

A FEMINIST AESTHETIC IN THE NOVELS OF  
WILLA CATHER AND BARBARA KINGSOLVER

THESIS

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This analysis of the works of Willa Cather and Barbara Kingsolver begins with a definition of a feminist aesthetic used to discuss the writers' works. This aesthetic provides a basis for analyzing the struggle of women as they become autonomous individuals while also considering the importance of community and the values of nurturing. Cather and Kingsolver offer two perspectives on this aesthetic from their different places in history. The two ideas in the aesthetic, independence versus interdependence, occur as issues with characters in both writers' works and provide opportunities for comparisons between the writers and their characters.

By using this aesthetic, I will demonstrate how Cather and Kingsolver both create characters who struggle with autonomy and community. Both have the view that a woman's voice offers a unique perspective on the world; they both emphasize the independence of their women characters. They also write about their characters' relationships with others as the characters struggle to find and maintain their own lives.

For this comparison, I want to discuss two different women writers, one who was writing in the early 20th century in America, and the other a current writer. This analysis will show the changes in the writers' characters from early feminist work to characters of a current day feminist writer by examining their similarities and differences. In Cather's work, I want to look at her independent women characters, then look at Kingsolver's work to find a shift from independence to interdependence for women. Kingsolver's work reflects the changes for women as she emphasizes the dilemma of staying independent while also keeping nurturing skills and working at maintaining important relationships.

The difference between the two writers' lives further enhances this comparison. Cather lived an unconventional life for a woman in early 20th century America, struggling to create her own life as a writer. It was not easy for a woman to be either an independent self-supporting woman or to become a nationally known and respected woman writer. For Cather, her career was always the most important thing in her life. Yet it was also not the only thing in her life; she did maintain strong family and friendship ties throughout her life. Kingsolver, as a modern woman, has achieved early literary success and also participates in women's issues. In her work, she emphasizes that relationships are primary. She has also been a single working mother and knows first hand the kind of demands required in combining work and relationships. While she appreciates and accepts the

need for women to act as individuals, she has strongly expressed the need for community and relationships as being of utmost importance.

Starting out, it seemed to me that Cather would more strongly represent emerging voices for women that would stress their independence and autonomy. The early feminist aesthetic stresses the need for strong women's voices, the rejection of patriarchal views and the rise of women to prominence in society. Cather then, would best represent the early feminist theory that expressed the need for change in literature and in society.

I began my search for critical analyses of Cather's characters by looking for feminist criticism from the early 1970's, and for writings that would provide a basic background and a description of feminist literary theory. At this time, radical feminists re-evaluated literary works for authentic women characters, reviewing the works of male and female writers in search of positive images of women. In an essay in Josephine Donovan's Feminist Literary Criticism, Cheri Register discussed Cather's self-realized women characters. This discussion by Register led me to research for other criticism that would emphasize that aspect of Cather (21). Josephine Donovan's two collections of essays, Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, and Feminist Theory, The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism also contain various articles describing early feminist theory. Donovan's collections also include articles by a number of feminist writers. These two works are available in revised editions including original articles from the 1970's, revised prefaces, and, in the case of Feminist Theory, an additional

chapter, "The Eighties and Beyond." Donovan and two other critics, Marcia Holly and Cheri Register, also make strong statements about the need for feminine voices in the main body of literature.

From that initial research, I then looked for a more recent definition of the feminist aesthetic that would provide a similar framework to examine Kingsolver's work and support the theory of community in her work. Marilyn French's 1993 essay "Is There a Feminist Aesthetic?" says that women's writing emphasizes nurturance and community. In this article, French advocates the early strong position of the feminist aesthetic, but she also expands on it and includes what I think is represented by Kingsolver's work. This expanded feminist aesthetic considers more than the achievements of women. This view focuses more on the importance of interpersonal relationships for women and men as well as looking at the value of community.

By using these critics' ideas, I will show that Cather's work and women characters present an earlier representation of the feminist aesthetic, one that emphasizes independence and strong women's voices. Cather's characters are models of liberated women and provide voices of individual women at a time when those voices were limited. In that sense, she represents the first ideal of the feminist aesthetic, the independent woman. As the feminist literary movement took shape in the 1970's, Cather provided feminist critics with an example. In her article, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," Cheri Register discusses using Willa Cather's



My Ántonia to help understand liberation for women (21). According to Register, Cather created strong-minded women characters who provide good role models. Today these women characters remain important examples of fully realized characters.

Cather's own personal achievements placed her in a unique position. Her ambition and drive allowed her success in her individual strivings. She overcame great obstacles to forge her career and her own path. She then drew on these experiences to help create the strong-minded women in her work.

Comparing her with Kingsolver provides an opportunity to consider the newer aspects of community and inter-relatedness within the feminist aesthetic. Cather produced an impressive body of work, providing women characters ahead of their time. She also used beautiful language and stories of lasting influence and importance. Kingsolver's writing, in contrast, well illustrates the new dimension of interdependence. As Cather did, she uses vivid language, strong characters and memorable stories. In addition, she also presents characters who struggle for self-realization within the realm of raising children and being part of a larger family or community.

As a framework for the discussions of the two writers, I would like to clarify the critics' ideas of the feminist aesthetic, beginning with Donovan's emphasis on independence and then introducing Marilyn French's later view of the aesthetic that describes the need for nurturance and community. Josephine Donovan published her collection of essays, Feminist Literary Criticism, Explorations in Theory, in 1975. In her preface to the first edition,

Donovan explains that the essays in the collection provide an introduction to feminist theory for a reader who is not necessarily familiar with feminist criticism. Two of the main articles describe the need for recognizing and emphasizing writings that show positive views of women. The articles are "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction" by Cheri Register and "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic" by Marcia Holly. These two articles provide the background to make an argument for Cather and her characters as feminist. Written at the beginning of the feminist literary movement in the early 1970's, these articles offer a starting point, stressing the importance of looking at women writers' works, both classic and more modern works. At this time, recognizing women characters and writing emerged as a main focus. From there, finding out important aspects and differences in the characters and writing helped to draw conclusions about what this would mean in analyzing literary works.

Essentially these early critics set out to emphasize the lack of strong women's voices in literature both from male writers and women writers alike. Because of the lack of representation and the dominance of male characters and male writers, they advocated a new way of looking at writing that would represent women's voices and lives. In addition, they stressed the importance of correcting the lack of information and awareness, encouraging the creation of new work. The message remains an important one. Critics should review older works with new points of view, examining women characters and writers. New work should offer voices of authentic women

characters. From that beginning, using Donovan's writings about early feminism, I will show how those early definitions of a feminist aesthetic apply to both writers' work.

The actual climate of this change for women and writing is described by Marcia Holly in her article "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic." She describes how, in the early 1970's, she wanted to gather examples of strong women characters in literature for an essay but was discouraged because there were not that many exemplary women characters to draw from. She goes on to say that part of the reason none existed is that [since] "first-rank male authors do reinforce self-questioning and personal struggle in men; they accept the fact that men are seeking fulfillment and growth, and that men confront difficult personal and social conflicts. There is a lack of an equivalent reinforcement for women" (39). Since male autonomy was expected and encouraged in society, literature reflected this encouragement and acceptance. In contrast, women by and large were not encouraged as individuals or writers to speak out, and writings by male and female writers show lack of voice as well. She describes this imbalance, suggesting that examples of personal growth and struggle presented by men were accepted without question. Since men were assumed to be authorities on all subjects, it was not necessary to hear from women.

Holly goes on to say that "Feminist critics, by recognizing ourselves as women, are in the process of balancing that kind of lopsided view of humanity and reality. We are questioning and analyzing the depiction of

women and the treatments of women's lives in literature"(42). Holly reminds us that the beginning struggle of women and the women's movement in literature was to find meaningful and strong women characters in literature and then to address women's personal growth. These changes for women occurred as society adapted to the differences in attitudes brought about by the women's movement. As the social freedoms long denied to women became a reality in the 1970's, critics began to look for examples in life and in literary work to help in this struggle.

As the feminist critics looked at the representation of women in literature, they saw a challenge in raising new issues and ways of viewing literary work. Could women characters provide any different insight on the struggle to become a person? Were there examples in literature of strong, developed women characters? Even as the women's movement evolved and the literary movement with it, throughout these changes, the question still remained for men and for women of what it meant to be human. As Holly further states, "The content of a given piece need not be feminist, of course, for that piece to be humanist,. . ." (42). Although women's voices had not been heard in proportion to male voices, human values had been expressed in literature. Now women needed to apply their own voices, experiences and characters in their writing.

Cather's own development as a writer was based on an education in classical, mostly male literary works. She was able to build upon that background and to allow her own voice, as a woman, to come out in her

work and in her characters. Her work was also accepted by the general public when male literary voices were the dominant ones of the 1920's in America. She provided what was required in this aspect of the feminist aesthetic, women characters who thought for themselves, creating their own destinies and lives. She showed how a woman writer and her characters saw what was different and important, working with a strong woman's voice to find an audience. Cather was in a unique position to help create this voice for women. I believe she contributed well, creating a body of work that has been re-evaluated to show her achievement as a woman and her characters as role-models. Holly again says:

Feminist criticism represents the repudiation of previous formulations about women. It has emerged from a radical perspective about literature and sex roles, and is a tentative beginning in the development of a feminist literary aesthetic—one that is fundamentally at odds with masculinist value standards, measuring literature against an understanding of authentic female life. (46)

Holly wanted to signal a significant shift in attitudes about women and about women's writing. I believe Cather's writing reflects the shift. She presents a good starting place in the achievements of women writers to bring about awareness and to begin to understand what was happening for women as it began in the 1920's, was postponed until the 1970's and has continued until now in the 1990's. But, at the same time, Cather was deeply influenced

by the classic, mostly male writers' works that she had studied. Her own personal strivings and those of her characters reflect the hard choice of personal accomplishment as a worthy goal. Her work does not emphasize the newer part of the aesthetic, where community, nurturance, and relationships become equally important ingredients for human happiness.

As this new independence was being explored in early writing such as Cather's, or later in other feminist writers, another element of the aesthetic will need to be addressed. Women have entered into the writing world in a significant way, and their ideas about the world have changed the whole body of literature as well. In defining this new feminism, another critic, Cheri Register, also from Donovan's early collection, goes farther to discuss another dimension of the new feminism in her article in "American Feminist Literature: A Bibliographical Introduction:"

Feminists often emphasize that they are not simply seeking more room for women in the present social order. They want a new social order founded on "humanistic values, some of which are traditionally female" and not respected in contemporary society. Those traditionally 'male' values that feminists believe harmful to the common good community, nurturance, and relationships—excessive competition, for example—would be de-emphasized. (20)

Even as the importance of hearing women's voices gained prominence, new issues about being human also emerged. Women wanted to be heard, but their struggles for individual freedom would change a way of life forever. This early feminist criticism in literature asked that we go back and look at traditional literary works, looking for strong and individual feminine voices. At the same time, there was also a chance to look ahead, define or redefine what was needed as classic work by stating what was missing or needed for coming generations of writers and characters.

Both Holly and Register touch on the part of the feminist aesthetic that hints that a new humanism may be evolving. As women writers created characters that entered into the body of literary work, they showed women as individuals with struggles of their own. Register also quotes Wendy Martin in her article saying that, "A literary work should provide role-models, instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are 'self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men'" (20). These early critics, then, remind us that there is something missing from the body of literature when women's voices have not been heard as they should. In introducing these voices, they may also provide us important and necessary ideas to help us reexamine what it means to be a human.

Looking at what these critics have said, we can examine again what needed to be re-evaluated in writings about women. We can review how women and men wrote about women characters. We can also look at the role of critics as they examined the feminist aesthetic. The second edition of

Donovan's essays was issued with a new introduction in 1989; in the new edition, we can see the changes and evaluations shifting as years have passed to provide more societal choices and literary evaluations for women.

Donovan both repeats the strength of the early feminist aesthetic and offers new insight as the aesthetic changes. She says:

. . . Thus feminist criticism and the study of literature and history from a feminist point of view, are ideally forms of praxis. They should enable women—as readers and as writers—to break their culture of silence, to locate within a political spectrum, and to envisage and work toward alternatives. Moreover, the study of women's literature and art is inherently empowering for women because it strengthens our identity as women and thus creates a greater sense of political solidarity. (xiii)

In studying literature from a feminist perspective, the voices of women are heard; as more women are heard, others are encouraged to write. Having others share stories that clearly describe their world and a view of life from a woman's perspective, creates a new place of understanding and ultimately a new way of seeing things.

The strength of this aesthetic reaches out to educate others about the experience of women in the world, emphasizing that women are more than just in the background. Women are indeed individuals with voices. What they do as women and who they are as women reflect the strength of



individuals, but also reinforce and insist upon the importance of community and the need for nurturance and love. If the values of nurturance and love indicate feminine values, they may more importantly point towards an aesthetic for everyone, both men and women, in today's world.

Now that this early criticism has created a base of departure, we can see the shift in the feminist aesthetic. Both Marilyn French and Josephine Donovan provide some ideas suggesting that in the later part of the feminist movement we are seeing an evolution. Beyond the establishment of women's place and voices, we see a more encompassing vision for all humans.

Marilyn French provides this further thinking in her article "Is there a Feminist Aesthetic?" She reflects on the significance of women's art, especially the work of writers, examining the special qualities that women bring to their art. She discusses the importance of women's work and how it differs from what male writers do. One of her main theories stresses that the feminist aesthetic illustrates the importance of interdependence in life.

French comments:

Not only is each of us a complex network whose workings we barely understand, but each of us is connected to other people and ideas and things in equally complex ways. There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. Scientists are discovering more fully each decade that nothing dominates. (72)

French advocates a feminist aesthetic that encompasses a more integrated view of society. If men and women will now independently pursue their personal goals, where do the support roles in society fit? The traditionally feminine roles for women as supportive wives, mothers and caregivers provide an opportunity for further discussion. She suggests that the primary goal of self-discovery may not be the most important consideration. Cather's and Kingsolver's works provide women characters who have such roles but who are also strong women who are leaders, individuals, and equal partners in their worlds. This broader view shows how important women's work is and how a society that values this work is benefited.

In my discussion of Cather's work, I will show how the characters in her stories advance our thinking about women as individuals and their importance in all areas of society. In addition, I will also show the difficulties that arise for her strong women characters. With Kingsolver, I will discuss how her women characters act in a world changed by advancement and independence for women but with new problems for modern times.

Cather's work provides a variety of women characters who make different choices for their lives. With these characters, we are able to look back and see how women functioned during a time when the main choices for women were marriage and family. In My Ántonia, she tells the story of Ántonia Shimerda, a pioneer woman and her friend, Lena Lingard, frontier women who made different choices. In another of her novels, Song of the

Lark, Cather portrays a more vividly strong woman in Thea Kronberg, the main character in this novel. Cather's stories and characters provide a new view of the female experience; they were written for a popular fiction audience in America in the early 20th century. As Josephine Donovan says in After the Fall, "For also central in Cather . . . is the quest for individual autonomy and integrity, the quest of the new woman" (20). Cheri Register also describes using Cather's characters as examples, saying that My Ántonia can help students "' . . . realize that liberation involves hard choices; that it begins and ends with the self; that self knowledge depends upon contact with the real world'" (21). Cather's characters also fit the early feminist aesthetic as Marilyn French describes it. She says, "There are two fundamental, related principles that mark a work of art as feminist: first it approaches reality from a feminist perspective; second it endorses female experience"(69).

A critical part of the aesthetic, then, emphasizes strong and independent women. As strong women achieve in their lives, they must also learn to deal with the isolation from others that achievement sometimes involves, as Cather's work reveals. In comparison with Cather, I will then discuss Kingsolver's characters and their involvement with achieving and with nurturing. The aesthetic emphasizes the importance of expressing oneself as a woman because the female experience differs distinctly from the male experience. In addition, more women's written experiences need to become part of the literary mainstream to provide balance between male and female views. But at the same time we need to preserve the best aspects of

the feminine experience and bring them to equal prominence in literature and in society.

After Cather's time, and still in the late 20th century, women struggle to maintain independence and to have their voices heard. This struggle is not over and should not be minimized. Certainly the women's movement has progressed and many gains have been made. It is, however, necessary to examine another part of the aesthetic. Critic Janis Stout, in her book Strategies of Reticence, says about Cather's characters Thea Kronberg and Alexandra Bergson (Bergson is the main character in Cather's novel, O Pioneers):

. . . For both [Thea and Alexandra], their triumphs have meant absolute commitment, exhausting work, and a redirection of sexuality to make its great energies serve a large discipline. In the process of denying the satisfaction of the instinctual selves, they have suffered emotional impoverishment . . . For both Alexandra and Thea, the sexual, emotional self is not killed, but driven into deep submersion, where it cannot easily and directly be expressed. (103)

Examining Thea in depth, we find a woman who reaches her personal achievement goal, but loses part of herself in the struggle. So while Cather presents strong women characters, she does at the same time describe unhappy and alienated women like Thea Kronberg. We can praise Cather for

her characters who use independent thinking, who with drive and ambition throw aside emotional attachments that get in the way of their work. Thea achieves great success but gives up her personal life. This is something that men have easily done and not been condemned for, but it seems to be a more difficult problem when we talk about it for women.

In contrast, in turning from Cather's to Kingsolver's writing, we find that beyond the strong independent voice in the feminist aesthetic, something else is developing. Although women have gained recognition in careers and autonomy as individuals, they also begin to see that they are not necessarily whole without family, community, and nurturance. They also find they are still keepers and preservers, in large part, of these qualities for a sane world.

In Kingsolver's novel, Pigs in Heaven, Taylor and Alice Greer and Annawake search for connection. Everyone in the story finds out how they are interrelated and how much they need each other. The child, Turtle, brings people together. In this story, instead of independence, the characters are seeking stability, connection and each other.

Kingsolver's work demonstrates French's ideas and Donovan's revisions in stressing the importance of community and relationships. I believe, though, that I might find that this part of the aesthetic could only have come after independence for women has, in large measure, already been achieved. The return to interdependence probably could not have happened without the struggle for independence. Cather and others may have been the

ones who sacrificed their relationships to provide achievement so that others could then come along and question independence.

After looking at Kingsolver's writing, I want to look again at the larger definition of this feminist aesthetic that Marilyn French expresses as the special focus of women when she writes:

But in whatever ways the genius of the artist can devise, feminist art suggests that things are connected as well as divided, that a person is not always at war with herself or her world, that in fact people seek to live harmoniously with themselves and their world even though they can't control either. Feminist work often focuses on groups, community, people as part of a context, and helps to remind us of a reality alternative to the Western tradition of individualistic, alienated man, lonely in a hostile, aggressive world. (73)

In Cather's work we can still see that it is important to achieve something with the talent one has, whether man or woman. Cather brings notice and acclaim to her women characters, giving us plots that build on women's experiences to provide a strong core of stories about women. The work of a writer like Kingsolver adds her own women characters to the feminist aesthetic. She allows us to see that achievement may not be so important if there is no one to share it with and if in the end one does not belong to a greater whole.

Josephine Donovan again reinforces these ideas in her article "The New Feminist Moral Vision" and discusses this larger view of feminism saying that "feminism be seen not merely as a prescription for granting rights to women but a far broader vision"(171). She then discusses Robin Morgan's views about the need to examine this vision more thoroughly. Donovan says about Morgan's theory:

. . . that the new feminist moral vision is in many ways analogous to the vision of reality offered by the new physics. . . . The reason for this is that women have over the centuries developed an ethic that is appropriate to the world view that is emerging out of the new physics: they see in terms of relationships and in terms of environmental contexts. Moreover, women have been the custodians of humane values for centuries; . . . This ethic must become the governing morality in the modern world, she believes. (182-183)

From Cather we gain a vision that says that women are capable and have talent and wisdom for the whole society. After characters like those in Cather's work began to be heard and are still being heard, we have been able to look again at a larger view. Kingsolver tells that we need each other and that we should not and cannot live isolated from each other. Josephine Donovan, again in Feminist Theory, quotes Robin West who says: "We need to show that community, nurturance, responsibility, and the ethic of care are

values at least as worthy of protection as autonomy, self-reliance, and individualism" (194).

In subsequent chapters, I will further explore the characters and plots in the work of Cather and Kingsolver. These stories have shown and continue to show us the way of a world changed for the better as it accepts women as individuals, with hopes, dreams and desires of their own. In that exploration I will make comparisons between the Cather and Kingsolver and their characters and draw further conclusions about a feminist aesthetic.



## Chapter 2

### Willa Cather and the Rise of Women

Willa Cather provides women characters who are good examples for a discussion of modern women and the feminist aesthetic. These women characters struggle to find themselves in a patriarchal society and strive to create their own voices. Cather herself was not an outspoken feminist; according to Blanche Gelfant, "As an adult, she remained conspicuously silent on issues concerning women"(246). But she was certainly aware of the changes going on for women at this time, and her characters show the influences of changes occurring for women in the early 1900's. James Woodress says that the feminist activity was going on all around her in New York but she did not participate (236). She was, however, involved in her own struggles, and she used both her own experiences and the experiences of the women she knew to create these characters.

For the women in her novels, she drew on experience with her own friendships and acquaintances. Some of these women were pioneer women from Nebraska like Anna Pavelka and friends from Red Cloud like the Miner sisters. Later in her life, she had friendships with accomplished women and

used material from their lives—women like Olive Fremstad, the opera singer, the playwright Zöe Akins, and writers like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Sigrid Undset, and Sarah Orne Jewett (Gelfant 244-45). From her own struggles and from what she observed around her, she created successful and significantly strong women characters.

Three of Cather's strong women characters are Ántonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard in My Ántonia and Thea Kronberg in Song of the Lark. Lena and Thea provide good examples of the feminist aesthetic as women who follow their own desires and strive to create their own lives. Ántonia also follows her own desires but differs from Lena and Thea because her goal is to become a wife and mother. But I believe that Ántonia still fits within the feminist aesthetic because of her strong character and resolve. Woodress quotes Susan Rosowski who says “. . . that Ántonia is indeed an autonomous heroine. She goes her own way despite pressure from the male-dominated society she lives in”(Woodress 300). While Ántonia does stay within a more traditional role than Lena or Thea, she arrives there by her own determination and choices.

Ántonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard, two characters in My Ántonia, offer us authentic women's voices, women who find their own way in spite of many obstacles. In addition, their immigrant experience sets them apart from the daughters of American pioneer families and they struggle to overcome many difficulties. Lena and Ántonia both come from very poor

farm backgrounds where they struggle just to have enough to eat and have to overcome language and cultural differences as well. When their families need help with debts and expenses, they go to work in town to help out. Again, this sets them apart. As Jim observes in My Ántonia, even when a Black Hawk family was struggling, they would never allow their own daughters to go into service (199). So these young women were different and struggled to gain acceptance. Jim says, "The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like Antonia, been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new"(198). Their responsibility and their work gave them experience with the realities of the world and from that they gained self-confidence and independence. I believe Cather related to these women because they were as she was, somewhat different. Cather knew that she did not want a conventional woman's life and did not want to be controlled by others. She admired the individualism of the hired girls and their adventurousness. These were not the pampered girls of the town folk, but responsible and talented women who accepted the challenges in their lives. Their strengths allowed them to make positive choices for themselves and their families as they became important influences in their pioneer communities.

In the early part of the story, a young Ántonia, twelve years old, emerges as a bold and outgoing individual. She and Jim are neighbors and become close friends. They share many experiences of farm life on the plains

of Nebraska in the late 1800's and later on, small town life as well. Jim understands that *Ántonia* is different because of her immigrant status, her beauty and her independent nature. Early in the book, Jim teaches *Ántonia* to speak English; he learns then that, "*Ántonia* had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known"(30). *Ántonia* remembers much about her life in Europe and wants to compare everything in her new life with that experience; hence she shares stories with Jim about her life in Bohemia. He goes on to say later, "Much as I liked *Ántonia*, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; . . ."(43). Because of her age, and because she has seen a different world, she feels superior to Jim. But she does come to respect him for his knowledge of the countryside, and Jim admires and respects this young woman, who speaks her own mind.

*Ántonia's* independent character traits emerge early and develop as circumstances force her into experiences that are both difficult and self-developing. Early on she becomes a joint keeper of her family, working the farm with her brother Ambrosch after her father commits suicide. She is only fifteen at the time. After she takes up this work, Jim comes to see if she'll go to school with him but *Ántonia* tells him, "'I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. . .'"(123). Hard times force *Ántonia* to take up the chores of the field that were not required for most young girls. She may not have really wanted to do the work, but she understands that she can and must do the work to help her family survive.

Working in the fields alongside her brother adds to her confidence. She knows that she has accomplished something by doing the same work as Ambrosch and helping provide for the family. She says, "My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm" (123). Ambrosch does not treat her well for doing the work, but she overlooks this shortcoming in her desire to create something for herself and the family. She seems to derive some strength and enjoyment from it and tells Jim, "'Oh, better I like to work out-of doors than in a house!' she used to sing joyfully. 'I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man'"(138). Jim's family, the Burdens, thinks that this is not proper work for a woman and that it will ruin her.

With *Ántonia*, Cather deliberately provides "male-world" experiences. As she did in her own early life in Nebraska, Cather tried out male roles and male characteristics. Cather, in observing these immigrant girls taking on male activities, working in the fields, and earning extra money to support the family, probably saw role models for her own life. Cather admired autonomy and independence and wanted those qualities herself. Gelfant says, "From childhood on, she assumed considerable freedom: she rode her pony where she wished through the open farmlands; she spoke her mind and was respected for her intelligence. . . . To maintain her freedom in the future, she decided early upon renunciation of a traditional woman's role. . . ." (240). Cather then enjoyed her freedom from the traditional constraints of "lady-

like" pastimes and characteristics. She herself was a daughter of a respectable Red Cloud merchant, and yet she probably realized early on that she would never become like the women she knew from town. I believe she identified with women like *Ántonia* and *Lena*, because they were different, because they were strong and more independent than the models from her own family and friends. She could admire these women; they were capable of taking on the challenges of life as well as a man could. She incorporated these qualities of independence in her own struggle for accomplishment.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather provides several pages of commentary in her section on "The Hired Girls." Jim describes the qualities of the immigrant girls and acknowledges them as important characters. Jim says first, "I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid. If I told my schoolmates that *Lena Lingard's* grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English" (202). Cather knew that these women were showing strength, talent and independence, worthy characteristics. Later Jim says, "I always knew I should live long enough to see my country girls come into their own and they have"(201). She lets her readers know that the talents and backgrounds of these women would allow them to do well, and they do. *Lena* accomplishes a career, and *Ántonia* marries and has the family that she wants. *Ántonia* did not deliberately choose the rigors of the outdoor life and the pursuits of men, but she was able to accomplish the challenges that life presented. Cather

shows qualities of self-reliance and strength in these young women; at the same time, I believe, that she learned from them as well about overcoming criticism for being different. She also shows them being rewarded for their hard work and accomplishments. Jim reflects his point of view saying, "To-day the best that a harassed Black Hawk merchant can hope for is to sell provisions and farm machinery and automobiles to the rich farms where that first crop of stalwart Bohemian and Scandinavian girls are now the mistresses"(201).

As the characters lives shift from the country to the town and the young people grow up, circumstances change for Ántonia, her friend, Lena, and Jim Burden. Ántonia comes to town and becomes a cook for the Burden's next door neighbors in town, the Harlings. Here Ántonia reclaims some of her "womanly" ways and also develops some of her other talents. She becomes a good cook and quickly learns to speak English well. When the oldest Harling daughter Frances teaches everyone to dance, she says "Ántonia would make the best dancer among us"(175). Ántonia comes into her own at this time; Jim Burden describes her when he talks about her relationship with Mrs. Harling. We see a clearly defined character in the young Ántonia:

There was a basic harmony between Ántonia and her mistress. They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people. They loved children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the

earth. They liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see people eat it; to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them. They ridiculed conceited people and were quick to help unfortunate ones. Deep down in each of them there was a kind hearty joviality, a relish of life, and not over-delicate, but very invigorating. I never tried to define it, but I was distinctly conscious of it . . . . (180)

Again we follow *Ántonia's* development from her own family where she struggled to find her place and then becomes a hired girl to help her family by earning money. When her father dies, she loses the person that she loves best; she lacks closeness to her mother or her brother. When she moves in with the Harlings, she is also searching for a role model for her own life. Mrs. Harling becomes that role model for *Ántonia*. Mrs. Harling is accomplished in traditional nurturing activities and likes to cook and take care of children; *Ántonia* also succeeds in these accomplishments. After working with the Harlings, *Ántonia* develops a vision of her own future in part, I believe, to create for her own children a happier childhood than she had herself.

In this way, *Ántonia* does depart from the early feminist aesthetic. Though she finds her own voice, has own her opinions and has succeeded for her family and for the Harlings, her vision is to create her own family. From her memory of Bohemia, her Father's love, and his happy life there she



wants to preserve and create her vision in a family and to give her own children a happy childhood. She wants to create something different from her own parents' unhappy marriage. Working for the Harlings, she can see that she has the skills to take care of a husband, a household and children in a way that will make her happy.

Later on though, after Antonia leaves the Harlings, her inexperience with the larger world does lead her to choose the wrong man for a husband. Larry Donovan, a railroad man, woos her and promises marriage. She goes away to Denver expecting him to marry her, but he lies to her about his work and his intentions, abandoning her and leaving her pregnant. She comes home to Nebraska, hurt and heart-broken, but with enough courage to go on because of the child.

She stays at the family farm but is too embarrassed to see her friends in town. However, the experience has helped her to grow because she rediscovers what is important to her. She loves the life in the country and was not happy living in town or in the big city of Denver. She understands that she might be able to create the life that she does want. When she does choose a husband again, she chooses a man who will support her in a life on a farm. It is interesting that she chooses someone, Anton Cuzack, who gives up his preferred life in the city to be with Antonia.

Antonia is a strong woman character and a role model who exemplifies characteristics of the feminist aesthetic even though she is not solidly within it. She does not strive for an independent life or a successful

career as Lena and Thea do, but she does strongly pursue her own likes and dislikes, creating her own life as she goes. Gelfant says that although Cather “. . . did not espouse feminist ideals, she served them by creating images of strong and resourceful women upon whom the fate of a new country depended—characters like . . . *Ántonia Shimerda* in *My Ántonia*”(246). A character like *Ántonia* stands out among other women characters because of her opinions, her independence, her reasoning and the choices that she makes. Woodress says, “She is proud of her ability to work in the fields like a man; she refuses to give up going to dances when Mr. Harling issues an ultimatum; she doesn’t worry that working for Wick Cutter will tarnish her reputation. She makes no effort to hold Larry Donovan when he deserts her but returns home to have and keep her illegitimate daughter”(300). *Ántonia* makes choices and learns from her mistakes and grows as a woman and as a person.

*Ántonia* becomes strong by asserting her independence, being molded by her experiences, and by accepting both her failures and her triumphs. We understand that she makes her choices based on what she knows about herself and the world around her. In her first steps, in her own decision-making, she chose a man who did not love her or want her. Even though *Ántonia* does not achieve in a career and make a totally independent life for herself, she is as Woodress says, “. . . a character a woman can admire”(300). She recovers from her mistake and goes on to find what she does want. Her

goal is to live on a farm and to have her own family. She finds Anton and creates a good life for herself on the farm with her own children.

Lena Lingard, *Ántonia's* friend, is very different from *Ántonia* even though they start out together as immigrant girls growing up on a farm. Later she also moves to town as *Ántonia* does. When she comes to town as a young girl, she has already made her mind up about what she wants. She has learned the dressmaking trade and plans to work and take care of herself. She is a pretty young woman and is asked right away by her friends about getting married. She offers a quick opinion: "'I don't want to marry Nick, or any other man,' Lena murmured. 'I've seen a good deal of married life, and I don't care for it. I want to be so I can help my mother and the children at home, and not have to ask lief of anybody'"(162). Lena does not want to recreate a family life for herself as *Ántonia* does. She wants to be free and independent. Lena enjoys her freedom in town and not being anyone's special girl. She flaunts her independent ways, urging *Ántonia* to get away and visit her in her rented rooms.

*Ántonia*, Lena, and their friend, Tiny, are aware of how different they are in town as immigrant girls struggling to find their place. Each had families that could not offer them position or money, but each had to find her own way. Jim comments more on these immigrant girls and describes them as a remarkable group of women, "Physically there were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigour which, when they got over their first shyness on coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and

freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women"(198). Again, I believe that Cather thought that these women, Lena, Antonia, and Tiny were role models for her in the way that the conventional farm and town wives were not. Because they had to rely on themselves and their own talents, they were more developed as individuals and as women. Along the way, they had chances to make some of their own decisions and act on them.

Later, when Jim Burden goes to school in Lincoln, he finds Lena there as well. She has her own business as a dressmaker and her own life. She seeks Jim out, and they begin a relationship. However, Lena already knows what she wants, and that does not include any man. She tells Jim, "'Why, I'm not going to marry anybody. Didn't you know that?'"(290) They talk further and Lena says, "Well, it's mainly because I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers, even the wild ones. They begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to nobody"(291). She remembers her own desperate early home life on a poverty-stricken farm. Both she and Antonia suffered in poor conditions, sometimes with very little to eat or with no warm clothes. In Lena's family, every year a new baby was born—not an experience that she wants to repeat for herself. One night she tells Jim that she remembers, "home as a place where there were always too many

children, a cross man and work piling up around a sick woman”(291). She knows that her life will not be her own if she marries.

When Lena moves to town, a career choice presents itself to her, and she learns the dressmaking trade. Later, in Lincoln, she owns her own business. She likes men, but Jim is her only serious romance in the book. Their relationship ends with Jim going off to finish school on the east coast. Later in the story, Lena does realize her dream of being a successful career woman, and Jim says, “Lena. . . was now the leading dressmaker of Lincoln, much respected in Black Hawk. Lena gave her heart away when she felt like it, but she kept her head for her business and had got on in the world”(298). She becomes an accomplished business woman, achieving the life that she wants.

Lena’s choices are deliberate, and, again, she knows what she wants. As *Antonia* does, she makes her choices as an independent person. But she is different from *Antonia* in not wanting the everyday responsibilities of caring for a husband and children. Even so she has regrets. She is fond of her family back on the farm and misses them a great deal. She cries when she sees Jim and tells him about seeing her brothers in town. But to create the life that she wants, she understands that she must break from them. She wants to help her family and always sends them money for support, but she also wants freedom from caring for others or being under the control of others. In marrying, she believes her life will not be her own; then she is very firm in

her resolve not to marry. Antonia and Lena take different paths; Antonia finds happiness in marriage and Lena, in independence.

Lena then, is the kind of character Cather would relate to and easily create, understanding Lena's desire for freedom. Lena thinks for herself, makes her own choices and carries them out. As critic Janis Stout says, "Cather herself lived through her own career, pouring her life into her art. . ." (94). As much as we know about Cather, she was never interested in getting married herself, or in having children. The main emotional support she had in her adult life was from other women. Because Cather was an independent woman herself, she could portray the life of the new women when many women could not or did not easily make that kind of choice.

Though Lena is an independent character, Thea, in Cather's novel The Song of the Lark, best represents the modern woman that Cather herself aspired to be and wanted to portray in her work. Thea reaches the pinnacle of her career when it was not easy for a woman to have her own life, much less a successful career in a man's world.

Thea grows up in the small town of Moonstone, Colorado, and has a conventional childhood. As the piano-playing daughter with talent, Thea takes lessons from Professor Wunsch, the town's music teacher. Thea must go for lessons because she has talent and her parents support her in her talent. Wunsch has his own thoughts on his pupil, "It was his pupil's power of application, her rugged will, that interested him" (27).

As Thea emerges as an individual of talent, she develops both her exterior and interior self. In this part of her life at home, she has many relationships with her family and her friends. But as she turns twelve, she begins a new part of her life separate from others with a room of her own:

The acquisition of this room was the beginning of a new era in Thea's life. It was one of the most important things that ever happened to her. Hitherto, except in summer, when she could be out-of-doors, she had lived in constant turmoil; the family, the day school, the Sunday-School. The clamour about her drowned the voice within herself. (51)

Even at this early time, Thea senses her difference from others and realizes her own talent. She believes that she has the will to accomplish her goals. Wunsch, her piano teacher, and Dr. Archie, the town doctor, are the two people who guide her towards imagining and later creating the actuality of her artistic and autonomous life. "She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. She brought everything to it and it answered her; happiness consisted of the backward and forward movement of herself" (70). Here Thea develops as a person and distinguishes early on what she is about and how to recognize it.

Thea begins to understand her talent and how it sets her apart from the people in her small town. She too knows, as Lena did, that she must ultimately break away. Yet in Moonstone, the people who care about her give

her enormous support. Unlike Antonia, and Lena, who had to support others and fend for themselves, Thea receives support from friends and family. Critic Sharon O'Brien, in her introduction to the book, describes the passage where Thea acquires her own room:

Thea does not create this space for reverie and meditation by herself: her aunt Tillie helps her paper the room, her brother Gus lays down the carpet, her mother 'gave her an old walnut dresser with a broken mirror,' and Ray Kennedy offered a railroad lantern for nighttime reading. So, Cather suggests, the creative self does not evolve in isolation—there are gifts, legacies, inheritances that contribute to its development. (xiii)

Thea does not come into her own simply because of her own will. She also needs the comfort and support of her family and friends. They support her; they also live through her. But she is driven and really does not acknowledge their help in proportion to the support that she receives. She does care about the people in Moonstone who love her and support her, but her career is all important. She realizes the importance of the people who have helped her, keeping in contact with her friends and family, but she does not really return this support. Ultimately, her self-absorption and her career keep her from reaching out to people.

At this point in the story, Thea's characteristics are set. Her family understands her nature. Her parents consider her future after her music



teacher Wunsch can no longer teach her and decide to let her drop out of school. She becomes a music teacher herself then. They also consider Thea's courtship with Ray Kennedy, an older railroad man who adores her. He is only waiting until she reaches the age of seventeen so that he can ask her to marry him. They can understand that Thea might not settle down in Moonstone. As her parents discuss this possibility, Mr. Kronberg speculates that Thea will not get married. He says, "Thea's not the marrying kind. . . . She's too peppery and too fond of having her own way. Then she's got to be ahead in everything. That kind make good church-workers and missionaries and school-teachers, but they don't make good wives" (90).

Cather makes us very aware of the constraints for women at this time in America. There were good wives and mothers, and there were the "others" who did not make good wives and mothers but made a life for themselves in the professions acceptable for women at that time. So while Thea's independence and talent are admired and encouraged, she also realizes that she will be giving up something as well to pursue this dream for her life in music. She also now experiences her first major loss of an important relationship in the death of her suitor, Ray Kennedy. However, Ray wills her the money to leave Moonstone and provides her a way to study music in Chicago. At the early age of seventeen, she learns that the loss of someone she cares about can further her own desires.

As Thea leaves Moonstone on the train to Chicago, she thinks about her family, about Ray, and her future in music. At this point, she must have

understood that her dream, while supported and admired by others, was hers alone to pursue. She thinks to herself:

But, of course, it was herself and her own adventures that mattered to her. If youth did not matter so to itself, it would never have the heart to go on. Thea was surprised that she did not feel a deeper sense of loss at leaving her old life behind her. It seemed, on the contrary, as she looked out at the yellow desert speeding by, that she had left very little. Everything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her. She lacked nothing. (138)

She understands clearly that she is choosing her career. With that choice, she knows that she will be relying primarily on herself. When Thea arrives in Chicago, she begins her music career in earnest; we are offered a portrait of an artist in development. She does build a community of support in Chicago in this early stage of her career. Mr. Harsanyi, her piano teacher, and his wife become her friends, encouraging her in her music and her personal development. She rents a room from Mrs. Lorch and Mrs. Anderson, a mother and daughter who also become her friends. They offer her advice and support. Starting out, she still reaches out to others, needing the support and care of a small group. Harsanyi begins to teach her piano only to discover her beautiful voice. After studying her progress in piano, and the development of her character, he helps her understand that she would reach her goals best by becoming a singer. He says to her one day:

I believe that the strongest need of your nature is to find yourself, to emerge *as* yourself. Until I heard you sing, I wondered how you were to do this, but it has grown clearer to me every day. . . . What you want more than anything else in the world is to be an artist; is that true? (183)

She now becomes obsessed with her goal to become an artist, and she has found someone else who understands that goal; another successful artist identifies the desire for success in her. The next part of her development becomes even more obvious to her. She must pursue her goal of a singing career at all costs, to its end. She also understands her own obsession. Thea comprehends her own power to achieve her goal and goes over it as she rides the train back to Moonstone after a summer in Chicago. "She smiled—though she was ashamed of it—with the natural contempt of strength for weakness, with the sense of physical security which makes the savage merciless. . . . She was going to have a few things before she died"(190). After her training in Chicago and the change she makes to work with Bowers, the voice teacher, Thea herself is different. She becomes determined, but she also develops a hardness and toughness in order to survive. She begins to cut herself off from involvements with others; she steels herself for the thing she wants most.

When she arrives back in Moonstone, her changes and her family's changes create a different atmosphere for them all. At this point Thea truly realizes how much she has shifted in her position in her life. She is able to

tell Dr. Archie, her old friend, what she really feels, “‘I only want impossible things,’ she said roughly. ‘The others don’t interest me’”(211). When she leaves Moonstone at the end of the summer, the break is complete. She weeps bitterly on the train to Chicago. Then the narrator asserts, “it was all behind her and she knew she would never cry like that again. People live through such pain only once; pain comes again but it finds a tougher surface” (214).

In her choice, she closes herself off from the pain of separation. She knows that she will always choose in favor of her career, and that will cause her to separate from the people who care about her. She begins now to substitute her career for her relationships with others. This distancing allows her to put emotional life into her work and close herself off from others. She knows that she will not be able to be involved with anyone but she will be able to avoid any pain. She now frees herself for her odyssey as a grown woman, on a quest for the highest in her career.

Back in Chicago, Thea is not happy. She is disconnected. She does not like her teacher, the people she works with, or the places that she lives. She changes her lodgings because they are too far from her new teacher, but she loses the friends that she had there. Her new teacher, Bowers, is excellent, “. . . he has all the qualities which go to make a good teacher—except generosity and warmth” (218). She gets the professional help she needs but not any emotional support or friendship. She also loses Harsanyi as a teacher and finds out that he and his wife are also moving away. She goes to visit

them and tells Mrs. Harsanyi, “. . .it seems to me that what I learn is just *to dislike*. I dislike so much and so hard that it tires me out. I’ve got no heart for anything”(224). She is lonely and lost in the big city with only her talent to comfort her.

Then she meets Fred Ottenburg; she knows that he is something different for her. He is a suitor and an equal, not a teacher or mentor like Ray Kennedy, Dr. Archer, Hasaranyi and Bowers have been. She realizes he could be a serious sweetheart different from any that she has known so far. Fred takes her under his care. He likes music and women and finds Thea intriguing. At this point in the novel, she has accomplished all that she can with her teacher Bowers and decides to go on a trip with Fred.

She falls in love with Fred but finds out later that he is married and cannot offer her full emotional support. But Thea is not interested in marriage either. Sharon Foster says, “Thea’s self-dependence also involves rejection of the womanly roles of wifehood and motherhood.” And further, “Thea’s dissent from the normality of matrimonial commitment derives partly from her dedication to her own individual development and partly from her urge towards self-preservation”(170). She does not want to be distracted in any way from her work; she does not want anyone to tell her what to do. While she may want Fred, she realizes that a full commitment would take away from her work and even allow Fred to have control over her. Again Foster says, “Even with Fred, whom she both likes and respects, she is always conscious of the threat of male manipulating. . .”(171). Thea

wants to be the one to make the decisions for herself and for her career, not wanting anyone to tell her what she should do.

Even though she cannot finally resolve the problem of Fred at this point in the novel, she does find her true creative self in her trip to the Southwest. She finds inspiration in the high desert country and in the artistry of the work they find in abandoned Indian dwellings of the Southwest. All of her teachers so far have been men, and she has attempted to model herself after these hard-driving men. In the southwestern landscape she finds peace and then inspiration. On her first night there she goes to sleep, “. . . she felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world” (256). Sharon O’Brien says, “Thea abandons her urge to control and manage her life”(xiv). This important step leads Thea to an exploration of the different kind of art done by the Native American artists.

Cather also took a similar trip to the Southwest mid-way in her life. Sharon O’Brien describes Cather’s revelation on viewing the Native American artists’ works: “Cather saw in their decorated earthen vessels the harmonious integration of gender and vocation she wanted in her own life, perhaps precisely because the Indian culture she valued did not possess the romantic, individualistic, Western concept of the ‘artist’”(x). Thea too had molded herself into the traditional Western patriarchal artist. She left much of herself, her community and her nurturance behind in her pursuit of achievement. The Indian pottery drew Thea and Cather back to the everyday pursuit of art and the simple creation of everyday beauty. This art, done by

women, was created for practical use, to be used daily and not for the creator's personal recognition. This knowledge gave them both energy to go on in their own lives, understanding that art could be an integral part of life.

But neither Cather or Thea really changes. O'Brien again says, "Not only do Cather and her heroine take something that does not belong to them, but both are using the art of a communal (and eventually colonized) culture—which is anonymous, domestic, ritualistic—to empower an individualistic notion of the artist that is anything but anonymous"(xvi). They both derive inspiration, but they continue in their pursuits, literary and operatic, that bring them the singular fame and recognition that they desire.

Thea returns to Europe and success again, putting her career ahead of everything. When her Mother is dying in America, she cannot go home to visit because she must sing in Europe at a critical turning point in her career. In her love relationships, she is involved with married men who are not available to her, both Fred and a singer that she meets in Europe. She is able to advance in her career; she becomes the great singer she hopes to be.

When she returns to sing in New York, she renews her friendship with Dr. Archie. He has helped her in her career, and they are still able to tell each other their deepest feelings. After seeing her in New York, he tells her, "'I'm afraid you don't have enough personal life, outside your work, Thea.' . . . Thea replies, 'My dear doctor, I don't have any. Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does'"(380).

Thea and Fred do marry, but it is not central to the story. Thea's triumph in her chosen career is the focal point. Cather gives us a model of a modern woman who pursues her talents and desires to the highest point. She does not compromise anything because of the demands that others put on her. This unique and admirable character shows us much about professional development and accomplishment for a woman.

These three women characters demonstrate the feminist aesthetic well. Antonia and Lena persevere, survive, and prosper from humble and difficult beginnings. Antonia maintains her individuality but thrives with her family around her, taking joy in a husband, children and farm life. Lena flees from the ties of family and what she perceives as the burden of motherhood and marriage. Thea achieves, in the highest way, in a professional career.

These characters offer much as role models and as examples of modern women. They also allow us to reflect both on what it means to sacrifice one's personal life for achievement as well as giving unselfishly of oneself in order to preserve nurturing values. Lena and Thea show strength of character, autonomy and accomplishment in their lives. Antonia also shows strength and independence but does not pursue a career outside of her home. Cather herself was more like Lena and Thea, a successful career woman, an example of the feminist aesthetic that gives women a voice. Yet even as she gave us the outstanding voices of Lena and Thea, she left a lasting impression in the character of Antonia. She lived, created and demonstrated the advance of women, but she also looked back with some ambivalence to someone like



Antonia, a preserver of traditional feminine values. As Gelfant describes Cather's strivings, she says that she successfully avoided a woman's expected fate, but goes on to say, "The costs to Cather were not negligible, . . ." (240). Even as Cather and her character, Thea, forged ahead in the pursuit of individual goals, they realized they had paid a price for their success. We admire their success, but we also understand that they forego something in the singular pursuit of that success.

## Chapter 3

### The Women of Pigs in Heaven and the Search for Community

Over seventy-five years have passed between the work of Cather in the early twentieth century America and that of Barbara Kingsolver in the late twentieth century. During this time, radical changes have taken place for women in America. Though Cather herself and her women characters were ahead of their time in their striving, Kingsolver's modern women represent the current conditions for women in America. Kingsolver in her book of essays, High Tide in Tucson, says, "I'm told it is terribly hard to balance career and family and particularly, creativity. And it is"(95). Though women have made strides in careers and gained financial independence in this time, they still struggle to balance their families, their work, and their relationships. Kingsolver's characters in Pigs in Heaven provide a forum for this continued discussion of independence and interdependence.

The characters in Pigs in Heaven provide a positive view of the strong belief in caring that exemplifies a current feminist aesthetic. As Marilyn French discussed in her article, this new feminist aesthetic emphasizes caring and community as an alternative to the traditional achievement of western

culture. As French says, “. . . feminist art focuses on people as wholes; the human is made up of body and emotion as well as mind and spirit; she is also part of a community, connected to others; . . .”(70). The values of caring and what it means to be human require more examination at this critical time in society. Achievement is an important part of life for men and for women, but the values of caring and nurturance may be equally as important.

Alice and Taylor Greer, the two main women characters in Pigs in Heaven exemplify independent and caring women. They have struggled in their lives, yet they are secure in the knowledge of themselves as individuals. Alice's husband left her when her daughter Taylor was a baby, and she struggled to raise Taylor as a single mother. Taylor too develops as an independent young woman and leaves home early to find her own life. These women both value their own voices, but they also need and understand their connection to others. Together, they form a loving and committed family, resilient in their own right. They need each other, but their dependence does not outweigh their independence.

While Cather's characters represent the qualities of striving, achieving and reaching their goals, Kingsolver's women show us more about the importance of relationships. In these relationships, we see the characters interacting with acceptance, protection, love, and nurturing. In addition to their commitment to family, Alice and Taylor both have jobs and support themselves but do not have professional careers. Kingsolver does not place any special emphasis on their work. I believe that this reflects the acceptance

of working women in today's world. Annawake Fourkiller, the young Native American lawyer, represents the driven professional woman character in the story. For Annawake, work controls her life, and she has failed in her relationships with others. She reminds us of Thea, striving in her achievements as she closes herself off from others in her quest for success. We learn the reasons behind her striving and find her trying to heal her own personal wound and her families' wound in pursuing the case of the adopted child Turtle. However, in the novel, we also follow the changes in this character, watching her become a different person as a result of working on Turtle's case. Annawake finally has to examine her own personal difficulties with other people. Later in the novel, she begins to interact with the people she cares about and starts to heal emotionally.

The story begins with Alice Greer's ruminations as she begins to realize that her marriage to her husband Harland is definitely over. The sentence, "Women on their own run in Alice's family" introduces the novel (3). Alice grew up on a farm with a formidable but less than personable mother, Minerva Stamper, who raised hogs on her own. Alice wants to be different from her mother and have a life that is not so full of loneliness. Alice leaves home to marry an adventurous and ultimately unreliable man, Foster Greer, who abandons her after she has a baby. Right away, though, she realizes that she has come away with a better deal, "... she'd known Foster long enough to know a good trade when she saw one, him for a baby. He had given her fresh

air . . .” (24). Like Lena and Thea, Alice finds that men and marriage can be a less than positive experience.

In motherhood, however, Alice finds something that had been lacking in her own upbringing:

She believed that motherhood done fiercely and well  
would end her family’s jinx of solitude; Alice threw  
herself into belief in her daughter as frankly as Minerva  
had devoted herself to hogs. But kids don’t stay with you  
if you do it right. It’s one job where, the better you are, the  
more surely you won’t be needed in the long run. (24)

She understands the trade-off that she makes. She will love her daughter the right way and give her the love, attention, praise, and nourishment needed to create an independent person. In creating an independent and well-loved person, she will form a bond based on respect and sharing, breaking the cycle of isolation and distance.

Taylor Greer, her daughter, turns out to be the independent-minded woman that Alice knew she would become. As a young woman, Taylor is in pursuit of her own dreams, traveling across the country. When she stops in Oklahoma one night for coffee, a woman asks her to take a young child. She accepts this child into her life, raises her on her own and loves the child deeply. The other parts of her life, her work and relationships, are separate and important, but not as important as the raising of the child. In this way, Taylor reminds us of *Antonia*, whose children are very important to her.

Like Antonia, Taylor seems to get back as much as she gives in her caring of children. Antonia's family makes her whole as a person. She achieves her desire to create a happy childhood for her children, in part to make up for her own unhappy childhood. She gives them what she was not able to receive in her own family and in doing so, completes her own vision of the life that she wants. Taylor, instead, repeats the pattern of love and acceptance that she received from her mother, then extends it to an adopted Indian child that she did not choose.

The main narrative begins when the child, Turtle, witnesses a near-fatal accident. Taylor and Turtle are vacationing at Hoover Dam when Turtle sees a man falling below the dam. They become involved in the rescue of the fallen man, Lucky Buster, and become first local, and then national celebrities. This leads to their being on the Oprah Winfrey show where Taylor reveals, on national television, Turtle's history of being abandoned in Oklahoma. At this same time, Annawake, the Indian lawyer in Oklahoma, Cherokee country, sees the program, realizing that the child's adoption by a white woman may be illegal under the Indian Child Welfare Act. The Indian Child Welfare Act protects a Native American child by notifying other members of their family so that children may be raised by their tribe. Annawake sees Turtle's case as both as an opportunity for her professionally, as well as righting an injustice that has been repeatedly done to Native Americans. We also learn that her twin brother, Gabriel, was taken away from her family

when they were children while their Mother was ill—a great source of guilt and pain to Annawake and her siblings.

Annawake, like Alice and Taylor Greer, is an independent woman too, but her work dominates her life. She has struggled hard to become a lawyer and she has, like Thea Kronberg, paid a price for success. As she mulls over taking the case, she thinks of her own life and her pursuit of injustices in the world, “In that air-conditioned universe of mute law books she was terrified that she might someday fail to recognize her own life. You can’t just go through life feeding cats, pretending you’re not one of the needy yourself” (61). Annawake, like Thea, has substituted work for her personal life. She pursues justice for others, but neglects her own emotional life, pushing aside her pain and isolation so that she won’t have to deal with it. Instead, she becomes obsessed with finding the true story of Turtle. She says that she wants to pursue it because of a noble goal to help Native Americans. But she also seeks to fill an emotional hole in her own life.

Though she is not as consciously aware of it as she thinks, her goal is to save a child to make up for the lost child in her own family. Her own brother, Gabriel, was adopted out of the family when their Mother had to be placed in the hospital because of alcoholism. Her anger at the adoption drives her effort to return Turtle to her Indian family. But more importantly, it has worked to keep her away from facing the responsibility of being emotionally involved with others and being in a meaningful relationship herself. She has held others at arm’s length to get where she wanted to be. While she

claims that she understands this case, she is not considering all the aspects of it. She has lost sight of her human caring and drives a hard bargain that is damaging rather than healing. When she wants to pursue the case she goes to her boss and tries to justify taking the case. Her boss, Franklin Turnbow, tells her:

“No matter what her story is, a lot of hearts are involved.”

“I know,” Annawake says again, but this is one thing Franklin doesn’t believe she can truly know. She isn’t a mother.” (67)

As Annawake becomes involved in the pursuit of her noble cause over consideration for the people who might be affected, she also brings into the story an interaction with her tribe, the Cherokees. Her involvement with the tribe brings the reader into the Native American world, and she contemplates her own tribal identity as well. Further along in her discussion with Franklin, they talk about this connection to the tribe. Annawake recalls that when she was in law school she would “. . . always dream about the water in Tenkiller. All those perch down there you could catch, any time, you know? . . . I’ve never been without that”(67). Franklin agrees with Annawake about the importance of belonging to the tribe, that it is always foremost in his thoughts. He isn’t pure-blooded like Annawake:

. . . yet he isn’t white because he can’t think of one single generalization about white people that he knows to be



true. He can think of half a dozen about Cherokees:

They're good to their mothers. They know what's planted  
in their yards. They give money to their relatives,  
whether or not they're going to use it wisely. (68)

This recurring discussion of tribal issues provides a central focus in the book. An emphasis on a return to community is reinforced often. This theory relates to the interconnected spirit of the aesthetic; it uses French's idea again that, "Feminist work often focuses on groups, community, people as part of a context, and helps to remind us of a reality alternative to the Western tradition of individualistic, alienated man, lonely in a hostile, aggressive world"(73).

When Taylor is forced to take Turtle away from their community in Tucson, everyone suffers. They are missed as well as needed at home. Their lives away are lessened without the support of a community. The health of the individual relates to a connection with community; the whole community contributes to the health of the individual. Kingsolver in her essays describes the need for community when raising children, "They thrive best when their upbringing is the collective joy and responsibility of families, neighborhoods, communities and nations"(104).

Before Annawake can talk again with Taylor, Taylor takes Turtle, leaving town. Annawake must then talk with Taylor's boyfriend Jax, who is unhappy about Taylor's and Turtle's forced absence. He cannot understand why Annawake would cause this much pain for them all. Jax and Annawake

begin a long discussion about the white American view of life in comparison with the Native American view of life and how it might relate it to Turtle's own life.

Annawake tells him the Cherokee story of the bad boys who are turned into pigs and become "The Six Pigs in Heaven"(87). The boys in the story think only of themselves and the fun they can have, neglecting their duties to the community. Their mothers punish them and the boys complain, saying that they are being treated like pigs. Annawake says, "And the spirits listened, . . . . They figured, 'Well, a mother knows best,' and they turned the boys into pigs." (88) Jax says, "So that's your guiding myth. Do right by your people or you'll be a pig in heaven." Annawake confirms that, "Do right by your people" is their major guiding myth and then she questions Jax. "What are yours?" Jax mentions the American myth which encourages individualism. Annawake finishes his response for him saying, "Your culture is one long advertisement for how to treat yourself to the life you really deserve. Whether you actually deserve it or not" (88). Annawake suggests that the individualistic myth and Taylor's own selfishness keep Turtle away from her rightful place in the tribe. Of course, we also know that neglect by members of the tribe has caused Turtle to be away from the tribe in the first place.

By presenting these two views, Kingsolver describes the opposing forces in the story—that of the traditional Western culture with its individualistic values and the Native American community that preserves community and interdependence in a modern world. Yet, in this story,

neither view seems to have all the answers. Only when they join forces to help each other and the child do the best solutions emerge. These themes of independence and the struggle for community interweave throughout the story. Individuals search for their own life as they also try to figure out Turtle's fate.

For the main women characters, this struggle is well-illustrated. Taylor, Alice and Annawake have achieved independence, yet they also value the interaction of community. Kingsolver describes the dilemma of independence within a community in her own essays, " . . . from living in a town that listened on party lines, I learned both the price and value of community"(42). While independence and community are both important, the balance between them challenges the preservation of individuality while interacting with others. Alice values her independence; she raises a child well on her own. She shows Taylor how to be independent; Taylor continues that tradition with Turtle. Taylor has created strong bonds with her friends because she understands the importance of relationships. Even with her independence and resourcefulness, through her struggles with Turtle, she establishes community to bring meaning to her own life, to her child's life.

Taylor receives wide support from her community of friends in Tucson. When she moves away to Seattle to stay in hiding from Annawake and the Indian litigation, she comes face-to-face with the reality of losing that network of support. She runs out of money, losing contact with the friends who could help her. Constrained by a tight budget and no extra time, she

soon realizes that in protecting Turtle, she has also damaged her by keeping her away from the people who care about them. Being a good mother may not really be enough.

Alice has a strong attachment to Taylor; as her own second marriage ends, she can turn her attention to Taylor's troubles. She reaches out to help as Taylor takes the child into hiding to avoid the pursuit of Annawake. As the story evolves, Alice too becomes more deeply involved in Taylor's and Turtle's future. Alice's journey now revolves around helping them. In their closeness, they rely heavily on each other for support. They love and accept each other; moreover; they do not judge each other when they disagree.

As Alice flies out to meet Taylor on the first leg of her journey out west, she thinks over Taylor's troubles. "Taylor in trouble is not something Alice knows how to think about. Everything she's done before now, however crazy-quilted it might have seemed, always ended up with the corners square. . . . When Taylor called from a phone booth in Las Vegas with her soul broken in twenty pieces, Alice felt deeply betrayed. The universe has let them down"(127). Alice feels that she has given Taylor all the skills that she needs to meet the challenges of life. She understands objectively the talent, generosity, and goodness of her own child. She knows that Taylor has given a great deal to the well-being of this abandoned child, and Alice cannot comprehend this injustice.

When they meet in Las Vegas, they share their miseries, Taylor with the possibility of losing of Turtle and Alice with the end of her marriage. As

they sit talking, Taylor also talks about her boyfriend Jax and how their relationship is floundering now that she had to leave him behind in a hurry.

Alice says:

‘If you’re having trouble sticking with him, that’s my fault. I didn’t bring you up with men as a consideration.

I think single runs in our family.’

‘It’s nothing you did wrong, Mama, I never missed having a dad. Plus I don’t think your theory holds water.

My friend Lou Ann grew up without her dad, and she feels like if she doesn’t have a man in the house she’s not worth taking up shelf space.’

‘Well, you’re solid gold, honey, don’t let that slip your mind.’ (133)

Alice always gives Taylor her best confidence, love and support, as a person, as an individual. More than that, they believe in each other, providing support for each other, both giving and receiving. She also will not let Taylor say anything bad about herself.

But Alice also feels that Taylor is running away from her problems without looking at any other options. Taylor believes that Annawake only wants to take her daughter from her and that there is not another option. Alice lets Taylor go off and take Turtle away where Annawake can not find them. She does not always agree with Taylor, but she respects her and trusts her. When Taylor calls later from Seattle and tells her that all the money

Alice has given her is gone, Alice can not believe it. Taylor also does not tell her the whole truth about why the money is gone. "Alice senses that what Taylor just told her isn't completely true. But she lets it go. Trust only grows out of trusting"(217).

Alice, much as she believes in her own daughter, knows that there may be another way. She remembers her cousin Sugar Hornbuckle who is a Cherokee living in Oklahoma. This leads her to hatch her own plot to talk to the Cherokee nation about Turtle. She finds Sugar in Heaven, Oklahoma, then goes to seek her help. Taylor goes to the West coast to create a life for Turtle that will keep her safe and in Taylor's custody.

Alice's cousin, Sugar Hornbuckle, lived with Alice's mother when she had the hog farm in Mississippi. Since then, she has lived in Heaven with her husband Roscoe and with the extended Cherokee tribe, experiencing a strong sense of community. As Alice begins her trip, one of the community's members, Cash Stillwater, starts his return journey after being gone for a few years. They schedule a party for him, a hog fry. As Sugar mulls over the thought of Alice's visit she looks around at the people gathered for the party. "Sugar feels rocked in the bosom of family. All these people are related somehow to Roscoe and herself and her children. Probably she could pick out any two people in Cherokee county and track the human path that links their families"(186).

Again Kingsolver brings in this community and tribal element. The landscape she uses provides a welcome relief from the sterile worlds of Las

Vegas and Seattle where Taylor and Turtle first flee. In the worlds of gambling palaces and shopping malls, the people they meet are not connected to anyone or anything. While Taylor and Turtle are fugitives, they live away from the people who care most about them. Turtle's life is not enriched by these experiences as it would be if she were with the people who cared about her most.

In Heaven, Alice meets and slowly renews acquaintance with her long-lost cousin Sugar, who is married to Roscoe. Alice tells her about her failed marriage to Harland. Sugar commiserates and Alice thinks, "Sympathizing over the behavior of men is the baking soda of women's friendships, it seems, the thing that makes them bubble and rise"(190). Alice comes back into a community of her own extended family and establishes instant intimacy with Sugar as they discuss their troubles with men. Alice prides herself on her strength and independence, yet she too needs other people. She enriches her life with the interaction with the tribe, with Sugar's world. They share her troubles and seek help for Taylor and Turtle, thus merging the two families in mutual help.

Alice and Sugar reminisce about their childhood together in Mississippi. Sugar recalls Alice's spirit and courage. She remembered an incident when Alice challenged a carnival act to have her entrance money returned when they had joined their resources to pay to see an act with a dead and stuffed Siamese calf, two bodies and eight legs, presented as a legitimate show. Alice asked for her money back since the animal was dead, and in her

mind not authentic. Sugar tells her she was impressed at Alice's asking for her money back. She says, "I wisht I'd had more of that. I feel like I didn't show my girls what I was made out of" (193).

Kingsolver presents tension between two different ways of life and two different women. Alice has had a more independent life than Sugar. Alice's decisions and choices were made outside of the protection of a larger group. She was able to show her daughter confidence and what it meant to have your own opinions. In contrast, Sugar's daughters grew up under the close watch of the tribe. Sugar says, "My kids all live right here"(220). Sugar's closeness to her family is a physical one. Alice and Taylor maintain their bond by respect and trust even when they are not physically near each other. But instead of a judgment in favor of one life or another, this section builds on a growing base of acceptance and interconnectedness.

Alice and Taylor, confident in themselves as people, also know the value of love and how love can make people better. They need each other, but they also let each other make their own decisions and live their own lives. As Alice thinks over Taylor's upbringing, she recalls her own philosophy, "When you're given a brilliant child, you polish her and let her shine" (127).

When Alice flies out to Las Vegas to help Taylor and Turtle, she brags about her wonderful daughter to the woman next to her on the airplane. Taylor reflects the confidence that Alice has given her. It allows Taylor to take a chance with an abandoned child, something most people would be



afraid to try. Alice also comments on the reward of taking a chance and receiving a child like Turtle:

. . .My daughter's never been married. She found the little girl in her car one time and adopted her. She's independent as a hog on ice. . . Somebody just left the baby in her car and said 'So long, sucker!' What could she do? Alice reaches for the pictures in her purse. 'It turned out all right, though; that little girl is a pistol. Whoever left her off had no eye for good material.' (126)

Taylor and Turtle's relationship continues in the tradition of acceptance and respect. They are a unit, they are together, but they maintain their identities. Taylor functions well on her own; Turtle has also taught her about love as well as the importance of being cared for. Taylor has saved Turtle, but Turtle has also shown Taylor things about life that she would not necessarily have known on her own. Taylor prides herself on her independence, yet she needs Turtle. Turtle is the one who reminds Taylor of the connections in her life—her boyfriend Jax, her other friends, her life in Tucson. This child has a strong capacity for love after hurt and rejection, a reflection of the love that Taylor has given her.

Taylor does feel a need to provide extra protection for the child because of the abuse that she suffered before she came to Taylor. We learn that Turtle was sexually abused and beaten in the care of her aunt and her aunt's boyfriend after her mother died. Turtle requires more care and nurturing

because of her abuse. Her emotional and physical growth have been slow. Because of her commitment to Turtle, we come to feel that Taylor has received a gift in her life. The energy and hope that she has given have been returned to her in the gift of this child and the child's happiness. Throughout the story, their closeness is highlighted by their interaction. When they are on their trip to Hoover Dam, Taylor worries about Turtle being close to the railing near the dam:

She grips her daughter's arm so protectively the child might later have marks. Turtle says nothing. She's been marked in life by a great many things, and Taylor's odd brand of maternal love is by far the kindest among them. (12)

Later she realizes that Turtle is the only person who has actually witnessed Lucky Buster's fall into the dam, she questions whether Turtle is telling her the truth:

""Turtle, are you telling me the absolute truth?"

Before she can manage an answer, Taylor U-turns the Dodge, furious at herself. She'll never ask Turtle that question again." (15)

When Annawake comes to talk to her about Turtle the first time, she and Jax are trying to scare birds from their apricot tree so that Turtle can have apricots that have not been ruined by the birds. She tells Annawake:

You must think I'm cracked. I'm trying to keep the birds out of the apricot tree. My little girl likes apricots more than anything living or dead, and she's the kind of kid that just doesn't ask for much. I've been going out of my head trying to think how to get the birds out of the fruit. (74)

Because Turtle keeps to herself and does not demand much from her mother, Taylor sometimes overcompensates when she can do something for Turtle. She understands that Turtle sometimes requires extra attention, knowing her early childhood experiences have not been the normal nurturing experiences.

Taylor's love and the possibilities of love inspired by the child are central to this work. A larger view of community, hope and nurturance expands from this child. Kingsolver gives Taylor an Indian child to adopt to emphasize further the importance of nurturance and community. She stresses nurturance and the need to belong to something bigger than oneself. The importance of the tribe also further illustrates a message of healing and hope that brings people together. Kingsolver is not just talking about a lost child. Her story returns often to the theme of community and the importance of the values of caring and needing each other.

As the story advances, the characters change. Annawake begins to question how she has handled the case and plots a wild scheme to fix up Cash Stillwater, a Cherokee tribe member whom she believes to be Turtle's

grandfather, and Alice Greer. It is not a rational act, but an attempt by Annawake to resolve the nightmare she has created. Taylor and Jax, in their separation, begin to realize their love for each other and how much they need each other.

The intertwining of the two communities, white and Indian, also allows the other characters in the story to consider the issues of community and independence. Jax, Taylor's boyfriend, and Gundi, their artist landlord and Jax's short-lived love interest, discuss this idea after he receives a letter from Annawake about Turtle and the Indian Child Welfare Act. The letter details the injustices for Indian children brought up in a white culture where they are not accepted by whites and are deprived of their Indian background. Jax says to Gundi,

‘Do you think people like you and me can understand the value of belonging to a tribe?’

She looks at him, tilting her head. “Of course. We all long for connection.’ (152)

Later they discuss it further, Jax observing:

‘But how can you belong to a tribe, and be your own person, at the same time? You can’t. If you’re verifiably one, you’re not the other.’

‘Can’t you alternate? Be an individual most of the time and merge with others once in awhile?’ (154)

Gundi expresses the idea of longing for connection and belonging. But as an artist and a strong individual, she offers the solution of staying independent but acknowledging and acting on the need for involvement with others. This passage also foreshadows the resolution of the story, where the characters Taylor, Alice and Annawake all keep their identities but bend to accommodate the important people in their lives.

As the story evolves, Kingsolver resolves her characters' conflicts with the best possible situations for Turtle. Turtle must be involved with her Indian heritage. The story brings us back again to the idea of a return to community from isolation and estrangement in the modern world. The Native American portion of the story emphasizes nurturance and community, contrasting the Indian community with the more alienated and isolated world of traditional western culture.

Both Kingsolver and Cather refer to the Native American influence for their characters, using it to provide insight and wisdom about what is important in life. Thea both restores her personal self and finds her true artistic self when she visits the Native American site with Fred in Song of the Lark. When she views the painted pottery of the Native American cliff dwellers of the southwest, she understands the importance of beauty in everyday life. She also finds peace in the serenity of the outdoors and slows down her hectic pursuit of her achievement in a career. Taylor, in her interaction with the tribe, realizes that she does not have to carry the burdens of the world by herself. She learns that even though she is strong and

independent, she can and does need other people to help her raise Turtle and that needing involves risk. Taylor loses some of her independence but gains wholeness when she brings the abandoned Cherokee child into her life.

When Taylor and Jax decide to come together after their experience with separation, they realize the importance of their love. They also realize the significance of a larger community than they have known before. They also see how a child has shown them about connection and belonging. Kingsolver's characters show us that learning about your individuality is important but finding and needing each other may mean even more.

As it becomes clear that Turtle will be spending some of her time with the tribe, the members of the tribe interview her. Taylor tells Alice about Turtle's talk with the Indian social worker. Cash Stillwater, a Cherokee, proves to be her grandfather, and she will spend time with him. Taylor says the social worker asked Turtle to tell him who her family was. Then she says Turtle could not say who her family was because Taylor herself was confused about the issue as well. Before her experience with Turtle and the Cherokee nation, Taylor felt that all her friends including Jax were in her mind as people that "you're just accepting that it's okay for people to leave when they feel like it." And further she tells Alice, "That's what your family is, the people you won't let go of for anything"(328). Turtle helps Taylor realize who her family is and how much she needs them.

Alice does become involved with Cash and realizes that this is someone who is not like her other husbands. She says he is someone

different, "A man who would go out of his way" (329). But he has had his troubles. He has lost his wife and daughter and could not and did not save his granddaughter from bad influences. In his pain, he separated himself from the place and the people he loved. His inability to act had consequences, but he did care, wanting to make a difference. Meeting Alice, then discovering that his granddaughter is Turtle provides him with meaning again. He grows to become again part of the larger community around him.

Annawake also begins to understand herself better. Unlike Thea, who cannot change the course of her life, Annawake wants to change the estrangement in her life. She seeks help from her Uncle Ledger, who raised her. He offers her some words of wisdom to guide her as she tries to change her behavior and helps her see that she has mourned her lost brother Gabriel by punishing other people. He tells her to look right in front of herself and to try to contact her brother directly. She knows that Gabriel is in prison; she can reach him if she wants to. Contacting Gabriel will be the first step in healing her own family as well as beginning to let go of some of her anger. In doing this, she can also help in the resolution of Turtle's fate. Annawake can then come back from her lonely pursuits to the larger community of caring. Uncle Ledger tells her,

"Annawake, you've got you a good heart. Run with it. Your whole life, you've been afraid of yourself." "He is looking right at her. Not through her, like most people

do, to the paper doll that is Annawake Fourkiller, but *into* her." (332)

The child, Turtle, becomes part of both families; although Taylor must give up sole custody, we sense a greater good for the child and for everyone in the story. Alice joins the Cherokee nation and decides to marry Cash. Together they will become the grandparents of Turtle. As the story ends, Alice thinks new thoughts, different from the beginning of the novel, "The family of women is about to open its doors to men. Men, children, cowboys, and Indians. It's all over now but the shouting" (343).

Kingsolver takes us into the hearts and minds of families in search of love and connection. Her characters face many obstacles. The women struggle on their own, trying to find out what they need. They exhibit strength and independence; they show us women who can make decisions and create their own lives. But Kingsolver also wants to show an expanded world where men and women in different cultures can work together and grow. They learn that beyond independence is a hope of sharing and of keeping sane in an estranged modern world.



## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

In comparing the feminist aesthetic in Cather and Kingsolver, I thought that the results would show more about their differences than any similarities they might have. As expected, Cather's characters did exemplify the new American woman, women with voices of their own representing the changes that were taking place in the early 1900's. In contrast, Kingsolver's women characters of the 1990's struggled most to find meaning and connection in an estranged modern world. But beyond their obvious representations in each aspect of the aesthetic, I found Cather to be more within the community and to have more of a nurturing side than I had originally thought.

In Cather's characters, I did find the basics of the aesthetic with her strong women like Lena, Antonia, and Thea, women who stand out as independent individuals. These are accomplished women, especially Lena and Thea, and are models for modern women. But with Antonia, Cather also shows an admirable character who is a wife and mother, deeply involved with her nurturing life. And even Lena and Thea, through their striving,

still look back to their connections in caring and community. When Lena moves from the country into town, she misses her family and always sends them money. Thea, even though she does not always acknowledge her support, owes much of her success to the people who care for her and help her career. She comes very close to changing from her singular pursuits when she first meets Fred, almost letting him into her life. Then when she views the artwork of the Native American artists, she seriously considers the idea of art in everyday life.

While Cather's characters pursue their own lives and goals, they move within a circle of caring and community, sometimes without realizing its importance and influence. Perhaps, as Donovan suggests in her book After the Fall, Cather's later characters turn more towards a life of community. Donovan says that later in her career Cather herself did move away from achievement towards support and interdependence. David Stouck, discussing Cather's later works, says, ". . .they question the choice made by Thea (and presumably by Cather herself), that of a commitment to art over life." Stouck argues, "The priority of life over art and achievement is implicit throughout Willa Cather's last four books." (295) Since the works studied here were not her last works, I can only comment on the glimpses of this that I have seen in her characters, Lena, Thea and Antonia. Donovan goes on to say, ". . . I propose, however, that the real opposition was not so much between 'art' and 'life' as between art mediated by the masculine logos, autonomous art done by the individual in isolation—that is, Western

'masterpiece' art—and art done in the context of the collective, anonymous art, in other words, women's traditional folk art"(115). Donovan suggests that Cather, after living the life of lonely artistic pursuit, looks back at the life of community and everyday art as something preferable to solitary achievement.

Kingsolver, in Pigs in Heaven, resolves the estrangement of her characters from their lonely pursuits to a place in a community. As Meredith Sue Willis describes the characters in Pigs in Heaven, "They come together through their various kinds of love for a child. They love her as an individual and as part of the long line of a people. . . . the community is seen as dynamic, as part of an every-weaving web of tradition, which. . . recognizes no foreigners and is flexible enough to make a place for everyone."(86) This is what is best about the aesthetic; it allows a place for everyone in the community, acknowledging the need for each other.

One interesting connection with both writers concerns their references to Native American culture. Of course Kingsolver's work is about the Cherokee child, Turtle and her relationship to her tribe. Also Cather and Kingsolver as well as Cather's character, Thea, make inspirational trips in the desert to Native American sites. Cather went to the Indian ruins in Colorado, and she has Thea go there as well for inspiration. Both Cather and Thea examine a return to the values of art in everyday life as well as their connections with others and a larger community. Sharon O'Brien says, "In

Indian culture, both past and present, Cather found everyday life imbued with aesthetic order and meaning”(x).

In High Tide in Tucson, Kingsolver also goes on a desert hike and spends the day in the wilderness in Arizona. She finds Indian corn grinding stones, flint chips and pottery shards. Of that day spent alone among the simple and beautiful artifacts of everyday existence she says, “I can’t think of a day in my life in which I’ve had such a clear fix on what it means to be human”(13). Both writers find peacefulness and unity in Native American art and culture that is different from the western individualistic tradition.

While Kingsolver and I now believe, Cather as well, are both within the nurturing and caring side of the feminist aesthetic, they have both given us memorable women of character, strength and independence. I think we still owe a great debt to Cather and her independent women characters. At a time when these voices were not heard, Cather told their story. Thea, triumphant in her operatic career, stands out as an impressive and unique character. Kingsolver too has given us women like Alice and Taylor, strong in a different way from Thea. It would be hard to imagine Turtle being rescued by anyone other than the determined and resourceful Taylor, who relied on her own good judgment to take an abandoned child into her life.

From both writers we have gained insight by examining the complexities of their characters. We have watched Thea, Antonia, Taylor and Alice in their struggles with work and relationships, seeing both their triumphs and their failures. They have demonstrated independent spirits;

they have made their own decisions about life and accepted the consequences. They have shown that after reaching certain goals in life, they must struggle to maintain wholeness in their personal lives. Both writers prove that a feminist aesthetic can show the way to lives of meaning with others in caring and community.

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## VITA

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