceivable to me . . . I cannot imagine such a creature as a virtuous Negro woman" (qtd. in Giddings 82). Defending themselves against allegations such as these became one of the first priorities of the early black women leaders. According to Paula Giddings, "The lesson that the Black women were trying to impart was that color, class, or the experience of slavery did not nullify the moral strength of

true womanhood" (88). It is crucial that we consider this social and historical context in any analysis of Fauset's fiction, but we also need to realize that she was more than an apologist and defender of black womanhood. Her metafictional critique of the ending also indicts the society which perpetuated those degrading stereotypes while refusing to allow black women to escape them.

Many critics who consider The Chinaberry Tree focus, as does Mary Jane Lupton, on ways the novel depicts "womanly concerns" such as "motherhood, children, family, dress, security, the home, social acceptance, and so forth" (388). Others concentrate on its depiction of ideologies of black female morality. Barbara Christian views the novel as the story of Laurentine Strange's struggle to be admitted to the middle-class society from which she is excluded by virtue of her illegitimate parentage: "The novel is, to a large extent, the measure of [Laurentine's] ability to step softly and straight, so she might be admitted into [society's] shelter" (44). Vashti Crutcher Lewis also locates the center of the text in Laurentine's struggle to be accepted by the middle and upper-class residents of her small New Jersey town on the grounds that she possesses "attributes of chastity, refinement, and beauty, all of which are a result of correct breeding" (382). Seizing on this concern, Cheryl A. Wall argues that The Chinaberry Tree is Fauset's weakest fiction because she is "intent on proving . . . that most Black girls

are good, most Black people are moral" (1982, 84). But neither Lupton, Christian, Lewis, or Wall consider sufficiently how the special concerns of being a black, middle-class woman who is considered "always already" immoral permeate the text.

Mary Helen Washington suggests that black women were too concerned with "uplifting the race" to recognize that traditional notions of "true womanhood" were merely tools to further the suppression of women (74). Thus, women writers at the turn of the century wrote with the explicit purpose of proving that black women were not sexually immoral and could certainly meet the requirements of "true womanhood" (Washington 73). By the 1920s, when Fauset began publishing her fiction, the parameters for acceptable "womanly" behavior had begun to loosen. The "new woman"--a woman who worked and supported herself--was no longer considered to be such an anomaly. And many women, including I believe Jessie Fauset, had begun to recognize the danger posed by the ideology of "true womanhood." Fauset also realized, however, that there were other dangers awaiting black women who chose to become "new" women instead of "true" women. A white woman, assumed to be virtuous, could choose the route towards independence and authentic living without necessarily relinquishing her claims to morality. A black woman, assumed to be base, could still only assert her claim to morality by centering her life in the traditional, patriarchal home. If she chooses to live

a life independent of domestic concerns, she also chooses to live a life without objective evidence of her virtue and morality. This double bind is illustrated most clearly in Fauset's third novel The Chinaberry Tree (1931).

The surface text of The Chinaberry Tree depicts one woman's struggle to achieve both her own independent sense of identity and a position of comfort and respectability among her community. The subtext of the novel reveals that in order to achieve respectability she must sacrifice identity. But the connection text reveals the most damning truth of all: in spite of relinquishing her identity, a black woman, because of her race, will never be able to attain what Carolyn Wedin Sylvander has called "the compensation of idealized femininity" (5). A close examination of these three texts within this single novel reveals how astute Fauset was in her critique of a society which imposed the romantic plot upon black women while simultaneously prohibiting them from fully participating in it.

At the beginning of the novel Laurentine Strange has only one desire. She prays, "Give me peace and security, a home life like other women, a name, protection."⁹ Her request is especially poignant because she is asking for things that were denied her mother, a wealthy white man's mistress. Her mother claims to have loved Colonel Halloway with all her heart because, as she says, "He was God to me" (13). These words, echoing those of Angela's mother in Plum

Bun, seem to be a formula for the kind of relationship the young women in Fauset's novels have rejected. They are not looking for men to be their gods, but rather searching for men who can be princes and provide for their material and social needs. The surface text of the novel depicts Laurentine's search for such assurances. Laurentine is attracted to a successful man in her community, Phil Hackett, because she believes that he will give her respectability and security. Again she prays, "Oh God, you know all I want is a chance to show them how decent I am" (36). Laurentine's prayers are clearly expressions of her desire to refute the unstated but apparent accusations of her neighbors that she is not a "decent" woman because her parents were not married.

White and black characters in the novel accept the notion that the only way for a woman to be truly respectable is for her to be married. When she was a child, one of Laurentine's friends would no longer play with her because her mother would not allow it. The little girl tells Laurentine, "My mumma say I dasn't [play with you]. She say you got bad blood in your veins" (8). As an adult, Laurentine discovers that Phil Hackett will not marry her because a powerful white man asserts, "there's bad, there's vicious blood in that bunch" (49). After this disappointment, Laurentine turns from her plan of finding happiness and security through marriage to a quest to try and discover her own personal resources and identity. She still

wants to be "serene, gracious, amiable and to be all these things because of the assurance of her place in her world" (85), but she begins to build that place alone. Laurentine makes some friends, and "suddenly her life was full of little incidents of interest" (99). Laurentine is a successful dress designer and has two assistants working in her shop. She is well-liked by her group of friends, and she is happy. Laurentine eventually concludes that her life is "just as one would want it" (100). In many respects she has become exactly what Amy in The Sleeper Wakes dreams of becoming: a "citizen of the world."

In spite of all this, however, Laurentine is not accepted by the larger community, which is unable to relinquish its notion of what makes a woman admissible into society: conformity to the patriarchal narrative of marriage and domesticity. It is only after a new man, Dr. Denleigh, begins to court Laurentine that the Strange family gains a measure of respectability: "Since Denleigh's quiet championship of Laurentine . . . Red Brook had been inclined slowly, regretfully to let the Stranges alone" (241). Like Maggie in There is Confusion, Laurentine needs to be "bulwarked" by the respectability of a man's name in order to be fully accepted. For Laurentine that man is Stephen Denleigh. She tells him, "You restored me; you made me respect myself. You made me alive to my own inner resources" (204). Actually, Laurentine was well on her way to self

respect and authentic living without Denleigh, but without him she would never be able to show anybody within either the black or the white community how "decent" she is. The novel ends with Dr. Denleigh and Laurentine's approaching marriage.

The subtext of this novel, although not as fully developed as that of some of Fauset's other works, illustrates how impossible it is for Laurentine to retain an independent sense of her identity while conforming to the expectations and demands of her society. She eventually cedes all credit to her lover for her own happiness. She is unable to even take the credit for discovering her own "inner resources." If she is to be perceived as "decent," she must relinquish all claims to self. But there is an even more sinister message hidden in this subtext. It is apparent that the black community in this novel has completely adopted and endorsed the notion that a "virtuous Negro woman" is a very rare thing. Malory Forten, a suitor of Laurentine's cousin Melissa, tells her, "Every fellow does want his wife to be on a pedestal; he'd like to think of her as a little inviolate shrine that isn't ever touched by the things in the world that are ugly and sordid" (265). Although, as Melissa realizes, "life doesn't permit you to keep things like that in your head" (265), the women in the novel are constantly expected by their own community to conform to such patriarchal notions. Even Laurentine's friend Mrs. Brown recognizes that Laurentine's mother's relationship with the

colonel "meant the death of her own . . . good standing in the community" (316). And another one of Melissa's suitors reminds her to be "very, very good" (334). This warning, which is repeated numerous times throughout the novel, clearly indicates that the assumption is that Melissa is incapable of being "good" and hence retaining her virtue. Like the women Mary Helen Washington describes who accepted the notions of "true womanhood" in order to try and create a place for black women in the already existing social structures, the community of Red Brook is unable to recognize the destructive nature of the standards they have accepted.

The connection text of There is Confusion is perhaps Fauset's harshest critique of the romantic ending. It shows that black women are eventually destroyed and defeated by their hopeless attempts to conform to a narrative paradigm which ultimately excludes them. The last paragraph of the novel shows that both women, Laurentine and her young cousin Melissa, have indeed found men to marry them and provide for their financial needs while also "bulwarking" their reputations. However, the process has left them "rather like spent swimmers, who had given up the hope of rescue" (340). Although they have found rescue in the form of their future husbands, they are incapable of thinking at all: "they were unable to focus their minds on home, children, their men" (340). The victory is hollow for them and, like Helga the

hero of Nella Larsen's novel Quicksand (1928), they are virtual zombies at the conclusion of the text.

The "bad blood" that plagues Laurentine and Melissa, clearly the blood of their black womanhood, will continue to "taint" them as well as the other female heroes in Fauset's fiction. Fauset's critique is bitter and harsh, and she excuses no one from the blame of accepting the fairy tale as a model around which black women are expected to construct their lives. In her use of formulaic narrative techniques, Fauset actually does "transcend the form of the romance" by showing how the romantic ending is ultimately the only, if unsatisfactory, alternative provided for black women. This "truth" is vividly portrayed in all her fiction. The exclusions of the "happily ever after" ending mirror the exclusions Fauset and other black women of the early twentieth century constantly faced and struggled with throughout their lives. Because of these exclusions, Fauset was not able to "write beyond the ending" in the way many white women novelists were doing at that time. Thus, one distinctive way race and class inflects gender is clearly illustrated through an examination of Fauset's metafictional critique of the ending. Mary Jane Lupton has argued that "Jessie Fauset does create, in each of her four novels, authentic female lives, lives which reflect woman's struggle against racial, economic, and sexual barriers. She also gives us lives which are fulfilled, even, in the end, happy"

(392). The women depicted in these novels do seem to represent Fauset's attempt, in Maria Minich Brewer's words, to "trace the channels through which narrative exclusions are continuous with historical, political, and social [exclusions]" (1146). In this sense they are "authentic." As I hope I have also demonstrated, however, the most "authentic" thing about them is how unhappy the women characters are as a result of the constraints of the romantic ending necessitated by the conditions of their lives as well as the plot.

NOTES

¹This general pattern of approval in the black press and criticism--stemming from the supposed unreality of Fauset's portrait of blacks--in the white, mainstream press holds true for all of Fauset's novels. I chose Plum Bun for this analysis simply because it seems to have been her most extensively reviewed novel. See also for example Fred De Armond, "Social Thought in Negro Novels, " rev. of There Is Confusion, by Jessie Fauset, Opportunity Dec. 1925: 369-71; Rev. of There Is Confusion, by Jessie Fauset, New York Times Book Section 13 April 1924: 9, 16; Edwin Berry Burgum, "Our Bookshelf," rev. of The Chinaberry Tree, by Jessie Fauset, Opportunity March 1932: 88-89; "Book Reviews," rev. of The Chinaberry Tree, by Jessie Fauset, Hound and Horn April/June 1932: 507. An exception to this rule is Mary Ross' favorable review of Comedy, American Style, "The Tragedy of Mixed Blood," The New York Herald Tribune 10 Dec. 1933.

²It is important to note that the two other women novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, were similarly dismissed.

³Mary Jane Lupton notes the connection between Fauset and Dowling in "Clothes and Closure in Three Novels by Black Women," Black American Literature Forum 20 (1986): 409-421.

⁴Patricia Waugh identifies such deconstructive fictional activity in her book Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988). Waugh defines metafiction as "the construction of a fictional illusion . . . and the laying bare of that illusion" (6). She focuses on metafiction by male authors in which the fictional illusion is violently disrupted. The disruptive strategies Waugh describes usually involve something like The French Lieutenant's Woman's multiple endings or an author's intrusive comments concerning the creation of the text. This disruption forces the reader to acknowledge the fictionality of the text and identify the illusion with which she had become comfortable. However, metafiction is not a tactic limited to male authors. Katherine Fishburn suggests that all texts by women writers are metafictional ("Wor(l)ds Within Words: Doris Lessing as Meta-Fictionist and Meta-

Physician," Studies in the Novel 20 [1988]: 186-205). Certainly, if this is true, theirs is the subtly subversive metafictional activity of Fauset not the more obviously disruptive tactics of the male authors Waugh cites.

⁵In Edith Wharton's Argument With America (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1980) Elizabeth Ammons argues that Wharton's endings represent a similar sense of dissatisfaction with the options available for women (48-9).

⁶Jessie Redmon Fauset, The Sleeper Wakes, The Crisis 20 (Aug. 1920): 168-173; 20 (Sept. 1920): 226-229; 20 (Oct. 1920): 267-274. Future references to the novelette follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

⁷Jessie Redmon Fauset, There is Confusion (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924) 17. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

⁸Jessie Redmon Fauset, Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral, 1928 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) 12. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

⁹Jessie Redmon Fauset, The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life, 1931 (College Park, Maryland: McGrath Publishing Company, 1969) 21. Future references to the novel follow this edition and are made parenthetically within the text.

PART THREE
THEORIZING A NEW FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

CHAPTER SIX
RESISTING THE READINGS

My analysis of Jessie Fauset leads me back to the observations I made in Chapter Three concerning the vital role previous feminist interpretations play in any attempt to offer resisting readings of women writers. For it is only possible to conduct fully resisting readings in the context of existing analyses. Previous feminist readings of women writers establish the foundation for both the necessity of a resisting reading of women writers and the possibility of such a reading. That this is the case is most evident in reading Jessie Fauset, a writer who has been almost completely ignored by the feminist interpretive community as well as by the mainstream critical establishment. More than my reading of Wharton or Cather, my reading of Fauset represents an attempt to bring her "into the sisterhood." In reading Fauset's novels I resist far more strongly the previous feminist readings of her than I resist the novels themselves. This is because most feminist readers have

resisted the romantic plot of her novels so completely that they have consequently rejected Fauset. In response to these earlier readings, I demonstrate how Fauset's romantic endings represent a protest against the restrictions placed upon her by a white, patriarchal society. In rethinking my readings, I am forced to acknowledge, however, that I have refused to interrogate Fauset with the same kind of rigor I applied to Cather and Wharton. I have been satisfied merely to demonstrate her articulation of the age-old story of women's oppression and resistance to that oppression. Why have I suppressed the other stories her novels tell, such as her articulation of the necessity for compromise and cooperation with a corrupt society or her apparent inability to imagine a world outside of that system? Why, in my consideration of Fauset, have I followed in the footsteps of so many Cather and Wharton scholars who excuse those women writers on the grounds of "the limits of their time and type"? The answer to these questions lies, I believe, in the fact that unlike Cather and Wharton, who have been securely established in the "sisterhood," Fauset still inhabits the feminist margins.

Because of the nature of feminist criticism, it is difficult if not impossible to begin by challenging the position within the feminist canon of a woman writer or a female-authored text. As my analysis has demonstrated, no individual woman, woman writer, or woman's text escapes the the male world in which all lives and textual productions are

located. Nevertheless, a feminist critique of those "structural roots" can only take place from within the feminist interpretive community. Women writers and their texts must, it seems, be brought "into the sisterhood" before their status there can be interrogated. This first necessary step is the one represented by so many of the feminist literary critics examined in this study. If this step were to be omitted, then one half of the crucial task of feminist literary criticism would be eliminated. For it is crucial that the feminist interpretive community continue to identify the protest against the patriarchy in women's writing before it turns to an examination of how women's writing also reifies patriarchal society. Otherwise, our literary criticism may cease to be "criticism with a Cause."

As feminist literary critics we still cannot afford politically to interrogate a woman writers' reification of the patriarchy before we have established her protest against it. As Diana Fuss has observed, we do still need to "theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak" (118). But we also can no longer afford to ignore the many ways women writers hold multiple subject positions as they are participants in the society they protest. As resisting readers, we must stand on the shoulders of the feminist literary critics who came before us. Our readings do not negate theirs. They merely complicate them, allowing us to see the many stories women writers tell rather than the

unified story we so often identify. Becoming resisting readers allows us to see both the conservatism and the radicalism of the women writers we critique, and it ultimately allows us to recognize those aspects in ourselves.

In "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism" (1981), Myra Jehlen describes the difficult task facing feminists who find themselves critiquing the male ground of Western thought from a position which, like Archimedes' fulcrum, is ironically located upon the very terra firma it purports to contest (575-576). In the decade since Jehlen's essay first appeared this issue has been, if not resolved, at least addressed thoroughly by the American feminist interpretive community. The general consensus seems to be that while creating alternative, separate worlds is not an acceptable option for feminist criticism, care must be taken to ensure that feminist criticism do more than simply earn for women "the right to be men" (586). The feminist interpretive community, however, has sidestepped Jehlen's most radical suggestion: that "women's assumptions" be sought at their "structural roots" which are often located in men's writing (586). The feminist interpretive community has devoted insufficient attention to the fact that women writing imaginative as well as critical texts are, like Archimedes, never able to leave the male world in which their textual productions are located. Even the most radical feminist critique is located within the society it attacks. The

consequences of a refusal to recognize this fact are far-reaching, and many have been demonstrated in this study. Clearly, the feminist interpretive community cannot continue to maintain its false sense of isolation and uniqueness if it is to move forward with the vital and important work of creating feminist literary criticism. We must fully theorize our interpretive strategies, and we must learn to alter those strategies which, when carefully examined, prove to be detrimental to the goals of feminist literary criticism. This is not an easy task. Just as a feminist critique of the male world is made more difficult because women have nowhere else to stand, my critique of feminist critiques of that world is equally complicated because my fulcrum remains located upon a feminist ground. But this critique is necessary because, as Jehlen so eloquently puts it, "it is only right that feminism, as rethinking, rethink thinking itself" (601).

The first, and most important, step in the process of becoming resisting readers consists of identifying precisely what it is we think we are doing and what we hope to accomplish when we practice feminist literary criticism. Critics seldom feel that it is necessary to define feminist literary criticism. One reason for this omission may be that since the project of feminist literary criticism is now entering its third decade, it seems unnecessary to define it. Another reason why definitions of feminist literary criticism

seldom appear in recent critical studies may be that, as scholars like Alison Jaggar have demonstrated, there are different kinds of feminism, and critics have become aware that any attempt at definition might prove unrepresentative. A third explanation may be that critics look back to the time in which the feminist interpretive community was more interested in defining itself and find the evangelistic, naive tone of those definitions embarrassing. The pull towards what Jehlen calls "serious literature" and "value-free scholarship" is still attractive, and we want to sound less like the so-called "wild-eyed feminists" of the 1970s and more like sophisticated scholars of the 1990s. None of these explanations justifies the omission on the part of a feminist critic of a clear articulation of the presuppositions, prejudices, and goals behind the interpretive strategies she adopts. As Elizabeth A. Meese has suggested, there are "perilous risks" associated with a refusal to define the project of feminist literary criticism, including "persistent fragmentation and alienation, which undermine feminism's ability to form the political coalitions needed to bring about change" (4). By not defining and acknowledging the project of feminist literary criticism, we risk constructing a criticism which is no longer "feminist."

It is absolutely necessary for us as individual critics who define ourselves as members of an interpretive community to capitalize upon a self-conscious awareness of our own

assumptions before attempting to revise our approach to reading women writers. On the other hand, it is important that an articulation of what constitutes feminist literary criticism for an individual critic or for the entire feminist interpretive community not attempt to impose a monolithic, dogmatic design on every feminist literary critic. There are really very few "requirements" of feminist literary criticism. As I have already stated, the central project of feminism is that of attaining and defending equal rights for all women.¹ Feminist literary criticism must attempt to contribute to this project. It seems to me that the one and only thing we can require all feminist literary criticism to do is contribute to what Meese has called the "discourse of liberation" (28). I believe it is crucial that as practitioners of feminist literary criticism we not lose sight of this goal. Because the basic aim of attaining and defending equal rights for all women is what makes feminist literary criticism unique as well as significant, we must not allow it to be buried by our sophisticated interpretive strategies. In many respects an insistence upon this aspect of feminist literary criticism reflects a return to the positions advocated in the 1970s by critics like Donovan and Cornillon. And I believe that returning to the roots of feminist literary criticism is a necessary first step if we are to move forward. The years since the 1970s have taught us that there are many different ways of accomplishing these

important aims, however. In fact, we have learned that these aims do not mean the same thing for all women. We must be careful not to make the mistake of insisting that all feminist literary criticism seek to contribute to women's liberation in the same way.

While I don't believe my assertion that feminist literary criticism must contribute to the "discourse of liberation" is one most feminists would consider radical, I am not as confident that my next claim will be considered so uncontroversial. A second assumption behind feminist literary criticism that must be acknowledged is the power it attributes to literary texts and to literary criticism. And that power, very simply, is the power to change the material reality of women's lives. Again, what I am advocating is a conscious return to some of the arguments that were central in the early days of feminist literary criticism. It seems only reasonable to me that if we agree to accept the notion that feminist literary criticism should effect political change, then we must also recognize that the agents for that change are the texts we read and write. It is crucial that we acknowledge our role as "ethical critics." For one thing, a refusal to do so leaves the American feminist interpretive community open to charges of being naively unaware of its own foundations. More important, I think, is the fact that a conscious willingness to embrace the political project of feminism in our literary criticism--to admit that texts can

change the world--will inevitably strengthen that project. Returning to Robinson's injunction that feminist criticism be "criticism with a Cause," the feminist interpretive community can once again strive openly for change, and as a result accomplish that change more effectively. Postmodernism, however, has made us more aware that these necessary changes are not the same for all women. We have lost the confidence that solutions will be easy to discover, and we have rightly begun to recognize that one woman's freedom may constitute another woman's oppression. Nevertheless, it is crucial that, even as our increasingly sophisticated interpretive strategies alert us to the difficulty of our project, we not abandon it in despair. If it is to retain the title "feminist," feminist literary criticism cannot abandon the political projects of feminism. And it cannot afford to allow those projects to remain disguised, if it is to have any chance of success.

As I have tried to show, the second important step the feminist interpretive community must take if it is to move towards a more effectively political literary criticism is to foreground, rather than suppress, the many and varied ways other interpretive communities shape its interpretive strategies. Steven Rendell and Gerald Graff suggest that there is a considerable amount of overlap between one interpretive community and the next (54; 1985, 114). In its struggle to differentiate itself from other schools of

literary criticism, however, the feminist interpretive community has zealously suppressed any systematic exploration of the ways it reflects those communities out of which it emerged. The unfortunate results of this restrictive approach are twofold. First, many feminist literary critics have been hesitant to self-consciously appropriate interpretive strategies from other communities. For example, the productive possibilities of recognizing the multiple subject positions occupied by women writers and their texts cannot be achieved if the feminist interpretive community refuses to adopt postmodern interpretive strategies. Apparently, some feminist critics fear that such appropriations will pollute the "pure seas" of feminist literary criticism. The most obvious example of this is Nina Baym's complaint that feminist literary critics who are brave (or foolish) enough to appropriate interpretive strategies from deconstruction or Marxism "excoriate their deviating sisters" by building on "misogynist foundations" (45). Only the false assumption that there is no overlap between feminist and other interpretive communities would lead Baym and others like her to believe that it is even possible to contaminate feminist literary criticism with misogynistic interpretive strategies. Feminist literary criticism is--to use the famous phrase of "misogynistic" deconstruction--"always already" imbued with misogyny. Like Archimedes,

feminist literary critics must acknowledge the position occupied by their fulcrum.

The second consequence of the feminist interpretive community's refusal to acknowledge its overlap with other communities is, ironically, related to this fact. Because if we do not acknowledge the overlap of other interpretive communities with the feminist interpretive community, we cannot explore the misogyny that may accompany that overlap. We become unable to recognize that when we read Willa Cather strictly as a novelist of the "myth of America" or Edith Wharton as a novelist of manners we are adopting the (often restrictive) interpretive strategies of previous, non-feminist interpretive communities. In other words, clinging militantly to a sense of group identity founded in isolationism results in a dual loss for feminist literary critics. As an interpretive community we lose not only the authority to appropriate potentially life-giving interpretive strategies, but we also lose the ability to critique some of the interpretive strategies that may already be strangling our literary criticism.

As members of the feminist interpretive community we must make ourselves more aware of how our treatment of women writers is shaped by a grid we have not developed. When we turn to Cather, Wharton, or other "canonical" women writers we must resist the tendency to assume that the literary criticism that has come before us in no way shapes our

feminist literary critical practice. And when we read less well-known women writers, we must realize that while most of the available literary criticism concerning them may reflect a feminist perspective, that perspective is nevertheless influenced by many other interpretive communities. As this study has demonstrated, the choices feminist literary critics make are profoundly influenced by decisions made generations before the emergence of feminist literary criticism. We do not turn to authors like Cather, Wharton, or Fauset with a "blank slate." Furthermore, we cannot turn to these writers in our literary criticism without being influenced by the critics who have shaped their reception. The point is not to cleanse ourselves of "all unrighteousness"; such a task is not only impossible, but also unnecessary. Rather, we can and should foreground as much as possible the specific ways in which our critical decisions have been shaped by forces beyond our control. And then we will be in a better position to resist those forces when necessary.

It is not difficult for the feminist interpretive community to identify specific ways our critical judgments have been shaped, both productively and destructively, by other interpretive communities. As I have demonstrated, the authors we choose to analyze, the specific texts by those authors that we choose to read, and even the aspects of those texts upon which we focus are deeply influenced by other interpretive communities. Wharton and Cather are good

examples of the fact that the authors upon which the feminist interpretive community focuses its attention often were first read and found to be valuable by the New Critics. While writers such as Jessie Fauset, Edith Summers Kelley, and Agnes Smedley were writing in roughly the same time period as Cather and Wharton, these lesser-known figures never found favor with the academic establishment. Paul Lauter cites a 1948 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of ninety college syllabi which revealed that three women writers were occasionally being taught in American literature courses: Dickinson appeared in twenty-four courses, Wharton appeared in five, and Cather appeared in four (439). In a five year period surrounding that survey (1946-1950), The Modern Language Association's American Bibliography cited eighteen articles on Willa Cather and one on Edith Wharton. During that time no articles appeared on Jessie Fauset. Assuming the M.L.A. Bibliography is a fairly accurate representation of the kind of work literary critics are producing, we could expect to see a significant change in the critical representation of these women writers in the 1990s. And so we do. In the 1990 edition of the M.L.A. Bibliography, 101 articles appear on Cather and twenty-six on Wharton. Feminist literary criticism has obviously influenced the amount of critical attention some women writers receive; most of the articles cited on Wharton and Cather reflect a feminist perspective, and there are

certainly many more total articles than there were forty years ago. The feminist interpretive community has failed, however, to influence the selection of specific women writers in significant ways. It is revealing that only one article on Jessie Fauset is cited in the 1990 M.L.A. Bibliography.

There are many factors that contribute to the selection of articles for publication in academic journals. And Jessie Fauset's status as a black woman writer no doubt still mitigates against her being regarded as a subject worthy of scholarly consideration. Perhaps there are dozens of articles on Fauset circulating among journal editors who simply "aren't interested in this kind of thing right now." I believe, however, that there is another, equally powerful, selection force in place which prevents these articles from ever being written. The feminist interpretive community is still heavily indebted to the selection criteria established by white male critics in the first half of this century. They decreed that Wharton and Cather were valuable when they included them on their syllabi and in their academic journals. We have accepted and validated their judgments by selecting these writers as the subjects of our literary criticism and by continuing to neglect other women writers who have not received such "official" approval. If we are to move forward with literary criticism that speaks the "discourse of liberation," feminist literary critics must resist the aesthetic judgments of other interpretive

communities. Naturally, we do not want or need to abandon writers like Wharton and Cather entirely. But we must make a more concerted effort to choose more non-canonical women writers for analysis in our literary criticism. Furthermore, we must admit that "non-canonical writer" and "woman writer" are not always synonymous terms.

Not only is the selection of the specific women writers about whom we choose to write influenced by other interpretive communities, but the specific texts by these women writers which we choose to analyze are often determined by forces the feminist interpretive community does not control. A cursory review of the American Book Publishing Record and the Cumulative Book Index reveals some interesting trends in the publication history of Willa Cather and Edith Wharton. In general, the same select novels continue to be republished year after year. Although Cather published twelve novels during her lifetime, only three have remained in print more or less consistently throughout the years: O Pioneers (1913), My Antonia (1918), and The Professor's House (1925). Works by Edith Wharton, who was more prolific than Cather, have been equally under-represented. Only The House of Mirth (1905), Ethan Frome (1911), The Custom of the Country (1913), and The Age of Innocence (1920) have regularly stocked the shelves of bookstores over the years. The availability of these texts has had a profound effect on their treatment by various interpretive communities. Even

today, when inexpensive editions of many books by both authors are easily available, these selected texts still receive the lion's share of critical attention. In the 1990 M.L.A. Bibliography, although each of Cather's novels except Lucy Gayheart was represented, almost 25% of all articles cited under individual novels were articles on My Antonia or The Professor's House. The case of Edith Wharton is even more dramatic. While she wrote twenty-one novels during her lifetime, articles are cited in the 1990 M.L.A. Bibliography for only six novels. Half of all the articles cited are on The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth.

The issues surrounding the selection of authors for canonization and novels for re-publication lie outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that, at least until recently, the interests of the feminist interpretive community have shaped such decisions only tangentially. It is crucial that we not continue to support such practices by restricting our literary criticism to those authors whom the New Critics "approved" and those texts which the book-selling community preserved. The New Critics almost certainly selected works that at least seemed to support the doxa of their society. And that was not a society committed to attaining and defending equal rights for all women. If we merely accept their critical judgments by continuing to focus on authors and works they selected, we lose the opportunity to illuminate how this ethos was challenged by the literature

of the past and can be further unwritten by the literary criticism of the present. We can easily resist this shaping force by deliberately seeking out texts by well-known as well as unknown women writers who have heretofore been ignored by the critical establishment. As I have shown, reading previously ignored novels like Sapphira and the Slave Girl and The Mother's Recompense clarifies Cather and Wharton's challenges to their society while simultaneously demonstrating how fully they were a part of that world. And opening the canon to Jessie Fauset further exemplifies the many different ways American women experience being a woman. Resisting the selection practices of other interpretive communities will contribute to the "discourse of liberation" by allowing us to draw attention to various aspects of the female experience rather than restricting ourselves merely to those aspects with which the dominant critical community is comfortable.

Once we have determined the subject of our literary analysis by choosing a writer and by choosing a text--decisions which, as I have demonstrated, are frequently influenced by forces that, when unrecognized, lie outside of the control of the feminist interpretive community--our interpretive strategies continue to be influenced by the overlap of other interpretive communities into our own. These influences may begin shaping our interpretive strategies before we are even aware of ourselves as literary

critics. Many members of the feminist interpretive community have their first encounter with women writers, especially the "major" writers, in a classroom. I myself read both Cather and Wharton for the first time in 1987 in a graduate course on modern American writers at Tulane University. My professor included Cather's novel My Antonia on the syllabus and recommended Wharton's novel The House of Mirth for outside reading. Discussion of My Antonia centered on how the novel conformed to the standard characteristics of American literary modernism. My first encounter with Cather foregrounded her use of complex narrative strategies and sophisticated symbols. This is not necessarily a bad way to be introduced to Cather, but neither is it one that emphasizes the concerns feminist literary critics have had with her work. In later years I myself taught Cather in a course on American women writers. At first I was surprised to find that I was willing to suppress ways Cather fit with the female tradition we were attempting to define in the course and focus instead on the "American" aspects of her work, also a subject of concern. I am certain that this tendency was the direct result of my own first encounter with Cather, and I am equally sure that it enters my literary criticism in ways that are considerably less overt. As a feminist literary critic committed to developing a method of resisting reading of women's fiction, I believe one important step consists of identifying how our early encounters with

women writers shape our literary criticism. I do not believe it is always necessary to reject the interpretive strategies we have been taught by members of other interpretive communities. Rather, I advocate making ourselves aware of how these interpretive strategies shape our own approaches to the texts and then resisting the tendency to restrict ourselves to such approaches in our literary criticism. We can thus become more self-conscious about exploring alternative aspects of the texts we study, teach, and critique.

Most of the suggestions I have made thus far regarding the development of strategies for resisting reading within the feminist interpretive community do not require an individual scholar to make any profound changes in the basic critical assumptions that person brings to the task of literary criticism. But such changes are also a necessary component of resisting reading. As I have demonstrated in this study, the feminist interpretive community has relied heavily on notions of "expressive realism" and the "rule of unity." Heavy reliance upon interpretive strategies founded in New Critical notions of close reading and closure has often restricted feminist literary criticism and prevented it from contributing in any large way to the "discourse of liberation." This is because the unified story critics typically identify in texts by women writers is one of women's oppression. Wharton's Lily Bart is the victim of a

vicious society that sees her only as a "beautiful object." Cather's Antonia struggles throughout her life to ultimately achieve happiness as she triumphs over the patriarchy that has consistently oppressed her. Such stories unfairly limit our understanding of women's writing and, implicitly, of women. But recognizing the multiplicity inherent in women's writing is not easy. It is extremely difficult to resist employing interpretive strategies so prevalent they seem "natural," an inherent function of reading. In speaking of deconstruction, Jonathan Culler demonstrates that even those critics most highly conscious of their attempt to "deny the notion of organic unity its former role as the unquestioned telos of critical interpretation" nevertheless base their criticism on notions of organic unity because such notions "are not easy to banish" (1982, 199-200). And while it may ultimately prove impossible to completely "banish" such notions, the feminist interpretive community must consciously resist the attractive and comfortable position of relying on the "rule of unity."

As I have attempted to demonstrate, because the unified story the feminist interpretive community so often identifies is that of the oppression of women, and because such a story can easily hide other important narrative directions in a text by a woman writer, it is important that we refuse to be satisfied by merely uncovering that common refrain. Part of the process of becoming resisting readers of women's fiction

involves aggressively searching for multiple texts within a narrative. The notion of subtexts and surface texts plays an important role in this process. This approach is limited, however, because it is based on binary and hierarchical oppositions. One way to use the idea of subtext without succumbing to the limitations it implies is to look for multiple stories in a text by a woman writer. We can self-consciously search for, not just one or two voices, but three or four or more. By "overreading" women's writing in this way, the feminist interpretive community will be much less likely to define it as simply an account of the story of female oppression. As resisting readers we can push ourselves to ask how the voices that emerge in women's writing contradict and conflict with each other. If we identify a text within a work that seems to take a definite position on an issue, then we can immediately search for another text that deconstructs that position. We do not have to deny that Lily is a victim of her society, but we can also see that she does accept individual responsibility for her actions and that she and other women in the text often break the bonds of their restrictive society. And we can recognize that while Antonia may be a hero, the most successful characters in Cather's novel have become "Americanized." We can recognize Fauset's romantic endings while also acknowledging the critique they imply. Aggressively and self-consciously searching for multiple texts will reveal

many moments when the story, or better stories, told in women's writing are more than just "cut and dried" revelations of women's oppression.

In addition to allowing us to hear multiple voices, resisting the "rule of unity" can facilitate the identification of moments when, as with Fauset, the "gaps and silences" prove more important than the voices in women's writing. Jonathan Culler emphasizes the importance of considering more than simply what can be read on the page. Culler argues that by following traditional reading methods, "we commit ourselves to naturalizing the text and to ignoring or reducing the strangeness of its gaps and silences" (1975, 232). That which is not or cannot be said, Culler suggests, can convey a powerful message. Relying on what Catherine Belsey has called the New Critical "confrontation with the [unmediated] words on the page" effectively prevents the feminist literary critic from considering the "silences" in a text by a woman writer. In addition, relying exclusively on the "rule of unity" has led the feminist interpretive community to seek only one story on those occasions when it does turn its attention to "silences" in texts by women writers.

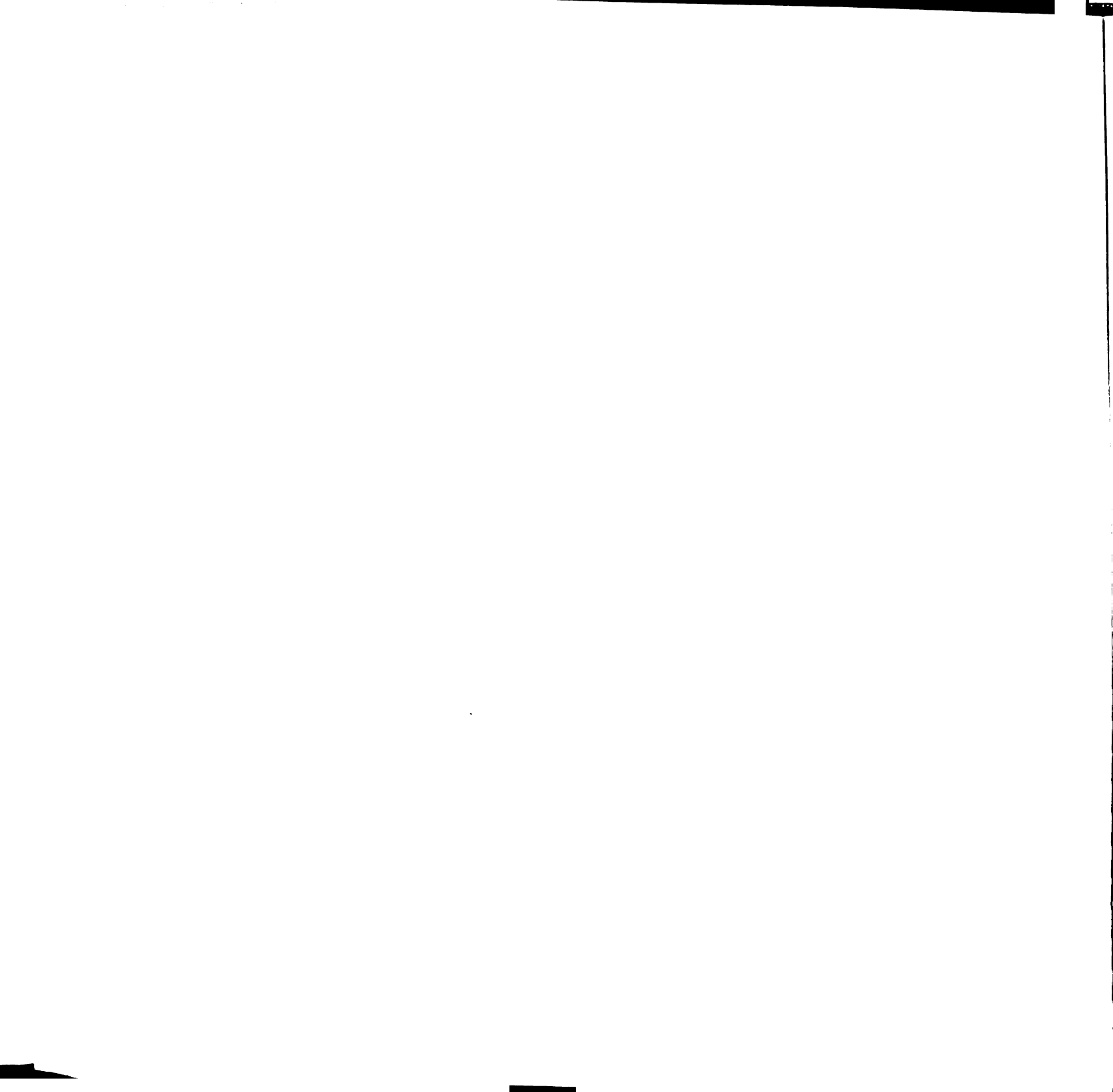
The exploration of "gaps and silences" already figures prominently in the work of some feminist literary critics. Susan K. Harris studies nineteenth-century American women writers and demonstrates that while on the surface their

novels conform to the demands of their culture, crucial gaps and silences reveal an alternative world of female power and autonomy which subverts the oppressive patriarchy. In her study of twentieth-century women writers, Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims that what connects all the writers she studies is "their desire to scrutinize the ideological character of the romance plot (and related conventions in narrative), and to change fiction so that it makes alternative statements about gender and its institutions" (x). DuPlessis focuses on moments in which the narratives are silent concerning the traditional stories of romance and family; these moments reveal alternative worlds where such stories do not structure female lives. What both of these critics have in common is their exclusive concern with how the silences in a text reveal issues of women's oppression and women's rebellion against that oppression. By looking only for silences that speak to that old story of female oppression, feminist literary critics miss the opportunity to identify instances when the silences speak to the racism, classism, and even misogyny embedded in women's writing. Looking at the silences in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, for example, reveals that in important ways Cather was too close to the patriarchal system of caste and class to adequately critique it; she was herself a participant in the very society which she also protested. As resisting readers of women's fiction we must recognize not only the importance of

"gaps and silences" in the texts by women writers, but also the fact that these moments can reveal more than one story.

Recognizing that women's writing does not necessarily relate the unified story of women's oppression and developing interpretive strategies to help us identify other stories it may tell go hand in hand with resisting the impulse to overemphasize the importance of personal experience in our literary criticism. Postmodernism alerts us to the necessity of constructing a feminist theory that is not so fully reliant upon notions of "woman's experience." As I have already suggested, a theory of reading that has as its foundation the relationship between the way the author experiences womanhood and the way the reader experiences womanhood will strangle any but the most narrow and self-serving readings of women's fiction. It is essential that we stop making "women's experiences" the cornerstone of feminist literary criticism. As resisting readers we must self-consciously refuse to look strictly for images of ourselves in the texts we read.

But just as it is difficult to "banish" notions of the "rule of unity," it is a complicated task to resist the impulse to identify ourselves in texts by women writers. In her study of the role of the unconscious in women's reading and writing, Jean Wyatt argues that readers enter texts by women writers "by way of an identification with the narrator that corresponds to the mirroring process of the imaginary"



(94). Wyatt's arguments ring true and have long been supported by feminist literary critics like Nancy Burr Evans, who suggests that reading women's writing allows women to see their own experiences "mirrored in articulated form" (309). This kind of full identification is dangerous, however, because it prevents us from recognizing our own flaws--our racism, classism, sexism, and participation in the patriarchal society we inhabit--in texts by women writers. We do not have to refuse ourselves the undeniable pleasure of seeing our personal experiences reflected in the texts we read by women writers. But as feminist literary critics committed to contributing to the "discourse of liberation," we must resist the impulse to allow this identification to be the end point of our critique.

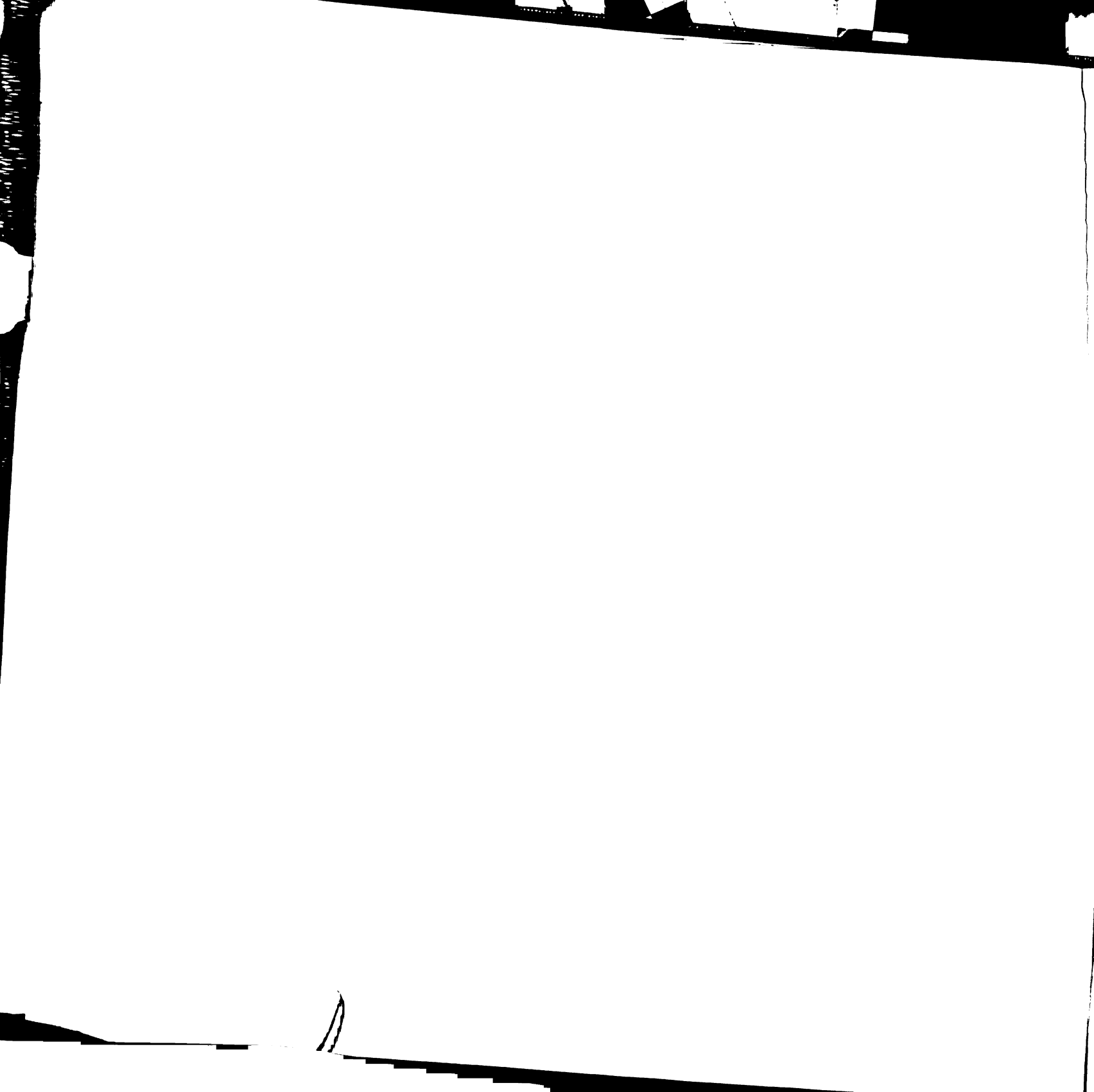
This is easier said than done, because as Wyatt, Evans, and even Freud suggest, there are powerful forces which function in our unconscious and make it difficult to resist identification as we read. In working to become resisting readers of women's fiction the feminist interpretive community needs to negotiate a space in which individual members can preserve the "personal is political" agenda of women's liberation without excluding all personalities unlike themselves. As feminists, we consider ourselves more "apart from" our society than "a part of" it. We are engaged in illuminating its flaws and in correcting them. And we find it very difficult to recognize those flaws in ourselves or in

texts by women writers. Feminist critics have often failed in their attempt to understand women's writing because they have approached it with all the answers instead of with the questions. By assuming we know what it means to be a "woman," we discover nothing but our own assumptions reflected in women's writing. Even when, as members of the feminist interpretive community, we claim to accept postmodern concepts of gender, we continue to posit unified female subjects in our literary criticism. The "innocent" woman, we imply, still lies somewhere behind the text.

One way to resist this tendency is to approach the works of women writers as if we were encountering a text we recognize as belonging to an "other" tradition. As white women reading white women writers, black women reading black women writers, lesbian women reading lesbian women writers, or any of the multiple possible combinations of those groups, we confine our reading unnecessarily when we approach those works assuming we know the woman in the text because she shares common experience with us. Reading women writers, even those from our own tradition, as if we were reading "the other" involves consciously searching for those moments in a text which are incompatible with our world view or with our ideal world. Conversely, it may involve problematizing moments within a narrative which we believe that we fully understand based upon our personal experience.² By resisting and "overreading" such moments we may discover that narrative

prose by women writers does more than simply confirm our own personal experience. Women's writing also has the potential to challenge us to revise our understanding of "woman" altogether.

Some of the most radical consequences of becoming resisting readers of women's writing have, I hope, been made evident in this study. The feminist interpretive community will no longer be able to focus simply on how women's writing articulates a protest against the patriarchal society from which it emerges. As resisting readers we will increasingly need to identify those moments in which texts by women writers reflect and indeed support their own cultural position. We must acknowledge that part of our task as members of the feminist interpretive community consists of consciously refusing uncritically to embrace women writers, the characters they create, the plots they construct, and the texts they compose. It is patently unwise to canonize (in the ecclesiastical sense) women writers or the stories they tell, and we must resist the temptation of taking this critical position. Furthermore, it is important that we recognize that the willingness to be critical of women writers and the texts they create does not conflict with the feminist commitment to attaining and defending equal rights for all women. If our literary criticism is to empower women, it must provide tools to help us recognize our own



participation in a system that is ultimately detrimental to the goals of feminism.

This brings us back to the question of how feminist literary criticism will contribute to the "discourse of liberation." Becoming resisting readers of women's writing can help us, as women, to change the material reality of our own lives as well as those of other women. If we resist the impulse to see only our ideal selves in the texts we read, then we will be able to recognize the manifestations of our patriarchal society in women's writing. It will become evident through the women's writing we analyze that women are in many ways as racist, classist, and sexist as men. Once we recognize this in women's writing, by far the easier task, we will be in a much better position to accomplish the difficult work of recognizing our own position as products of the patriarchy rather than simply protesters against it. Eventually, we may then be able to change our own behavior and perhaps stop contributing so generously to our own oppression. If that happens, feminist literary criticism will have made an invaluable contribution to the "discourse of liberation." The project of feminist literary criticism involves reading texts differently from how they have been read in the past. As a result, as members of the feminist interpretive community, we will be different because of our reading.

NOTES

¹Alison M. Jaggar classifies these goals as typical of "liberal feminism" in her book Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988). Jaggar claims that "the fundamental problem for the liberal theorist is . . . to devise social institutions that will protect each individual's right to a fair share of the available resources while simultaneously allowing him or her the maximum opportunity for autonomy and self-fulfillment" (33). Consequently, according to Jaggar, liberal feminists are engaged in an ongoing struggle to enforce "the application of liberal principles to women as well as to men" (35).

²Some of these ideas are explored at length in Katherine Fishburn's unpublished manuscript, Cross-Cultural Conversations: Reading Buchi Emecheta.

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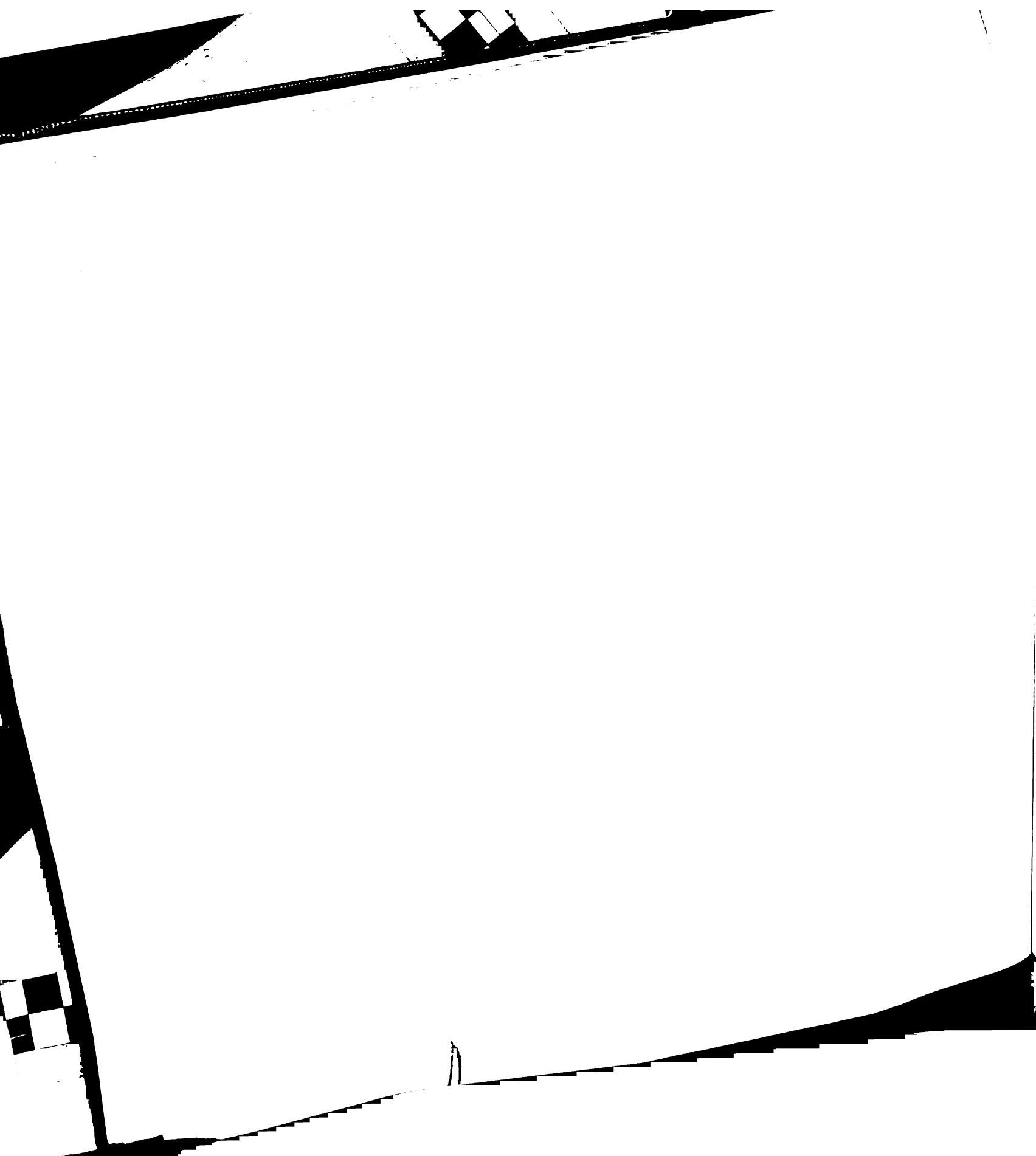


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