

ENVIRONMENT, SELF AND IDENTITY IN SELECT NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

Ph.D Thesis

SHVETA TRIPATHI
ID No. 2012RHS9533



**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
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Shveta Tripathi

ID: 2012RHS9533

Under the Supervision of

Prof. Nupur Tandon



DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
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I, **Shveta Tripathi**, declare that this thesis titled, “**ENVIRONMENT, SELF AND IDENTITY IN SELECT NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER**” and the work presented in it, are my own. I confirm that:

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This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**ENVIRONMENT, SELF AND IDENTITY IN SELECT NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER**” being submitted by **Shveta Tripathi (2012RHS 9533)** is a bonafide research work carried out under my supervision and guidance in fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** in the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Malaviya National Institute of Technology, Jaipur, India. The matter embodied in this thesis is original and has not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any other degree.

Place: Jaipur

Date: November 15, 2019

Dr. Nupur Tandon

Professor

Dept. of Humanities & Social Sciences

MNIT, Jaipur

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Shveta

ABSTRACT

The social upheavals at the turn of the twentieth century in America gave rise to a type of fiction that wasn't purely fictitious; rather, exhibited the gradual transformations taking place in the political and socio-cultural strata of the country. As all writers are products of their time and encapsulate the moods of the era by the aid of their unique perceptual power and creative abilities, Willa Cather too is such an artist who primarily echoes the life of the immigrants of the American Midwest after the Great Migration. Her fiction considerably deliberates upon the traces of human endeavour in inhospitable surroundings, and narrates the tale of their audacious triumph over the Nebraskan wilderness. Though primarily, the writer's popular literature pertains to the frontier life, her stature ascends the limitations of a mere regionalist.

The study attempts to explore the various facets of 'self and identity', along with the analysis of the factors that contribute in its shaping, through an interpretation of six select novels - *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), *A Lost Lady* (1923), and *The Professor's House* (1925). To achieve the set objective the research takes aid of both the primary as well as the secondary literature. The research design being used is naturalistic and the methods of analysis are qualitative and context sensitive in nature. The critical framework used includes the ecocritical aspect, psychological theories of 'self' and 'identity', and the changing gender roles of the time.

The thesis is divided into five chapters which provide detailed discussions on the concepts of environment, self-identity, gender roles and their due treatment in relation to the Cather's major characters from the select novels. The chapters are entitled as: Willa Cather: Psycho-Social Milieu and the theories of Self and Identity, Environment and Identity, Presence in Absences, Connecting the Pieces, followed by the last chapter that concludes the thesis and also discusses the future perspectives in the area.

Chapter One introduces the life and times of Willa Cather, and the critical approaches used for the present study. The psychoanalytic theories of 'Self and Identity' as discussed by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan and Erik Erikson

along with the feminist and the ecocritical approaches make the conceptual framework for the discussions of the study.

Chapter Two discusses the interplay of environment and identity by discussing the bearing of the physical and socio-cultural environment on the fictional characters. Nature writers depend on its various forms to awaken imagery and evoke a better understanding of the self. It works as a catalytic centre that awakens the consciousness of self and its relation to the outer world. In case of Willa Cather besides landscape the most vital natural attribute is land which facilitates as a medium to explore one's own self, and in the process find their true identity. The active role of landscape, place and space in her fiction gives voice to the other social aspects like gender, ethnicity and social status.

In order to have a better realisation of the psychological intricacies of a fictional character it becomes inevitable to comprehend the making of the author's self. Chapter Three serves this purpose by providing insights of Willa Cather's self and her presence in absences from the lives of her characters. It explores the autobiographical elements from the select novels by discussing the impact of the writer's life and environment on her characters. Cather models her characters out of certain aspects of herself and at other times as the prototypes of real people whom she knew very well.

Connecting these scattered pieces and presenting an all-inclusive psycho-analysis of major characters from the select novels becomes the subject matter of Chapter Four. The characterization in Cather's fictional world provides an insight into the suppressed, violent and struggling human of her days. Each novel introduces the reader with a new self and its evolution. The lonesome soul and intense struggle of Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*, the fading charm of Antonia, bewitched by the beauty of the modern life in *My Antonia*, the efforts of young Thea towards gaining individuality in *The Song of the Lark*, the dissatisfied Claude Wheeler who would do anything to get an aim for his life in *One of Ours*, the decline of the traditional culture and the hollowness of the modern life, presented as an analogy with the life of Mrs Forrester in *A Lost Lady*, the yearning of Professor St. Peter for his past life in *The Professor's House*, and the lives of Alexander, Myra, Father Latour and Vaillant, C'ecile, Lucy and Nancy, all appear to be the representations of the unconscious.

Willa Cather's fiction presents characters with peculiar selves that can be seen in a constant struggle with their surroundings. These individuals show apparent signs of dejection and alienation; their relentless agitations against the social conventions place them as diverse characters. In the study of these six novels it has been observed that the writer draws heavily from her life and shares her own understanding in creating these peculiar literary figures, moreover the writer's female characters are more certain of their identities in comparison to their male counterparts. Cather's vital inputs in defining the gender-identity helps to attain a distinct vision of the changing gender roles of her times and her version of male-female identity. She strives hard for establishing the identity of the 'New Woman' and the weariness of the seemingly confused male of the twentieth century.

This research can be further continued in the above discussed aspects of self-identity, by exploring her later novels and short fiction. Another aspect of vital scope lies in the exploration of the autobiographical elements in her fiction.

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CHAPTER I

WILLA CATHER: PSYCHO-SOCIAL MILIEU AND THE THEORIES OF SELF AND IDENTITY

Willa Cather is such prolific writer whose position in the American literature is exclusive and undisputable. She is among the top ranking novelists of the first half of the twentieth century, and earns the reputation of being one of the three most remarkable women novelists of this time, along with Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow. With twelve novels, around sixty short stories, a collection of poetry and an extensive contribution to the non-fiction, Cather becomes a significant writer of the century. She has written almost every type of text and almost on every theme; simple yet complex.

As a novelist she is closely identified with the south-west region, and was one of America's first modern writers to discuss the frontier experience as a subject matter worthy for high-quality fiction, bringing the Great Plains on the American literary map. Her reflections towards immigrant life and the enveloping environment extensively contribute to the fast changing American scene at the turn of the twentieth century, and the human self accommodating in it. The type of perception towards country and its people as created by the writer has hardly been attempted by any other. Although her setting often revolves round Nebraska, the literary reputation of Cather rises above the limitations of a specific region or gender. Her novels have such a power of distinctiveness that it poses a challenge for the critics to formally describe her art under a specific genre. The singularity of her art bears such virtues which can only be experienced and not explained. As an American she saw life in terms of the possibilities provided by the New World, and her vision darkened only when those possibilities seemed to fail. For Cather "Americanism is Europeanism" addressing the issues of a new environment in its own way (Daiches 18).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Willa Cather has been extensively read and researched. Scholars have delved into various aspects of the writer and enough investigation has already been done in certain areas such as migration, environment and her heroic women. Scholars have also explored contrasts between the writer's Old and New World, traditionalism and modernism, city and country life. It is worthy of mention that much of the exploration has been done

posthumously as her qualities as a writer were not fully understood and appreciated during her lifetime, and were dismissed for not being pertinent to the contemporary times. During the succeeding decades her writings began to be appreciated, resulting in the continuous growth of the writer's literary stature.

A few of Cather's devout scholars such as Susan Rosowski, Guy Reynolds, Janis Stuot and her biographers E.K. Brown, Edith Lewis and James Woodress have done ground breaking work in establishing her as a writer with original substance. Moreover the contribution made by John Randall, Danielle Russell, David Porter, Hermione Lee, Dorothy Ghent, David Daiches, Jessica Rabin and Mildred Bennett throw light on Cather's writing style, technique and her treatment of various subjects. The books written by the aforementioned writers about Willa Cather provide reader with further insights about the writer's attitude towards nature, gender, ethnicity and society which allows the researchers to probe into her fiction and discover its essence.

Three biographies have been written on Willa Cather. The first two biographies appear in the year 1953, written by E.K. Brown and Edith Lewis, respectively. In his preface to the book *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, Brown states that one of his articles entitled "Homage to Willa Gather" was published in 1946 and was much appreciated by Cather who then through correspondence shared details about her art and inspirations. The mutual exchange of letters and regular meetings took place until her death in 1947 after which Edith Lewis, her literary executrix asked him to write a biography on Willa Cather. She requested him to keep in mind the principle of exploring the author not for herself but for the motive of probing the general values that guided her art and "the light her life and character might cast upon her art" (Brown iii-iv). Working on this advice Brown started working on Cather's biography with the conviction that Cather was an extraordinary artist and "no American novelist since the death of Henry James was Willa Gather's equal in vision or in design" (iv). Brown was almost near to completion with his work when he died in 1951, which was later completed by Leon Edel.

The other biography published in the same year was authored by Edith Lewis, Cather's friend and life time companion with whom she shared forty years of her life and stayed together until her death. The biography entitled *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* illuminates the reader about Cather's personality, lifestyle and tastes by the narration of personal incidents, but it does not provide the required detailing it ought to.

Moreover, as it has been written by Cather's confidante, the probable chances of an honest and unbiased depiction reduce.

The last of these biographies is an exhaustive and much appreciated piece of work published in 1987. In this volume of almost seven hundred pages labelled as *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, James Woodress makes successful attempt of presenting a comprehensive image of the writer in light of her writings, the comparisons between original and revised editions of her writings, previous biographies, interviews, speeches and her personal letters. The reason why the previous biographers failed to give a complete picture of this remarkable woman is probably due to the restrictions she might have laid in their path of exploration by being an extremely private person. Woodress expansively describes the chronological developments in the writer's personal life and their impressions on her fiction. Though most of the personal letters written by the writer were destroyed by herself, and the ones which were available were strictly forbidden (in her will) to be directly quoted, fortunately the correspondents who outlived her, contributed a few letters, considering Willa Cather as a public figure. The biographer judiciously compiles all the possible literature available about Cather, giving details about her personal life and how it inspired her fiction.

Some exceptionally good books have been written on Cather which spread through the latter half of the twentieth century, and in more abundance during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The on-going research on Willa Cather suggests her worth as a writer of originality. David Daiches, published *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* in 1951 where he acquaints the reader with Cather's childhood, her uprooting, her literary pursuit and basic themes, thereby providing a critical estimate of the writer's worth as a novelist, short story writer and a poet.

Susan J. Rosowski's systematic analysis of the writer's life and works in *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* published in 1986 is a valuable addition to Cather's literary criticism. It demonstrates the progress of Cather's artistic vision based on the eighteenth century notion of romanticism which seeks to locate sense in materialism; Rosowski finds this possibility of discovering meaning in external objects as the subject matter of Cather's fiction. The book is a distinguished work of criticism, and meets the challenge of presenting the writer's artistic development and achievement in length as well in depth.

Willa Cather's fiction is much influenced by the traits of her own personality. Hermione Lee's *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (1989) and David Porter's *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* (2008) are considerable help in bringing out the double shades of Cather's life elaborating her constant swaying in between a few opposite extremities. Hermione Lee is a British literary critic who is well known for her literary criticisms on Virginia Woolf. Lee feels the writer is not much read, yet considers her as a true modernist, and places her firmly in the modern literary tradition of her times. Her exploration about the writer locates new meanings in her writings by providing insight into the conflicts that lie in Cather's life and works. Her primary contention is about the writer's perspective of 'doubleness' as reflected in her fiction and her personal life. According to Lee these double shades of her personality are the key to gain a proper understanding of the depths of her art.

David Porter follows almost the same line of thought in his book. He too argues for the notion of Cather's divided-life which is well evident in her narratives and characters. In addition to the illustrations that defend his claim, he traces the importance of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Baker Eddy in Cather's career. According to Porter the echoes of these two contrasting personalities spread all through her fiction; moreover, he labels it as Cather's "alter egos, with Jewett embodying dedication to one's art, Eddy exemplifying what one can achieve through self-promotion" (xxi). Cather was highly concerned about the positioning of novels with special focus on the dust jackets and the promotional strategies adopted by the publishers for which she even took the radical decision of shifting to a new publisher. Porter considers that Cather picked up this tactic of self-promotion from Eddy which certainly benefitted her.

The next three books being reviewed prove a vital aid in acquiring an understanding of environment - physical and social. These books discuss the pertaining issues of migration, ethnicity, gender, race and the corresponding domestic and open spaces. The first amongst these is *Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* by John H. Randall III published in the year 1960. The thought that inspires this book is the writer's search for value in the contemporary American society. It is a quest to answer questions like – "what does the good life consist? . . . What do Americans think constitutes the good life, and are they right?" (ix). By means of discussing the life and works of Willa Cather, Randall attempts to respond to the aforementioned questions, which led him to "conclude that she herself was engaged in a

search, a lifelong quest for value” (xi) which she nearly found in the companionship of either landscape or her looking glass. Danielle Russell too explores her works in search of various aspects of identity, with special emphasis on the significance of landscape and space as discussed by him in the book *Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison* (2006). Another important contribution discussing about identity in Willa Cather’s fiction is Jessica G. Rabin’s *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein and Nella Larsen* (2004).

Online assistance too is readily available in form of the website “Willa Cather Archive” which helps Cather scholars to get access to digital editions of her writings and an exhaustive range of research papers. The archive is a combined effort of a couple of groups working in association with the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. It originated in 1997 and has published ten volumes of research articles under the series of *Cather Studies*. To mention a few are *Willa Cather and Material Culture*, *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*, *Willa Cather as Cultural Icon*, *A Writer’s Worlds*, *Willa Cather and Modern Cultures*, *Willa Cather and the Nineteenth Century* edited by Rosowski, Reynolds, Stout and others.

Scholarly work has also been done for the attainment of academic degrees; however, not much research has been done with context to self and identity. The ones that are available have focused on either one or two of her novels or short stories. As such an attempt to present a consolidated study of the factors that contribute to the self and identity of Willa Cather’s characters still lacks. The purpose of the present study is to understand and address this gap with an aim to analyse six of her most notable novels that pertain to the conception of identity.

The selection of this research area is to an extent due to the publication of her personal letters in the year 2013 under the title *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* which were made available to the general public after legal removal of ban from her letters. The book is edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout and offers a chronological presentation of 566 surviving letters written by Cather (nearly twenty percent of her actual letters, as most of the personal letters were destroyed by her). The letters do not provide any sweeping or shocking revelation, but they definitely provide an insight into the writer’s mind. In spite of being personal, the letters do not give a clear cue about the

much debated sexual identity of Willa Cather, as most of the correspondences exchanged with her supposed lover (Isabelle McClung) were destroyed. The ones available are crisp and plain communication, yet give a certain idea of the mutual feeling of possession. It is only the letter written in 1893 to a childhood friend, Lousie Pound (discussed in Chapter Three) that augments the imagination. Moreover, Cather's letter to Annie Pavelka (the real Antonia) where she sends to her a washing machine and the overall concern conveyed through the letter, suggests of how much the lady meant to her.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to explore the various facets of 'self and identity' and analyse the factors that contribute in its shaping, through an interpretation of six select novels ranging from second to seventh in its chronological order of sequence: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), *A Lost Lady* (1923), and *The Professor's House* (1925). In order to present a holistic picture, the critical framework used includes the ecocritical aspect, psychological theories of 'self' and 'identity' along with the feminist approaches. Though the primary focus of the present study is to explore the aspects of self and identity in major characters, it also investigates the ecocritical aspect of the select novels for the reason that Willa Cather is essentially a nature writer and the significance of environment in her fiction is inevitable.

The study will be incomplete without considering the history of America, and the psycho-social background of the writer that left an indelible mark on her mind. The atmosphere of unrest at the time of the interwar period and the Great Migration set to a situation that initiated the loosening of identity categories. This thesis focuses on the most representative works of the novelist to help in understanding not only the social and psychological perspectives of the writer but also the factors that contribute in its development. The remaining novels *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) have also been taken into consideration wherever found necessary in contributing to the topic of the thesis.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The origins of American literature lie in the seventeenth century. Its early writings were inspired from the European models and did not reflect the true characteristic of the

nation. Gradually the country developed in its own distinctive manner, creating the literature that reflected the socio-economic deviations of its time. The latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century is a crucial era which witnesses massive historical changes that contribute in shaping the American identity.

The Industrial Revolution, beginnings of which can be traced to the early nineteenth century in Europe, was a milestone in the history of the whole world including America, which brought major transformations in the society. By the seventies, the first phase of the Revolution shifted to the second, and influenced almost every aspect of life in some way or the other. A significant event at this time that bothered the lives of the common masses and changed their way of thinking altogether was the American Civil War (1861-1865). The war also represented the defeat of a way of life: victory of the industrial North over the agrarian South. It witnessed a massive loss of human life, estimated to be around two percent of the American population and took a huge economic toll on the country. The end of the Civil War left people broken and battered, psychologically wounded and economically depressed. The immediate post-war period faced the strains of regional divisions. For the South it was an overly punitive reconstruction and this regional distrust led to the celebration of the local, which was then reflected in their literature.

The budding commercialization came out as a promise and attracted a large number of people towards the city life. The Great Migration doubled country's population, thus widening the disparity between the rich and the poor. This immigration at the turn of the century was one of the most important influences in American culture. By the early twentieth century, America was becoming an international power with more diverse and complex cultural self-identity. The ethnicity, social norms and gender roles of the immigrants seeped deep into the literary and cultural discourse, bringing a cultural crisis in the nature of the American character, and giving a new meaning to the notion of American selfhood.

Another distinctive attribute of the time is the introduction of psychological theories, Sigmund Freud being the most significant theorist of the time. Freud introduced the concept of consciousness which stressed the coexistence of several levels of consciousness and sub-consciousness in the complex human mind. Attempts were made to explore human mind to recall the past experience, therein determining the whole personality.

The common masses sensed a loss of confidence in the self, which is reflected both in the themes and in the technique of fiction of the time. The writer was now no longer just the sweet singer, but became an explorer of experience who used language to build up rich patterns of meaning. The fiction of this time had been moving towards a greater increase in psychological subtlety. This phase of drastic social upheaval ignited an environment of distrust and uncertainty amongst the people. The concept of individual awareness became the most important psychological factor, where every human was seen to be captive of his own stream of consciousness. Daiches elucidates-

If the characteristic theme of the eighteenth-and nineteenth-century novel was the relation between gentility and morality, that of the twentieth century is the relation between loneliness and love.

(1969, 1155)

The differentiation between the nineteenth and twentieth century was a sweeping watershed of cultural ethos in the American society that divided the past from the present. To Randall it appeared as the “chief distinction between the age of optimism and humanitarianism and the age of anxiety and intolerance” was the different evaluations they placed upon the human creature (1960, x). The people of the nineteenth century carried their own worth and dignity, supported by the strong value systems which empowered them to control their destiny. On the other hand, the twentieth century society seemed to be egocentric and captive of their unruly desires.

The American Literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century is enormously diverse as it mirrors the social and economic unrest of the time. Important writers of the early nineteenth century include Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe and James Fenimore Cooper. Irving was a satirist, Poe, a story writer while Cooper explored the native American life of the frontier. The period of Civil war was particularly considered important, as the writers were inspired with a new spirit of hope and adventure that surrounded the country. The greatest contributor to this period was Herman Melville who wrote the epic moral fiction *Moby Dick* (1851). Walt Whitman’s unconventional poetic autobiography *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was controversial in its time for its overt sexuality. As a result of the westward expansion during the century, Mark Twain became the most important contributor to regional literature. Twain, in his popular creations of the time- *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884),

describes the life along the Mississippi. Other writers of the period include Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The disturbance and expansion in the country led to the emergence of two broad categories of writers: the realists and the naturalists. Both realism and naturalism evolved out of the turmoil of the Civil War. Realist writers developed the local literature into a literary tradition, specifically intended towards a truthful and accurate reflection over reality by focusing on people and events rather than the plot. These writers reflected upon the everyday life, displaying the mundane affairs. Henry James was one of the most prolific realist writers who brought a new precision and complexity into the description of the states of mind. His novels were quite different from his contemporaries as it dealt with the psychological course of action, targeting the upper middle-class. Other writers who contributed to this school of writing include Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, Joel Chaandler Harris, Bret Harte, William Dean Howells, Sarah Orne Jewett and Sidney Lanier.

While realism sought to give an objective account of the every-day life, naturalists laid an additional emphasis on the scientific forces that cause all these events in the world. The naturalists saw man as a victim of his own fate and considered the everyday subjects unromantic. The greatest of this group was Stephen Crane who created a masterpiece on the horrors of war *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Much naturalist literature dealt with the poor class struggling for survival, in contrast to the realists who portrayed the life of the middle class. Naturalist writers included Henry Adams, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Robinson Jeffers, Jack Landon, Marianne Moore, Frank Norris, Eugene O'Neill, John Crowe Ransom, Marjorie K. Rawlings, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Carl Sandbury, Edith Wharton and Thomas Wolfe.

The realists and naturalists predominated this initial era but soon a new group of writers followed them- the modernists. Modernists popularly known as the 'Lost Generation' contributed in revealing their disillusionment with the post-war society. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane and E.E. Cummings constituted the group. Passos wrote about war, Fitzgerald captured the mood of the time, Hemingway won the Nobel prize in literature for his notable contributions *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, and the work of

William Faulkner was highly appreciated for his technique over stream of consciousness in the American prose.

Though Willa Cather is primarily part of the naturalist school, she is also considered as a modernist writer, as her fiction qualifies the requirements of both schools of thought.

WILLA CATHER- LIFE AND WORKS

Willa Cather is noted for writing about nature and her distinctive portrayals of the immigrant settlers and the frontier life of Nebraska. The prevalence of this setting in her fiction makes the reader regard her as a Nebraskan, unknown to the fact that the writer was born in Virginia in 1873. She spent her first decade on a sheep farm near the town of Winchester amid the green hills. When she was just nine years old her family permanently migrated to a thinly populated ranch in Nebraska. The new place came as a challenge for the Cather family; what was visible was a tremendous stretch of the raw prairie grassland with almost negligible traces of cultivated land.

The uprooting of young Cather from the green hills of Virginia to the treeless plains of Nebraska came as an utter shock, and had a deep impact in shaping her complex self. She felt that all her coverings had been taken off as she later said that she felt, “a kind of erasure of personality” (Cather 1967, 448). She grew up amongst the immigrants from Sweden, Bohemia, Russia, Germany and other parts of Europe. She was always found to be keenly interested in the lives of the immigrants who gave her a new direction and a change that was intellectually exciting. In absence of a school near the wild land, Cather mostly spent her time out of the doors. She used to ride on her pony to acquaint with the immigrant settlements, trying to achieve an understanding of their life struggles and experiences. According to David Porter, this transition phase of moving from “mountain-sheltered valleys to unprotected plains”, and then coming in contact with new people, languages and customs was vital. It instilled in her a deep human understanding which is the much needed ingredient for a fiction writer (8).

The immigrants came from different backgrounds, cultures and languages, but they somehow managed to narrate to the young girl their stories of the old country, as it might have been easier for the foreign settlers to open up in front of a child than in front of the grown-ups. The tales of their past life and country developed in young Cather a

fierce passion for the land and the unyielding frontier spirit which then becomes the core of her writings. L. Brent Bohlke brings the selected interviews, speeches and letters of Willa Cather under a single head, entitled as *Willa Cather in Person* where the reader finds Cather speaking about her passion for the prairie land and its people, she says-

I grew fond of some of these immigrants--particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home country. I used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was with me, the initial impulse. I didn't know any writing people. I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition.

(Cather 1986, 20)

The life on the Divide, amid the hard struggles and unconquerable spirits of the immigrants inspires the writer's characters and their environment. The interaction between her characters and their environment echoes her own observation and understanding of the strong-minded pioneers of the Midwest and their survival stories. Cather shares her experience of the frontier land and its inhabitants, stating that-

I have never found any intellectual excitement more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these pioneer women at her baking or butter-making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said – as if I had actually got inside another person's skin. (Cather 1986, 10)

Finding the frontier land untameable, the Cather family moved to a nearby town Red Cloud a year later. It was here that Cather started attending school and demonstrating her brilliance as a student. Though the writer was primarily interested in science but she also had an interest in music and drama. She used to exhibit her dramatic skills in the local theatre in the Red Cloud opera house.

During her teens, she developed a habit of reading every night; she read Shakespeare, Byron, Tolstoy, the nineteenth century classics – Scott, Hawthorne, Thackeray, Dickens, Ruskin, Carlyle, Emerson, and Poe. Cather was different from her time; the thing that distinguished her from the counterparts was the courage to do something extraordinary, and to live her life without the approval of others. Coming from

an ordinary family, she had to face financial hardships to continue her studies. Her firm decision about going to college after high school pushed the family to borrow funds and send her off to Lincoln. Until this time Cather was firm on her decision of studying medicine, but she reconsidered her choices when an essay, she had written on Thomas Carlyle, as an assignment for her English class was published in the local newspaper on request of her teacher, who found it exceptional. This incident was transformational, she later called this effect to be “hypnotic” (Cather 1986, 181). The incident became a turning point in her life; she then pursued a humanities curriculum - studying English, French, German and classical literature. Daiches acknowledges the sound contribution of the writer’s mother, grandmother and her maternal aunt in introducing her to the English Literature, Bible and other classics. This training had already well prepared the young Cather to take a deep plunge into the “literary knowledge and ambition” when she reached Lincoln to pursue her degree (1951, 1).

Cather started her career as a journalist, and then began teaching in a high school in Pittsburgh. Later she moved to the New York City to join the *McClure’s Magazine*, and soon became the managing editor. During these days, Cather wrote some short stories discussing her memories of the pioneer life and immigrant families, which were then published in the local dailies, but were later considered insignificant by the writer herself; in a 1921 interview with Archer Latrobe Carroll she mentions these early stories to be “bald, clumsy, and emotional” (Cather 1986, 21). To improve her writing, she then turned to a study of Henry James who was the most respected novelist of the time. James has been a major influence on Willa Cather and her writing. Conflict between the Old World and the New World as being portrayed in her works, finds its origin in the themes of James. In one of her essays on Henry James, she refers to him as the “mighty master of language and a keen student of human actions and motives” (Cather 1970, 275). Cather generally preferred the past literary masters to contemporary writers, noticeable among them being Dickens, Thackeray, Emerson, Hawthorne, Balzac, Flaubert, and Tolstoy. Another important writer whose influence can be seen in her themes of exile is Virgil.

More than any other author, it is Sarah Orne Jewett to whom Cather’s literary achievement owes; an author whose work she highly admired. Cather describes her as a significant influence on her development as a writer. They both met in 1908 and after reading Cather’s fiction, Jewett felt her style to be devoid of originality, moreover it appeared to her, a poor imitation of James writing style. She then decided to write an

extensive letter to the young writer, suggesting her to write about what she knew, and even encouraged her to give up journalism to write full-time fiction. Jewett wrote-

Your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society . . . in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up.

(qtd in Lewis 66-67)

Cather, who had always wanted to do serious writing, took Jewett's advice quite seriously and left the *McClure's Magazine* to work as a professional writer. Her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* was published in 1912. The novel did not turn to be a great success. Critics found it to be a sheer imitation of Henry James' style. After the cold reception of *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather turned again to the advice of Jewett, who encouraged her to "give herself up to the pleasure of recapturing in memory of people and places [she] had believed forgotten" (qtd in Daiches 16). She then shifted from imitation to mirrored auto-fiction.

Cather then reminiscences of her pioneer life, dedicating *O Pioneers!* to Sarah Orne Jewett. *O Pioneers!* (1913), her second novel is considered to be an exceptional work appreciated for its portrayal of frontier life. Remarking on her enormous potential as a writer, Daiches says-

The heroic nostalgia that pursued her until the end first changed her from a minor imitator of James to a novelist of fierce originality and individuality, and from the moment she discovered herself with *O Pioneers!* she went her own way with remarkably little notice of her contemporaries.

(1951, 186)

When most of the contemporary writers reflected on the changes that took place at the turn of the century, Cather lamented on the forgotten times, remaining the child of the nineties for rest of her life. David Stouck remarks that besides turmoil of the Civil War, the other factor that contributed in the creation of American identity is the struggle of the common masses "to subdue the lonely and terrifying wilderness" around them (26). The artistic frame of Cather owes itself to the aesthetic and populist movements of the nineties, where the former rallied on 'Art for art's sake' and the latter on the deteriorating condition of land and its helpless labourers; as the country experienced one of the worst

agricultural depressions. The reason behind Cather's fiction being unable to mirror the meticulous changes taking place around her is that she had always considered art as an escape from reality. However, the influence of the populist movement is evident in her fiction; the protagonists from her early prairie novels perfectly portray the sufferings of the farmers in general and the immigrants in particular.

Along with the social upheaval, her personal suffering also marks a strong imprint on her writings. As her childhood witnessed a major migration at a very tender age of just nine years, Cather suffered a serious identity crisis because of a sudden uprooting, which is undoubtedly "the determinative event" of the writer's life (Ghent 6). It is difficult for a migrant to get detached from his/her past and confer to the new surroundings, and for Cather this change – removal from the Virginian green valley and being positioned to the boundless wild Nebraskan prairie, "opened her sensibility to primordial images and relationships" which later became one of the most dominant characteristic of her art (Ghent 6).

Willa Cather has written on almost every possible theme. Unlike other writers Cather breaks fresh grounds and is best known for her frontier novels. The two novels that best justify the assertion are *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, where she flawlessly explicates the life struggles of immigrant families "with startling precision and accuracy and with special attention to the crucial role of culture and region in the construction of social identities and relationships" (Laird 242). Other themes that stayed near to her heart include the contrast between the city and country life, the Old and New World, Nostalgic for the good old days, and the like.

Most of Cather's poetry and short stories were first published in the newspaper dailies. Later a collection of her poetry *April Twilights* appeared in 1903, followed by her first edition of short stories *The Troll Garden*, that published in 1905 and contains few of her best known stories including "A Wagner Matinee", "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case".

In 1912 Cather's first novel *Alexander's Bridge (AB)* was published, discussing the life of Bartley Alexander, a world renowned engineer suffering from a mid-life crisis, whose loyalty is being shared between his wife and his mistress. His wife, Winifred signifies the complex social world whereas his lover, Hilda symbolizes his lively youth

and ambition. Winifred is his present, into which success has forced him while Hilda was his past, but it is here where his happiness truly resides. The theme of the novel is the protagonist's struggle with his ebbing youth and advancing middle age. The novel did not bring her any fame; she then turned to the frontier theme, publishing a trilogy set in the prairies.

Published in 1913, *O Pioneers!* (OP) is the opening novel in Cather's 'prairie trilogy', the other two being *The Song of the Lark* (SOL) and *My Antonia* (MA). The novel brought Cather the recognition of a mainstream novelist. It narrates the chronicle of immigrant life in Nebraska, presenting the conflict between man and environment. *O Pioneers!* introduces Alexandra Bergson, Cather's first heroic woman whose life is a stern test of destiny. The next novel in this sequence is *The Song of the Lark*, published in 1915. It goes into details of the small town life and its narrowness. The novel is about Thea Kronborg, a Swedish girl who struggles to become a successful opera singer. The same theme is discussed in a much later novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) but it does not bring out the same impact on the reader, as its heroine lack the strength and life of Thea. The last novel in the prairie trilogy *My Antonia* (1918), is a memoir. The narrator recalls the life story of his childhood friend, Antonia. Writer's own childhood memories become the novel's backdrop, giving a detailed description of the pioneer woman's life struggle. It also brings out the contrast between the country and town life of her times.

In 1920, another collection of her short stories appeared under the title *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Following this, Willa Cather published a war novel in 1922, which brought to her both recognition and criticism. *One of Ours* (OO) set on the war-theme received the Pulitzer Prize, but could not satisfy the literary laureates of the time. The novel discusses the complexity of Claude Wheller's life. The protagonist is taken over by the psychological puzzlement of the need to go and the need to stay. He is unable to understand his own yearnings, but eventually finds real fulfilment amid death and destruction.

It became difficult for Cather to deal with the severe criticism received by *One of Ours*. The writer once again retreated back to consider her past, for inspiration. For the next two decades Cather did not stop writing. Her novels appeared one after another, though the tone now became graver. *A Lost Lady* (LL) and *The Professor's House* (PH) were considered her masterpieces. *A Lost Lady* (1923) presents the elegiac portrait of an

aristocratic woman's gradual decline, paralleled with the fading spirit of an earlier age which once possessed the graciousness and warmth that Marrian Forrester embodied. The writer used almost the same line of thought in *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), however like Lucy, Mrs. Henshawe too could not match the intensity of Mrs Forrester's character. The other novel which brought to the writer much appreciation was *The Professor's House* (1925). It is a philosophical novel discussing the concerns of a middle aged man, who reassesses his life choices after accomplishing fame and material riches. The protagonist, Professor Godfrey St. Peter compares himself with his student Tom Outland, whose life he feels is truly rewarding. The novel juxtaposes the stressful materialistic civilization and the peaceful open landscapes.

Willa Cather's later novels- *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) failed to produce the same impact which her early novels brought to the reader so naturally. It was only *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) that stood as a unique piece of art based on the theme of Christianity; critics consider it as the culmination of her literary quest. It was equally successful as *The Professor's House*, is indeed considered as one of the best English language novels of the century. The novel introduces two European priests who are sent by Rome to bring order to the American Southwest. The character of Father Jean Marie Latour becomes Cather's ideal human being who is a perfect example of the composite culture of Europeanism and Americanism.

Shadows on the Rock is placed amid the beautiful landscape of Quebec, and presents the tension between the conventional conduct of France and the modern methods of future Canadians. The novel also addresses the concern of bringing spiritual civilization to the New World. Her final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* deals with an altogether different theme - the slave-owner relationship, where she retreats from the Nebraskan prairies to the Virginia just before the Civil War, to bring out the turbulence of this unusual relationship. The narrative is a tale of three strong willed women- Sapphira, her beautiful mulatto slave and Sapphira's daughter, Rachel. An abolitionist by nature, Rachel resists her mother's harsh attempts.

Meanwhile, Cather kept herself busy in writing other fiction and non-fiction. *Obscure Destinies*, a collection of three stories appeared in 1932, then appeared *Not*

Under Forty (1936) her collection of essays. Other creations include the story collection *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948) and *Willa Cather: On Writing* (1949).

The success of the prairie trilogy firmly established Cather as a promising writer by the end of the second decade. However, when Cather continued discussing the same human stories repeatedly; critics began to discard her as a writer who could not reflect over the revolutionizing present, rather becoming progressively nostalgic in her writings. During this period, Wilson and the younger critics of his group took charge of the matter. Granville Hicks criticized Cather's work, failing to present the current happenings and eluding into an idealized past, moreover, Hicks proclaimed that the writer "never once tried to see contemporary life as it is" (qtd in O'Brien 116). During the phase of worldwide despair, Cather's work lacked social relevance, it did not reflect the catastrophic reality of the World War and its ugly repercussions. By this time, Cather was already established as an old-fashioned writer who only talked about the past.

Joan Acocella crisply brings together the views of various critics on Cather's work. Referring to this group of critics, she says, "What these people wanted were the novels that would mirror their postwar disillusionment, the way *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* did" (22), but Willa Cather worked on the principle of 'Art for art's sake'. This young review group wanted something new, something that discussed the industrialization of the world and modernization of the social life and so on, while Cather could not step out of the dreams of the Old World. Harlan Hatcher in *Creating the Modern American Novel* (1935) called Cather's work as a harmless stuff that "could be read in schools and women's clubs where Theodore Dreiser and Anderson would have caused a panic" (qtd in Acocella 25). Writing for the *Nation*, Carl Van Doren, commented on her vision as the real strength reflected in the common rustic people and their fervent spirit; according to him, her characters exhibit such a passion which blows like a free and devastating wind (17).

The same nostalgic subject matter that appealed to Mencken, Randolph Bourne, and Carl Van Doren soured her reputation with younger critics, such as Hicks and Edmund Wilson. Hayes writes-

Her novels are lacking in that complexity which characterizes modern life, and so reflect the author's calmness and unconcern over the present day affairs. Yet this simplicity is Willa Cather's by choice, for she feels that the modern American

novel is “over furnished” so that it may impress or entertain the reader. She prefers that her novels be artistic rather than amusing or didactic.

(46)

Woodress, in her preface to Cather’s biography mentions the views of J. Donald Adams who wrote in the *New York Times* that “no American novelist was more purely an artist,” and George Whicher stated that “no American writer . . . can be more certain than she to capture ultimately the admiration of posterity” (1987, xiii). Dorothy Van Ghent addresses her as an “elegist” that laments for an irredeemable American tradition that was now permanently lost. She expresses-

Her art is a singular one. The prose style is suave, candid and transparent, a style shaped and sophisticated in the great European tradition; her teachers were Homer and Virgil, Tolstoi and Flaubert. But the creative vision that is peculiarly hers is deeply primitive, psychologically archaic in an exact sense.

(1987, 5)

The background of her novels is largely pastoral; while reading her fiction one feels that the writer desired to share the same feeling of excitement and agony which she had once experienced herself. Hayes comments, that her style is simple and lucid which effortlessly redirects the reader towards “Cather’s aversion to the complexity of modern life” (47).

After the huge success of the ‘prairie trilogy’, Cather decided to broaden the subject matter and decided to try something new and landed in writing *One of Ours* that earned the Pulitzer prize for her. The first half of the novel was again set in the prairie, followed by the other half in a war. The protagonist Claude Wheller dreams of doing “something splendid” (OO 26), and finds a fair chance by participating in the World War. Where on one side the writers like Hemingway, Passos and Cummings wrote exceptional war novels like *A Farewell to Arms*, *Three Soldiers* and *The Enormous Room* respectively, that provide a vivid detailing of the butchery of the war, the logic of Claude sacrificing his life for an idea, did not make sense to the people and the novel received severe criticism. Edmund Wilson calls the book “a pretty flat failure” (qtd in Rosowski 2001, 109). Defending the Pulitzer committee’s decision, the *New York Times* editorial in

1923 confronted that Cather understood the actual meaning of the World War, and also that had a purpose; it did not only mean the physical devastation but also the psychological damage. Unlike others, she realised that there were “worse things than war” (Cather 1990, 57).

During the late twentieth century the feminist literary critics assembled to list down the woman-authored books, so as to establish that women writers were equal to men. They wanted to make it clear that the reason for the under representation of women writers was political and not biological. Willa Cather was surely a strong name to the list, but the feminists did not just want a first-rate woman writer, they needed her to be a feminist too. This was the place where Cather and the feminists stood head to head. Cather’s first two prairie novels *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* were everything a feminist needed. Thereafter something changed in the voice of Cather, the result could be seen in the male narration opted by the writer for her subsequent novel *My Antonia*. The Antonia whom the reader knows is not the real Antonia, but the perspective of Jim Burden. Yet another example, of women being silenced by men all over again. The feminists took the title of the last chapter as a huge insult, as it entitled “Cuzak’s Boys,” and not “Antonia’s children.”

The feminists simply cannot stand the term ‘male-identified’ and for the same reason they never sympathised for Cather’s teen period, where she took the identity of ‘William Cather’. Jean Elshtain rightly puts her disappointment, “One is either part of the group of those who have found their authentic voices as women or one is a ‘male-identified’ dupe of the patriarchy” (qtd in Acocella 39). In those days, young boys and girls used to get albums filled by their friends about the various things they admired, their passion etc. Willa too once filled in a similar page in the name of William Cather; the writer here answered that the trait she most admired in men was an original mind and that in women is flirting, giving a silent cue that she does not expect any intellectual activity from a woman; certainly assuming herself to be an exception.

Cather did not seem to have a high opinion of other women authors. She awes at, “why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it” (qtd in Acocella 39). Moreover she thinks God does so not with a serious intent rather as a “sort of ghastly joke” (Cather 1967, 408). She goes further to say that female poets were “emotional in the extreme, self-centered, self-absorbed” (Cather 1970,

146), and the female novelists could only write about love: “They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable” (Cather 1970, 276), if they do not talk about emotions, they surely do other inartistic things like running after a cause - “The feminine mind has a hankering for hobbies and missions” (Cather 1967, 406). However, Virginia Woolf later makes the same complaint in *A Room of One’s Own*, saying that women used their writing only as “self expression” rather than as an art. According to Frances Kaye, Cather’s writings were politically dangerous; Cather distanced herself from the general cause of women, and accepted only a few male-identified women (187). Cheryl Lange quotes the thoughts of Susan Gubar, who believes that men see women as “blank pages,” but that women sometimes also see themselves in this way, using writing to re-create themselves” (qtd in Lange 3).

The other group of feminist critics felt sorry for Cather. They tried to explain to the world the other possible interpretation of Cather’s work; it could be that the attitudes expressed in her novels were not hers, but were of the men, the men in her novels. Joan Acocella enlists the views of Jean Schwind, who tried to defend Cather from the charge that she held incorrect views. In a 1993 article, she comments about *The Professor’s House* saying that the story was not about Professor’s despair; rather it was a critique of the patriarchy (qtd in Acocella, 41). For this reason, one could say that Cather’s work contains patriarchal attitudes, but only to condemn them.

To categorize Willa Cather under a genre or to one distinctive school or style is not at all an easy task; critics found it as the most challenging and had to split it. Daiches attempts an organised compilation of placing Willa Cather’s art in the literary gallery, just to resolve that she cannot be “classified with respect to either theme or technique” (186). He says-

Alfred Kazin puts her beside Ellen Glasgow as another type of “traditionalist”; Henry Seidel Canby also associates her with Ellen Glasgow in both theme and craftsmanship; Fred Millett associates her art with the “genteel realism” of Edith Wharton; Carl Van Doren contrasts her as a frontier novelist with Jack London.

(1951, 186)

Willa Cather has been ignored by the male critics and obscured by the feminists for their own reasons. Her fiction hasn’t received the recognition it deserves. Malcolm

Braddury omitted her from his comprehensive survey in America's introduction to Britain. Richard Chase and Leslie Fiedler, the theorists of American literature ignored her completely. Hugh Kenner, an eminent critic did not even mention her in *A Home-Made World* on modern Americans. Furthermore, the third edition of *The Literary History of the United States* (1963) devoted merely four out of fifteen hundred pages to her, concluding that "Her art is not a big art" (qtd. in Acocella 31).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is a primary research investigating into the various facets of 'self and identity' done through an exhaustive examination of the select literary texts. To achieve the set objective the research takes aid of both the primary as well as the secondary literature. The research design being used is naturalistic and the methods of analysis are qualitative and context sensitive in nature. The critical framework used includes the ecocritical aspect, psychological theories of 'self' and 'identity', and the changing gender roles of the time.

As the aim here is to investigate the self-identity of the major characters, besides the psychological theories and gender roles, the requirement of the literary theory of ecocriticism becomes obligatory, for the reason that Willa Cather's fiction shows direct bearing of the physical environment on the characters. In an overview, she appears as a writer whose fiction propagates only about environment, immigrant life and civility of the Old World; nonetheless, further investigation unwraps her fiction to be an ocean of opportunity for analysis of the psychic state of characters and the implications of the aforementioned environmental factors in defining the paradigm of identity formation.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is defined as "that area of literary and cultural studies which studies the relationship between human culture and society and the natural world". The theory explores the environmental perspective within literature focusing on the influence of the physical environment as depicted in literature. After the initial critical reception of the theory, almost at the turn of the twentieth century, scholars started re-reading the nature writers to consider the "textual explorations and representations of the natural world" along with the "matters of gender and race in their relation-ship to the discursive mediation of the natural environment", at the same time also bearing in mind the reading

of the natural world “as the articulation of a non-human other” (Wolfreys 121-122). Christopher Cokinos in the 1994 Western Literature Association (WLA) meeting in the Salt Lake City about ‘Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice’, elaborates that “ecocriticism is fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy, one that investigates and helps make possible the connections among self, society, nature, and text” (qtd in Shinde 108).

The Earth has witnessed emergence and collapse of several civilisations; it has also seen two World Wars and is awaiting the third. Even though the human behave irresponsibly towards nature, it forgives human mistakes; it even comforts the dispirited souls that turn towards it amid the disasters and also the rush of the modern lifestyle. Several writers have beautifully encapsulated these memories in literature. The need to explore this feeling towards nature in literature gave rise to the critical theory of Ecocriticism or Green Studies in 1980’s in USA and early nineties’ in the UK. Cheryll Glotfelty and Glen Love pioneered this study in USA by their respective contributions titled as “Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism” in the 1989 Western Literature Association, and “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism” in WLA Presidential Address to respond to the environmental crisis. According to Cheryll Glotfelty the question that preoccupies the mind of an ecocritic is that “in addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category?” (qtd in Taitano 1).

While Glen Love urged to revalue nature writings, as it could potentially redirect one from ‘ego-consciousness’ to ‘eco-consciousness’ (208-209), Glotfelty argued for a separate critical study for nature oriented literature and proposed the term ‘ecocriticism’. As traditional theories lay emphasis on either linguistics or the socio-cultural background, similarly this literary theory considers ‘nature’ as the prime force which affects our evolution. For the scholars of ‘Green Studies’ it is not only language and social elements that affect the world and its people, but also the contribution of the physical environment. Along with the well-known poets and authors, the regional literature too became much popular among the ecocritics. A few writers like George Eliot, Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, D.H. Lawrence, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Eudora Welty, N.Scott Momaday, Laurence Durrell, Scott Russell Sanders “have directly asserted the importance of place, often attributing to it the role of indispensable participant – even leading character – in their work” (Love 2003, 1-2)

Glotfelty suggests an interesting and useful model for enquiring into nature writings. He uses the three developmental stages of Elaine Showalter’s feminist criticism

to provide a systematic method for investigation into nature writings. The first stage of this model proposes to enquire as to “how nature is represented in literature – virgin land, Eden, Arcadia, howling wilderness”. In the second stage of ecocriticism, efforts are laid to “recover and describe the genre of nonfiction nature writing and, in addition, identify and study ecologically oriented fiction, poetry, and drama”. The last stage examines as to “how literary discourse has constructed the human”, questioning the Western notion, which is of the view that humanity and nature may be investigated in segregation, and thus not have a bearing on one-another (29).

Psychological Theories of ‘Self’ and ‘Identity’

‘Identity’ and its counterpart, ‘self’ are currently receiving a significant amount of interest from the social scientists and those working in related disciplines. As territorial and cultural boundaries become obscure in the increasingly global environment, the concept of identity also undergoes a transition. Identity can be understood as a narrative, as a story of the ‘self’ that we narrate about ourselves in order to know who we are. According to Kohut, self is the “content of the mental apparatus” (qtd in Harre 74); and according to Anderson and Schoenig, the ‘point of origin’ in terms of location and time which communicates with the outer world as an entity –

Identity - inward looking . . . provides a consideration of the existence of a unity, a coherence that extends across time and situation. This unity can be the 'essence of the individual' that serves as the core of all particular manifestations. Outward looking, identity is that constellation of characteristics and performances that manifest the self in meaningful Action.

(qtd in Harre 76)

Stuart Hall describes the emergence of identity as a type of “unsettled space or an unresolved question in the space, between a number of intersecting discourses” (qtd in Fearon 5). The Father of psychology, Sigmund Freud expresses identity as “many obscure emotional forces which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of an inner mental construct” (qtd in Elliott 50). Lacan in his theory of ‘symbolic order’ projects selfhood as an image of self that is present not inside but outside the physical self;

Moreover, the system that helps in providing meaning and identity to an individual's self, is the one which is not his/her own, and indeed has minimal control over it (qtd in Mansfield 43). According to Jung, the self, as expressed psychologically "is the psychic totality of the individual"; he further explains that anything which an individual assumes to be greater than his totality "can become a symbol of the self" (Jung 1959, 156).

Several theorists have contributed their unique notions about self from both the philosophical and psychological school of thought. These theorists attempt to explicate the truth of the 'self' and the configuration of one's inner life. Eighteenth century philosopher Kant considers self as the bedrock on which the individuality or identity is built. Kant defines the self as, "the feeling of connection or consistency between all your perceptions, the collection point of your thoughts" (qtd in Mansfield 19). He is of the view that what flows within our inner lives is in reality just the reproduction of the collective representations that constitute us. The conscious mind is central for any human relationship with the world; and in order to be in contact with the world, an awareness of oneself is essential which can only be reached with thought. The subject connects with the society in an affirmative exchange of thoughts to receive a cohesive and persistent sense of selfhood.

Amidst the chaotic Civil War, the Great Migration and the Industrial revolution, the nineteenth century culture witnessed an increasingly escalating unease of the self and its accommodation in the world. The major proponents of the study of 'self' who accepted the challenge to find answers to the unique queries of mind were the psychologists Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan and Erik Erikson.

The appearance of the Freudian psychoanalysis in the twentieth-century was a significant occurrence, and no discussions of the time go untouched by his vocabulary and concepts. He is regarded as the most influential exponent of the 'subjective theory'. His arrival at the turn of the century merely systematizes a version of the self that had been long accumulating. Freud's success as a psychologist comes from his perception and understanding of the self that was causing trouble to his culture, and to search for an answer to this problem. The subject in this era suffered from its terror of isolation, the murky desires and easy breakdown as a consequence of the modernization. One can assert that the whole society formed an image of a single mind, struggling to liberate its unconscious energies to find them uncontrollable and threatening. To Freud, "the subject is full to the brim of identifications, emotions and values, separating it from the subjects

around it, even though the processes from which this subjectivity is derived are seen to be as good as universal experiences” (qtd in Mansfield 36).

The Freudian concept explains that a human attitude, mannerism, experience and thought is largely shaped by some irrational drives that pass in and out of our awareness, which he names as ‘unconscious’. This unconscious mind is unaware of the extensive range of emotional impulses and inspirations that comes in the way of our everyday life. At times, these flashes are pleasant, at times alarming, but are always an integral part of our usual practice. These impulses become the defining attribute of the ‘self’.

In his structural model of the psyche, he discusses three distinctive agents of the psyche which form the base for all human activity; he coins them as ‘id’, ‘ego’ and ‘superego’. The ‘id’ works on pleasure principle and is largely comprised of the unconscious and uncontrollable drives of the psyche that force an individual to behave surprisingly, and at times even anti-socially. The ‘superego’ on the other extreme is the pacifying or the moralising agent that controls the irrelevant human behaviour. ‘Ego’ is the realistic part of this model, which bridges the gap between the unruly human desires and their principled regulation. It is the functioning of the ‘ego’ that determines an individual’s personality. A situation demands attention when ‘id’ starts to overpower the ‘ego’; in such a situation the personality exhibits an unruly character as it is actually controlled by the unconscious desires of the psyche.

Freud explains the notion of the unconscious with the help of dream mechanism in his most significant work *Interpretation of Dreams (1904)*. He found dreams to be an immense source of help in enquiring about the interior life of a person. He deems a dream to be an apparatus for wish-fulfilment, allowing the repressed material an adequate expression. He saw dreams as the representations of the unconscious mind under the costume of some insane images and symbols, the comprehensive analysis of which could provide a breakthrough the otherwise secured mind, and may flash the suppressed desires of the individual. These impulses in their endeavour to enter the conscious mind for gaining expression and fulfilment meet the barrier of repression.

The traces of these dreams on the periphery of the human mind which in actual are representation of the repressed desires by the conscious mind, may feel an urgent need for its disposal. The thoughts being objectionable and offensive, find it difficult to be brought out in original before the society. In contrast, an artist with his/her gifted

possession uses these repressed impulses of the human mind to give them a new life. Freud's theory can be appropriately used to discuss aesthetics, which sees an art form to be analogous to one's dream.

the dream attempts to placate unconscious material by giving it some temporary outlet, and conjuring for it some image of its possible satisfaction, the art work reprocesses in a disguised form the most troubling Oedipal obsessions of the artist, and indeed of readers and audiences.

(Mansfield 35)

Freud gave another important notion of 'Oedipus Complex' that considers gender as one of the key contributing factors to subjectivity. He advocates that a subject is not born into an undefined world; rather he/she enters a world that is already structured according to the cultural traditions and sexual identifications of that time. The patriarchal society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century laid heavy restrictions on the women of those times, which can also be seen in the work and writing style of Willa Cather.

Like Freud, Carl Jung contributed significantly to the notion of self through his idea of the collected unconscious. Jung and Freud influenced each other during the formative years of Jung's intellectual life. Later their views diverged, as Jung criticized Freud for laying excessive importance on psychosexual process and libido, and considering it to be the chief contributor to the personal growth of a human being.

Jung draws an analogy between psychology and literature. According to him, if one attempts to analyse a piece of art; the study shall directly permit the investigator to also look into the psychic temper of the artist. He says, "The poet's work is an interpretation and illumination of the contents of consciousness, of the ineluctable experiences of human life with its eternally recurrent sorrow and joy" (qtd in Ross 504). To analyse such work of art, it is essential to get an understanding of the experience that underlies it. Jung's concept of collective unconscious, encompasses the lessons learnt from life – the emotive human experiences, crisis and the traumatic encounters. This material is psychically assimilated by the writer, who then with his experience and expression forces the reader to get a deep human insight to the otherwise overlooked feelings. The work of art must not only be analysed by what has been written, but also by

what has been avoided, passed over in silence and intentionally concealed from the reader. The attempt to replace reality with fiction substitutes the otherwise unacceptable experience, and even conceals it. Willa Cather herself seems to be aware of the psychological working of an artist; in ‘The Novel D meubl ’ (1922) she lucidly explicates that the emotion which is realised after reading a page, without even being specifically mentioned there, is the beauty of art which communicates the presences in absence (Cather 1988, 41). It is certainly the emotion that is communicated through the art work that defines its quality.

Language is the centrepiece of all human interaction; writers strategically use the language-tool to provide expression to their perceptions, thoughts and beliefs. Rooted in their socio-historical context and tradition, the manifold experiences of the writer automatically become the backdrop for a piece of fiction: narrating stories of human fortitude and progression. It is not an overstatement that language is the primary instrument for defining human life. Mansfield parallels the respective discussions of the ‘language game’ and the ‘identification of language’, as proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger who even though part of distinct traditions put forward “language as the centrepiece of the interactions of consciousness” with the external world (Mansfield 38). Jacques Lacan draws out fully the importance of language for psychoanalysis. His most imperative conclusion is that unconscious is structured as language. Behind Lacan’s theory of language are the ideas of Freud and Ferdinand de Saussure (linguist). Freud contends that a subject could only deal effectively with the unconscious material by bringing it out in the form of language. Saussure in his representation of human culture recommends that the, “human being was to be seen as the signifying animal, and all human rituals and behaviours could ultimately be read” (qtd in Mansfield 38).

According to Lacan, a child originally has no sense of self or identity, it is the image presented by the mirror (as explained by Freud) as well as the people around it that shapes his/her sense of self. Lacan asserts and therein elaborates that one’s selfhood, which is indeed the subject’s centre of gravity is actually grounded outside the physical self - “The Mirror image supplies the self with an image of its own coordination, of system and unity”, he further elucidates that the “self’s new understanding of itself has come to it from the outside, in an image it has seen in the external world” (qtd in

Mansfield 43). Likewise, when the infant starts believing about the attainment of a complete self, it finds to its astonishment that-

this image is not its own – that it is the play of light on a mirror, the gaze of a completely separate subject or a word in the mouth like ‘I’ that may seem to represent the self, but is equally the property of others – that it senses its identity is being sucked away from it into a public, shared world of orders and hierarchies.

(qtd in Mansfield 45)

Another important concept has been put forward by the psychologist Erik Erikson, popularly recognised for his theory of psychosocial development. Expounding on Erikson’s stages on life cycle, Sarah Poole and John Snarley state that “A developing body, a developing mind, and a dynamic socio-cultural milieu are the three primary processes underlying a person’s identity formation and psychological development” (599). He downplayed the role of psychosexual processes and even unconscious mind in the development of a personality. Rather, he stressed on the interpersonal, social, and cultural influences in shaping an individual’s identity. He composed a theory on human life cycle comprising eight stages representing various stages of human development. The psychologist theorized that a person’s development depends on three processes which can aptly provide clarification for all human actions. These are as follows-

the biological process of the hierarchic organization of organ systems constituting a body (soma); there is the psychic process organizing individual experience by ego synthesis (psyche); and there is the communal process of the cultural organization of the interdependence of persons (ethos).

(qtd in Zock 38)

Erikson’s childhood put forward many challenges in front of him which motivated him coin a new concept called ‘identity crisis’. Erikson’s theory of personality deals with different stages of life, where each stage of development presents unique challenges, which he calls as ‘crisis’. He believed that this crisis of the ‘ego’ challenges the individual identity and ultimately leads to the situation which he calls as ‘identity crisis’. According to Erikson, ‘Ego’ is not merely a moderator between the ‘id’ and the ‘superego’, it has a life of its own that clearly represents the total personality. It is the ‘ego’ that dominates

the personality, and not the 'id' that is itself dominated by the unconscious drives of the mind.

According to the psychologists, subjectivity is not instantly achieved; it is a process that is neither spontaneous nor automated, rather is achieved as the consequence of numerous critical life passages which compel humans to have a complex interaction between the imaginary and the realistic.

Women Suffrage Movement – Feminist Approaches

Of all things with which one identifies, the most basic and indisputable is gender. Gender shapes the expectations about one's behaviour, feelings, emotions, interests and self-identity. It is the first thing that provides meaning to one's existence, the first thing to answer the questions 'who are you?' and 'what is your role?' When a child is born he/she is unaware of the position of their gender, neither are they aware of the roles and responsibilities attached. Cheryl Lange asserts that from the inception of life "humans are taught to follow a strict code of behaviour that differs depending on their sex" (1). It is the society that shells out these roles and responsibilities affirming the centuries' old cultural concords setting acceptable boundaries for the sexes "Forcing men and women to fit into gender roles" (Lange 1). These compulsive conventions damage the very foundation of individual self-identity by means of believing and enduring the prevalent gender stereotypes, thereby adding meaning to the otherwise void self. Ever since the inception, society has been inclined towards the male gender in bestowing power and authority. Justifying the distribution of male-female roles by the society John Ruskin clearly states:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest.

(Ruskin 99)

America too did not grant women equal rights as men until 1848; when the abolitionists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott started their vigorous movement at the national level for women's rights. The woman suffrage became a radical movement as it opposed the family oppression and demanded admission to citizenship thereby stepping out of the domestic and entering the public arena. The concept of separate spheres for male-female roles was introduced to retain the females to the private or domestic sphere while allowing the males to harness the public horizons; thus, believing their sole purpose to be a wife and a mother. In addition, Jane Rendall throws light on the female role and her status in the society; he reveals that the nineteenth century philosophy and arguments duly justify the focus of a woman's life to narrowly limit herself to her family and the domestic space (Rendall 189). Stanton puts forth the ideology of gender-equality by focusing on the essence of survival and development in togetherness, she says "one may as well talk of separate spheres for two ends of the magnet as for man and woman; they may have separate duties in the same sphere, but their true place is together everywhere" (qtd in DuBois 66). Furthermore, the revolutionist proclaims that the greatest reality of her life is unquestionably womanhood where "wifehood and motherhood are but incidental relations" (qtd in DuBois 64). Simone De Beauvoir explains that the woman who continue living her restricted life, does so for the reason that she has "no desire to shock, no intention to devalue herself socially, has to live her woman's condition as a woman" (Tong 816).

The suffrage movement continued for seventy years and led to the historic change in the American Constitution. It was the 19th Amendment of the American Constitution in 1920 that granted equality to women, giving them the right to vote. This important development at the advent of the twentieth century shook the roots of the centuries old conventions of the American society. The abrupt change hit hard both the American men and the traditional role of women, challenging the former's earlier role of a 'provider and protector' and the latter's role of 'order and arrangement'.

Mark Whalan in *American Culture in 1910's* throws light on the tension build as a result of decade's feminist activism of the twentieth century, he states, "by 1913, nine states had allocated women full voting rights, with partial rights existing in twenty- nine more" under the consistently rising pressure of the movement, by 1917 "a further seven states allocated women the vote". It was a year later, when finally Wilson authorized the principle of female suffrage (13). Woman suffrage swayed away the previous gender-identities and led to a new search for self-identity. Sylvia D. Hoffert defines the 'New

Woman' of the 1920's as "single, well-educated, independent, self-sufficient, and strong-willed" (qtd in Ashton 12). This 'New Woman' began to trespass the territory of men with full vitality embracing new fashions, ideals and personal freedom. The sudden redefining of gender roles led to new adjustments and relations between the two sexes but also resulted in an identity-crisis for men who were forced to accept women in the otherwise male-dominated workplaces. The growing confidence of the women, and the frustration, dissatisfaction and insecurity of the men is the cultural context of Willa Cather's novels.

CHAPTER II

ENVIRONMENT AND IDENTITY

“What is typically background is foregrounded in the novels of Cather”

- Danielle Russell

The discussions in this chapter attempts to bring out the interface between environment and identity. Environment is an all-encompassing term and to divide it on absolute basis is a challenge, as a person’s identity is shaped by the environment in its holistic purview. However, for the ease of analysis, Environment has been broadly bifurcated here as – physical and socio-cultural. Where the former discusses the interactions between an individual and his/her natural or artificial setting, exploring the recollections of landscape, place and space with reference to Cather’s characters. Significant socio-cultural factors influencing the writer’s characters include – migration, changing gender roles and the comprehensive ethnic structure of the society. The constraint of drawing out a clear cut demarcation, carries the discussions of the socio-cultural factors to the fourth chapter where a detailed analysis of the character and his/her life are attempted.

Identity formation is frequently articulated as ‘who am I?’, the answer to this question leads human beings to set themselves on an eternal voyage for the search of one’s true self. Unaware of the destination, we search for the treasure externally, when it is, in reality locked deep inside like a pearl in its shell. Ironically, this pursuit is rarely a solitary task. The riddle can fruitfully be solved if we engage others in searching ourselves. The search for an individual self is not an individual task rather a social activity; our family, friends and even foes reflect our image in their behaviour, words and expressions towards us. Identity, whether individual or collective, is inseparable from its immediate culture, society, and the natural setting. He acknowledges the role of an individual’s enveloping environment, including civilisation, geography and the socio-cultural elements in the development of one’s identity. The quest for identity is an unending progression, it’s not a self-conscious act, rather an on-going journey which keeps on collecting experiences through time; fabricating and eroding it.

Erik Erikson considers the role of society and culture to be a major influence in shaping one’s identity, where society provides us with an image of ourselves scattered in

pieces, which we then gather to call as self-identity. Ian Burkitt elucidates- “to become an individual self with its own unique identity, we must participate in a world of others that is formed by history and culture” (1). Lacan also propagates nearly the same concept in his theory of ‘symbolic order’. According to him the image of selfhood is present outside the physical self where one has very limited control. The process of gaining this selfhood is indeed the mirror image that is comprised of the meanings and identities given by the society and not oneself. Kant too in his philosophy says that it is in the interpersonal discourses that one finds the sense of selfhood.

Russell contends, “the relationship between an individual and the world is complex, but identity is intimately and irrevocably entwined with place” (3). He suggests that a place whether fictional or existing in the “real world” is not only to be experienced objectively but also emotionally, as it affects the individual in each aspect of his/her personality. Geography can be both what the eye can see i.e. the particular landmass or a body of water, and also what the mind imagines. Russell too asserts that “The fictional location has the roots in the real world” (44). The construction and representation of space, whether in terms of place, landscape or geographical location is crucial to the formation of identity. He further elucidates that “Space is never neutral”; it endures the imprints of history - “Ideological, cultural and social concerns inform both our understanding and depictions of space” (1). The places we occupy greatly matter; emerging identities are responsive in both positive as well as negative to the physical conditions we encounter. The act of self-construction is vital to the development of identity, and the enveloping environment works as a catalyst, fostering personal growth.

Willa Cather is such a writer who exhibited a dedicated and lifelong attempt of seeing things in its wholeness. Her artistic expression situates her characters in the ecological environments, describing the rhythm of everyday life in its totality. Breanne Grover expresses that Willa Cather’s art “grows out of her experiences with landscape” (41-42). Susan J. Rosowski in *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination* introduces her as a writer “who is profoundly identified with the places that shaped her and that she wrote about” (x); distinctly situating her in “the greening of literary studies” (ix). In light of the historical details provided by Ronald C. Tobey, Rosowski regards Cather’s ecological concern, to have been certainly affected by the struggle of ecologists in Nebraska, who were involved in understanding and preserving one of the greatest biological regions of the world. Cather’s prairie grasslands had attracted a considerable number of immigrant

settlers, who had found hope in the promising virgin soil of Nebraska, considering it as the heart of the American continent (qtd in Rosowski 2003, 103). The writer thus creates a body of art which reflects the ecological aesthetics.

The organization and representation of space in a fiction depicts the connection between a writer and his/her environment. Even if humans have not yet worked on the landscape, the imagination has already brought it to life by means of symbolic language. We become aware of this environmental imagination only when we come across its symptoms. The untamed physical nature acts as the medium through which the human soul could find peace and comfort. It is here, where Cather places her characters, who struggle through their lives in search of their true self. The character is unaware of the presence of an additional member i.e. environment, who walks parallel to them, interacts with all the other characters and influence their lives in powerful and subtle ways. Reynolds remarks about Cather's textual space to be "concerned with the psychological processes of the self as it connects with and interacts with environment" (174).

The on-going issue of the engagement of environment and identity has inspired many writers to pen down the connections between the human nature and the natural systems. The literary settings, whether rural or urban, natural or man-made evokes the underlying emotions of the human soul. The writer exploits the setting to control the characters, and to establish the mood of a scene. The physical setting has an emotional resonance, and it is impossible to detach the human element from the landscape, space or place. It gives the plot a realistic form, thereby creating convincing characters. The natural settings push the reader to gain apprehension of the characters that gets absorbed in the atmosphere, and relate themselves to the characters of the fiction. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the contribution of a few major writers towards nature writing, has directly asserted the significance of place, which sometimes acts as a participant and at times even becomes a leading character itself in their fiction (Love 2003, 1-2).

The unrest at the dawn of the nineteenth century evoked possibility and hope for many people, in the new land 'America'. Nevertheless, Russell attempts to present a clarification on the myth of an empty and unpeopled land. He says that many writers have made use of the "birth imagery" to discuss the formation of this country, and the gradual nurturing of life; however, there are no facts to validate the fact, moreover, it was never

unpeopled, though the population might have been scattered with less cultivated land area; yet it is portrayed in such a manner as this birth imagery bestows “a strong emotional and artistic resonance” to the fiction (11).

Literature is a powerful tool of recording the history of development and hardships of the human race, which might otherwise be lost. The myth passes from generation to generation and from the literature of the times. The myth created is an answer to a psychological yearning for knowledge, even if it may be unreliable, can be at times compelling to fulfil the psychological need for an identity. Terry Eagleton contends that “A nation is an act of imagination . . . a country of the mind, rather than a tract of land or collection of individuals” (qtd in Russell 2). The myth mechanism, as discussed that even if is unreliable, is much needed to give an answer to the curious human minds.

Images captured and experiences accumulated during the childhood go a long way; they move subconsciously with the self that has been polished with time. The assertion is presented in the light of Cather’s often quoted pronouncement that an author’s most important material is gathered before the age of fifteen. The selected novels substantiate the statement with examples of recuperating memory where the landscape brings some the lost or forgotten concerns of the life; thereby, further contributing in their respective self-identities.

The writer’s actual and uncomplicated picturesque portrayals of the environment transports the reader to her life and times, effortlessly depicting the vast empty land of Nebraska, the rich culture of the cliff dwellers at the Mesa, the social changes and their impact on the lives of the common people. Spanning from her early short stories to the later environmental masterpiece *The Death comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather has almost attempted every method to recreate the physical and cultural environment that has haunted her mind. A writer who resisted complexity and upheld the notion of simplicity in writing, expresses that an artist experiments everything in giving shape to the thoughts that constantly tease their mind. According to her, overlooking the conventional methodologies and expressing the thoughts “down on paper exactly as they are” to the writer, is expected to best reveal their character (Cather 1953, 57).

Most of the novels of Willa Cather are set in Nebraska, it is the prairie setting where these stories unfold. Her fiction provides vivid description of the prairie landscapes, the seasonal changes and its impact, both in the form of joy and suffering on

the life of the immigrants and other inhabitants. Cather uses land as an instrument to reveal the true human character. These characters exhibit unique selves; who “after going through phases of resistance, revolt, reconciliation and adaptation, reach an organic and creative relationship with the environment” (Kuriakose 249). She portrays individuals who have been transformed by the environments they experience; Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg and Jim Burden from *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* (prairie trilogy) respectively, are archetypal to the assertion. These three novels best describe the natural co-existence – the interconnection between the human and the natural. Another novel that came much later in her career *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is an excellent example of this interface. Though, all her fictional characters are always found wandering amid the physical settings, which is mostly the prairie, the impact that Cather was able to create in these novels lacks in the remaining. It is only in *The Professor's House* that she excellently weaves the importance of space. The notion of space for the protagonist is his old house, the memories of whose familiar space are difficult for him to forget.

Situating her characters in the naturally occurring landscapes or in man-made artificial spaces, she implies that natural and constructed, open and enclosed spaces are important factors in shaping the identity. Dooley claims “Cather assumes as obvious and not requiring argument or justification that the natural world exists to serve human welfare and to satisfy human desires” (65).

With context to the concept of ‘Immigration, Ethnicity and Gender’ in Willa Cather’s fiction, Jessica Rabin fuses various aspects of identity providing a holistic view of the idea; where Gleason baseline states that “identity is what a thing is” and Novak feels that “each of us is responsible for creating his or her own identity”, however one’s own identity is not fully under his/her control as he/she cannot choose or regulate the social factors (qtd in Rabin 25). According to Sollors, “this tension between chosen and imposed identities (is) crucial to the American experience” (qtd in Rabin 25).

In Cather’s fiction, the physical setting has its own unique prominence. Setting is not just a physical place, but a living presence where Cather’s characters “do not simply live in places; they *live* places emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually” argues Laura Winters; Eudora Welty compliments Cather for crafting impressive textual landscapes without compromising even with the minute details (qtd in Russell 3-4), Moreover, she “never lost sight of the particular in the panorama” (Pothanamuzhi 38).

“Identity is an interactive process which is, to a great extent, shaped for, and by, the spectators” (Russell 8), the aim is to convey a particular persona or identity to others. Hence, an important factor in determining identity is audience. Maureen Whitebrook’s describes identity as expressing “something of one’s self for public consumption” she continues by saying, identity is selective, fragmentary, intensely adaptable, needing to allow that “expression may need to be modified by the reaction of others” (qtd in Russell 8). Cather depicts this flexible nature of identity in *The Song of the Lark*, wherein the female protagonist Thea Kronborg, when a child, believed that public opinion could be mollified by imitating mainstream behaviours. To escape detection, she alters her behaviour to accommodate to the expectations of others. Though this attempt brings her success as an artist in Chicago, it does not bring to her inner peace. She starts yearning for her hometown. The visit to the Mesa, invokes in her a true realization of art, as form given to hope and experience. Thoughts of those primitive people and the sight of the relics of human endeavour arouse in her a feeling deep in itself, guiding her towards the real self transformation.

O Pioneer’s! is Willa Cather’s first landscape-centered novel. Chronologically it stands second, but critics consider *O Pioneers!* as her first lengthy work of fiction. This is due to the originality with which she painted the lives of Nebraskan immigrants, unlike her previous novel that lacked originality. It is here that the writer hits her home pasture by fictionalizing the land and the frontier experience in which “the environment of Nebraska is used as an analog for novelistic form” (Rosowski 2003, xii). *O Pioneers!* depicts the struggle of its initial inhabitants who were indeed Cather’s own friends and neighbours. The novel strikingly unfolds both external and internal struggles, whereby the former deals with the harshness of nature and human adaptation, and the latter illustrates the agony of a powerful woman. David Stouck declares Alexandra as an epic heroine, stating that the novel focuses on “the struggle of the earliest pioneer settlers of the prairie and on the embodiment of their most heroic gestures in the stalwart figure of Alexandra Bergson” (26).

The first section of the novel titled as ‘The Wild Land’, introduces the reader to a land which is unique to itself, as vast as an ocean, with only a few homesteads and sod houses to be seen here and there, which at the opening of the novel are seen to be struggling for not getting blown away with the fierce wind. The so called houses did not show any mark of permanence, rather are depicted as match boxes placed in a haphazard

manner on a vast stretch of land, which could be shifted to any new location at the wish of the mother nature. Furthermore, the placing of the human element in this wild land seems to fully depict its harshness. The writer uses the contextual base of Alexandra and Emil's return from the town, during the cool and breezy winter-evening to describe the greatness of the land-

which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.

(*OP* 4-5)

The land seemed to be untamed, wild and expressionless. For the people who came to a new country in search of life, this absence of convincing signs of human existence is most depressing and disheartening, as the ploughed area was almost insignificant. The plight of the immigrants and other inhabitants could be weighed from the author's autobiographic description of the land who paints it as "feeble scratches on the stone left by prehistoric races" (*OP* 7). She further describes these scratches to be merely "markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings" (*OP* 7).

Willa Cather brings out the ordinary natural phenomenon with such sensitivity that the reader finds it difficult to stay detached from her perspective; the beginning of the 'Neighboring Fields' provides such an example, a beautiful imagery of air and earth to be "curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other" (*OP* 29-30). Moreover, the earth is seen to yield "itself eagerly to the plow . . . with a soft, deep sigh of happiness" (*OP* 29). This creative description of the routine functioning of the air and earth explains Cather's harmony with the nature. Alexandra's spiritual communion with the Divide is well explained through her consciousness of germinating soil and her dream fantasy of a gigantic earth figure.

The protagonist Alexandra Bergson, daughter of a Swedish immigrant homesteader in Nebraska is the eldest child of the Bergson family, who is handed over the responsibility of the land by her father, on his deathbed. Despite financial problems, the love she develops for land, does not allow her to sell it. Alexandra stands upright to face the challenge; she is an indomitable spirit, with no place for the words indetermination and irresolution. She is not the same as other immigrants. She makes a trip to the

neighbouring areas, and spends five days down the valley to gauge the potential of other farming locations. These passing days change something deep inside her. The love she has for her land is only brought to surface during this passage. Alexandra reflects on the great operations of nature and feels a sense of personal security towards it. When she returns back, she felt a –

. . . new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it...She had never known before how much the country meant to her...The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there...Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring.

(*OP* 28)

This extraordinary beauty of the human consciousness is indeed recognition of Alexandra's emotional investment in the country. The reader notices a gradual development where the initial wild land converts itself to an enormous repository of wealth and prosperity. The novel clearly depicts that the land already possessed the miraculous strength under its wild cloak, but waited for a sympathetic human effort to unveil its power which Cather shows in Alexandra's progressive decisiveness. It becomes a central character whose absence could otherwise be clearly felt; she becomes the evidence of the triumph of human spirit.

Place can be a character and/or catalyst; it has both an identity of its own and an impact on the identities of those who experience it. The interaction between person and place can be mutually transforming; a specific site can alter an individual's perspective as effectively as an individual can alter the physical landscape.

(Russell 4)

Wilderness is shown as unfriendly and unsympathetic to man, however Crazy Ivar is shown to depict a sincere affection towards the wilderness. Cather introduces him as a Swedish hermit who finds contentment in solitude, away from the human dwelling, and the sight of broken pottery and noisy tea-kettles. Ivar is a kind hearted mystic who understands animals, and loves the land in its originality, making no effort to alter as per his comfort. He lives beside a pond in a home dug into a clay bank, and his neighbours

are ducks and geese. His love for the animals and birds, and his reluctance to alter the beauty of nature makes him an integral element of this wilderness. Cather describes-

You could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done.

(*OP* 14)

Cather rejoices total symbiosis between a human soul and the nature. The passage shows an ecstatic fusion of self and nature. The author in an account skilfully crafts the significance of trees. The white mulberry tree is the only character that is shown to be aware of the plight of Marie, and also about her love to Emil. Once Marie tells Emil that Bohemians used to worship trees before the coming of the missionaries; they used to have faith in trees and believed them to bring luck - good as well as bad. Emil discards her views to be old, but Marie firmly puts forth her genuine feelings towards the trees, which she considers of being true friends, and with whom one can talk at any point of hour. She says-

I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do. I feel as if this tree knows everything I ever think of when I sit here. When I come back to it, I never have to remind it of anything; I begin just where I left off.

(*OP* 59)

When the human soul comes across a stage of utter confusion, a situation where it is difficult to open up publically. It is here when the soul feels the presence of the Mother Nature who brings solace to the troubled human spirits without querying about the reason. The cheerfulness of Marie's face tries to hide her anguish, the suffering of her unhappy marriage and one-sided devotedness towards her husband, Frank. When she could not share her pain with any human, it is the mulberry tree that ultimately comforts her.

The central theme of the story is the protagonist's determination to tame the wild land that had its ugly moods. The conquest of the protagonist over this wild land appears more of a lover than of a warrior. The physical nature is an enormous treasure which could only be achieved through human effort. Her love seems to awake the land by a loving touch which "pretended to be poor" (*OP* 45), though in reality it wasn't. Its

success is attributed to the reason that this time the land was worked in the right manner, and once it received the care and concern it needed “it worked itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found that we were rich” (*OP* 45).

The land now becomes what Alexandra has hoped for, a place no longer wild. It appeared to be hospitable, moreover inviting the human spirit for its further exploration. The land seems to fulfil its promise, thereafter becoming a mere object to be possessed. David Stouck remarks that “The epic vision of the land and its first people in *O Pioneers!* gives way to the personal quest of pastoral in *My Antonia*” (23).

The physical environment works as a backdrop, and the identities emerge partially due to the physical conditions we encounter, the spaces we live in shape our life. For the aforesaid assertion, Toni Morrison’s opinion on the significance of space in the formation of identity for women in particular, is vital. She proposes that women have a more intimate relationship with place for the reason that they generally perform more intimate tasks in that space. They are more attached to the surroundings; therein it can be asserted that space contributes more evidently in the formation of a woman’s identity. Willa Cather thrusts upon this irrevocable connection between the environment and an individual, situating her characters in contrasting and conflicting environments that confronts the essentials of identity. In an interview, she shares her personal experience with the places, acknowledging that she felt “a very strong sense of place” which somehow was not related to the political demarcation of the area, in terms of the nation, but in terms of its social sense i.e. “the feeling, the mood of the community”. Furthermore, Morrison makes it obvious that while writing her book she directly draws from the “autobiographical information” she possessed, as the memory of the concerned places were very much alive in her. She reveals-

I do very intimate things ‘in place’. I am sort of rooted in it, so that writing about being in a room looking out, or being in a world looking out, or living in a small definite place, is probably very common among most women.

(qtd in Baker 158)

Alexandra is so attached to the land that she starts dreaming of a mysterious lover who is clearly associated with the nature. She has an image of a gigantic man, who is strong and swift with a figure of “yellow like the sunlight” and the “smell of ripe

cornfields” (*OP* 80). Moreover, in a conversation to Alexandra, Carl declares to her “You belong to the land”, responding to which Alexandra firmly says “The land belongs to the future”, we simply are the custodians who shall come and go but the land shall always remain here and “the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it – for a little while” (*OP* 122).

The protagonist considers herself merely as a benefactress of the land with no sense of ownership; indeed her sense of identity in relation to land considers herself as custodian rather than landowner that too for the reason that “the land requires human attention to have meaning” (Rabin 26). Alexandra is certain that she belongs to the land, however the land does not belong to anyone, it simply brings happiness in the lives of those who understand it; for the protagonist, the mere sight of the productive acres that spread a long way across the divide brings to her fulfilment, only to remind her that “the land belongs to the future” (*OP* 122).

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather gives an account of the transformational journey of a shy young farm-girl who turns up to be a sophisticated artist. Primarily set in Moonstone, the story moves to a lot of different places to support the plot. The setting moves just as a background in the novel, without due consideration to any specific landscape. However, the only place shown to reflect the bearing on human action is the Panther Canyon in Arizona. It is here, where the sight of the relics of ancient Cliff-Dwellers rejuvenates the otherwise spiritless Thea.

Thea Kronborg, daughter of a Swedish Methodist pastor who turns into a successful opera singer with her passion and will. Her journey of transformation is a mere a product of her friends’ unconditional and tireless support, besides their positive perception towards her talent. Thea used to live with a desire to become a successful pianist, which later she learns is not her actual talent; instead it is her voice which makes her extraordinary. Meeting the challenges of a new career and lifestyle, she starts losing her spirit and confidence. Her consistent attempts bring her success as an artist in Chicago, but down the heart she is homesick for the sand dunes, and deep, silent snows of Moonstone. The following winter season Thea catches severe cold, leaving her physically and spiritually exhausted. It is here when Frederick Ottenburg serves as a strong emotional pillar to Thea, and makes arrangements for her relaxation.

Landscape and space do not have identity of their own; it is the individual and his/her perceptions that give meaning to the surrounding environment. Early in her life, Thea identifies herself with the nature; this is even before recognising her relation with music. She has always sensed a strange connection with it; as if that her existence and identity are closely gnarled with the surrounding nature. On her thirteenth birthday, while wandering about the sand ridges, she gets absorbed in the vista. She continues to look “at the sand hills until she wished she WERE a sand hill” (*SOL* 52), yet knowing the fact that the dreams of her life shall soon make her leave them soon. Meinig asserts that “any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads” (qtd in Russell 17). When an individual consciously comes in contact with the surroundings, a new relation is developed between the environment and the self. The person unknowingly starts communicating with the space one occupies, and ponders upon his life from a new dimension. When she gets a chance to listen to music in a theatre, her spirit exhilarates with excitement; the grandeur of the city-life leaves her awestruck. The purity of music takes her to the familiar landscape; Thea could sense Nature in the music-

Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. There was home in it, too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old. (*SOL* 130)

One cannot come in contact with the real self amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life; it is in the seclusion, where true self is realised. This is where the identities are both lost as well as created. A person’s connection with the landscape is largely shaped by his/her perceptions, the thoughts and feelings that preoccupy the individual’s psyche, contribute substantially in giving meaning to the otherwise lifeless objects around. According to Russell “detached observation of the vista is an impossibility; associations and expectations infuse our interpretations” (17).

When the urban lifestyle and its demands slurps up every single drop of Thea’s youthful charm and fervour, leaving her all drained up, Fred offers her a proposal she couldn’t deny. He feels that at this juncture it is only the comforting nature that could aid her. Ann Moseley uses Paula Allen’s interpretations to discuss the need for an obligatory pause to revive the deadened spirit and to come in terms with the inner cognizance. He expounds-

the distractions of ordinary life must be put to rest and emotions redirected and integrated into a ceremonial context so that the greater awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning. In this way the participants become literally one with the universe, for they lose consciousness of mere individuality and share the consciousness that characterizes most orders of being.

(qtd in Moseley 227)

With almost the same probable reasoning, Fred arranges for Thea, a stay of few months at his father's ranch in Arizona which he is certain, shall recuperate her and make her "a new girl" (*SOL* 186). As she drives in the wagon, Thea senses the nature therapy - the release from urban suffocation into the open air of Arizona. At the sight of the enormosity of the pine forests of the Navajos at the base of the San Francisco Mountain, Thea contemplates over the peaceful life of these pine trees that have been enjoying their stay for centuries. Her curious eyes see them standing at a substantial distance from each other and ponders-

Each tree grows alone, murmurs alone, thinks alone. They do not intrude upon each other . . . Their language is not a communicative one, and they never attempt an interchange of personality in speech. Over their forests there is the same inexorable reserve. Each tree has its exalted power to bear. (*SOL* 189)

Willa Cather's novels are rich of specific botanical details and give a pictorial view of the flora of the area "which can be identified nearly one hundred years later" (225), observes Ann Moseley. Remarkably, she does not only provide beautifully crafted botanical descriptions, but also artistically transfuses it with symbolic meanings. The writer here leaves the reader to probe into the parallels between man and environment - the ways in which we can get inspired from the nature. The above passage gives clue of Cather's fancy for a world where human beings may too have a peaceful living, by staying together yet distant as the pine trees. A world where every human being develops on his own without encroaching other person's territory for self-seeking. As for the Navajos, same is true for the mankind; Each human being is a reservoir of abilities and potentialities waiting to be harnessed and their own power to bear the suffering.

A landscape may mirror a character's emotional state, and is creatively exploited by writers as an evocative literary device. This time it is not Cather's prairie where an individual unlocks her creative energy; instead, the spectacular setting of Arizonan

Panther Canyon, where she beautifully incarnates the ancient life of the cliff dwellers. She makes the reader get absorbed in the textual vista at the Panther Canyon. Amid the new landscape, Thea's life gets meaning, it become simple and full of light–

All the houses in the canyon were clean with the cleanness of sun-baked, wind-swept places, and they all smelled of the tough little cedars that twisted themselves into the very doorways. One of these rock-rooms Thea took for her own. . .she could touch the stone roof with her finger-tips. This was her old idea: a nest in a high cliff, full of sun.

(*SOL* 191)

At this juncture Thea feels that “all her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up”, but now Thea gains a new insight, she reflects on her own life, affirming that now she has got a place which is away from the reach of “meaningless activity and undirected effort” (*SOL* 192) . Thea feels that her power to think has converted into a power that is only receptive to sensation. She compares herself to a lizard who could now only respond to heat or colour. Thea could feel a special sensation in the ancient dwellings; it was of a dignified sadness and of the air one once breathed. The stream flowing was the only living thing in that dead landscape; it shows the continuity of life, that never stops. While bathing in a stream, she reflects on a fragment of pottery left by the ancient dwellers, and envisions–

what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself, - life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?

(*SOL* 195)

Amid the forested mountains, canyons and ruins of ancient cliff dwellers Thea discovers her vocation; in doing so “her life becomes inextricably intermingled with its ecology – with its geological and cultural history and with its natural life” (Moseley 218). The visit to the cliff dwellers invokes in Thea a true realisation of art as form given to hope and experience. Thoughts of those primitive people and the sight of the relics of human endeavour arouse in her a feeling deep in itself, which transforms her into a new self –

There was a livelier movement in her thoughts, and a freshening of sensation, like the brightness which came over the underbrush after a shower. A persistent affirmation – or denial – was going on in her, like the tapping of the woodpecker in the one tall pine tree across the chasm.

(*SOL* 197)

The significance and power of natural landscapes is apparent in the above chronicle. Nature teaches humanity, and guides the way to reach one's soul; this awakening provides synergy with the self. Suddenly everything seems to take a systematic form in her mind, bringing to her the clarity as to what she was to do, in this world from now on. Ann Moseley notes –

the Ancient People of Canyon and their artifacts portray a symphonic union of cultures through the amalgamation or the influence of diverse groups, just as Thea's voice will be influenced by artists from various cultures.

(220-221)

When Thea arrived at the Panther Canyon, she was all laden by the glooms of city life, the catalytic nature brings to her the realisation of dreams. The force of nature could be seen in her electric transformation which appears to be an instillation of the energies of whole universe. The otherwise dismal soul is now all set to conquer the world. The girl who could not identify herself in the city has realised her potential in this Arizonian Canyon. Thea takes a deep plunge, as she is now aware that her chase for dreams is only possible by being part of the industrial progression; nonetheless she would always need the assistance of nature to revive her fallen spirits. Cather suggests that nature is an enormous repository of energy; it has the power to transform anyone who is ready to understand it, with sincere dedication. Besides nature, it is the power and beauty of the historic artifacts that helps Thea to locate herself amidst the chaotic city life. Russell states, "Identity, of person and place is open to external manipulations which can be coercive or co-operative" (5); in light of this assertion, after setting herself free in the natural environment, Thea is ultimately able to locate herself in this world.

Movements or relocations can alter identities to a great degree. American fiction substantially discusses the importance of a home - both literal and longed for, as migration is the core of American culture. Urgo remarks that American literary history

reflects “the interplay of rootedness and migrancy, settlement and escape” (1). Whatever reason may back the relocation, for an immigrant the change in location brings a drastic transformation. It serves both, as an escape from something, or towards something. Urgo goes further to explain the migratory phenomenon, and its impact on the humans as an act of physical relocation where one find’s himself/herself “surrounded by people who think, speak, and act in ways that underscore one’s own sense of difference, and to seek out those who think, speak, and act in the peculiar fashion that one finds familiar” (1995, 3), finding the familiar in the unfamiliar. The American history records a feeling of exile and detachment in its immigrant population; for a newly arrived immigrant the feeling of being odd, percolates deep down, thereby alienating him/her from the mainstream. This phenomenon does not singularly influence the pioneer migrants, but has bearing on the successive generations too, validating Urgo’s contention - “What begins as a physical consequence of migration endures as a cultural style” (1995, 3).

Geographical social mobility affects an identity to a great extent, as it becomes difficult for a migrant to get detached-attached from his/her past, and confer to the new surroundings easily. Willa Cather herself witnessed a major migration at the age of just nine; the sudden uprooting might have resulted in her an identity crisis, the strong imprints of which could be found in her frontier themes, where land plays an important role. At various points in her life, Cather’s circumstances compelled her to leave the familiar places and to occupy the “unknown spaces” (Winters 8). The migration may appear physical, but as discussed with reference to Toni Morrison, “the feeling, the mood of the community” is hard to get detached from; it follows the individual wherever he/she goes (qtd in Baker 158). The spatial mobility faced by the writer makes her consciously aware of the places and spaces being occupied. The displacement from Virginia to Nebraska was a significant incident in the writer’s life; nevertheless parting from Red Cloud, Lincoln, Pittsburgh and Bank Street homes, too shows the related traces in her fiction. It offers a rich territory to respond to the question of space and identity, central to her literary endeavours. We become immediately and deeply aware of space while reading a Cather novel. The importance of place in her fiction dominates the texts, where the land itself becomes a character, self-sufficient to construct a strong identity. In Willa Cather’s writings-

the sacred place is not always a place of peace and contentment. In fact, it may be the place in which one must come to terms with the most difficult unresolved

impulses. The sacred place can be a place of danger because it is a place of transformation; it is liminal space.

(Winters 8-9)

Urgo introduces Cather as one such writer of the twentieth century whose work is singularly sufficient to serve the discussion on migration and its impressions the American Culture; it “articulates the cultural mode of thought produced by migratory consciousness” (1995, 5). Though, almost all of her fictional works discuss about the life and struggle of immigrants, *My Antonia* is a novel which most sensitively deals with the issue of an immigrant’s life and experiences on a new land, amongst different people, and their struggle for survival.

My Antonia is the most widely read and appreciated Cather novel. Last in the sequence of Cather’s ‘prairie trilogy’, the novel aptly discourses over the relatedness between mankind and environment. Cather could not draw the prairie more beautifully than she did in this piece of fiction. Deeply rooted in the sense of the contemporary time and place, Cather sets it in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Cather’s prairie is both cruel and lovely; it is too intense to be controlled by the human endeavour. The novel opens up with a dialogue between two friends in a train, feeling nostalgic, who discuss about how it feels to have spent their childhood in the Nebraskan town. With a beautiful pictorial view of the America of the nineteenth century –

buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet iron.

(MA 1)

The novel is a memoir narrated by the male protagonist Jim Burden about his childhood friend Antonia. It is considered an autobiographical work; as critics parallel the lives of Jim Burden and Willa Cather. When Jim migrates to the new land, he is of the same age as Cather, he rides the pony, visits the farmlands, talks to the settlers, same as Cather herself used to do in her childhood. In light of the novel one can directly see the impact of environment and migration on the construction of self-identity.

The depiction of land and landscape in Willa Cather's fiction narrates the story of human growth and development. The drastic uprooting and an involuntary obligation of getting repositioned to a new landscape came as an absolute tragic event in the lives of Jim and Antonia. Antonia's innocent childhood wasn't ready to accept the wild prairie. Even in Nebraska she could sense the Bohemian land and later states - "my feet remember all the little paths through the woods, and where the big roots stick out to trip you" (MA 181). Nevertheless, the landscape which appeared harsh and unfavourable in the first look actually became the means of growth and prosperity. The land stretched like a blank canvas where the children were to paint themselves afresh to build their own success story.

Antonia, the eldest child of an immigrant Bohemian family, and Jim Burden, an orphan from Virginia, who has come to this strange land with his grandparents, both relocate to this new place at the same time. As the character of Jim is inspired from Cather herself, the depiction of the first impression about the land is vividly depicted. The sight of this new land triggers as a shock to the young boy, as was to Cather, for the land contrasted Virginia, which was a place of distinct landmarks. However, the initial sense of emptiness soon transforms into a rich imagery, the land gradually responds to the human endeavours and reveals its living character. Cather describes the initial sight of Nebraska through the following passage-

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

(MA 7)

The strength of Antonia Shimerda's character is derived from an active connection between herself and the surrounding environment symbolizing land itself. Cather presents Antonia as an embodiment of nature; "as a representation of the fusion of land with self" (Grover 49). After the death of her father, she adapts in such a manner that her personality starts reflecting a perfect blend of harshness and beauty. She understands the seasonal rhythm, and the lessons taught by the natural world, gradually earning the status of Mother Earth. The earthy tones used to describe her all through the novel and the

description about her as given by the conductor makes her look like the nature herself.

The author describes her eyes as –

. . . big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the woods. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark color. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking.

(MA 14)

The contrast between Antonia and Jim Burden owes to the reason, that the former happily accommodates herself to the new environment, while the latter is seen struggling with both his own self and the place. Finding himself in a new place, amid new people, Jim experiences confusion. For a boy of his age, who was not treated in a kind manner by the law of nature, this change was quite radical. His first encounter with the Nebraskan prairie aggravated his predicament, he recalled that “the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction” (MA 12). Jim could even sense the change in his own perception towards his existence, envisaging his own disfigurement - “Between the earth and the sky I felt erased, blotted out” (MA 13).

The following day, young and hesitant Jim steps out with his grandmother to see the sod houses and the tall grassy fields that surrounded him. While exploring the land, he comes across a pumpkin garden, where he expresses his wish to stay alone for a while. He sat in the middle of the garden, leaned back against a warm yellow pumpkin, as still as he could, since he did not want anything to happen apart from sensing the warmth of the sun as the pumpkins did. In company of the selfless love of Mother Nature he could gather peace; this tranquillity might have helped him to recall the love and care of his gone parents. Though transient, the moment made him feel “entirely happy”. He feels that this happiness is comparable to the one “when we die and become a part of something entire”. The boy, who wasn’t able to achieve harmony of body and soul to adapt to the new surroundings, suddenly feels a revival of the deadened spirit that now allows the protagonist to experience the unexperienced - the happiness “to be dissolved into something complete and great (and) when it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep” (MA 12).

The exchange between the setting and the subject is usually complex. Both individual and nature influences each other, “The process of becoming aware is often triggered by personal experiences in nature” (Grover 35). One finds perfect solace and

comfort only in nature as it responds to all human queries. “Self-discovery is often depicted as occurring outdoors, whether it is a pastoral ideal or the more foreboding American wilderness” (Russell 2). When Jim visits the pumpkin garden, he is deeply absorbed in the natural vista; he wonders of everything around him and develops a lifelong appreciation for the land. It is here where he finds peace and realisation of the true self; a self which is now passionately ready to embrace the future, promised by the new land. This experience becomes the stepping stone for Jim’s awakening towards the quest for identity. He eventually figures out a strange relationship with the land and the landscapes, and develops an eternal connection with it. Jim’s prairie childhood: his communion with nature and a sacred relationship with Antonia, formulates in him a much deeper sense of understanding, to prepare him to unveil the complexities of future. Laura Winters proclaims-

In Cather’s fictional universe, deep patterns of human experience cannot be understood apart from a profound exploration of the ways in which human beings create and inhabit space.

(16)

The depiction of a landscape, space or place in any of the Cather novels, could be seen as a human face. It appears more of a character itself, rather than a mere setting. A character that is most aware about other characters, who listens patiently to a human soul and its misery, and also responds back in the most selfless manner. Saposnik Noire brings out the importance of the humanised landscape, in her analysis of *My Antonia*, “the landscape acts as a silent protagonist because we cannot speak of the actions or feelings of characters . . . without invoking images of nature” (qtd in Russell 35). The landscape also becomes a means for human growth and survival. A few descriptions of the prairie, as crafted by Cather, become deeply symbolic and representative of the American dream, where the plough and the pen come together to personify the dream, with aid of the most challenging journey, the short voyage as she calls “from the brain to the hand” (Cather 1967, 76). One such pictorial depiction is worth discussion, when Jim and Antonia, along with the other hired girls look out over the land. They observe the spectacular view of the sunset, where a plough stands against the horizon, exhibiting an incredible sight of “a great black figure” inside the spherical red. This figure of a plough, against the sinking red disk appears as the true representation of the prairie life. The following lines elucidate the conquest of human hardships over the harsh yet considerate nature –

Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share — black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

(MA 118)

The picturesque description of the plough set inside the sun is so splendid that it kindles the reader's imagination. When Jim revisits Antonia years later, he finds her to be happily married to Anton Cuzak, sustaining a large family. Her farm, house and fruit cave are shown much a part of the whole landscape, as if it were too a part of the nature. Her house is low-lying yet steeply roofed; "the caves were not much above the forest of tall hollyhocks", according to Antonia by July the house gets buried in the seeds (MA 160).

Willa Cather thrusts upon this irrevocable connection between the environment and an individual, situating her characters in contrasting and conflicting environments that challenge the very core of identity. The female protagonists of the 'prairie trilogy' demonstrate this interface by opening themselves to the influence of the natural settings, and finally locating themselves in their environment. Thus a keen study of *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* suggests that the associations and experiences of an individual with his/her landscape play a significant role in the construction of one's identity.

Willa Cather in her following novel *One of Ours* makes use of the same prairie setting but the war theme shifts the scene to the harsh realities of the World War I. Inspired from the mood of the times, Cather weaves the story of Claude Wheller whose quest for selfhood takes him to the dark realities of the war. The familiar scene of prairie is seen only in the first half of the novel, where the protagonist has to leave his studies in the middle to serve the responsibilities laid down by his father. The setting is not unimportant here, but it has only been detailed to an extent to support the characterization and plot of the novel.

One of Ours stands in contrast with the other war novels of the time, as they present an intense portrayal of the harshness and bloodshed of the World War; whereas *One of Ours* is more of a psychological struggle, which presents a parallel war, one in the external world and another deep inside the protagonist. Though the setting does not have

an instant importance to develop the plot, Cather shows her love towards the nature every now and then. One such illustration is when Claude feels the constant temptation to visit the huge woods ever since his arrival to the war scene. When he finally manages to reach there, he could sense the freshness of rain and could feel his feet sinking in the “spongy, mossy earth”. While wandering in the forest, Claude wonders whether this extreme dampness and gloominess of the place was incessant; at this juncture-

suddenly the sun broke through and shattered the whole wood with gold. He had never seen anything like the quivering emerald of the moss, the silky green of the dripping beech-tops. Everything woke up; rabbits ran across the path, birds began to sing, and all at once the brakes were full of whirring insects.

(OO 151)

A Lost Lady is an elegiac portrait of an aristocratic woman. Mrs Marian Forrester is the figurehead of culture and society. The lady embodies the charm and warmth of the good old times contrasted with her fall of character; as paralleled with the gradual decline of a way of life that started somewhere around the beginning of the twentieth century.

The novel is set in the small fictional town of Sweet Water, Nebraska. It opens up with a striking sketch of the most popular house in the town, the popularity does not owe to its remarkable creation, and instead it is the warmth of the people who lived there. Cather is an excellent craftsman, who compels the reader to envision the setting and move back to the times where the characters belong. She becomes both an artist and an architect while describing a landscape, especially when she elaborates about a house –

The house stood on a low round hill, nearly a mile east of town; a white house with a wing, and sharp-sloping roofs to shed the snow. It was encircled by porches, too narrow for the modern notions of comfort, supported by the fussy, fragile pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous.

(LL 1)

The novel, as in *My Antonia* brings out the changes taking place in the external environment. The Industrial Revolution gave way to many development activities, Cather shares her own experiences of this developmental process, and produces a blend of the

natural and the man-made. Captain Forrester dreamt of “the rail-roads across the mountains” (LL 28), as he had once dreamt about his house in this place at Sweet Water. The creation of these modernized man-made landscapes is the outcome of a dreamscape. This dreamscape is the embodiment of the vision of a group of people. Unfortunately the dreams when turn to reality, they open the gates for a new world, where moral values do not have any place.

The physical terrain no longer dominates the setting. Economic gains in the name of modernism and development are seen to ruin the beauty of the nature. The physical appearance of Ivy Peters is illustrated with natural imagery; the absence of eyelashes gives him “unblinking hardness of a snake’s or a lizard’s” (LL 11). The crude sketch of Ivy Peters allows us to peep in the future for actions that match his personality. He is seen as most inconsiderate towards animals and birds. This nasty creature is nick-named as ‘poison Ivy’ is inhuman towards dogs, rabbits and birds. His name owes to the fact that he had poisoned numerous dogs. Ivy is also seen to have winged a woodpecker and then slit its eyes. This cruelty continues to bring its impact on the unproductive marsh of the Forrester’s, which is destroyed by him for a grazing land; practical concerns overshadow the aesthetic value. The novel shows a few such traces of environmental interaction, giving way to the unfolding of the dramatic plot.

The Professor’s House is a classic example of the interplay of consciousness and environment. Willa Cather discusses the importance of place and space in a person’s life. The writer fictionalises this concept in the male protagonist’s life; interestingly, St. Peter shares almost common characteristics of self as the author herself which are discussed at length in the following chapter. In this context the concept of gender identity can hence be related to both genders.

The novel has a double plot, wherein the master plot gives way to a distributary which develops itself into a novella, therein joining the main stream. The two threads describe the life events of Godfrey St. Peter and his much loved student and friend Tom Outland. The former depicts a strong yearning towards his familiar space, the attic of his old house where he had spent almost two decades of his life. The latter takes the reader to an almost familiar setting of the ancient cliff dwellers as depicted in *The Song of the Lark*.

St. Peter, a man in his fifties has received the Oxford Prize for his eight-volume work on *Spanish Adventures in North America*. The prize has brought him fame and also

money which fulfils the dream of his wife to own a luxurious house. It is here where the intricate plot unfolds. Godfrey is seen highly reluctant to move to his new house. Even when the family plans a summer trip he pleads to stay back to complete his work and retires to his attic in the shabby old house, which he still rents to somehow preserve those memories that value the most to him. However, the real reason for St. Peter's stay, is the comfort of a familiar space, which allows him to treasure "his privacy, his ability to closet himself, and the art he creates in his private cell (that) takes on the form of a religious emotion/devotion" (Rabin 50).

According to Urgo, "What is happening to St. Peter is not extraordinary", because the American culture itself reports unsettled lives and a continuous movement in terms of space and time. However, he also reports that in Cather's imagination his "refusal to migrate is a life-and-death issue" (Urgo 1995, 16). It could possibly be, for the reason, that Cather herself was conscious about the sensitivity of familiar and unfamiliar spaces. Paradoxically, St Peter stands on the crossroads, resisting change, when his whole family and even the surrounding society happily transmute themselves with the progressiveness of the country.

Like Jim/Cather, St. Peter too experiences a major displacement from an exciting lush landscape to the monotony of dry lands. He was an innocent child of eight when "his parents sold the lakeside farm and dragged him and his brothers and sisters out to the wheat lands of central Kansas" (*PH* 19), he too like the author "nearly died of it" (*PH* 19). St. Peter has a special connection with Lake Michigan, the view of this landscape has remained unsurpassable, and finds no substitute in his numerous exotic travels. When Godfrey was offered a position at Hamilton, he happily chose it, not because it was the finest and the most promising opportunities, instead "it seemed to him that any place near the lake was a place where one could live" (*PH* 20). While describing the beauty of Lake Michigan to his French pupils he says - "It is a sea, and yet it is not salt. It is blue, but quite another blue. Yes, there are clouds and mists and sea-gulls, but—I don't know . . ." (*PH* 20) and finishes off with a French phrase. This interesting closure clues towards the end, perhaps shares his wish to let the reader feel the power of the untranslatable. The sight of Lake Michigan from his study had been a source of inspiration all through his life

The great fact in life, the always possible escape from dullness, was the lake. The sun rose out of it, the day began there; it was like an open door that nobody could shut. The land and all its dreariness could never close in on you. You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free.

(PH 19)

Professor's study, once the sewing-room is described as "the most inconvenient study a man could possibly have", but this was the only place in his house that vowed to him, the much needed "isolation (and) insulation from the engaging drama of domestic life" (PH 15). All his youth he had been busy doing his work in this domestic space, which has been a constant companion in his toiling days; according to the protagonist, a work-room is one of the most important places and it must be "like an old shoe; no matter how shabby, it's better than a new one" (PH 44). This familiar space forces him to yearn for the "golden days" (PH 21), when he was a vigorous and ambitious young man. Reassessing the mistakes he made in his life, he recalls Tom Outland, in whom he could see his long gone youth.

The story of Tom Outland is a novella in itself, which only adds more meaning to the mental state of St. Peter's life. Yet another time Cather makes her character come in contact with the environment; at liberty for external manipulations. During a winter camp, Tom and his friend explore the almost inaccessible landscape. The discovery of an untouched ancient life of cliff dwellers at Blue Mesa leaves him awestruck. The amazement of encountering with something, that had been untouched by time; it depicts the patience and love of those artisans who created it; Outland "felt that only a strong aspiring people" who possess the "feeling for design" must have surely built it (PH 165). The sight of the ancient Indian dwellings and their rich culture brings a turning point in his life. He becomes curiously passive but also active at the same time. Tom spends much of his time lying down on the rock, and contemplating in almost Buddhist quietness. His soul receives the much needed gratification, he says - "I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep" (PH 207).

The writer introduces the reader to a mesa, the beauty of which is a perfect blend of the natural and man-made. She introduces us to a tribe that seems to be ahead of any other civilization. The cliff dwellers, as Ivar from *O Pioneers!*, made very little attempt to disturb the physical environment. Outland senses a strange admiration towards these

people, designating them to be “too far advanced for their time and environment”; they were the distinctive people who were-

cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead, protecting the children, doubtless entertaining some feelings of affection and sentiment for this stronghold where they were at once safe and so comfortable, where they had practically overcome the worst hardships that primitive man had to fear.

(*PH* 181)

Professor St. Peter receives an incomparable and inexplicable fulfilment, from a mere reading of the adventures of Tom Outland; he could feel each written word thoroughly, and that might have even transferred him to the place, if not physically then too mentally. He re-experiences those moments and memories of the people who once occupied the Blue Mesa through the diary of his much loved student and friend. St. Peter could now feel absolute gratification, received through the expeditions of his student; as in Outland he could see his youth being re-lived. His attic is the room where these memories are still alive; it is that place which has surpassed the monetary value, to become a priceless possession for the protagonist who in this reference states that “the great pleasures don’t come so cheap” (*PH* 22).

In the recent decades the relation between man and environment has almost entirely been explored, however to seek for an answer as to what is the right relation between human beings and their nature is a ceaseless debate. The utilitarians urge to reserve land for profitable purposes whereas the preservationists wish to preserve the nature for recreational, aesthetic and spiritual purposes. Willa Cather too has been consistently debated on what to be considered - a utilitarian or a preservationist. When the world around her was swiftly adapting to the transformations, and the intellectuals were looking for the right decision as how to preserve the American wilderness without bringing to halt the question of development, Cather’s work surfaced as of a preservationist focusing on the need of conserving land in the industrial era. The contrast between the agrarian plains and industrial cities is the backdrop for Cather’s fiction which displays author’s notion of the environmental tension. Though the writer personally

chooses urbane settlements and lifestyle, her fiction is full of aesthetic and spiritual illustrations of the nature.

Urgo designates her work to be a “preservationist aesthetic” (2003, 56). It discusses the contemporary issues of modernization and preservation. The writer is popularly known for the themes of possession towards land and country life, however in light of her personal life and choices, some critics perceive that she “sees landscape only in terms of its economical value” (Grover 44). Joseph W. Meeker discusses the relation of land with its characters to reach their final destinations. He argues that Cather’s work is devoid of “environmental ethic”; instead it suggests “an ethic of development that supposes that land fulfils its destiny when it is successfully farmed” (88); Furthermore, he is of the view that the author uses the land only to provide a suitable background for her stories of human fortitude; therein suggesting the upper edge of industrialization over environmentalism. Nevertheless, it is in actual the concurrence of industrialization and environmentalism which provides originality to her fiction, and hence conveying an environmental balance. The career and life choices of Jim Burden juxtapose these two concepts; by profession Jim acts as a legal counsellor to the railroads thereby supporting the development process, on the contrary he personally favours the country-life suggesting a conservationist view. Willa Cather’s fiction in essence is this confusion of Jim’s life. However, Breanne Grover resolves that the event of Jim’s homecoming at the end of the novel, though not permanently, “suggests a fusion of his two worlds”. Moreover, it may be reasoned that as the lives of Jim and Cather move on almost similar patterns, the importance of this event is equally applicable to both - the protagonist and the writer. Urgo is of the view that Cather does not only help her characters to get awakened through the landscape but also “advocates a larger, national ecological awakening” (qtd in Grover 48).

CHAPTER III

PRESENCE IN ABSENCES

“The great characters in literature are born out of love, often out of some beautiful experience of the writer” – Willa Cather

While analysing Willa Cather’s novels and characters, a straightforward relationship may be established between the novelist’s self and her characters. Willa Cather is regarded as the most autobiographical writer as she draws heavily from her memories and life experiences. The author is constantly rewriting herself, at times from the female perspective and at other times from the male perspective; sometimes blowing the trumpet loud for country life and on other occasions, criticising the same. Cather fashions her characters out of certain aspects of herself, and at other times as the prototypes of real people whom she knew very well. A complicated self herself, Cather draws energy from contraries, “Her fictions are of split selves and doublings” (16), proclaims Hermione Lee. She elaborates that Cather-

is pulled between the natural and the artificial, the native and the European. She is a democrat and an elitist. She relishes troll-like energy and primitivism as much as delicacy and culture. She is religious, and fatalistic. She is equally interested in renunciation and possessiveness, in impersonality and obsession.

(16)

Merrill Skaggs too characterizes the writer as one who “formulated her ideas through oppositions” (qtd in Rabin 23). Willa Cather maintains consistency in flashing contrasting and conflicting features displaying the tensions between the masculine-feminine, romanticism-realism, modernism-traditionalism, country-city life, moreover her writings equally appreciate and criticize both Europe and America. All the six select novels are distinct pieces of fiction, essentially in its treatment of self and identity. Thematically, *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* move on almost similar lines, exhibiting the heroic pioneering efforts and glory of the prairie land. Both Alexandra and Antonia, exhibit their heroic powers by taming the wild land, the former by her decisiveness, while the latter by her toiling labour. *The Song of the Lark* too shares the same prairie setting to narrate the story of female heroism; however, the fiction does not reports of the

protagonist's conquering over land, instead over the orthodox society. In the other three select novels, Willa Cather does not exaggerate the super powers of her protagonists, on the contrary, exhibits their deficiencies; bringing out the psychological complexities of her characters.

The Song of the Lark and *The Professor's House* share some common attributes, by demonstrating the life issues of two artists: the struggle and eventual success of a young singer and the mid-life crisis of an established professor, respectively. All the select novels have their real life inspirations; Hilda Kron, Olive Fremstad, Annie Sadilek Pavelka, G. P. Cather, Mrs Silas Garber as prototypes to Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Antonia Shimerda, Claude Wheeler and Mrs Marian Forrester respectively. Moreover, a careful reading of *The Professor's House* hints toward the probable mid-life crisis of the writer herself. All these real life characters had once contributed to the humdrum of Cather's childhood and adolescence, creating a great impact on the writer's mind. Responding to Jewett's advice, Willa Cather looks back on her own life for her material and inspiration. However, it is worth mentioning that though these people always existed down the memory lane as exceptional individuals, it was only her later visits to the old places and people that ultimately motivate her to write about them.

An autobiography includes the true facts and occurrences of one's life, while a piece of fiction may take shape as per the wish of its author; Cather's writings become an amalgamation of the two, making it eligible to be called an 'auto-fiction'. The term auto-fiction addresses two aspects – autobiographic and fiction. The former may again have twin meanings here - firstly, where the writer's life events relive in the fiction; Secondly, when the authorial 'self' glides in the characters of either gender. A number of obvious analogies exist and shall be discoursed later in the chapter; nevertheless, it does not hint towards an exact life parallel with her characters. She has been such a person who lived in alienation, and tried best to hide her real 'self' which unknowingly peeps out in her writings.

The voices of Willa Cather's probable past selves speak aloud through her fiction, presenting alternative versions of the writer's self. Jessica insists that most of Cather's fiction "includes autobiographical elements" (Rabin 22), supporting it with Janice Morgan's views about the twentieth century women writers, who practised the style of writing autobiographical fiction to "retain a sense of the self as plural...[and of] roles/identities as multiple" (qtd in Rabin 22), and in doing so the writer constantly knits her experiences by means of her art, to make sense of her idea of self and identity. All the

select novels could be associated with the writer's personal life, indicating towards a clear relationship between her own opinions and the opinions of her characters. The expected adverse social responses, confine free deliberation of one's thoughts, which then constitute the unconscious in the form of repressed material. As already discussed through the psychological theory of Sigmund Freud that an individual "could only deal effectively with unconscious material . . . by bringing it into language" (qtd in Mansfield 38). Language is the best tool to deal with the troubling emotions, social glitches or simply narrating one's story of struggle and triumphant survival. Willa Cather reflects on that quality in a piece of writing where more than the words, emotions hidden underneath are felt. She explicates-

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (Cather 1988, 41-42)

Though Willa Cather strategically hides traces of the personal self in her fiction, the element of autobiography is often palpable. The writer admits that it is difficult "to write about the things that are near your heart, from a kind of instinct of self-protection you distort them and disguise them" (qtd in Porter 10). In the 1922 preface to *Alexander's Bridge*, she says that when a writer works on his own material -

he has less and less power of choice about the moulding of it. It seems to be there of itself, already moulded.... In working with this material he finds that he need have little to do with literary devices; he comes to depend more and more on something else—the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night.

(AB viii-ix)

Firm and diligent young Cather, understands it early that achieving one's dream is a male prerogative in the society. During her childhood and early adolescence Willa Cather used the guise of masculine appearance and characteristics; moreover she herself changed her name from 'Willa Cather' to 'William Cather', to give her a sense of superior accomplishment in the male-dominated society. Likewise, at college in Lincoln, Cather always desired to play male roles in drama. This 'William Cather phase' of the writer's life has its reflections in several of her fictional works, in the form of frequent use of male narrators and the occasional archetypal treatment of the women. Evelyn I. Funda and

Susan Andersen points out the importance of a note filled by the writer (at the age of fifteen) in a friend's 'confession album', signed as 'Wm. Cather, M.D.' about her fancies, opinions and tastes which "anticipate recurring themes in Cather's later writings and reveal her as a remarkable young woman with a strong sense of style, zest, and wit" (207). The note demonstrates Cather's clear sense of understanding of the social issues, gender roles and her personal inclination towards 'male roles and activities'. The simple, direct and honest answers to complex questions could easily envisage the formulation of a revolutionary writer, predicting her to be an original mind and a future innovator.

Young Cather's abhorrence for the social expectations of the nineteenth century is evident from a few of her responses. She advocates the removal of 'Huge Bustles' as the reform most needed under the contemporary conditions; besides considering 'Dresses and Skirts' of the nineteenth century as the greatest folly of the era. Cather gives a clear indication of her choices as a free woman when she replies 'Pants and Coat' as the thing she would most desire if shipwrecked on a desolate island (209).

Willa Cather was never quite convinced with the complex female attire of the contemporary times. Similar insights are available in Willa Cather's discussion about the socio-cultural milieu of the time, the position of women and the efforts put in by her in carving the image of the 'New Woman'. None of her major characters succeed in meeting the gender expectations of the society, and become androgynous, carrying a blend of masculine and feminine qualities. The female characters in particular seem to break gender walls and trespass the male territory in similar ways as once were done by the writer herself. We can sense this background while reading *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* in particular – where Alexandra wears a man's coat and Antonia wears her father's boots to show the writer's attempt in liberating the women from the nineteenth century constrained definition of femininity. Evelyn and Susan express this parallel as-

the lack of conventionality in her expression of gender, the rebellion against the standards for women, and the seeming comfort and ease in her lack of conformity, all of which translate into many of her women characters who are comfortable in their own unconventional sexuality as they challenge female stereotypes.

(Funda 215-216)

Selecting female heroes in all the three novels of the 'prairie trilogy' is writer's contribution in shaping the persona of the 'New Woman'. As Cather herself had to face the social restrictions laid down by the provincialism of the small town, she convincingly brings it out in depicting the characters of Alexandra, Thea and Antonia. When she

chooses them as her heroic protagonists, she challenges the patriarchal society of America, thereby going against the conventions, and at times even defeating them. The male control revealed through the characters of Oscar and Lou in *O Pioneers!*, Thea's elder brothers and the towns-people in *The Song of the Lark*, Ambrosch and Mr Harling in *My Antonia*, and finally the expectations St. Peter has from the women of his family in *The Professor's House*, mirror the socio-cultural scenario of the writer's time. Ebere Nweze discusses two identifiable categories of auto-fiction: firstly "the promotion of assertive individualism" (138), secondly "the image of the self as a representative of the group" (138). Nweze continues to proclaim that the writings depicting the struggles and successes of female characters encourage the women in common, making them believe that if they are willing to stand for their rights within the prejudices of the patriarchy they have fair chances to be victorious. This concept exhibits the protagonist as the representative image of a group, as a model whose initiatives for gender equality must be acknowledged and supported. Likewise Rosalind Coward too expresses that "I am, but I am a representative of all women". According to her the story of her oppression is the story of all other women and shall become the mouthpiece for them (47).

The authorial self peeps through almost every single aspect of her discussion. Cather fictionalises her thoughts, opinions, fears and doubts; the characters at times become a mouthpiece to broadcast her own ideologies. After reading Cather one can find traits of traditionalism and modernism, city-country dichotomy which equally criticizes and praises them both, and her distinctive concept of unhappy marriage.

Nevertheless, the fiction of Willa Cather reveals a strong inclination towards the prairie land and country life. Cather herself never really settles there, and in its place preferred criticising the city life living in a city. This mental tussle can be explained in the light of the psychological approach-approach conflict, the writer being fascinated by both: the peaceful rustic country life, and the liberty offered by the progressive city life. Cather's fiction too discourses the conflict, thematically addressing it in almost all the select novels. The following illustrations substantiate Cather's constant fluctuation between the country-city life: Alexandra loves the country but decides to send her brother to the city to learn the sophisticated urban ways of the society, Carl disparages the spiteful urban ways praising Alexandra's splendour, on the contrary, Alexandra craves for Carl's freedom offered by the city, Thea's discontentment towards the heartlessness of the city and her wish to retreat back yet continuing with the city and its modern life-style, Antonia's momentary fascination towards the fashionable city-conduct, her sudden

withdrawal and the final contentment in the rustic lifestyle, Jim's concluding thoughts about Antonia's fulfilling life contrasted by the futility of his own life, Marian's temptation to become a permanent part of the urbanities, and St Peter's disgust for materialism, all offer the reader an insight into the writer's opinions and philosophies.

Willa Cather does not give her novels the conventional fairy-tale ending; there exists numerous elements in her novels that derive from the writer's own personality and viewpoint. Her views on marriage and love are clearly marked through the accounts of almost all the characters and their unhappy relations. Randall remarks that Cather's fiction shows that "permanently satisfying relationships between men and women are impossible" (95). *My Ántonia* seems to be a childhood love story but does not end with the marriage of Jim and Antonia. In *O Pioneers!* the devastating nature of romance is epitomized in the catastrophic end of Emil and Marie. Joan Acocella remarks that in Cather's fiction the-

male-female passion generally doesn't work out—the marriages are often unhappy—or it doesn't even get to first base. The woman is unavailable; the man broods and pines . . . these men are feeling what Cather herself felt. This is her portrayal of lesbian love: silent, hopeless longing.

(46)

The writer's sceptical view of marriage is obvious in the relations of Marie and Frank, where one is devoted and the other is highly suspicious; the estranged relations between Fred, Dr. Archie, Claude Wheeler and their respective wives; the incompatibility between Mr and Mrs Shimerda, Mr and Mrs Forrester, St. Peter and Lillian; the betrayal in the Antonia-Larry relationship; covetousness in Jim-Lenna relationship, are all doomed at the writer's wish; illustrating Cather's alienation towards the concept of love and marriage. In *The Song of the Lark* the writer informs the reader through the epilogue that "when Thea dined in her own room, her husband went down to dinner with Tillie" (SOL 311); the framing of the sentence, along with the deliberate exclusion of her husband's name forces the reader to turn to the previous pages to find out who Thea's husband is—Nordquist or Fred? As with Thea and Fred, the marriage of Alexandra and Emil too is no more than just a safe deal, as intimated through the words of Alexandra - "I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like—those young ones" (OP 122). Certainly Cather did not marry all through her life, but Bennett reasons that had she married "she would have run the risk of falling out of love the way that her Professor does" (Rabin 43-44). The plot in her fiction serves-

as justification for her refusal to allow her artists to have more than abortive encounters with the opposite sex . . . this suggests not only a deep fear of emotional entanglement on Willa Cather's part but also a belief that art could and should be used as a substitute for a continued physical relationship.

(Randall 45)

The same is true in the context of the dreams of Cather's fictional characters: Alexandra, Jim and St. Peter, all envision almost a similar dream viz. the flashes of the unconscious. These flashes are indeed the wish fulfilments of the repressed desires, which burst out in the form of dreams. Alexandra's sexual fantasy about a strong man, Jim's innocent youthful fancy and his puzzlement over Leena and Antonia, and St. Peter's daydreaming about his beloved student Tom Outland who also personifies his own youth, are all suggestive of Willa Cather's personal desires that were once suppressed. Woodress remarks -

Cather's own suppression or sublimation of sex perhaps is revealed in Alexandra's recurring dream of being carried away by a strong man whose face she could never see . . . The sense of let-down that Alexandra experiences after her struggles are over is also characteristic of Cather.

(1987, 244)

In 1912 Cather made a journey to the Southwest, coming across an excellent landscape with a great past of complex traditions. The discovery of such a land was a splendid feeling for Cather as an observer, and as an American appreciating one's rich and lengthy past, finding "something that was not only extremely simple and extremely beautiful, but extremely old" (Brown 171). The region soon became near to the writer's heart and pressed itself into her fiction; in her references to Mexico in *O Pioneers*, the extensive account of Thea's emotional epiphany at the Panther Canyon in Arizona in *The Song of the Lark*, the Coronado expedition in *My Antonia*, the discovery made by Tom Outland about the ancient settlements of the cliff dwellers in *The Professor's House*, and lastly in the conception of a much later masterpiece *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Willa Cather's fiction presents a realistic account of the common life, its people, their incidents, and moreover the themes it addresses. The writer is well-known to be an auto-fiction writer; the 'prairie trilogy' distinctly envisions the author's past. Cather extensively uses the principle of her 'own material' in *O Pioneers* - the novel's landscape is Nebraska - her own frontier land. The people comprise of Cather's real neighbours including the immigrant families from Scandinavia and Bohemia. The

struggle for survival speaks the story of the first pioneer families on the Divide. The writer's initial reflections on her own novel were not rather affirmative as it was "all about crops and cows". Nonetheless, the novel still seemed interesting to her as she could finally give shape to her own childhood memories in the manner she intended to do - "She let the country be the hero and had taken the little themes that hide in the grass and worked them into the story the best she could" (Woodress 1987, 237). Furthermore, Willa Cather says that the sketches discussed in the book are "living things caught in the open, with light and freedom and air-space about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself" (Cather 1988, 49). After the cold reception of her first novel, and the subsequent step of giving up journalism, Cather turned to a more mature style of writing, she herself confesses to have "recovered from the conventional editorial point of view" (qtd in Brown 171). While discoursing on the techniques and strategies of writing, Willa Cather says-

The shapes and scenes that have 'teased' the mind for years . . . make a very much higher order of writing, and a much more costly, than the most vivid and vigorous transfer of immediate impressions.

(1988, 48)

The inspiration behind Cather's heroic female protagonists of the prairie and other characters is certainly the real life. As most of the characters are stimulated by real people, it becomes apparent that the inspiration behind the great woman farmer from *O Pioneers!* also comes from the same source. However, the source of inspiration for this glorious character is either Cather herself as "Alexandra resembles Cather in her energy, determination to succeed, and strong masculine personality" or the other possible prototype is Hilda Kron – an emigrant from Sweden, a strong and vibrant person but, unlike Alexandra, Hilda was happily married and with the support of her husband was able to develop the richest farms in Webster County (Woodress 1987, 245).

The life and character of Thea Kronborg is very near to the writer's heart. The journey of a young female artist, struggling and ascending through the narrow-mindedness of a small town is purely autobiographical. Willa Cather's adoration for music, her struggle as an artist, the landscapes, childhood memories, all make the novel a very intimate work. The novel is-

a fascinating blend of memory, experience, and friendships . . . The aspirations, longings, and strivings of young Thea Kronborg making her way in the world were Cather's own feelings.

(Woodress 1982, 199)

Thea is a blend of the young and aspiring Willa Cather, and Olive Fremstad, the leading Wagnerian soprano. When Cather shifts to Nebraska at the age of nine, the immigrants and their life-stories contribute immensely to the writer's experiences. Like Thea, Cather too had come across a number of extraordinary personalities in the town, who had their individuality and did not bend to the conventionalities of the society. E.K.Brown says –

Everyone in the village who had an exceptional nature responded to that exceptional element in Willa Gather's, exactly as happened with Thea Kronborg when she was growing up in Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark*.

(xi)

It suggests that Cather's struggle for success, and her personality too had a great impact of these people. The imprints of the same could also be seen in the short story "Two Friends" published under *Obscure Destinies*, where the town, its people, and the young girl all hint towards the real town of Red Cloud and the writer's relation with its people. David Porter declares that the first part of the novel entitled as "Friends of Childhood" is certainly "the most autobiographical fiction she ever wrote". He states that-

Thea's town of Moonstone, though nominally in Colorado, is so similar to Cather's Red Cloud that one can still use the novel's descriptions as a town map. The house in which Thea grows up is modeled on the home to which the Cather family moved . . . Thea's second-story room is Cather's, even down to the distinctive wallpaper Thea puts on the wall.

(119)

Almost all the key figures of Thea Kronborg's childhood have their counterparts in the writer's early years. Dr. Archie is the real Dr. McKeeby, whom Cather used to accompany on country calls, the doctor looked after her as Thea was looked after when she was seriously ill; Spanish Johnny, the music teacher is Herr Schindelmeisser, Cather's piano teacher; her childhood competitor Lily Fisher is supposed to have existed with the same name and traits; Ray Kennedy partially modelled on the traits of the brakeman Tooker; Aunt Tilly has a few characteristics of the writer's cousin, Bess Seymour; Mrs. Kronborg, her rawhide whip, her iron discipline for her seven children are the traits that correspond to Jennie Cather, Willa Cather's mother. It then even implies that the motivation and support Thea received by her mother to pursue her talent was once realised by Cather too. Moreover, both Thea and Cather move to pursue their respective

fields of career at the age of seventeen. Both Thea and Willa Cather get rescued by their respective teachers: When Andor Harsanyi listens to Thea's voice in the church, he makes her realise that her actual talent isn't in music, but in voice. Thea too feels that she had been chasing a wrong dream "she studied piano to fit herself to be a music teacher. But she never asked herself why she was studying voice" (SOL 140). Her own voice, had always instilled in her the "confidence, that sense of wholeness and inner well-being that she had felt at moments ever since she could remember" (SOL 141); however, she had always been busy in fulfilling the wishes of her family and friends, taking it-

for granted that some day, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it.

(SOL 141)

Likewise, Cather's childhood dream of becoming a physician gets surprisingly transformed through an unplanned occurrence. It happens to be when Cather wrote an essay on Thomas Carlyle as an English assignment; her professor, Ebenezer Hunt got extremely impressed with her writing skills, and got it published in the *Nebraska State Journal* without her knowledge. As already mentioned in the first chapter that for young Cather the feeling of seeing her name in print was absolutely mesmerising, calling it as a "hypnotic effect" (Cather 1986, 181) which changed her aspirations altogether. She now wanted to become a writer.

Cather wasn't sure on to whom to model her fictional artist; having three options in her mind, Cather visits the aspiring singer Olive Fremstad, but due to some mishap with Olive on the way, she could not talk to her. Cather too declined the idea of selecting Fremstad as the stimulus, for she "looked like an old woman" (qtd in Woodress 1987, 253). Nevertheless, the same night Willa Cather went for Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, where the announcement on change of cast disturbed the audience; in place of Mme Duchene now Mme Fremstad was to sing the role of Giulietta in the Venetian scene. After listening to the singer, Willa Cather's reaction made her astonish over her makeover. The woman who was looking fully drained off in the afternoon had now been transformed to "a vision of dazzling youth and beauty"; mesmerised with the singer's voice, the writer kept on saying, "But it's impossible . . . it's impossible". The writer felt that the singer was "dreaming the music, not singing it"; she was so impressed with her performance that she used the incident much the same way in *The Song of the Lark* as it happened (Woodress 1987, 253). Further meetings with the singer made Cather realise

that Olive Fremstad was “exactly the kind of artist she herself aspired to be” (Woodress 1987, 256).

Of the numerous geographic and social narrations, the most impactful is the account of cliff-dwellers in *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House*. The reason as to why the reading of Thea's emotional epiphany looks so convincing is that it is woven of real emotions and feelings of the writer. The impact on Thea as an artist, as has already been discussed, is more factual than fictional. When Thea gets a clear sense of her vocation realising the true value of tradition to a person, it is indeed Willa Cather herself who was once liberated by these emotions. The placing of the cliff-dwellers account at the crucial phase of Thea Kronborg's history, the impressions of the landscape, its ancient inhabitants and their artefacts on an artist prove that -

how very personal a work *The Song of the Lark* is. It is the one of her novels in – which she is not recalling or resurrecting, but working in the impressions of the present or the immediate past.

(Brown 171)

When Thea Kronborg spends her summer in Arizona among the ruins of the cliff-dwellings, she astonishes to the fact that why the Indian women used to decorate the ordinary jars that were to be used only to carry water. Thea grasps to answer this strange query while bathing in the stream; she realises that art is just an effort “to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (*SOL* 195). Woodress brings out a striking analogy between the lavishly decorated shards of broken pottery and literature. According to him, the same principle applies to literature too “One made a sheath with words to capture the rushing flow of life. The structural principle of fiction must be organic; form must follow function” (1987, 232).

The glimpse of Cather's self is evident in the feelings of Thea. It comes across when amidst the ruins of the ancient-dwellers, Thea ponders on her past when she had been running after a numerous things, as if left behind and trying to catch up with something. However, it was in this gigantic landscape that “she could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind”. The thoughts certainly prevailed but “were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas”. The tranquillity aids Thea to re-assess her life and decisions. It was hard to recall for her, as to when she last got time for herself, all these years she was fully engaged “hurrying from one task to another”, for which she now astonishes as if it all mattered to her or to anyone, at any

point of time “and now her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation (*SOL* 192).

The Panther Canyon episode becomes the turning point of Thea’s life which brings to her a spiritual consciousness of the self. She feels hopeful towards future, with a voice that has grown stronger yet grounded. The above discussion stands more justified for Cather than for Thea. When Cather elucidates that Thea could feel the sensations very clearly, music effortlessly comes to her in the most sensuous form, permitting her to comfortably engage in the “act of remembering” (*SOL* 192), we can assume that Cather too must have felt in the same manner, inspiring the writer for her later works, that undeniably became highly successful, as Thea became after the enlightening voyage. David Porter states that-

In Cather’s telling of the Panther Canyon episode, she celebrates through Thea the fulfillment of Jewett’s words in her own life and in her writing: she too had found her Panther Canyon, had become the instrument of her ideas, had learned to write fiction so natural and truthful that it feels like a tree bursting into bloom.

(120)

Yet another time Thea’s life reflects the writer’s own experiences, her subsequent success and its allied inconveniences mirrors Cather’s dreariness. Willa Cather herself was living an almost similar life in New York – on the one hand, flourishing as a promising writer and achieving the sort of artistic accomplishment as Thea does in the novel, and on the other, wrestling with the frustrations of becoming a public figure, addressing the challenge of maintaining a writer’s tranquil and private life. In the novel, the writer depicts this anguish, drawing attention to the variance between public and private life. In one of the scenes, when Dr. Archie visits Thea, who has now become a celebrated singer, he is forced to seek an appointment unlike their former casual meetings. After hours of waiting, Thea comes, gives a “piercing, defiant glance” through her partially covered face. She might have succeeded in hiding her drained up soul from the public, but that one glance was enough for the doctor to find out that she had turned “very pale”; moreover she looked “forty years old” (*SOL* 264).

The suspicious and mystified stare intended for public soon soothes to find a familiar face in public. Pushing Dr. Archie into the elevator, she hurries to avoid the spurt of her real self in public. Inside the elevator, Thea continues “frowning, as if she were

trying to remember or realize something” (SOL 264), followed by a long and authoritative confrontation in the room -

“Why didn't you let me know?” . . . “Oh, I wanted to take my chance with you, like anybody else. It's been so long, now!” . . . she threw both arms about him and hugged him. “Oh, Dr. Archie, DR. ARCHIE,”—she shook him,—“don't let me go. Hold on, now you're here,” she laughed.

(SOL 264)

The incident appears to be an unification of a presumed personal memory of the writer, presented under the cloak of an identical situation in Olive’s when Cather tries to catch her after a great performance, just to grasp that “Fremstad's eyes were empty glass; she had spent her charge” (qtd in Woodress 1987, 254). The concluding words by Willa Cather in an article about Olive Fremstad, which later appears as a part of the synopsis to the novel, blur the boundaries between a biographic and an autobiographic description -

She grew up in a new, crude country where there was neither artistic stimulus nor discriminating taste . . . She fought her own way toward the intellectual centers of the world. She wrung from fortune the one profit which adversity sometimes leaves with strong natures—the power to conquer.

(Woodress 1987, 257)

It appears that Willa Cather finds *The Song of the Lark* as an appropriate platform for sharing her long journey, the challenges, and the real meaning of art and an artist. She believed that to master an art form “a fearful tax is levied on the entire personality of the artist”; this process of true realisation and artistic achievement however implies “a constant bleeding of a person's strength” (qtd in Brown 187). When the writer with context to Thea’s growth as an artist, states that artistic growth is “a refining of the sense of truthfulness”, and that the senseless people believe that being truthful is easy - “only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is” (SOL 305), the reader again feels that the description is fittingly applicable to the writer’s artistic growth too.

Cather did not step back in admitting that *The Song of the Lark* was her most autobiographical narrative. According to Lee the double shade of Thea’s life find roots in her childhood. She declares that the novel is not only an “autobiography”, but also “dramatization of Cather’s credo” (120). In the novel, the reader can identify “two

manners” of the protagonist: “intimate” and “remote”; the intimate manner of Thea’s personality could be observed either in solitude – her attic study, or in open landscape – as in Panther Canyon where her introspections and epiphanies take place; the “remote” or public manner could be seen in her vigorous engagements with her family, community and audience (120). It is interesting to note that when Thea talks about her ‘second self’ and the second selves of the people surrounding her, the discussion becomes a straight correlation between the writer and protagonist. Thea’s questions seem to be an actual urge of Cather’s self - “How deep they lay”, “how little one knew about them”, “What if one’s second self could somehow speak to all the second selves” (*SOL* 192). According to the protagonist, these hidden second selves find exposure only in music, and are to be guarded fiercely to sustain in a conventional society.

While still working on *The Song of the Lark*, Cather’s Nebraska visit brings to her a clear idea about the content of her following novel; it shall depict the life of Annie Pavelka, whom she had known very well as a childhood friend. Annie worked for one of Cather’s neighbours and the story of Annie and her father’s suicide were amongst the first stories of her Nebraska stay-

this woman's story ran very close to the central stream of life in Red Cloud and on the Divide, that she stood for the triumph of what was vigorous, sound, and beautiful in a region where these qualities so often seemed to suffer repression or defeat (Brown 199).

Cather wanted to carve her fictional heroine “like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides” (qtd in Stout 5); Annie was one such character. She was the embodiment of Cather’s feelings about the prairie and its immigrants. The writer felt that Annie was “one of the truest artists” she had ever come across; she considers her an artist, owing to the gratification she used to sense “in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains” (Cather 1990, 44).

Willa Cather’s Pittsburgh years were full of happy memories of “her first, and probably greatest, love Isabelle McClung” (Lambert 29). She lived with the McClung family in their big house; it is here that Cather wrote *April Twilights* (1903), *The Troll Garden* (1906) and substantial portions of *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* sitting in her attic room. In the course of *The Song of the Lark*’s publication and preparation to starting a fresh novel, Willa Cather’s personal life faces substantial jolts including old Judge McClung’s death, Isabelle McClung’s marriage announcement, that “came as a

considerable shock” (Woodress 1987, 276) and left her “stunned and then deeply depressed” (Lambert 29), followed by the selling of McClung house, where Cather had spent a good number of years in close companionship of Isabelle. While discussing about her to be published novel, Cather writes to Dorothy Canfield Fisher (March 15, 1916, New York City) that this matrimonial alliance shall be a “devastating loss” for her and would certainly bring an extraordinary change in her life (Cather 2013, 219).

The writer’s consistent yearning for the good old days, and acceptance of the fact that it cannot be reinstated renders her fiction a dramatic quality. The positioning of *My Antonia* in her career happens to be when she had started feeling that her past was far better than her present. Though in her fiction, Deborah G. Lambert remarks that Cather cautiously “transformed her emotional life and experiences into acceptable heterosexual forms and guises” (26), *My Antonia* becomes a crucial and revealing piece of work; the backdrop of this novel encapsulates the anguish of a failed love-relationship. Lambert brings forth the impact of this troublesome phase on her subsequent novel, he mentions that when the writer was abandoned by her lover, she was writing *My Antonia* and “both her sense of loss and the need to conceal her passion are evident in the text” (29).

Willa Cather’s sexual identity is debatable and her fiction shows an apparent discomfort with sexuality. Cather never quite satisfactorily deals with the issue of homosexuality in her writings, making it difficult for the critics to declare her as a lesbian writer. Few critics negate the possibility, in absence of valid evidence, whereas, the other group declares that the writer was most certainly a homosexual, based on her close ties and emotional exchanges with women. Sexuality, in psychoanalytic theory as explained by Jean Laplanche -

. . . does not mean only the activities and pleasure which depend on the functioning of the genital apparatus: it also embraces a whole range of excitations and activities which may be observed from infancy onwards and which procure a pleasure that cannot be adequately explained in terms of the satisfaction of a basic physiological need.

(qtd in Lindemann 149)

Woodress adds “There is no disputing that her closest friends were women—Louise Pound first, then Isabelle McClung, later Edith Lewis, Zoë Akins, and Elizabeth Sergeant” (1987, 141). Most of the letters of correspondence with close friends and

supposed lovers including Isabelle McClung were destroyed by Cather herself; only three surviving letters are available out of hundreds of exchanged letters between Isabelle and Cather, and they too are not much debatable. However, the letters written to and about Lousie Pound give a glimpse of the passionate and candid young Cather, whose expressions are full of sexual desires towards the same gender. In one such letter written to Mariel Gere on August 1, 1983 Cather gives her reason for late reply to be Lousie's absence which made her feel "lonesome and weary of life" (Cather 2013, 19). Later in the same letter she is seen sharing her experience of receiving "sundry bruises" while "driving a certain fair maid over the country with one hand, sometimes, indeed, with no hand at all". She goes on by saying that the lady "did not seem to mind" her driving method even when they proceeded "off banks and over haystacks" (Cather 2013, 21-22). Cather here talks about Lousie Pound and the kind of feeling that is being conveyed through this letter is that of an overwhelming excitement, notoriously playful. One could sense the underlying masculine feelings in the young Cather.

For a Cather scholar this narrative is interesting, as it contributes in defining her sexual identity; it even signifies that her sexual orientation was already a well-established fact between her mates as she exhibits not even the slightest of trepidation in sharing the moment with her friend, moreover asks her "to read all of this letter to Ned and Frances, except the last part" (Cather 2013, 22). The phrase "except the last part" seems more like a teen's trick of augmenting curiosity. However, in none of the other surviving letters the same wild passion of the writer ever appears.

In the same line of thought, Karen A. Hoffmann offers contrasting views about Willa Cather's use of male narrators. She puts forth that being a female writer, writing from a male perspective may hint towards her alliance with masculinity, yet maintaining her feminine status more pertinently, substantiates the restraint against the restrictive gender categories (Hoffmann 25-50). Lambert points out that her novels "include homosexual relationships concealed in heterosexual guises" (29). Joanna Russ in the same context explicates the fact that "the male member of the couple, who is also the central consciousness of the novel, is unconvincingly male – is, in fact, female and a lesbian" (qtd in Lambert 29).

The relationships of Marie and Emil in *O Pioneers!*, Enid and Claude in *One of Ours*, Mrs Forrester and Niel in *A Lost Lady* are the examples that substantiate the

aforesaid assertion to a great extent. Lambert goes further to assert that in treating the relationship of Marie and Emil, when it finally culminates in their deaths, the writer's fear about the social reception of homosexuality is clearly visible. Their story "expresses both a fantasy of sexual fulfilment and the certainty that death is the retribution for this sort of passion"; furthermore, Cather diverts her principal character to a safe heterosexual marriage, illustrating both "the fantasy of homosexuality, and the fear of it" (Lambert 30). Additionally, the same fear becomes the background for *My Antonia*, the construction of which was already affected by the writer's personal life and her own sexuality. In *The Professor's House*, St. Peters yearning for his beloved student Tom Outland, and daydreaming about their garden meetings, imagining Outland approaching from the garden gate, shows apparent images of homosexuality. It is significant to mention that Godfrey is content in his own isolation (as Cather), indifferent towards the presence/absence of his wife or his daughters. Alexandra D. DeBiase argues that Godfrey in his "past romance" with his beloved student, who brings to him the revival of youth, marks an unsuccessful attempt "to recapture primary harmony through male-male intimacy" (4).

In describing the character of Antonia, modelled on Annie Pavelka, the writer agrees over her own fascination towards the exuberant woman. She wanted to select a detached observer's view, as it might have occurred in reality. Coming to the question of who this detached observer shall be, Cather clarifies that much of what she knew about the lady was primarily received through her talks with the young men; "she had a fascination for them, and they used to be with her wherever they could". As Cather heard a lot about Annie from the young men, she decided to take aid of a male observer as her narrator who could do justice to the feeling she had for her (Cather 1990, 44).

When Cather says "Annie fascinated me" and later states that "She had a fascination for them"; there surfaces an obvious relation between Willa Cather and the young men, who presumably are none other than the writer herself. The assertion makes additional sense when Willa becomes Jim in the novel, feels attracted towards Antonia, admitting it to be a childhood fascination; nonetheless, the threat of probable homosexual cues does not allow Jim to have full expression of his feelings. This must be analysed in light of Isabelle's desertion of Cather. Lambert states that-

During this time of grieving, she seemed not to trust herself to write of her own experience of love and sex. For the Cather persona and the beloved woman are not

only separated: both are actually denied sexuality, although sexuality arises in distorted, grotesque forms throughout the novel.

(31)

Moreover, while discussing the American culture of the early nineties, Mark Whalan discusses Willa Cather through the eyes of critics who “have contended that Jim is an autobiographical mask for the confusing attractions Cather felt toward the pioneer women of her own Nebraska youth” (98).

Jim’s despair and restlessness pervades all through the novel, suggesting Cather’s own discomfort. The novel took almost three years to complete. In the intervening time, Cather’s sour relations with Isabelle and her husband, Jan Hambourg also pacified, which may be associated to the novel’s rancorous middle giving way to a serene ending - depicting Antonia’s love affair, Larry Donovan betrayal, protagonist’s toiling farm days during her pregnancy, followed by the later peaceful descriptions about Antonia, her husband, their numerous children, happy in their own imperfections. The narrative style selected by the writer is used to offer the same impact as Cather herself sensed, because every time when she went back to her home in Nebraska, her friends used to update her about the events that had taken place during her absence; Jim too receives information about Antonia in the similar manner, whenever he used to pay a visit to Black Hawk.

Jim Burden and Willa Cather share much in common: Jim enters the Nebraskan land at the same age as Cather, share the same feeling of uprootedness, and react similarly on the harsh vastness of the prairies. Jim and Antonia wander through the prairies, riding the pony as Cather once used to meet with the immigrant families and listening to their amazing stories. Jim and Cather shift to the sophisticated city life to become part of the developing economy, yet consistently look back at their joyful childhood and adolescent days. However, it is interesting to note that none of them ever leave the city refinements in place of that, continue to reminisce their glorious past: Cather/Jim “possess together the precious, the incommunicable past” (*MA* 175). By means of Sharon O’Brien’s estimation that “at times Jim is Cather’s mask and spokesman, whereas at others she is ironically detached from him” (qtd in Rabin 30). Jessica suggests that “Cather will not allow any character who shares so many biographical details with her own younger self to be a simple or straightforward one” (Rabin 30). Mirroring the lives of Jim and Willa, David Porter comments -

Not only do Jim's childhood and his university years at point after point recall Cather's own, but the similarities extend into his adult life: he too is a storyteller, someone involved in the competitive whirl of life in New York, someone who finds himself dissatisfied, thinking back to a better time, being drawn—imaginatively at least—into that earlier life.

(140)

My Antonia's reading suggests the writer's own sense of life, engaging herself in the memories of her favourite people and places, country and fields. The honest depiction of real people, places, memories and feelings make this piece of fiction an exceptional work. "Everything in the book is there to convey a feeling, not to tell a story, not to establish a social philosophy, not even to animate a group of characters" (Brown 206).

David Porter remarks, "Like Alexandra, Antonia emerges by the end of the book as the iconic pioneer woman: courageous, undaunted, resilient—like Alexandra, a survivor" (Porter 134). However life treats these two pastoral heroines differently, compelling the former to look back and mourn at the unalterable tragedy of Emil and Marie, and permitting the latter to overlook the past, guiding Antonia towards a promising future. Cather had wonderfully revitalised the pioneer spirit in the two preceding novels, but-

In *My Antonia* she transmutes these old experiences into something with its own internal coherence and logic, something so fresh and vivid that it feels like a world created anew.

(Porter 136-142)

Willa Cather could successfully create strong and heroic women characters because she could imagine of a progressive society where women could realise their dreams to establish their identity in a patriarchal society. The characters of Alexandra, Thea and Antonia unmask themselves to be independent females, defined not by their relationship to men rather their own sense of self, as Cather herself. Lambert remarks that in carving the portrait of Alexandra-

Cather provides a paradigm of the autonomous woman, even while she acknowledges, through the images of Alexandra's fantasy lover, the temptations of self-abnegation and passivity.

(Lambert 28)

However, the writer's dilemma over the presumed consequences of radical writing by a lesbian writer, may have motivated her to opt for male narrators and presenting the traditional image of women, at times through the opinions of minor characters; St. Peter in this context is a fitting example who, in revealing his expectations from women, appears to be an absolute traditionalist. Curiously, his character is to a great extent, personification of Willa Cather's own views, opinions, nostalgic yearnings and even her later expectations from life.

At times her writings present the dark side of her feminist approach. Strong masculine elements are easily traceable in the writer's personality through the available literature, for instance when Woodress introduces the young Cather, we find the description as "The masculine head and voice attached to a girl's body and skirts" (1987, 69), suggesting the gender restrains in achieving the passionate dreams she had sought. Cather has been constantly criticised for considering the other gender superior to women. Moreover, she criticised the works of other female writers and identified herself with the male predecessors and contemporaries. The 'Peter's confession album' too gives us insight into the writer's prejudice towards male gender. According to young girl, the trait she admires most in a woman is of 'flirting', besides considering 'a good looking woman' as the greatest wonder of the world. On the contrary, the trait she most admires in a man is 'an original mind'. The above responses provide evidence to her gender bias. It appears as if Cather did not consider women worthy of any intellectual activity, moreover, choosing 'a cultured gentleman' as her travelling companion further validates this assertion. It becomes ironic that where on one side, the writer stereotypes men and intelligence, she does not do the same for women and beauty. It is also thought provoking that the responses are more masculine than feminine.

The above mentioned responses clearly indicate Cather's unmanipulated frame of mind, which might have been later affected by the anxiousness of social reception. It symbolises as if Willa Cather stereotypes the gender with obvious hints towards detesting the same gender. It gives the impression that the writer considers woman solely worthy of being a showpiece, that too ironically. On the other hand, it is the male gender of which she has expectations; yet it is fascinating to find that Willa Cather's own characteristics match not to the female but the male gender.

When everyone was under the traumatic upheaval of the World War, Willa Cather was engrossed in her self issues, writing pastoral and nostalgic fiction. During the period of the First World War, Cather published *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonia* and other

short stories, none of which truly mirrors the current happenings of the outer world, as was been reflected in the works of almost every other contemporary writer. Nonetheless, the coming of *One of Ours* in 1922 was surprising to everyone; the point of amazement was that though the novel was set on the war theme, it wasn't actually a war novel; instead the unfortunate tale of a young man who realises the essence of his life in the unpleasantness of war.

In November 1918, when New York City rejoiced over its victory on Germany, Willa Cather wrote to her Aunt Franc, recalling her cousin who had lost his life in the battle at Cantigny. The writer and her cousin G.P. Cather Jr., grew on the Divide; she had cared a great deal for him when they were little, and according to her, they both were "very much alike and also very much different". However, they get separated when Cather moves to Lincoln. The hopelessness of G.P. Cather's life was that he wasn't able to "escape the misery of being himself" and it was his misfortune that whatsoever he did, used to either end up as "ugly or ridiculous" (qtd in Woodress 1987, 304).

It is when the United States enters the war, that he grabs this godsend opportunity, enlists himself without delay and leaves for officer training, thereby bringing his aimless life into action - "He was extremely happy in the armed services and was believed to have great promise by his superior officers" (qtd in Brown 214). The breaking of war in Europe led to their subsequent meeting and long talks after years, it is at this moment that Cather feels she started to "understand him" and realise the hopelessness of him being trapped on the farm; Cather felt extreme pain in listening to the curiously melancholic inquiries of her cousin about France and the greater world. It happened to be like, whenever she described something about her life, her cousin "would twitch and curl" his lips, leaving the writer thoughtful towards his vulnerability (Woodress 1987, 304).

The discussion had a significant impact on the writer, and it became extremely difficult for her to take him out of her mind. Cather writes to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, in the late March 1922 that just to have an "escape from him and his kind that I wrote at all" (Cather 2013, 312).

Nevertheless, a personal loss wasn't the only reason behind the genesis of this historic piece of writing. Willa Cather had met soldiers from various places particularly from Lincoln, Red Cloud and Pittsburgh. Among them was "a young violinist, whom she saw only four times, David Hochstein", and after her cousin, this young man interested the writer the most. A bit later when she met him again, after inclusion of United States in the war, but finds him much in doubt about the war- "its issues and outcome, and about

the course he should himself pursue” (Brown 215), followed by his entry in the army and consequent depression risen from the exasperating military training. Cather highly admired the change in him in their next meeting, which for some reason swapped his gloominess with gladness.

After the death of David Hochstein in Argonne in 1918, Cather reads the letters he had sent to his mother, as she had done with his cousin’s letters. Looking at the “intellectual and emotional maturity” in her cousin as well in David, Cather was deeply moved by the heroic transformation of-

a Nebraska farm-boy, with little education and slight experience of life, and . . . a New York musician of solitary and pessimistic temper, changed so much and so quickly? How could war and the army and France produce such effects? These were the questions that led to the writing of *One of Ours*.

(qtd in Brown 215-216)

Furthermore, when the war breaks out in Europe in the year 1914, Willa Cather was in the farms of Nebraska, working on the manuscript of *The Song of the Lark*. She primarily focuses some of her most moving descriptions of this war novel, on the way the news was received over there, by her and the people around her.

Ironically, a feeling of extreme happiness captivates the writer when the New York Times reports of G.P. Cather’s sacrifice for the country, for only Willa Cather, besides his mother, could understand that he died for something important. The thought that a person as gloomy as his cousin “could lose himself in a cause and die for an idea seemed to her remarkable and exciting” (qtd in Woodress 1987, 304). Writing *One of Ours* was a big challenge for her, as she was far away from the actual experiences and harsh realities and of the war; moreover, in giving real shape to the novel’s France portion she would have to revisit France, as her memories of the last visit go back to almost fifteen long years. Still, Willa Cather feels joyful and shares her feelings with Dorothy through a letter dated March 8, 1922, where she mentions that the novel had given her “three lovely, tormented years”, the feeling was absorbed to such a depth that she started feeling it was in her blood, and from there on she would never be able to be the same person she once was (Cather 2013, 312).

The ghosts of G.P. Cather, David Hochstein and her own reflections on the First World War did not permit her to sense anything, as thinking and writing about them “drained her power to feel things”. In her letter to Dorothy she acknowledges the

brilliance of her present life, because she was in “complete possession” by her cousin, and as already notified in the first chapter, nothing was more exciting to Cather than to move inside someone else’s skin, but her cousin was “an expensive boy to keep”, for the reason that-

She had to travel with him, cut off every source of income to give him a perfectly undisturbed mind. She thought it had been worth it, for a fortune could not have brought such excitement and pleasure.

(qtd in Woodress 1987, 304)

Being a war novel, the fiction definitely narrates the irreversible wreckage caused by the First World War; nevertheless, the complicated story of *One of Ours* is more devoted towards narrating the story of a young man’s fulfilment who paradoxically finds this fulfilment in the destruction of war. Although the lives of G.P. Cather and David Hochstein inspire the fictional characters of Claude Wheeler and David Gerhardt respectively, there is a great deal of Willa Cather’s own self weaved into Claude’s sensitive character. Other minor characters also germinate from the writer’s vast pool of memories.

The war changed the concept of life and human living altogether, imposing an uninvited change in every person’s life. For Willa Cather, this was the time when ‘the world broke in two’; for few it was directly related to their rights and autonomy, to some it meant the physical and social changes taking place in the environment, but for people like Claude the war came as an opportunity to run away from their miserable existence to become part of “something splendid” (*OO* 26).

The fact that *One of Ours* earned the Pulitzer Prize did not create a positive impact on some of the reviewers, instead aggravated the severity of their criticism. These comments had hit the writer hard, who then retreated back to the world of her childhood memories for bringing to life the persona of Mrs Silas Garber, whose memory gets reawakened with a newspaper report of the death of Mrs. Lyra Anderson on March 21, 1921 in Washington, while Cather was still writing *One of Ours*. Mrs Lyra Anderson was once Mrs Silas Garber, wife of Nebraska’s former governor. The thought of writing about her never came to her mind; nevertheless, it takes the writer just an hour to work out the whole story in her mind. Cather describes herself as a type of person whose brain is “full of ghosts”, the ghosts of some distinctive personalities, for whom she has constantly sought to “find bodies”. For the writer “A *Lost Lady* was a beautiful ghost” in her mind, that occupied her for twenty long years before she could think over it as a likely theme for

discussion. It is the feeling of immense pleasure to find out that all these lovely emotions that were once a part of her memory, now found a suitable body. Also, this gush of the stored ideas isn't found suddenly; it is like coming across "a remembered face and having that friend one day come in through the door" (qtd in Woodress 1987, 341).

Willa Cather had grown up looking at the charming personality of Mrs Garber, a Californian beauty, who was far younger than her husband. She possessed a mystic charm in her exquisiteness; the fascinating ways in which she socialized with the towns people and hosted the railroad men who used to take a halt to visit the grand estate of the governor made her worthy of praise.

However, the beauty and charm of Mrs Garber alias Mrs Forrester started fading with the loss of their riches caused by the failure of Mr Garber's bank. Willa Cather creates a parallel between Mrs Forrester, and the declining West, presenting the loss in greater values of the Old World that she used to cherish. The falling of this golden era brings much of restlessness in the writer which appears in her averseness towards becoming part of the current period; Edith Lewis recalls that Willa Cather "wanted to live in the Middle Ages. And we did live in the Middle Ages, so far as was possible" (119). Hermione Lee elaborately presents the variance between the women's image as reflected through Willa Cather's early pioneering novels to the later aristocratic models, bringing out the shift from "female heroism to femininity" (193). She remarks that these women from her later novels are "socially adept, self-conscious, sophisticated, decorative. They have no children, they are separated from their family roots, they have no independent occupations, and they define themselves in terms of their relation to men" (193-94). This group of ladies does not experience pleasure in doing something great and impersonal, but into experiencing things that are purely personal.

As Cather had a fascination for Annie Pavelka, similarly Mrs Silas Garber was also "an object of romance to Cather in her childhood" (Lee 195). Once again her sexual preferences come to light when the reader finds a male narrator giving voice to Cather's observation and opinion about a female. According to Willa Cather, to maintain Mrs Forrester's charm she needed an observer (like her) who could earnestly identify and narrate the magic created by the "woman I loved very much in my childhood" (Woodress 1987, 341). She finds that quality in Niel Herbert, who plays in her estate as Cather used to picnic on the Garbers'; the one who adorns the gracious elegance of Marian as Cather used to. In Niel's portrait of Marian, an innocent attraction and infatuation towards the lady is quite noticeable. The writer defends her choice of narration, saying-

There was no fun in it unless I could get her just as I remembered her and produce the effect she had on me and the many others who knew her . . . I wasn't interested in her character when I was little, but in her lovely hair and her laugh which made me happy clear down to my toes.

(Cather 1990, 77)

The garden memories of Emil and Marie's tragedy revive, when one reads about Frank and Marian's love in the garden, followed by the much anticipated catastrophe, when Niel overhears Frank and Marian's laughter and sighs coming from her bedroom, in the absence of Mr Forrester. The scene comes as a turning point in his life, crushing the courteous image of Marian. The woman who was once an epitome of sophistication and a symbol of love and care, had now fallen down in the eyes of the narrator.

Willa Cather's creations appear more as an auto-fiction than fiction; it has been seldom that she did not refer to her biographic material and developments while writing. Cather's two most revealing works that draw a parallel between the fictitious happenings and her real life are *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House*. The former earnestly explicates the life of an artist: the rising, the zenith and her ultimate alienation; conversely, *The Professor's House* focuses exclusively on this last stage of alienation in an artist's life, who here is probably Willa Cather herself. Edward Said discusses an interesting phase in a writer's life, when he/she reflects more and more on his/her past, during the late years of survival, backing the notion of how the late works of an artist "crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavour" (x). Melissa Schuh explores the theory in relation to Günter Grass' and J. M. Coetzee's *Autobiographical Writing* stating - "Lateness arises from the deliberate process of remembering and presenting as well as structuring memories of the past due to an impetus whose motivation clearly lies in the present" (289).

In Willa Cather's fiction, the aspect of retrospection is in abundance. Analysing her works in the light of 'Said's theory of lateness' simply adds more intensity to the personal element in her later works. When the novel was published in 1925, Willa Cather was in her sixties, and the protagonist is introduced with almost the same age, besides, exhibiting the same fondness towards nature, isolation, passion for writing and most importantly the comfort he finds in his not so comfortable study, which for both Godfrey St. Peter and Willa Cather is their sewing room. Nonetheless, the reason why Cather chooses a male and not a female to narrate the vacuity of her own life seems to be either an intentional

hiding of the obvious autobiographical cues; or the other and more reliable possibility could be the author's semblance to a male rather than a female character.

It seems that while Cather was writing the novel, she did not realise how much her own self and character she was instilling in her fictional replacement, Professor Godfrey St. Peter; the similarities are striking. In addition to the aforementioned connections, both Cather and St. Peter were born on a farm amidst the awesomeness of mountains and valleys, having an emotional connection to the place which gets disturbed when they both were forced to migrate. After analysing numerous parallels between St. Peter and his creator when we read that "St. Peter nearly died of it" (PH 19), it is thought provoking that is this incident purely fictional or inspired from a personal memory?

As Godfrey returns back to the same mountains and valleys for his professional career so does Willa Cather; both work tirelessly for years, but lack the spiritual fulfilment expected from their respective professions, diverting their energies towards their dreams – St. Peter writes a multi volume historical work on 'Spanish Adventures' that becomes a highly successful venture, though at a slow and gradual pace. Similarly, Willa Cather leaves her promising career of journalism for devoting her life altogether to do serious writing. James Woodress presents an excellent parallel between St. Peter's and Cather's works, he expounds that the protagonist's first three volumes of research do not create an impact, as happens with Willa Cather's collection of poems, short stories and her first novel namely *April Twilights*, *The Troll Garden* and *Alexander's Bridge*. It is with the fourth volume that-

he began to be aware that a few young men, scattered about the United States and England, were intensely interested in his experiment. With the fifth and sixth, they began to express their interest in lectures and in print. The two last volumes brought him a certain international reputation and . . . the Oxford prize for history, with its five thousand pounds. . .

(PH 21)

For Willa Cather the fourth volume becomes *O Pioneers!*, which earns her an image of a writer with considerable potential, followed by *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* that became greatly popular, and then her last two novels (preceding *The Professor's House*) that take her to the international platform and bring to her recognition and a Pulitzer Prize. It is interesting to point out here that though the award did not bring to her a substantial amount of five thousand pounds which St. Peter receives, she is able to make almost the same amount from the royalties promised by Knopf, after she makes the most

crucial decision of her career of replacing her publisher, Houghton Mifflin with Alfred Knopf. Woodress remarks that the “autobiographical similarities” are much deeper than the noticeable facts including the “spiritual malaise” of both St. Peter and Cather (1987, 367).

The traces of resentment of a failed love and losing Isabelle to Jan could yet again be seen in *The Professor's House*; her sense of loss revives with her visit to the Hambourg's home in France in 1923. This sense of loss doubles in amplitude for the reason that besides the loss of her love, Cather also lost a home away from home, as McClung house was her abode for years. This could be easily related to St. Peter's attachment to his old attic and his reluctance to move to his new house. Her ambivalence towards Jan was later placated with the purity of his character. Sharon O'Brien contends that “the emotional impact the visit had on Cather can be glimpsed in...the profound spiritual and emotional crisis reflected in *The Professor's House*” (qtd in Rabin 44). The character of Louie is suggestive of Jan Hambourg; and the bitter relationship between St. Peter and Louie which eventually reconciles is evocative of Cather and Jan relationship. However, critics differ in their assessment about the novel with context to the relationship between Willa Cather and Jan Hambourg- a few consider it as an indication of resolution between the two while others consider it as ironic. Cather's alienation during this period is reflected in Lillian's perception about her husband which fittingly applies on the author too; she perceives her husband to be “naturally warm and affectionate”, but somehow all of a sudden he begins to alienate himself from everybody (*PH 130*).

In *The Professor's House*, Willa Cather allows her protagonist to permeate deep inside the philosophical contemplations that apparently find their origin in the author's own life considerations. The disgust of St. Peter's life in the middle age makes him to retrospect the course of his life. He realises that it is not only in the present that he is unable to control his life, but his life was never in his control; it was all a matter of chance that happened to him. His education in France, his love and gradual marriage to Lillian, moreover his most treasured coincidence, the coming of Tom Outland in his life “had been a stroke of chance” (*PH 213*), he could not have otherwise imagined “his career, his wife, his family” to happen to him, because he had never aimed at any of them, it was only a coincidence of events that allowed it to happen (*PH 219*).

When he first met Lillian he had already reached the level of maturity in his personality with context to love, society, books and solitude; however, since then his life had come to stagnation in terms of existence. He certainly gains the monetary riches of

life, respect as well, but the man he once used to be in his youthful days, the personality his friends used to know, was absolutely missing; these were the days “when he was always consciously or unconsciously conjugating the verb “to love”” but now he was a changed man (*PH* 219).

Recognition and rewards bring to Godfrey a sense of satisfaction which dramatically transforms to an eternal suffering of his life. The riches brought out from the award makes him the owner of a big and luxurious house, which on one side is the point of enthusiasm for his wife and all the other family members, but on the other side, is a thing of despair for St. Peter, as he is highly reluctant to leave his old house, especially his attic study and the garden, places where he had spent quality time in writing his enormous research. Willa Cather had the same emotional inclination towards the sewing room that used to function as her attic study at the McClung house in Pittsburgh. The loss of this place and Isabelle McClung were immense, as has already been discussed. Hence, “When the professor refuses to leave the old house and his study, it is not hard to believe that Cather was giving her fictional character an option that she herself had not enjoyed” (Woodress 1987, 369).

Willa Cather inserts a supplementary story of Tom Outland in part two of the novel and then links it to the main plot of the novel. She introduces Outland as protagonist’s favourite student, who later loses his life in the World War. The story was ready in her portfolio, as she had written it ten years back, to encapsulate the memories of her thrilling experience at Mesa Verde. In 1915, Cather and Lewis visit Mesa Verde in Colorado to meet one of the members of the Dick Wetherill’s family who first discovered the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde. It is from him that Cather heard the story of how he “swam the Mancos river and rode into the Mesa after lost cattle, and how he came upon the cliff dwellings that had been hidden there for centuries (Brown 195).

Tom Outland’s story demonstrates the same discovery, and the narration too runs almost in the similar manner. Willa Cather instils in Godfrey her own feelings; her protagonist yearns to be a part of his student’s discovery and his visit to an ideal world, where he seeks to find the revival of his spirits. David Porter says that-

the qualities of Godfrey’s and Tom’s ideal worlds so closely match those that Cather sought in her own work: proportion, symmetry, design, immortal repose, the calmness of eternity, qualities reminiscent of Keats’s *Urn*, which she had long held up as an image of art, and of her art.

(211)

The novels of Willa Cather narrate the story of human endeavour, confusion and their ultimate triumph over the socio cultural environment. The characters seem so real and convincing since they have been inspired from real people, the people who had once felt the same things, who had once accompanied Cather and contributed in her sense of self, making her an exceptional writer, narrating the story of human endurance.

CHAPTER IV

CONNECTING THE PIECES

“What you resist persists.” – Carl Gustav Jung

Despite numerous resemblances, no two human beings are alike; “Each human being is a centre of powers and capacities, refined, developed and modulated into a repertoire of skills” (Harre 69). The interior life of a person, or ‘selfhood’, is a unique combination of cognitive and emotive experiences, distinctiveness of which depends on one’s cultural-ethos and personal experiences. A person’s sense of self keeps on modifying with the change in their immediate environment and it includes the subject’s relationship to gender, interpersonal discourse, culture and ethnicity; an individual “is a complicated patchwork of ever-changing personal attributes and relations” (Harre 2). The self is that point of origin through which we identify ourselves and gather experience of the world to contribute in the socio-cultural history; it is the site from where “a person perceives the world and a place from which to act” (Harre 3). No literary theory is self-sufficient to answer the questions as to why an individual is like he/she is. Or what led to the emergence of a strong or weak self, or high or low self-esteem. These queries could only be responded by analysing and empathising with their life-journey. When an individual interplays with the world, he/she develops socially, economically and even aesthetically, thereby contributing to the person’s psyche.

The chapter attempts exploration of the ‘self’ of Willa Cather’s major fictional characters through a detailed discussion of the select novels. In her representations of life on the frontier, the writer reflects upon the pioneering efforts of both men and women, but at times, “at least professionally, had assumed male identities” (Laird 242). The author explores various facets of identity, challenging the established female roles, and constructing afresh gender identities. The ‘prairie trilogy’ depicts Cather’s ardent concern with the struggling immigrant women and their success in gaining independence and autonomy from the “resistances social or gender-based as well as geographical” (Laird 243).

O Pioneers! is an unromanticized fiction-reading of the triumph of Alexandra Bergson, a heroic pioneer who earns success at the cost of psychological turmoil. The young girl with a “glance of Amazonian fierceness” (*OP* 3) and an aura of firmness in her eyes “fixed intently on the distance” (*OP* 2) fights against all environmental odds and

granite-hard circumstances to sustain her family, after her dying father bequeaths the responsibility of his homestead to her. John Bergson foresees in his daughter “the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out” (*OP* 9), which compels him to take this unconventional decision.

Alexandra’s extensive triumph as a pioneer claims its success on power and autonomy, the otherwise male prerogatives, central to the concept of American identity. Her heroic stature finds its way in her mystic union with the land and her practical business intelligence. When the neighbouring homesteaders are selling farms, Alexandra is busy accumulating more land. Though the reader is informed that the protagonist’s “mind was slow, truthful, steadfast” and did not have “the least spark of cleverness” (*OP* 24), she was the only one who could foresee a bright future, not just because of her instinct, but her watchfulness on the commodity markets and the study of the shrewd behaviours of town proprietors, who were “buying up other people's land” (*OP* 27) during a similar situation. It’s no more than a gamble to buy additional land in the surrounding pessimism, that too on a mortgage of six-years. Alexandra has no more convincing words for her brothers on this decision, than her assertion, “I can’t explain . . . I know, that’s all” (*OP* 26); she withstands the odds and ultimately triumphs over the “wild soil against the encroaching plowshare” (*OP* 18). As discussed in chapter second, Cather allows her characters to get inspired and feel protected in the lap of nature, when Alexandra Bergson gets anxious about her own decision of buying more land, she finds consolation under the starry sky that has always inspired and instilled in her, the much needed self-confidence.

The faith that John Bergson had on his daughter’s capabilities is authenticated with a glimpse of a totally different country sixteen years forth; with the honest hard-work of Lou and Oscar, backed with her strategic decision making, the harshness of prairie gets transformed into an enormous repository of fortune, and the fertility of land has transcended every possible thought. Cather informs the reader that the harvesting, at times continues without a break during the days as well the nights, and if it’s the peak season there would be “scarcely men and horses enough” for the wheat-cutting. Moreover, “The grain is so heavy that it bends towards the blade and cuts like velvet (*OP* 29).

Alexandra, almost forty, owns the richest farm on the Divide. Her withering face shows contentment, as well the signs of hard labour and a character that has never changed through the years -“her strength of power, her dependability and kindness” have

been constant all through (Stouck 27). With the “same calmness and deliberation of manner” (*OP* 34) she still attends to her brothers and appreciates every negation with positivity; besides, she divides the wealth equally among her brothers and herself, to maintain the peace and harmony of the family. Woodress brings out the plight of Alexandra’s life, remarking that-

this material well-being is juxtaposed with Alexandra's loneliness and the smug, selfish, bigoted men her brothers have become. The new era has brought prosperity and comfort, but something fine has been lost; and in this new age that worships false gods tragedy strikes.

(1987, 243)

The only satisfaction money has brought to her is making her younger brother, Emil learn the sophisticated urban ways of living, away from the crude country life, to lead “a richer, freer life than the one she has known” (Laird 244).

Cather allows her readers to experience an extraordinary character, a “strong pioneer figure who combines masculine and feminine qualities” (Lee 106); her strength of mind and body are truly male attributes; they allow her to fight the battle of survival and sustenance, making her victorious over the harsh prairies. Alternatively, the motherly love towards Emil, the care and concern for Ivar, fondness towards the little nieces and most importantly, longing for the companionship of Carl, are all feminine, making Alexandra an androgynous character; Hermione Lee states that Alexandra “is a young soldier and a fierce Amazon, a striding hero and a kind sister, wearing a man’s coat and a woman’s veil, with a severe look and a shining head of hair” (Lee 106). It is imperative to point out that though Alexandra wears a man’s coat, the love and care she spreads among her family and social sphere is purely maternal.

Busy with the domestic and financial accountabilities, Alexandra fails to recall her own existence. No one ever bothered about her personal life, as they never feel a need, “She had no real youth, no religious elation, no romance, no personal life of any definable kind (Brown 175). The peripheral toughness does not permit Alexandra to express her emotions with ease, neither does it welcomes the sympathy of others. It may be convincingly assumed that her constant display of strength makes people believe her to be a herculean - devoid of emotions, cravings and pain; effortlessly permitting them to have a comfortable side-step.

Alexandra's isolation is a forceful-gift imposed on her by the society, for being an unconventionally powerful woman. Her loneliness is evident in her discourse with Carl, where she confides her desire for choosing his freedom, over her land. Even though Alexandra is financially independent, social constraints come in the form of patriarchal control by Lou and Oscar, who blame Alexandra for being fooled by a younger man, appearing to marry her only for the family property. For her sacrifices she receives Lou's harsh words "this is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business" (*OP* 65), and Oscar's declaration, "The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title" (*OP* 65), which is no more than a real depiction of the patriarchal code of conduct. The vulnerability of the protagonist is well evident in an additional argument with her brothers, where Alexandra's endurance ceases and she bursts out - "I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was. . . if you take a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard like a tree" (*OP* 66).

It is not only Lou and Oscar who remind her of being the suppressed sex, Emil and Carl, the two men whom she loves exceptionally, also fail to act outside the patriarchal system. Emil finds "something indecorous" (*OP* 69) in the Carl-Alexandra relationship; his cold reception and awe over the situation, leaves the lady in exhaustion. Alexandra had been sure all these years that at least one person in this crooked world would always stand by her without being judgemental, but Emil too could not stand to her expectations. She breakdowns into tears and says - "I've had a pretty lonely life, Emil. Besides Marie, Carl is the only friend I have ever had" (*OP* 68). The protagonist's purgation makes Emil realise his sister's loneliness, for the first time he sees Alexandra not as a 'superwoman' but a 'woman'. Carl, her friend too leaves Alexandra all by herself, to make his own independent identity, so as to fulfil the male role of being a 'provider'. It is only when he returns self-sufficient from Alaska, the reader finds them reconcile.

The passing years eventually corrode the woman inside her, occupied with the roles of a farmer, a sister, an aunt, Alexandra almost forgets addressing her most important role: that of a 'woman'. Deep down she craves to be a real woman, one who could love someone and be loved in return. Ever since Alexandra understood the meaning of life, she found herself subduing her desires; the continuous repression of these desires gives way to a strange fancy during her girlhood, which only grew stronger with her passing age. The heroine imagined of being lifted up by someone very strong, not any man whom she knew, he was "much larger and stronger and swifter" than any possible

human being (*OP* 80). She never saw him but could feel him to smell like ripe cornfield with a glow of sunlight and could also sense him approaching, bending and lifting her “swiftly off across the fields” (*OP* 81). She used to comfort herself with this dream all through her life, and as soon as she came back to her senses she would run and find herself “pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body” (*OP* 81).

Alexandra's intense relationship with the land is projected in strong, deliberately gendered images, sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine. She perceives the land in intimate, even passionate terms, drawing strength from it and, in return, giving of her spirit and imagination.

(Laird 244)

The seemingly underdeveloped self of the heroine and the sexual tension as presented by Cather, are the result of her bottled-up feelings - “Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there” (*OP* 79). Alexandra’s repressed feelings breathe only when she imagines the land as her lover in intimate and passionate terms. According to Warren Motley, the firm belief the protagonist has about non-existence of her dream hero finds its roots in the social structure, where “only in an autoerotic daydream can Alexandra imagine a man willing to engage a powerful woman” (162).

The dream-fantasy of Alexandra and her intense relationship with the land could be best explicated with the help of the psychological concept where Freud describes the role of a dream in bringing out the suppressed desires. According to the theory of suppression, the desire may be consciously crushed at the moment but down the memory these repressed fancies still exist, adding to mental pain and anxiety. The anxiety in dreams may correspond to the psychoneurotic unease; Freud discusses the dream mechanism with the help of the following elucidation -

If sensations of an unpleasurable nature arising from somatic sources occur during sleep, the dream-work makes use of that event in order to represent . . . the fulfilment of some wish which is normally suppressed . . . (it) may originate from psychosexual excitations—in which case the anxiety corresponds to repressed libido.

(255-56)

Willa Cather’s presentation of place deliberately situates her characters in such spaces that allow the self to correlate with its surrounding environment, thereby

transmitting additional meaning to the perceptible human being. While analysing the character of Alexandra, the self appears to be far more relaxed and contented in the open air rather than the closed spaces. Alexandra's "curiously unfinished and uneven" big house, speaks out aloud of her lonesomeness, where "One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare". One can easily identify the kitchen to be the place near to Alexandra's heart as it is the "pleasantest rooms in the house" which provides ample space to the lively giggles of her "three young Swedish girls" (*OP* 32). As Cather herself tried to conserve every possible memory of her past in the same manner, Alexandra too brings together the quantifiable memories from her first log-house where she used to live with her parents. It included a few things of her mother, the old furniture and the family portraits, which she had then thoughtfully placed in her sitting-room. The impact of affluence is well evident in the highly pretentious and ostentatious description of the dining-hall, which Cather describes as "highly varnished wood and colored glass and useless pieces of china . . . conspicuous enough to satisfy the standards of the new prosperity". The writer mocks at this materialistic change in the society which expects a mandatory show off of one's riches, and informs the reader that to meet this social expectation, the heroine had given "herself into the hands of the Hanover furniture dealer", who had "conscientiously done his best" to present the dining-room as her "display window" (*OP* 37).

The passage splendidly describes the disproportion of the house, nevertheless it also shows Alexandra's autonomy to over furnish the significant areas of house and neglect the unimportant ones. The charm of kitchen may be associated with the memories of her mother's garden, in addition to the chuckles of the three young girls, who help Alexandra partly anaesthetise her solitude. Their cheerfulness and stupid affairs allow her to live the life she herself missed during her teen years, filling the emptiness of her otherwise void existence. Responding to the numerous complaints of her sisters-in law for the careless nature and regular laughs of the young girls, Alexandra retorts that it was solely "to hear them giggle" that she had put them in her kitchen; work wasn't an issue for her ever, she could have had easily managed it (*OP* 33). The "old homely furniture" constantly reminds Alexandra of her past life, where she really 'lived', in contrast to the mere 'survival' in the present. The omission of Alexandra's bed-room from the description, is something troubling. The dining-hall, where the whole family occasionally gets along is no more than a "display window" (*OP* 37) for Alexandra to substantiate the new level of affluence.

Warren Motley comments on the importance of architecture, for him “architecture is a primary metaphor of the self” in the writer’s work (151). The ‘unfinished’ in Alexandra’s abode gives us an impression of a neglected inner life; ‘uneven’ corresponds to a multi-layered-life, where she over fabricates one façade for the society to show-off her material success that could buy any comfort in the world; then again the reader sees another facet, where a deserted soul reminisces the past. The interiors could easily be correlated to a disturbed self; however, as soon as one comes out of the house, in the open air, the confidence of this ‘New Woman’ overpowers the lack of enthusiasm. It is under this free atmosphere that Alexandra’s real habitat exists, where she can express herself in the finest ways.

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time.

(*OP* 32)

The novel’s double-plot unfolds with the innocent love-affair between Emil and Marie. The anti-climax tragedy leaves Alexandra displaced and marginalised, giving her a double shock; first being the murders of Emil and Marie, the other being the astonishment over Emil-Marie relationship. The lady, whose strategic decisions do miracles, could not see the love behind their friendship. Oddly enough, Alexandra blames Marie, instead of Frank, who killed her brother and friend.

The lady, who had the strength to turn the world upside down, needs guidance even for the mundane affairs. On a cold stormy day, Ivar searches for his mistress and finds her fully drenched in water without sensing any pain. She calmly replies to Ivar’s concern “I don’t feel so cold now; but I’m heavy and numb” (*OP* 111). For the first time Alexandra feels exhausted of life; she starts sensing utter difficulty and pain even in the ordinary operations of life and “longed to be free from her own body” (*OP* 112). The flashes of her childhood illusion once again come to surface, of being lifted by a strong man, this time she could see him clearly, it is ‘death’ in ‘white cloak’. Suddenly she realises that all these years it was no one stronger than death that carried her. Alexandra’s emotional predicament could be seen in her desperate yearning for the companionship of

Carl; it's not the love she needs at the moment, but a companion who could help her make survive in this lonely world.

Alexandra finds the condition of Frank similar to hers, both have been devastated by fate; she recalls the words of a poem she once used to like:

Henceforth the world will only be

A wider prison-house to me

Alexandra at last reconciles with Carl, for the first time she permits her feelings to freely pour out, she sighs "you are all I have in the world" (*OP* 120). Leaving aside the social conventions, the two friends decide to share their joys and sorrows all through the life hereafter, but at the cost of a self that is "psychologically deadened" (Motley 164). According to O'Brien, the protagonist illustrates the author's belief that "human happiness and achievement must arise from losing the self in something larger" (qtd in Nelson 141).

The novel addresses the gender issues, and to an extent even justifies the gender restraints of Cather's frontier society. It is interesting to highlight an ironical contrast between gender roles and the economic stability of the frontier society where "poverty enforces gender equality while prosperity imposes more restrictive, more determinate gender roles" (Laird 246). Alexandra secures unrestricted autonomy to exercise her pronouncements for family survival during the most challenging days, surpassing all class and gender boundaries; however, when this power and independence procures her prosperity, she is expected of, to relinquish her free-will and come back under the suffocative clutches of the male-centred society. Cheryl Lange remarks on the status of women in a patriarchal society, where a male has full autonomy to lead a lavish life and set logical standards, whereas the human experience for a female should be "subjugated, subservient life in which she is defined only in relation to males" (1).

The following novel continues to explore the heroic life of a woman, yet in a different manner, addressing a different issue. As already discussed, *The Song of the Lark* is the autobiographical journey of the author herself as an artist. Though not an excellent piece of writing, the novel describes her first full-length portrait of an artist. The intense struggle of Thea Kronborg, fighting her way up from the bigoted values of the small Colorado town to become a great Wagnerian soprano of the Metropolitan Opera, narrates the story of transformation of a passionate yet troubled young lass. Carl Van Doren notifies that the protagonist "lifts herself from handicapping conditions almost as an

animal shoulders its way through scratching underbrush to food and water” (143), while Randall points out on the only disturbing characteristic of the novel being its “failure in moral vision” (50).

During her adolescence, Thea develops an obsessive interest towards music; the artist’s growing sensibilities are awakened by her elderly Moonstone friends. Professor Wunsch - an eccentric German music teacher, is the first to encourage her talent to become a pianist, Dr. Howard Archie - a gentle physician, whose skill and sympathy mean so much to her, Spanish Johnny who though unpopular among the townspeople for his disreputable ways, is otherwise a sensitive spirit, lastly Ray Kennedy - the railroad man, who prospects to marry the girl, but dies in a train wreck; all these four men and later Fred, construct a congenial platform for Thea to aid her ascend the ladder of success. It is Professor Wunsch who first senses something exceptional in her. According to him, Thea is like “the yellow prickly –pear blossoms” which grow in the desert, and are even “thornier and sturdier” than the ordinary flowers but they possess the beauty in their uniqueness, they are “not so sweet, but wonderful” (*SOL* 52). As Cather owes her success to her school English teacher who first makes her realise about her writing skills, similarly, Wunsch becomes that first person who becomes the stepping stone of Thea’s success. He could see in her personality the reflection of the surrounding landscape: innocent yet sturdy. The life insurance money of Ray Kennedy becomes the means for Thea’s career launching, taking her to Chicago under the adroit training of Andor Harsanyi, who shortly discovers that the girl’s gifted talent is not in music, instead in her voice; though untrained but a magnificent voice.

The thought of dazzling city life, which Thea experiences at her first visit in the concert hall as has already been discussed, subsequently introduces her to the reality. While coming out of the concert hall she finds out that the common masses were “full of cold, hurrying, angry people” streaming fast to catch street-cars yelling at each other who “jostled her, ran into her, poked her aside with their elbows, uttering angry exclamations (*SOL* 131). The view grasps her excitement leaving her horrified and she “pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer”; for the first time she becomes “conscious of the city itself”- its congestion, brutality and power to threaten one’s living (*SOL* 131-32).

Thereafter the demands and challenges of a metropolis - living in cheap rooms, singing in the church choir to earn money, soon makes Thea realise that the passage from Colorado to Chicago was difficult but her present and future hereafter shall be a stern test,

making her homesick. However, Harsanyi's conviction of protagonist's genius, infuses in her a "full, powerful pulsation" (SOL 141); A momentary impulse makes Thea realise that the world is full of young and talented people who too want to achieve their dreams, the only difference between them and her was that "*she was going to get them!* That was all. Let people try to stop her! . . . Let them try it once!" (SOL 142). The stubbornness and inflexibility of Thea's character push her forward to accomplish the set goals which yearn from deep inside, purely "selfless and exalted" (SOL 142).

Thea spends the following summer in Moonstone where a few instances disturb both Thea and her family. The first occasion is when the protagonist straightforwardly denies singing at the funeral of Maggie Evans, which she later even agrees to her mother's persuasion. Besides, Thea's older brothers and towns people become furious when she joins Spanish Johnny and his friends in the nearby Mexican village for the ball-night. The towns' people blame Mr Kronborg for his daughter's deed. Thea feels disgusted on the small town prejudices; burning in anger, the young girl resolves not to dream anymore, no more peaceful sleeps like she had the previous day, where she promises to her own self that one day "she would make these people sorry enough! There would come a time when they would want to make it up with her . . . and she would never forgive" (SOL 155). While returning back, something makes her feel uncomfortable down the heart, which the "calm and cheerful" (SOL 160) faces of her mother, father and her younger brother, Thor standing at the platform could not make out. That day, as the train pulled-out, there was something that pulled in her too, she cried all night in her berth -

But when the sun rose in the morning, she was far away. It was all behind her, and she knew that she would never cry like that again. People live through such pain only once; pain comes again, but it finds a tougher surface.

(SOL 160)

Preoccupied with herself, Thea recalls her first experience of going to the city, confident yet ignorant of the external world and its functioning; she feels silly and annoyed towards the innocent and pleasant child she once used to be, but wonders- "How much older she was now, and how much harder!" (SOL 160). This time Thea takes a firm decision never to come back to this small town and its small values.

The above situation can be clearly analysed in the light of Freud's concept of 'medical catharsis' as discussed by Erica D. Galioto. The purgation of feelings, which comes as a surprise, is the release of overflowing emotions which allows the patients to bring their "buried feelings and memories" to the surface, "once these feelings are made

conscious and worked through, their underlying tension can be released and occasion a fresh start or at its most extreme, a rebirth” (39).

During this phase of her life Madison Bowers takes over the task of Thea’s career as her new mentor; although a celebrated voice teacher, Bowers is both admired as well disliked by her for his peculiar attitude. At this juncture, Thea finds the companionship of Frederick Ottenburg. In the company of Fred, Thea is introduced to the socially prominent groups and art patrons of the town. It is Fred who saves her falling spirit after physical and spiritual exhaustion by making arrangements at the Arizonian ranch, where the protagonist “is liberated at last into a clear sense of her vocation” (Lee 124) to get an understanding of “what tradition can mean to art” (Randall 48). “She discovers that the land absorbs feelings and identity” (Grover 39), realising the true meaning of art in the relics of the ancient cliff dwellers, and “identifies physically with these creators, and finds herself trying to walk as they must have walked” (Lee 129). Until this time Thea was not yet conscious of the possibilities of her voice, but now grows “into a powerful and willful young creature, got her courage, and began to find herself” (Porter 234) in the “Endeavor, achievement, desire” (*SOL* 205) for the “glorious striving of human art!” (*SOL* 205). Art had transformed the protagonist to such an extent that - “Not only did the world seem older and richer to Thea now, but she herself seemed older” (*SOL* 196). Carl Van Doren says that the protagonist finds -

her true self again in that marvelous desert canyon in Arizona where hot sun and bright, cold water and dim memories of the cliff-dwelling Ancient Peoples detach her from the stupid faces that have haunted and unnerved her.

(285)

Willa Cather carefully disqualifies all the men in Thea’s life from being sexual partners by keeping them out of bounds. All the men that involve in Thea’s life are either introduced as elderly characters like - Professor Wunsch, Dr. Howard Archie, Andor Harsanyi, or those who have prospects of future companionship either die on author’s wish as happens with Ray Kennedy, or are eccentric behaviours as Madison Bowers; furthermore, Fred Ottenburg and the Swedish singer Nordquist, the two, men who are likely to qualify the promise of a life-time companionship also grieve unhappy marriages. However, the reader is informed that she later marries Ottenburg after his wife’s death. It shows yet another attempt of Cather “rigging the plot against marriage for Thea and satisfactory relations between men and women in general” (Randall 45). In the course of the next ten years the protagonist touches the zenith of success, but at the cost of human

relations; she has to abandon every human tie including her family as well her friends, who had immensely loved and aided her in making her dreams a reality, emerging - “not as a charmer but of an aggressive, domineering, and infuriating self-absorbed woman” (Randall 47). Furthermore, Thea revokes the idea of attending her mother’s final rites for not losing the big opportunity of singing her first opera role of playing Elizabeth, instead she puts her pain in the performance, which Fred reports “as homely as a country prayer meeting” (*SOL* 287). Randall calls the novel a fiction on ‘conversion’, where “Thea Kronborg is converted to art” (43); the artist takes a new birth where “art means everything and human ties nothing” (43). Cather accentuates the power of art to stimulate a life that can impart the wisdom to lead a fulfilling life. According to Breanne Grover, the writer’s aesthetic ideal originates from the fathomless depths of the globe, and in her case, “Music and art do not initiate the awakening process; they are a result of it” (41-42).

This conversion validates the trust of her childhood friends, the belief and encouragement of Mrs Kronborg, the groundless confidence of Aunt Tillie that one day Moonstone shall be proud of Thea; this dramatic transfiguration also authenticates Mrs Lorch’s predictions after Thea’s first opera concert, who states that “she would have it . . . she would have it, have it” (*SOL* 160). Assessing Thea’s journey of artistic pursuit Randall summarises her life choices as –

Thea comes not so much to love good as to hate evil . . . What she hates, of course, is the sum total of all the things that tend to drag her down and keep her from becoming the great artist she wants to be. Thea’s conversion is preceded by a dark night of the soul . . . associated, not with doubt and unbelief, but with being accosted sexually.

(45)

Thea gives herself a psycho-symbolic rebirth at Panther Canyon to awaken as an art herself. Cather notifies that as the human-body came in contact with the boundless physical environment, the interaction changed something deep inside her which could be effortlessly seen on her face; it was “an indifference, something hard and skeptical” (*SOL* 165). Richard S. Pressman comments on the uniqueness of Thea’s character who “appears to be outside the influence of society, Kronborg is essentially alone, tends toward the misanthropic, and asserts her individual self over the social self” (205).

Of all the heroic figures created by Willa Cather, irrefutably the most admirable character is of Antonia Shimerda from *My Antonia*. The protagonist apparently mirrors the image of Alexandra Bergson, critics identify both Alexandra and Antonia as ‘mother

earth'; Edward Wagenknecht suggests that *O Pioneers* and *My Antonia* should be read together, yet declares *My Antonia* to be a better book, according to him "both books have the same sense of reality, the same passionate honesty, the same somber, lonely beauty" (324); according to Donald Heiney the key difference between the two women heroes is that "Alexandra is somewhat excessively depersonalized and symbolic, and thus does not seem as real a person as Antonia" (194); Frederick J. Hoffman remarks that Willa Cather in both these novels "offers a land myth and a land goddess to rule it; a noble creature, strong, patient, robust, sensitive, and enduring, who undergoes a symbolic courtship with the land" (182). The novel distinctly focuses on "the social and familial roles assumed by or assigned to women" (Laird 247).

My Antonia is a representative novel of the identity and social status of the rising 'New Woman' of the twentieth century. The profound concept of identity offered here is far more complex in reality than it appears on the periphery. As discussed in the last chapter, the autobiographical impulse of the author's identity seeps in the identities of Antonia and Jim. Patrick Shaw too contends that "in the Jim-Antonia juxtaposition we see the twin selves that were suppressed within Cather", interestingly Clara Cooper identifies "Jim and Antonia as 'a woman-in-man narrator' and a 'man-in-woman heroine'", respectively (qtd in Rabin 31). Both of them qualify the status of being androgynous, constantly crossing the identities from feminine to masculine, and from masculine to feminine respectively. In her analysis of the issue of identity in *My Antonia*, Karen A. Hoffmann proclaims that-

Cather represents subjects defined as female (such as Antonia) having access to masculine positions and the subjects as male (such as Jim) having access to feminine positions; by doing so, Cather explores the possibility of circulating power and privileges between male and female subjects.

(26)

This complex treatment of the identity of her characters does not singularly reflect in *My Antonia*, but also in the peculiar personalities of Claude and St. Peter. When a female author gives voice to a male character, it has already crossed the gender boundary at the authorial level and is ready to come back and forth at the hands of author's wish. When one reads the characters of Jim, Niel, Claude and St. Peter, and well acquainted with the biographical details of the author, he/she can draw an explicit relation between the writer and her characters.

Antonia has left an indelible mark on the history of American frontier, presented before the reader through the eyes of Jim Burden. Cather experiments with the narrative style in *My Antonia*, freely admitting to have borrowed it from the French and Russian novels, where the introductory frame allows the author to reminisce past memories on a journey. Memory becomes central to the conception of identity in the novel. Jim and his friend, supposedly Cather herself, recount the memories of a common childhood friend, where the narrator acknowledges the place of this specific friend in their life. They recall her as a person whom they had always remembered and cherished the memories of; this young girl from their memorial was for them “the whole adventure” of their childhood (MA 2). Cather allows us to postulate a love affair between the two, when Jim at last names his memoir as ‘My Antonia’; however the reader soon realises, the bond though to be more than friendship, lacks the passionate fulfilment of love.

The novelist deliberately places Antonia and Jim, in a new country at the same time, to provide a holistic understanding of an immigrant’s life challenges. Jim and Antonia grow alongside; Jim, though an orphan, is steady with his well-run Protestant grandparents whereas Antonia though a cheerful girl, is part of an ill-adapted Bohemian family struggling for survival. The two contrasting personalities grab each other’s attention very early and become friends with a purpose - Jim teaches the English language to Antonia and she tells him stories of the Old World.

In Jim and Antonia, we see embodiments of the wearisome man and the flourishingly confident woman of the twentieth century respectively. Like Alexandra, Antonia too loses the pleasure of childhood to arduous-working, after her father, Mr Shimerda takes away his own life. Though transitory, the incident sways away the cheerfulness of the young girl, nevertheless the desire to live stays firm in her. Ashton comments on Cather’s style of creating dramatic circumstances that “change the construction of her character’s identity”; the relative shift in the heroine’s gender role then initiates a transformation of identity (44). Antonia starts wearing her father’s boots (which he considerably removes before his suicide) to remind herself of her role-reversal. Jim illustrates this transformation as -

Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength . . . I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered.

(MA 62)

Destiny diverts Antonia's enormous pool of energy to the nearby town with the effort of Grandmother Burden, who feels that the toiling fieldwork will make the young girl sturdy, and would ultimately make her lose "all her nice ways and get rough ones" (*MA* 62). Distressed at the deteriorating condition of the innocent girl, Mrs Burden arranges a decent household work for Antonia at the Harlings. Away from the crude farm ways, under the adroit guidance of Mrs Harling, Antonia starts adapting to the sophisticated habits of the town, socializing with neighbours, singing and dancing, precisely, living a free life. John Murphy calls this movement of the protagonist from the rural to urban as "a move from 'space and landscape' to 'sex and social issues'" (qtd in Grover 53).

The vivid description of Black Hawk and its lifestyle shows dancing as the most significant activity; it is where all the young ladies could flaunt themselves by wearing "their new dresses" and laugh aloud breaking the silence of conventions (*MA* 95). The vivaciousness of these chirpy birds did not leave a single man unaffected. These fine country girls had come either to earn a living or support their struggling fathers or their younger siblings. Jim confesses his fascination for the hired-girls and senses something unusual about them. Jim pronounces the hired country girls to be physically "almost a race apart". Furthermore, the independence relished by them as a result of the financial autonomy received through the outdoor activities, had bestowed to them a dynamism of personality which stands in contrast to their initial coyness when they first stepped in the towns. This vitality of their persona "made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women" (*MA* 97).

Jim calls these hired-girls conspicuous as they became "a menace to the social order" (*MA* 98), moreover the Black Hawk daughters were believed to be "refined" with urbane manners whereas the country girls were supposed to be "worked out" of their wearisome jobs. However the vitality of these charming young girls captivates the town boys, even the apparently asexual male protagonist responds to their sexual energy. Jim seems to be possessed by Lena's bewitching beauty who dances "without exertion, rather indolently", smiles but seldom answer to people's gestures, sighs that exhale "heavy perfume of sachet powder", music puts her "into a soft, waking dream" (*MA* 108). Though mesmerized with Lena's charm, he is highly possessive towards Antonia, and hates her free mingling at the social dances. Antonia too affirms his love initiatives, though very casually. Both Antonia and Jim desire to bind the other, yet are uncertain to get bound. On one such occasion, responding to Jim's concern for herself, she flirtingly

responds that she is enormously fond of him, and even sanctions him to like her as much as he wants to, but jokingly remarks that she must not catch him hanging around with her rival Lena or else she would complain to his grandmother. The reader finds Jim stranded between two ladies, of whom one is his adult love and the other childhood love. His dilemma is well evident through his contemplation, where he recalls Antonia's sweet face and true heart and consoles his bleeding self that "she was still my *Ántonia!*" (*MA* 109); though the town-life had tremendously altered her, she is still 'his Antonia'.

The reader again comes across Cather's 'dream-fantasy', bringing to light the unconscious desires of her characters. The representations of the unconscious come in the apparel of strange images and symbols flashed in dreams which become an apparatus for wish fulfilment for the otherwise objectionable and offensive desires. According to Carl Jung, if an individual has an unfulfilled desire, it is certainly "the desire that possesses him" (Rothgeb 72). Like Alexandra, Jim too sees flashes of the dreams towards morning and calls them as 'pleasant'. He dreams about his past life and Antonia, when they used to enjoy in the country – sliding, climbing and slipping down the strawstacks, the yellow mountains and the piles of homestead chaff (*MA* 109).

The dream suggests Jim's longing for the good old days, spent in wilderness with his beloved friend Antonia; it even hints at Jim's anxiousness of losing 'his' Antonia in the flamboyant town-life, or the frustration of having already lost her. Jim's indecisiveness that is quite well evident in his revelation about another recurring dream:

I was in a harvest field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosininess all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, 'Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like'.

(*MA* 109)

It is noteworthy that Jim is unsure of his own feelings, he isn't able to recognise the lady in his dream – "I was lying against one of them" (*MA* 109). He likes Lena but he likes Antonia too. His confusion distinctly flashes when the reader later knows that he wishes of being possessed by Antonia in place of Lena. According to Freud, when the same dream is recurring, its first flash means the wish-fulfilment, second might work out as a fulfilled fear, the third might simply be a reflection, and the fourth flash may simply reproduce a memory (148).

The boundless popularity of Antonia as an appealing dancer swells her with pride, hindering a clear stream of thought; she leaves the Harlings' (who consider her their 'ward') for living the free life she has become accustomed of. Antonia had become the product of her time, a time when females longed to come out of their domestic spaces, and any attempt to seize their freedom was assumed as smothering them. The fervour of this spirit can be easily seen in Antonia's blatant reply to Mr Harling, when he obstructs her to be a part of the social gatherings, she says that her own father did not ever stop her and she would not allow anyone to instruct her in her life, moreover, she makes it pretty clear to Mr Harling that he isn't her boss outside her work-area (MA 101).

The principal character in *My Antonia* appears to be Antonia, yet a critical reading shifts the focus towards Jim. It is Jim who introduces, develops and analyses the character of Antonia with his perception; though the narrative allows us to take the liberty of third party inputs too, but at Jim's discretion. The psychological theorists argument that the narration of, or about something is affected by an individuals' mind-set, thought-process, beliefs and even fears; A portrayal makes sense not only by what is shown, but also by what underlies in its uncovered and unstressed layers. The various episodes recapitulated by Jim Burden himself, suggest his constant battle with his identity particularly gender-identity, Kristina declares Jim to be "unsure, unhappy, and sometimes effeminate" (Ashton 34). Jim's thrust for identity seems not to be from within, instead a concealed pressure from the society on being part of the male community, who shoulders the age old gender-roles of a 'provider' and a 'protector'. Mr Shimerda, Antonia's father, unsuccessful to cope up with the challenges of the new country, catastrophically takes away his own life, considering himself a misfit for the role of 'a provider'. Continuing his legacy, Ambrosch takes over the authority, dictating the family chores. Antonia wastes no time in absorbing the fact that authority comes from responsibility, deciding on doing something bigger, bigger than her brother, Ambrosch.

Like the author, Antonia's gender identity too is inexplicable with relation to the conventional gender categories - masculine and feminine. In contradiction to the traditional gender roles, Antonia enters a man's territory by working on neighbouring farmlands. When Jim approaches his friend enquiring about the language lessons, Antonia retorts, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now" (MA 61). It is interesting to quote here that Jim is unhappy to see Antonia doing a man's work, as the charm of her face that attracted a million smiles is seen fading with every passing day, infact she has started looking like a man; her eating, yawning, stretching were all

masculine now. Another reason for Jim's despondency appears to be the sight of an independent woman, all set to filch his childhood friend.

Numerous instances from the novel reveal the patriarchal supremacy of the society that is unable to embrace the burgeoning females of the era. This making of the self and the pursuit for identity is in direct alignment with the importance, society gives to a particular gender. Jim, even though a child, feels a strange annoyance on Antonia's domineering attitude that wobbles his perceived superiority. One of the statements by the young boy from chapter four, truly reflect his state of mind as a consequence to the social rubrics-

Much as I liked Antonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner.

(MA 24)

Cather deliberately introduces Jim a few years younger to Antonia, to highlight the sense of hegemony which a male-child, merely of eleven possesses. This sense of supremacy isn't all affirmative, in reality, it shields the underlying fear of losing virility. The same chapter narrates an interesting account, where fortunately Jim gets a chance to prove his manhood, like a fictional hero. He kills a rattle snake and 'protects' Antonia. He recalls the moment when he saw the snake tightening his coils, ready to attack them. It is at this moment, that he might have realised a man's role of protector, and he fearlessly ran towards him, hit him straight in the head with his spade (MA 25).

The adventure substantiates his manhood, significantly in the eyes of Antonia, her appreciation lifts his spirit. She genuinely compliments him for his courageousness; her words "you is just like big mans", worked magically for him, for now he felt that he had well authenticated himself as a male and that too in the eyes of Antonia (MA 25). It is worthy to mention Russell's concept of identity, which says that identity can be a "strategic act" in order to "convey a particular persona or identity" (8). Surprisingly, the anxiety of the male protagonist is pretty evident in one of the simple confessions made by the narrator where he is seen stating that before the end of the autumn season, Antonia had begun to consider him, her equal; moreover, she increased her horizon of discussion from merely English lessons to other things (MA 24). It is thought-provoking that Jim considers himself inferior to Antonia and clearly confesses this inferiority; also, he feels obliged to be considered as an equal, with superiority being only a fashion heaved by the society. Even in his English lessons to Antonia he teaches her feminine mannerisms, Jan

Goggans remarks that for Jim, Antonia is merely a feminine territory whom he wants to conquer, as he perceives her to be an object of wilderness, which needs taming (156).

In one of the incidents when Antonia quits the Harlings' and starts working with the suspicious Cutters', we again get a glimpse of Jim's coyness. Antonia and grandmother Burden doubt Cutters's intentions during his wife's absence. Antonia's fear and grandmother's request force Jim to take the odd decision of staying at Cutters' in place of Antonia. Surprisingly, their fear turns to reality; enraged with the absence of Antonia, Wycliffe Cutter beats Jim breaking his nose. Somehow Jim manages to escape the scene, only to realise that his pain was more psychological than physical; though strange, but he gives Antonia's sobs a deaf ear, with a feeling to never see her again. The incident puts a grave impact on his psyche and he starts hating Antonia as much as he used to hate Cutter. Jim feels that it was all because of her that he had to face "all this disgustingness" (*MA* 121). Jim feels frustrated on being unable to defend his own self; conventionally it's a male-role to protect a female, ironically the male himself is beaten up in the scene. The humiliation is so intense for the protagonist that he pleads to his grandmother not to disclose the incident to anyone, not even to his own grandfather. He is under the fear that once the story gets abroad, he would have to come across it every day. The disgust of this humiliating incident lies in the anxiousness of the male protagonist to be mocked at by "the old men down at the drugstore" (*MA* 121).

In book III titled "Lena Lingard", Jim shifts to Lincoln for studies, he feels fortunate in the company of Gaston Cleric, his Latin teacher and a mentor who introduces him to the world of literature; the only distraction he continues to feel is the presence of Lena in the town who updates him of Antonia's affair with Larry Donovan. Lena's charm compels him to neglect studies, infuriating the much concerned Cleric who then suggests him to shift to Harvard along with him. Jim realises the dangers of a woman's company and quits the scene as suggested. As childhood memories have strong impressions on a person's thinking, Jim gets recurring flashes of the 'sledge' from 'Peter and Pavel's story' from his childhood, where they both threw a bride off the sledge, in front of wolves, so as to save their own lives. Presuming himself in the same situation, he has often feared of being in the same sledge. Kristina infers that it's ironical that in the absence of females, the men still have survival chances but with them "manliness and conventions" do not stand a chance of survival (Ashton 43).

The fast permeating materialism and the changing gender roles act as the backdrop of most of Cather's fiction. In *My Antonia* she hosts "The Hired Girls" as a

reflection of the contemporary women, booming in confidence, eager to harness their inner talent, well-equipped to trespass the male territory, to live a life of their choice. Lena Linguard and Tiny Soderball turn up to be the perfect examples of the 'New Woman'; initially introduced as a dressmaker and a hotel attendant, respectively, unlike Antonia the two ladies are rather clear in their frame of mind. Though friends, Antonia and Lena possess striking dissimilarities. With the background of country life both Lena and Antonia enter the city as hired-girls, but where on one side the former gets fully transformed by the industrialised city life the latter sees only a transient phase of diversion; According to Breanne Grover, Lena and Antonia represent 'the loss of landscape' and 'the endurance of landscape' respectively (53). On one side, the crude innocence of Antonia makes her a misfit for the discerning town-life, becoming prey to the unscrupulous Larry Donovan who leaves her pregnant, on the other side, Lena rises up the ladder to fulfil her dream, shelving needless distractions; even in her affair with Jim, she straight forwardly denies the proposal of marriage and later becomes owner of a dress-house at San Francisco. When Jim meets Lena in Lincoln he observes Lena's refined transformation, which reflected the conventional expressions of her vocation which she had picked from the dressmaking shop of Mrs Thomas. He further reflects on his amusement over Lena's communication skills which Antonia was totally devoid of, who even after being able to speak in English had "something impulsive and foreign in her speech" (MA 103).

Like Lena, Tiny too earns a fortune through a dramatic turn of events; in an encounter with Jim, later in the novel she makes it clear that the thing that fascinates her most is 'money'. Hermione Lee sarcastically calls Tiny and Lena "modern" to "have cut off the past" and their relationship to be "asexual, dry" which ultimately fails to inspire the male protagonist (Lee 155).

Antonia portrays an exceptionally affirmative attitude towards life even in the situations of extreme personal crisis. Jim does not directly report the reader about Larry's betrayal, infact is himself reported of Antonia's seduction and abandonment by Frances Harling and Widow Steavens. It is popularly seen that one may lack courage and strength in ordinary course of life, but reveals the extraordinary in peculiar circumstances; same is reflected through the character of Antonia. The quote from *The Song of The Lark* describes Antonia's state in the finest manner, Cather says that "There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm" (SOL 283). The episode of Larry's desertion brings disappointment and shame in the protagonist's life which could be seen as an

abrupt brake of Antonia's velvety life. A heroic transformation could be seen in Antonia's self; detached and unsociable, Antonia toils her labour in the corn fields dressed in "a man's long overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim" (MA 150). Instead of condemnation, the townspeople sympathise with her situation; they respect her industriousness, and make a consistent attempt to portray behaviours that overlook the past happenings. However, the circumstances had put such an impact on the protagonist that nobody was able to heal the wounded soul. She continues working hard on the fields until the time of giving birth. The strength of her character and her dignity is well reflected in the way she gives birth to her child; Cather informs- "without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child" (MA 150).

Though the child brings shame to her; unlike Hawthorne's protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter* she does not name her 'sorrow', indeed treasures her first child with love and pride of motherhood. Widow Steavens says that Antonia was never ashamed of her beloved baby. She labels her as a "natural-born mother" who loved her child immensely, and informs Jim that "no baby was ever better cared for" (MA 151). Antonia finally chooses the simplicity of farm life to be her source of livelihood, as it is in the country life that realises the sense of herself; in contrast to the sophistication of the city to which she considers herself a misfit. The protagonist feels that her life would be "miserable in a city", may even die of loneliness, and for this reason she wants to stay in the place where the earth as well the sky are friendly, and where she knows "every stack and tree" (MA 152).

Jim feels pity for Antonia for giving herself away so cheap. They both meet "in silence, if not in tears" (MA 151); it's when words become inept to express or to share the agony of life silence mollifies the hammering heart. Antonia's first glimpse makes her look withered, however it flashed "a new kind of strength" (MA 151). Yet again, in the cornfields, cherishing their untroubled playful days, the two friends soothe each other's sinking spirits. For the first time Jim becomes vocal about Antonia's position in his life –

I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister — anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me.

(MA 152)

Money can buy comfort, but not happiness; the assertion qualifies the lives of Antonia as well as Jim's. It's after twenty years that Jim pays a visit to Antonia to keep

his promise of coming back. All these years, Jim's reluctance to visit Antonia owes to the fear of seeing her "aged and broken", for him "some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again" (MA 155). The sense of Jim's possession of 'his Antonia' breaks; when he is informed that 'Ms Shimerda' has now changed to 'Mrs Cuzak'. Married to Anton Cuzak, mother to 'many' children: "big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life" (MA 160); the reader finds Antonia happy and contented, casting a sarcasm on the futility of materialism. Though in relative poverty, Antonia is richer than Jim as she embraces the real essence of happiness whereas Jim, even after acquiring the tangible assets and marrying a wealthy lady is seen poor. Antonia can be clearly seen as living in the present who has "dissolved into something complete and great" (MA 12), whereas Jim's life is totally devoid of a viable present but only with the memories of past and plans of future. On his way back Jim senses something profound, it's the feeling of home coming, completing a full circle of life by returning back to the place where he started. He envisions that for both of them, this long journey ever since they first met "had been the road of Destiny" and whatever has been acquired or missed all through their life, they both certainly "possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past" (MA 175).

Jim does not cease his visits to Nebraska as his soul was rooted in the childhood spent with 'his Tony', he "clings to his identity as a country boy and as Antonia's friend" (Rabin 29), but the reason "he avoids Antonia for years (was) to shield himself from the sight of diminishment" (Rabin 29).

Willa Cather continues to explore the depth of human emotions, relationship-intricacies and psychological turmoil in her following novel, nevertheless taking a diversion in terms of setting, choice of protagonist and even the purpose to serve. Although *One of Ours* received the Pulitzer Prize, the novel was both criticised and acclaimed; for it wasn't actually a war novel even though set in the period of World War I. Joan Acocella calls it both "a good novel and a bad novel" (18), criticising it on the basis of its problem with the war half as "Claude's transformation from dismayed farm boy into valiant infantryman is too quick, unreal" (18); Donald Heiney complains that "the two halves do not fit together" (197). However, the novel's commendation owes itself to the protagonist's characterization, which develops in the conventionally restrained life-style and gender roles of Frankfort, and progresses through the dark realities of the war period. Cather is adept at creating complex fictional characters;

Claude Wheeler stands second in the lane, transcended only by Paul (protagonist of Cather's short fiction "Paul's Case") in terms of psychological complexity.

Claude, a sensitive yet aspiring young man, in his early twenties is trapped "between a growing realization of what life is for most people and a strong but vague longing for something better" (Porter 169). All through the first part of the novel, the protagonist lacks a clear vision about life; his cravings are undefined and even unidentified; the jacket description articulates him as "a young Hamlet of the prairies", who only finds a purpose of his living, in the World War. His whole childhood, adolescence and even adulthood could not bring him a moment's mental contentment, which he finally consummates in sacrificing his life, in quest for "something splendid" (OO 26). It's ironical to mention that this gratification is not for the reason of patriotism, rather accomplishing the purposefulness of life, Cather says, "He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be" (OO 198).

The best way to deal with the complicated character of Claude Wheeler, is to juxtapose it with the various life-stages of human development as explained by the psychologist Erik H. Erikson who is best known for his conception of 'Identity Crisis'. According to the psychologist, each stage of human life cycle has a certain effect on the developmental hierarchy altogether- "a child naturally grows in accordance with both outer (biological) and inner (psyche) laws of development in relation to persons and institutions (ethos)" (qtd in Poole 599). In the light of this assertion when we analyse the character of Claude Wheeler, the cause for his discontent and hopelessness seems to find its roots in his childhood. It takes the love and care of both a mother as well as father, to build a strong sense of self; as a little boy the most noticeable thing about his childhood was "a violent temper and physical restlessness" (OO 15). When Claude shows discontent to his mother, Evangeline towards attending the native Temple school, and his desire to switch to the State University, his father, Nat Wheeler in his usual "jocular" (OO 14) manner brings the topic to the dinner table. Willa Cather informs the reader about the peculiar characteristics of young Claude stating that he "couldn't bear ridicule very well" (OO 14) moreover he "hated any public discussion of his personal affairs" (OO 14). Mr Wheeler promptly recognized his son's odd behaviour, but misread it to be his "false pride" (OO 14) and deliberately "outraged his feelings to harden him" (OO 14).

Erikson, in his theory, elucidates that the "school age" [fourth stage] shows a parallel between 'Industry' and 'Inferiority' where a child's school environs the social

spheres, to make positive associations with people. This life-stage needs the liberty to explore and challenge new things through play. “Inhibition threatens a child’s ability to master this stage . . . An unfavourable ratio of industry leads to a sense of inferiority or inadequacy” (qtd in Poole 600-601). Claude’s feeling of being constantly scoffed at by his own father seems to be the key contributor to his emotional instability.

Mr Wheeler wasn’t harsh only towards Claude, Mrs Wheeler too suffered the same anguish all through her life, still “was proud, in her quiet way” (*OO* 14). Mrs Wheeler had long ago surrendered her efforts to amend him, “she never felt disappointments” (*OO* 33) and instantly chose a survival strategy, that is to compromise with her destiny and accept the hostility and bitterness of her husband’s personality as a characteristic of his “rugged masculinity” (*OO* 14).

Claude shared an estranged relationship with his father during his childhood, and had never pardoned him for what he did to him at various instances, very particularly “for some of his practical jokes” (*OO* 14). One such instance is worth mentioning, when Claude was an enthusiastic boy of five, busy with his play, heard his mother begging Mr Wheeler to bring pink cherries from the orchard that hung loaded and were out of her reach. She would have certainly performed the task without seeking her husband’s help, if it was possible for her by any means, even if she thought of taking aid of a ladder, it would have injured her back. On the other side, Mr Wheeler never liked his wife to be making excuses especially of “physical weakness” (*OO* 14); the response Evangeline and Claude received for this request, was immensely shattering. Her husband returned snapping “Cherries won’t give you any trouble. You and Claude can run along and pick ‘em as easy as can be” (*OO* 14). The cheerfulness of Claude’s innocent face wipes off when he approaches near the beautiful red cherry tree -

his father had sawed it through! It lay on the ground beside its bleeding stump. With one scream Claude became a little demon. He threw away his tin pail, jumped about howling and kicking the loose earth with his copper-toed shoes, until his mother was much more concerned for him than for the tree.

(*OO* 15)

The helpless child “choking with rage and hate” (*OO* 15) calls his father a “fool” (*OO* 15) to have mercilessly cut down such a sweet tree. Claude could only express his

scorn towards his father through fuming eyes. Claude's life could be well contrasted with the pink cherry tree that gradually grew "sicker, wilt and wither away" (OO 15). Hopkins puts forth Sigmund Freud's concept of disorders of the mind to be the "residues of childhood experiences and primitive modes of mental functioning" (77).

These disturbing incidents of Claude's childhood ignited a special feeling inside him; something boiling deep inside him, which he treats by imposing "physical tests and penances upon himself". To make himself tough, Claude went to school only in a jacket for one whole year. Evangeline would neatly wrap him in his overcoat, but through his way to the school Claude would unwrap it and shall reach the school "panting and shivering", but would be highly contented with himself, for his contribution towards his self-respect (OO 15). In the following years, Claude somehow immersed in the studies, harnessing the intellectual worlds, playing football for the Temple and making new friends. When everybody else of his age was inclined towards the adolescent love, Claude neither initiated fondness towards girls nor responded to them. Cather clarifies-

He is not so much afraid of loneliness as he is of accepting cheap substitutes; of making excuses to himself for a teacher who flatters him, of waking up some morning to find himself admiring a girl merely because she is accessible. He has a dread of easy compromises, and he is terribly afraid of being fooled.

(OO 17)

As a country-boy Claude wanders around, in search for an aim or a mysterious ambition, that could serve the purpose for his living; explicitly, Claude yearned for an individual identity. According to Erik Erikson, as explained in his theory of human life cycle, the fifth stage of human development relates to the age of adolescence. Primarily, the objective of this stage is to achieve "a favourable balance of identity over identity confusion" (qtd in Poole 601); it's an age of extensive physical and psychosocial changes which often pose developmental crises, thereby challenging an individual's coping ability. Claude too, during this stage faces a "painful time of doubt and fear" (OO 24). Claude wanted to continue exploring the intellectual world, yet had to give up his studies, to serve his father's decision for managing the indigenous farm. Claude accepts the situation as a challenge, and responds courageously. His diligence is worth mentioning during this phase, yet it's compelling to remark that the sincerity was more to avoid criticism than to achieve a set goal. Claude had often waked up panicking about the farm

and crops; in reality, no one cared much about the rains or the delay in crop plantation, but the protagonist thought “they did” (OO 37). During his farm days -

He put a great deal of young energy into it, and buried a great deal of discontent in its dark furrows. Day after day he flung himself upon the land and planted it with what was fermenting in him, glad to be so tired at night that he could not think.

(OO 37)

Erikson illuminates that if the age of adolescence is mastered, an individual “will have a sense of ego identity, in which a unity exists between what one sees inside of the self and their perceptions of what others think or expect them to be” (qtd in Poole 601). This psychological theory helps us to understand the reason behind identity confusion of the protagonist.

Claude, an innocent and unworldly soul stands in contrast with his two brothers Bayliss and Ralph. In shrewdness, Bayliss is surpassed only by Ralph, who very cleverly picks the finest possessions of the house to take along with him. Other than Claude’s mother, it is only the old Mahailey who understands and cares for the protagonist. She shares a special bond with Claude, wherever he was concerned, she added a personal and caring touch; his pain made her ache while his happiness made her feel contented. Claude had a special position in her life, so special that she had planned to share her material possessions with him; she barely had something, possessed three beautifully patch worked quilts, made by her old mother for Mahailey’s marriage; she took extra care of these possessions and did not allow anyone to meddle with them. Well aware of the submissive attitude of the protagonist, Mahailey plans to gift one of these quilts to Claude on his marriage.

The life at Lincoln in the company of his friend, and adorably sophisticated Mrs Erlich, introduce him to the world of culture and makes him realise the worth of living; he realises that life could be a thing of contentment too. Claude becomes anxious to return back to the farm life again, dreading the maladjustment hereafter. It was this kind of life he always wanted to live, comprising of joyous family lunches, giggles, peace and most importantly freedom of expression. When Mrs Erlich introduces Claude as the “landed proprietor” (OO 39) to the two young University instructors, the words seem to infuse a stream of confidence in the veins of Claude. The protagonist contemplates -

What was it that made life seem so much more interesting and attractive here than elsewhere? There was nothing wonderful about this room; a lot of books, a lamp... comfortable, hard-used furniture, some people whose lives were in no way remarkable—and yet he had the sense of being in a warm and gracious atmosphere, charged with generous enthusiasms and ennobled by romantic friendships.

(OO 39)

The passing days aggravate the dissatisfaction he has towards his way of living. The Erlich boys inadvertently makes him realise even more of his helplessness. However, the thing that hurts him the most is his inability to be a part of that kind of life, instead being part of such a life where “ideas played but little part”. He senses himself to be a stranger, as to have belonged to a country where working “like the horses” and sleeping of tiredness was the sheer reality of life (OO 39).

Looking at the simplicity of Claude, Mrs Erlich feels that farm seems to be the best place for him; Claude conversely takes it to be his inability and incompetence to settle in any different occupation, other than farming. As already discussed, identity is even affected by what others think of you. He feels that even at the age of twenty-one, he is absolutely devoid of any specific skill or training or ability that can make him pertinent to fit in the type of society and people, he wants to be a part of. He soon gets unenthusiastic about farming too, he is conscious of his follies, is also aware that his energy is being wasted in “resisting unalterable conditions” rather than “accomplishing something”. Nevertheless, there is a profound self-affirmation that there would be something, something for which “he would spring to his feet”, for which he would be able to feel a powerful feeling of hope and pain. Claude is sure of one thing that farming isn’t the thing he wanted his life to be devoted to. There has to be “something splendid about life, if he could but find it” (OO 48).

Stepping to adulthood brings to Claude a transitory fulfilment, by means of having a love affair with Enid Royce. An old playmate and daughter of one of the early grain merchants in Frankfort, Enid was formally requested by Claude for a sleigh-ride. Claude for the first time feels that the bells of his sleigh produce a heart-warming music, that the sparkling winter night is somehow special; it is one when a boy senses a strange emotion

of love and excitement, when the world starts looking a better place to live in and he gets a sense of greatness for himself (OO 48).

This phase of 'young adulthood' marks the sixth stage in Erikson's theory of life-cycle. The stage prominently features the period of romance, where an individual yearns for companionship, someone to share his/her life with; Erikson names this stage as 'Intimacy versus Isolation'. Though the stage qualifies romantic relationships, yet transcends the narrow horizon of sexual attraction. The psychologist clarifies that the ability of individuals-

to lose themselves so as to find one another in the meeting of bodies and minds, is apt to lead sooner or later to vigorous expansion of mutual interests and to a libidinal investment in that which is being generated and cared for together.

(Erikson 67)

Psychological crisis may arise with a conflict between one's desire for long-term intimacy, however a commitment to retaining one's selfhood during the process; inability to master the stage leaves an individual isolated, with a deliberate effort towards distancing oneself from others.

Carried away by the charm of young Enid, and her selfless concern towards him, encourages him to propose Enid for a life time companionship. Even though being cautioned by Enid's father about his daughter's indifference towards the notion of marriage, and also about her extra inclination towards religion, Claude takes his decision, only to find himself in despair. Strange enough, but Enid in an inconsiderately clever manner locks Claude out of the train-cabin on the very first night of their marriage. It happens to be that when Claude first enters in the cabin, Enid informs him about her bad health. On Claude's enquiry for help, she apathetically replies, "'No, thank you. Sleep will do me more good than anything else. Good-night.'", insensitively shutting off the door (OO 86). As foretold by her father, Enid continues with her own way of life, and is not able to give Claude the status of husband. The only thing that matters her most is Christianity; however, it's important to mention that she never fails to address her family responsibilities. Enid's indifference shatters him, and his expectations from life. Once again loneliness overrides him, forcing him to search for a diversion. His only refuge is the 'timber claim', where "he felt unmarried and free. . . to read and dream" (OO 93). It is

in this natural abode that he feels his thoughts are his own and could meet the past self, younger than present but much more mature and interesting; moreover, a man free from the undesirable strings of compromise.

Same scene continues for the whole year, interrupted only by the news of Enid's missionary sister in China, who had fallen sick and longs for family aid. Enid happily volunteers herself for the service; Claude too indifferently accepts the decision, thinking "Let her go! . . . when she made up her mind, there was no turning her" (*OO* 96). It's not for the first time that destiny had been unfair towards him; he feels the world to be an unpleasant place to live in, where whatsoever he does, goes wrong, as has always had. Claude senses a feeling of void in his aimless life; the house which he had built and decorated with great pride, now hides its belongings like "the lumber piled in the shop of any second-hand dealer" (*OO* 98). The only thing permanent in the world is change itself: to move forward is the only choice now left with him, but the vulnerability of his self lies in the doubt as how to proceed forward in life. To start afresh, or to accommodate himself in the same rough circumstances? The problem with the possible solutions was that he was unable to do anything "unless he could get rid of this sick feeling in his soul" (*OO* 98).

At this juncture, the regular news flashes of World War and America's preparation to join the same, diverts Claude's attention and he gets absorbed by heat of the moment. He too enlists himself for military training to give purpose to his otherwise aimless life. Along with twenty-five hundred soldiers, Lieutenant Claude boards the 'Anchises' to reach France. The hardships on-board prepare him to confront the ugly face of war; almost forty people die of various diseases on the ship. Even though surrounded with the gloominess and hatred of war, Claude feels a sense of contentment with an "ever-widening freedom" (*OO* 131). It is on the ship that he inhales the long forgotten free air -

The fog, and rain, the grey sky and the lonely grey stretches of the ocean were like something he had imagined long ago—memories of old sea stories read in childhood. . . this fog which had been at first depressing had become a shelter; a tent moving through space, hiding one from all that had been before, giving one a chance to correct one's ideas about life and to plan the future.

(*OO* 131-32)

It is interesting to point out that the person who had always been unsure of his existence and the reason for his being, now leads a double life, one of a busy soldier, serving his sick mates, another - a free self. Ironically, the discomforts and misfortunes on the ship make him forget his uneventful life and unsuccessful marriage. Every now and then when group of boys talk about their love life and war-brides, Claude considers himself as the “least married man” on the ship. Surprisingly, he senses a sudden happiness to have left everything behind. To Claude –

Life had never seemed so tempting as it did here and now. . . he awoke every morning with that sense of freedom and going forward, as if the world were growing bigger each day and he were growing with it.

(OO 134)

It's worth mentioning that Claude finally achieves his overdue targets of the previous developmental stage in the sixth stage; we find Claude to have at least partially experience the ‘Identity achievement’ as opposed to ‘Role confusion’. The difference between the Frankfort Claude and the one on this voyage is noticeable, Cather explains his blooming confidence as one which was now unstoppable or unhindered, and if it happens by chance, it shall only come from the inside but not outside as “the feeling of purpose, of fateful purpose, was strong in his breast” (OO 135).

Until now Claude had never come across even a single person whom he could idealise in his life; however, after meeting Lieutenant David Gerhardt, for the first time he wishes to follow someone. The distinctiveness of Gerhardt's persona initially makes the protagonist uneasy as he reasons him to be his competitor but soon finds him to be a talented violinist and a kind hearted man; he has been nurtured with those values which Claude had always been devoid of. The two lieutenants spend a few lazy days at Madame Joubert's place, where Claude recalls Mrs Erlich talking about the “happy youth” which until now he hadn't experienced. Claude seems to be pretty aware with the fact that these happy days would never come again, and he would never be able to experience this “hazy enchantment” (OO 177).

Back from rest, Claude and his troops join the battle, marching towards the Boar's Head. The place is a mess of piled up bodies and uneven terrain, which calls a lot of American energy to clean it up. Claude, being the incharge, leads the troop however, gets unlucky to come across Germans just when they plan a big attack set as a trap for the Americans. The attack explodes the Boar's Head. Claude shudders at the sight of his men “stumbling and falling” nevertheless, fearlessly leads them with his prompt directions

(OO 195). His men including Hicks, Jones, Fuller, Anderson, Oscar “had become like rock . . . their eyes never left him” moreover, the trust in their eyes boosted his confidence and he feels “With these men he could do anything”. However, war has always brought destruction and gloominess; Hicks, Bert and Oscar carry the wounded Claude, to find “three clean bullet holes” in his body, and a smile on his face, but “by the time they looked at him again, the smile had gone”. They thanked God for not informing him that Gerhardt had already been “blown to pieces” (OO 196).

Mrs Wheeler reads and re-reads her son’s letters to keep him alive. Although Claude had lost his life, but there was at least one person who was convinced with the reason of his sacrifice; Mrs Wheeler well understood that for Claude “the call was clear, the cause was glorious”. The innocence of her boy, afraid of being tricked by others, finally found something to live for before he could die. Moreover, Evangeline thanks God for saving her son “from some horrible suffering, some horrible end”. However, her strength is just superficial, for whenever she hears of war, her son knocks the memories with even more vigour, and she helplessly “shudders and presses her hands tight over her breast, as if she had him there” (OO 198).

The emotional connection between Claude and the War makes this piece of fiction, an epic. Willa Cather constructs a parallel between the World War and an individual’s psychological war with his own self (no less than a world war itself). The plight of Claude’s life, his agony, his sufferings, to a great extent convince the reader that at times the choice is difficult; for a few the war might be a consolation, indeed a preference.

Willa Cather’s subsequent novel, *A Lost Lady* is a “short and flawless” piece of fiction with no “unnecessary furniture” (Doren 288). Yet another time Cather employs the same technique of narration as used in *My Antonia*. Both Jim and Niel are male narrators that control their female characters, Jim makes the reader see only those characteristics of Antonia which fit his image of ‘her Antonia’ and Niel Herbert describes the character of Mrs Marian Forrester as an ideal image of a ‘lady’ from his nineteenth century traditional mind-set who consider women as cultural-conservators and communicators of civilization. Niel idealises the lady since he was twelve and was favoured by her, after a fall from a tree on the lady’s property. For Niel, the charm of the lady is unmatched and unsurpassable; it is as if he has found someone who embodies what he has been seeking. The narrator “had never found one so attractive and distinguished”; Moreover, he is

startled to find such a person in the small town of Sweet Water. In her comparison, all the other women “were heavy and dull”; the ones who were pretty, also appeared to be lifeless objects of display, as they lacked that sparkle of the glance which could make “one's blood tingle” (LL 21).

“Where Mrs. Forrester was, dullness was impossible” (36). Her charm owes to her interest in common people, their life, their stories, if she does not find the refined company of Mr Ogden or Mr Dalzell to tell their best stories, she never minds even the company of the unscrupulous Ivy Peters. It is the unique style of her commenting, agreeing and appreciating people that impresses a person the most. While remarking on Marian’s peculiar character, David Porter describes the lady as “full of feminine mystery and charm, inscrutable in her weakness and her reckless courage” (43).

Unlike other female protagonists, Marian Forrester is introduced in a civilized and well settled environment. Married to captain Forrester, one of the pioneer rail-road aristocrats, the lady is most appreciated as a generous hostess; the visitors always find Forrester’s grand estate welcoming their arrival. Marian used to come rushing “in her dressing-gown, brush in hand and her long black hair rippling over her shoulders” to greet her guests. She never bothered about her appearance as “she was attractive in dishabille, and she knew it”. Though appreciated by all, the charm of Mrs Forrester in the eyes of the venerable men of the society was extraordinary, as for them, whatever she did was ““lady-like" because she did it” (LL 6).

The narrator presents Mrs Forrester as the epitome of conventional elegance; however, in reality the protagonist is a confident and independent lady, who does not reflect the morality of a traditional woman, rather, shows the sexual confidence of the ‘New Woman’. As a gendered narrator, Niel labels Marian as a lady conforming to the nineteenth century female conduct. Even in his admiration towards the lady, it is her feminine role, her relation with Captain Forrester that makes Marian eligible for his admiration, and worthy of his praise -

Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else. That, he felt, was quality; something that could never become worn or shabby.

(LL 40)

Willa Cather uses the sexual lure as a catalyst to depict the tragic decline of the lady herself who ultimately becomes Niel’s ‘lost lady’. Mrs Marian Forrester descends

from a sophisticated yet courteous hostess to a morally degraded woman in her illicit relations to Frank Ellinger. On one occasion, when the Captain is out for business at Denver, Frank Ellinger pays visit at the Forrester's house. Unaware of Frank's presence, the narrator plans to give Marian a surprise. Niel's innocent attempt turns into a shocking nightmare, when in his attempt to place a rose bouquet on her bedroom's window-sill, he hears strange sounds of "a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's . . . ended in something like a yawn" (*LL 43*).

The incident enrages Niel. A man's yawn and a woman's laugh leave an ever haunting impact on his life. He loses the most beautiful and cherished thing of his life, which would now be alive only as a memory of past. The deviation between the lady's presumed and real image dramatizes the situation, thereby increasing the tension between Niel and Marian. For the narrator, Mrs Forrester is now no more than an aesthetic ideal of the past -

Before the dew dried, the morning had been wrecked for him; and all subsequent mornings, he told himself bitterly. This day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence. He could never recapture it. It was gone, like the morning freshness of the flowers.

(*LL 44*)

The pleasant and admirable atmosphere at the Forresters' catastrophically gives way to the Captain's heavy fall, "it was as if one of the mountains had fallen down" (*LL 21*). Captain Forrester arrives as a poor man from Denver, settling his creditors and with only his pension left. His stroke adds to the misery. The fall of Mr Forrester initiates decline of the pioneering spirit, of which he himself is an important part. The blow is even more severe for Mrs Forrester, whose sophisticated life style, her elegance, her flirtatious bearing, all is depended on the riches of Captain Forrester. Niel is seen to be much concerned for her, as he fears that she is amongst those few people who could only survive in the extravaganza and lavishness of life, and any deviation from this would be an eternal suffering for her, "would be unfitting" (*LL 42*).

After Captain Forrester's stroke, Marian becomes a "different woman" (*LL 48*), an insecure person hiding her unhappiness from her ailing husband; however, for Niel this change in her was positive as he sensed in her an independence of character which was never "more in command" of her (*LL 50*). Marian Forrester's innocent queries to Niel about the town-life, the trending ways of life, and related questions, reveal her psychic

anguish in the quest for a stable identity. All this while, she grieves the ordinary life that compels her to realise the worth of prosperity, duly evident in her advice to Niel that “Money is a very important thing” and understand its worth in the beginning or else you may end up ridiculously “like so many of us” (*LL* 56). The death of Mr Forrester sweeps it all; none of his wealthy friends mark their presence in his last rites, attended only by the old settlers of Sweet Water and his former employees.

Critics parallel Marian’s fading character with the decline of pioneering spirit of the west. The passing years make the lady’s fall an enduring one. The Forrester house that once used to welcome its guests, is now all deserted, guarding its sick owner and his dull wife. Even the old marshland of the Forrester’s, depicted as an eternal childhood memory of the village boys, drains out at the hands of Ivy Peters. The nobility of the visitants that once embraced the company of the railroad president and other aristocrats now gives way to the shrewd and immoral Ivy Peters. The gatherings that were once admired for its chivalry and conduct of good old men and their lovely ladies, is substituted with the guests like Peters, hosted by the modern Marian. Niel feels vulnerable looking at the cheap ways of Mrs Forrester and her guests in a party; moreover, the sight of Ivy Peters casually holding Marian in his arms, finally becomes the narrator’s “last time” at the Forresters’ (*LL* 85).

The changing circumstances test her endurance, but cannot steal her zest towards life that rises above the mundane. Unwilling to approve the town’s view of her “to grow old gracefully”, Marian confesses to Niel - “I feel such a power to live in me” (*LL* 62). Her quest for luxurious happiness, which she was once a part of, motivates her to manage retaining the unique aura of her personality even when her life dashes to pieces. She succeeds in earning a lavish living by marrying a rich English man; ultimately getting settled in South America as Mrs Marian Forrester Collins. Even years later, when Niel isn’t sure of Mrs Forrester’s existence, the lady’s image –

flashed into his mind, it came with a brightness of dark eyes, her pale triangular cheeks with long earrings, and her many-coloured laugh. When he was dull, dull and tired of everything, he used to think that if he could hear that long-lost lady laugh again, he could be gay.

(*LL* 37)

Cather does her best to break and remake the conventionally restrictive female identities. Randall remarks on the nineteenth century view of women with context to Marian's character, "Women – that is, good women – were considered fragile vessels, the slightest flaw in whose chastity was fraught with dire peril for the social order" (179). In one out of two different readings of the novel, Hermione Lee sympathises with the female protagonist, blaming the author to "entirely endorse Niel's snobbish nostalgia and the Captain's traditionalism"; thereby, judging Mrs Forrester harshly "for betraying these values" (204). Jordan L. Von Cannon concludes that Mrs Forrester "adapts to changing circumstances" yet does not yield away her autonomy to celebrate the glorious past (48). He comments on Cather's contribution towards the notion of female identity which she illustrates by dismantling the "male notions of authority and antiquated ideas about femininity (49). Moreover, Joseph Wood compares the character of Mrs Forrester to that of an artist; even though "she did not write nor paint nor act nor sing" she meets all the requirements of an artist and "was guilty and lost because she put her own happiness before her art and betrayed her ideal to snatch at the joy of life" (Krutch 54).

For Willa Cather "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabout" (qtd in Nelson 19), subsequently altering her rustic pioneer themes to metaphysical fiction. During this era, the world was transforming swiftly to leave an eternal mark on the pages of the world history; however, unlike her contemporaries who were talking about the fundamental issues of their time, Cather became increasingly philosophical and her work ceased to reflect what was central to her own age. In addition to the previously discussed themes of space and nostalgia, she addresses a significant issue in *The Professor's House*: the spiritual fulfilment of the self. According to Skaggs, the novel is all about "Diminishment, diminution and disillusion", narrating the mid-life identity crisis of an "immensely complex and tired male autobiographical figure who asks Cather's distressed questions and illustrates her knotted concerns" (qtd in Rabin 42). Kristina proclaims Cather to be a "paradox because she sought for self-definition, but she also suffered from an identity crisis" (Ashton 6).

The novel introduces the reader to the ostensibly successful and materially gratified personality of Professor Godfrey St. Peter, who otherwise grieves from a 'deep depression'. The predicament of Godfrey's life is his reluctance to match the pace with his family who ironically, has fully synchronized with the changing values of the materialistic world. The novel is principally about the mid-life crisis of a man who is stranded between his own sensitivities and their fulfilment on one hand, and that of his

domestic accountabilities on the other. The personal crisis of the writer bestows an emotional depth to the novel, unmatched by any of her previous works.

For almost three decades St. Peter satisfactorily immerses his self in the pursuit of historical exploration. With the completion of his epic scholarly work titled *Spanish Adventures in North America*, comes the monetary treasure of success, though at the cost of inner peace. St. Peter's natural self, spiritually unifies with his scholarly work that accords him "surrogate spiritual peace" (Petry 28) cessation of which makes him conscious of the futility of life henceforth. Godfrey's identity seems a blend between 'the historical and the spiritual', that yearns for the same "pleasure" and "fun" it has received all these years probing the historical details (*PH* 22). His unperturbed soul feels suffocated in the traumatic interactions with his family, colleagues and the humdrum of the avaricious society. His inability to accept the reality, and his unwillingness to step into the next stage of life, gives way to a consistent subliminal mental battle. It is ironic to find that the protagonist's family fails to sense his agony, moreover, stride for the decoration of their symbolic 'New House'.

Cather has focused on the unhappy relations between the sexes, prominently the displeasing marital relations in almost all her fictional works; nevertheless, it is in *The Professor's House* that she attempts to discuss the subject at length. The author makes the reader aware that ever since Godfrey's marriage, his natural self has been struggling for inner peace. The passing years do not make him realise, how far he has drifted away from his original self. The realisation of this fact comes from a gradual contemplation, after his superannuation. The only personality trait that remains unchanged all these years is his love for solitude. In one of the instances, when professor pays a visit to Chicago-lectures with his wife, the picturesque landscape surrounding the hotel brings to him a "genial mood" (*PH* 70). The pleasant evening evokes past memories of Paris, reminding a contrast of the days when they first met and their present day alienation. He yearns to know what Lillian's feelings for him but infers - "The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own" (*PH* 73). Later that evening, he reflects over the passing day and senses comfort in those fleeting moments, nevertheless, the recollections of this memorable day did not include his wife or anyone else, it was solely Godfrey himself.

Unlike others St. Peter's life has been ruined by the treasures of success. The shabby old study is the only thing left in his life which embodies his whole youth and happy memories of his family; it is in this domestic space that his ideals of head and heart

synthesise. Busy in introspection, he evaluates the past, realising the hollowness of his married life, and also his “disappointments” towards his daughters and wife, who have drifted so far from his idealizations of them (*PH* 12). Lillian, Rosamond and Kathleen do not accommodate in Godfrey’s Victorian frame of a woman; the only woman who corresponds to his Victorian standards is Augusta, their seamstress. The riches received from Outland’s invention and his scholarly work has contaminated their behaviours, explicitly Rosamond. Remarking on his daughter’s amazing purchasing skills, Godfrey deems her to be “like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces” (*PH* 124). Cather’s beautiful simile elucidates Rosamond’s fitting cleverness to the avaricious society of the protagonist’s time.

From St. Peter’s perspective, the reason behind his despair is the swelling materialism that has corrupted the value system of his whole family. Furthermore, his acceptance of the fact that his wife and daughter are no more dependent on him, but on Louie and Scott, may have caused serious mental harm to him giving rise to anxiety and frustration. Throughout the novel, we find Godfrey unable to accept his sons-in-law; the mere presence of Louie and Scott makes him feel uncomfortable; on the contrary, Lillian is always at ease in the company of Louie. These consistent visuals are distressing to him and eventually make him realise that “he understood his own wife very little” (*PH* 60).

Written in 1925, just a few years later to the introduction of ‘women suffrage’; the novel deals with the insecurity and frustration of the male community. A clear analogy can be seen between the two – the twentieth century men and St. Peter. As the men of this era experiences bewilderment, and seems reluctant to accept the new roles of the females. Similarly Godfrey St. Peter’s retired life could be seen to have almost the same anxiety. Though, later in the novel, he confesses to Rosamond that he has been obliged by Louie for taking over the responsibility of the family. He feels a sudden drop in both, strength and spirit to continue the assigned roles, until now he had often complained about Louie, his life and his involvement in the house, but now something had changed in him, he felt “a distinct sense of loss”. Furthermore, in one of the discussions, Scott feels concerned for Godfrey as he “seemed absolutely flattened out and listless” (*PH* 122).

The novel is a complex knit of human emotions that keeps on changing with time, adding to the life experiences. The demise of Tom Outland has a significant bearing on the protagonist. Though Outland is St. Peter’s student, he is ironically the one who inspires Godfrey all through the novel. Interestingly, on the one hand, where this catastrophic death gives a major setback to St. Peter, on the other, it brings happiness in

the life of Rosamond (his fiancée), in the form of material gains. Startlingly, the power of money drastically transforms the lady. After her marriage to Louie Marsellus, there comes a bewildering transformation in both Rosamond and her mother which somehow drastically hardens them; Kathleen too comments about her sister that “she’s entirely changed. He [Louie] and all this money have ruined her” (*PH* 67). The author makes the reader aware that though Lillian has drifted away from her original conduct, yet she isn’t ill-intentioned. Likewise, St. Peter and Lillian may have “ceased to be lovers” (*PH* 128), in one of the instances we find that “her heart ached for Godfrey” (*PH* 124).

Kristina highlights two splits in the protagonist’s life, the first being his “inability to move into the next stage of his life” and the second his “desire to remain in the past and his feelings of irrelevance” (Ashton 52). The only deviation permissible, in fact desperately yearned for, is his revival of youth - where both his research and family brought him happiness and peace. Godfrey is certain where to find his spiritual peace again; it is in the memories of Outland and in re-experiencing the charm of Mesa through Tom’s diary that can disengage him with the outer world. Alice explicates his desire to accomplish-

an experience comparable to the one Outland recorded in his diary, the professor clearly longs for a transcendent peace comparable to the one he had derived from writing his eight-volume history.

(Petty 28)

The experience has almost a hypnotic effect on him which motivates him to even skip a family trip to complete his work on Tom’s diary. This assignment costs him almost two months which otherwise did not require more than a week, but he still calls it a “pleasantly trifle” (*PH* 217) because he had been busy in a task “he had never before been able to do” (*PH* 218).

The Professor’s love for historical facts finds its origin in his christened name ‘Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter’. Cather adeptly employs the classical allusion of Napoleon and creates an analogy between the real hero and her protagonist, by introducing him as a prodigy of historical investigation. Moreover, Godfrey connotes ‘god’s peace’, the protagonist later understands that this ‘god’s peace’ would only be attainable with resurrection of self, coming into terms not with the alternates for peace but with the true realization of ‘self as a psychic whole’ thereby realizing spiritual peace. Allegorically, his last name too reveals the spiritual significance. Randall infers that, "As a historian, he is

like the original St. Peter who holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven much as his namesake holds the key to history" (209).

Once again, the reader comes across Cather's dream therapy to make them aware of the protagonist's unaddressed emotions. He often daydreams of Tom Outland's return through the 'garden door' and their long intellectual exchanges amidst the apple trees. The author beautifully illustrates this particular emotion experienced by her central character; she says - "he enjoyed this half-awake loafing with his brain as if it were a new sense, arriving late, like wisdom teeth" (*PH* 218).

"Dreaming is a piece of infantile mental life that has been superseded" (Freud 566-567). According to Sigmund Freud both conscious and unconscious daydreams exist. It is in the recurrence of the conscious phantasies that the structure of its being comes to one's knowledge. Its production takes use of the suppressed desires, wishful phantasies and infantile material to rearrange it and form "a new whole" (497). Like dreams, daydreams too provide an apparatus for wish-fulfilment and are primarily based on childhood impressions. He exemplifies that these phantasies are instant indications of "hysterical symptoms" and are not originated from the memories of real life or incidents, instead are "phantasies erected on the basis of memories" (496).

While the family was gone, Godfrey happily gives away his time to the work he loves most. He starts editing Outland's diary that contains every minute detail about the Mesa and to him "this plain account was almost beautiful" which offers him a certain kind of feeling that kindles his imagination, and even transmits the excitement and passion that Outland might then have experienced (*PH* 217). It is in this intellectual and historical pursuit that he senses comfort - Tom Outland's memories, his old attic and his passion for exploration revive his spirit once again. However, this time he does not see Outland coming out of the "garden door", but a long forgotten friend, the boy he had left behind years ago, it was none other than he himself – the young Godfrey St. Peter. A fresh gush of life impregnates his self, filling the present void. He passionately craves to retreat back to the old boyhood days of Kansas as little Napoleon in search of his "original, unmodified" (*PH* 218) self –

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him . . . He seemed to know, among other

things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth.

(PH 219-220)

The dreary thought of his family's return makes him restless to such an extent that he happily becomes ready to embrace death to attain "eternal solitude" (PH 227). On no condition would he return back to his new house and family; moreover, he just "wanted to run away from everything he had intensely cared for" (PH 230). He wants to kill his own self, but lacks strength; that night in half consciousness he faces a near death of asphyxiation from gas. Dramatically, Augusta comes to save him both physically and spiritually. Later he realises that she was "like the taste of bitter herbs", which one might consistently avoid, but it persistently works to comfort the suffering body. Similarly, he too had always overlooked her presence, but at the moment, it was Augusta's divine power that comes and saves him from a disastrous end (PH 234).

The incident changes something deep inside him and this epiphany releases him from the strings, ready to let loose the past, and embrace the future. After a long time he feels the presence of earth under his feet, besides, he was now "spiritually stable" (Petry 29). St. Peter's state fits well in Erik Erikson's frame of identity, where an individual has to go through an intense 'identity crisis' in order to have a true realisation of self. Cather concludes that this "temporary release from consciousness" has been useful for the protagonist, perhaps obligatory, to offer him a chance to let go 'that something' which was now only past. Had he attempted it deliberately, he would not have been probably able to relinquish it. St. Peter wonders, whether his wife and daughters would ever realise what he has gone through in these past days, and that "he was not the same man they had said good-bye to". Nevertheless, he feels that it does not matter; rather he did not matter to them "they would be too happily preoccupied with their own affairs". The only thing that certainly counted was the contentment of his self which he was now able to comprehend. At this moment, he could feel the breeze and the ground, and that feeling was sufficient for him to "face with fortitude the *Berengaria* and the future" (PH 173).

Carl Jung explains that the conscious mind cannot form an absolute image of self; it is in the unification of the conscious as well the unconscious mind that an integrated self is realised (2014, 156). Religion (in its broad view) helps an individual to come in harmony with the unconscious thereby achieving the unachievable. Cather's attempt to

demonstrate the relationship between self and spiritualism may be explained with the Jungian concept. According to the psychologist-

one can never distinguish empirically between a symbol of the self and a God-image, the two ideas, however much we try to differentiate them, always appear blended together, so that the self appears synonymous with the inner Christ. . . Psychologically speaking, the domain of "gods" begins where consciousness leaves off, for at that point man is already at the mercy of the natural order, whether he thrive or perish.

(Jung 2014, 156)

Alice Hall summarises Cather's concept of spiritual peace, symbolically portrayed in her works as "derived from our perception of unity, order, and organization, our sense of psychological wholeness, in a vast and complex world" (Petry 31).

A glance at Cather's fictional characters from the select novels for this research reveals a few common characteristics, which otherwise are common to the whole humankind only a bit severe in magnitude for these characters. Alexandra, Carl, Thea, Antonia, Jim, Niel, Claude and most importantly Professor St. Peter go through psychological battles. A strange melancholy follows wherever they go and the gloominess of their lives is not physical, but psychological. Alexandra, Thea and Antonia, indisputably earn the title of 'heroic women' for fighting singular battles against the society and its conventional gender roles. Jim, Claude, Niel and St. Peter struggle to accommodate themselves in the world of sweeping values and escalating avarice. Jim Burden and Professor Godfrey St. Peter join hands in exhibiting resistance towards changing gender roles leading to confusion and stress and even frustration and, eventually, an identity crisis. In quest for identity, sooner or later, the character experiences the psychically painful process of epiphany thereafter sanctioning the true realization of selfhood.

"The end is nothing, the road is all." – Willa Cather

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet- Willa Cather

(I)

In the narrations of the picturesque landscapes, unyielding pioneer spirit, heroic rustic women and nostalgic past Willa Cather has influenced American literature in her own unique style. The writer accepted initial flaws in her writing which eventually contributed in the refinement of style, making her an immortal icon. The originality of her work shall always be indebted to Sarah Orne Jewett who suggested her to find her own inspiration and to write from that level. It was not until then that Cather started writing about the immigrants, giving life to the childhood memories and landscape. Later the Nebraskan land and people became her real inspirations.

Willa Cather's fiction considerably reflects upon the various ethnic groups of the American Midwest that explore the marks of human endeavour after the Great Migration. The ambitious immigrants from Europe who entered the new land in hope of opportunity, carried in them a sense of power that transformed the wide spread Nebraskan wilderness into celebrations of a fertile land - showing abundance of cornfields and orchards. However, at times this celebration of cultivating and domesticating the wild land shifts to elegiac narrations that laments for an irrecoverable past.

Cather is considered a regionalist but her stature rises above it. Her art and personality is a singular one - an amalgamation of diverse attributes that shapes her fiction. She finds place among both - the naturalist and modernist writers, but her fiction cannot be categorised on the basis of any specific theme or technique, neither can she be clearly associated to a specific genre. Like the duality of her personality, her art too has both - been appreciated and condemned. The condemnation is at times for its irrelevance and at other times for its concealed male images in the women centric novels.

The critical framework of ecocriticism, psychological theories and feminist approaches, aid in providing a deep understanding of the self. The terms 'self' and 'identity' are inseparable from each other. 'Self' is the point of origin, the repository of the unconscious, and the content of the human mind whereas 'identity' is the essence of an individual. Identity could be understood as the narrative of the self that exhibits it in

meaningful actions. The concept of ‘the unconscious’ as elaborated by Freud and Jung responds to a number of human queries. Freud’s dream-mechanism and its interpretation give a profound understanding of the complicated human selves; it assists in unveiling their suppressed desires and their ramifications on identity. According to Lacan’s theory of ‘symbolic order’, the image of self is present outside the physical self; shaped by the outside world on which an individual has minimal control. The much popular concept of ‘identity crisis’ devised by Erik Erikson explicates the challenges and the resultant impact on human identity at various stages of life. These challenges are termed as ‘crisis’ and the gradual process of breaking and making of the human self at times gives rise to ‘identity crisis’. Lacan’s discussion about language and its use helps in grasping the psychology of writer. It equips one with the intellect to search for concealed meanings because psychology does not only consider the spoken but also the unspoken and intentionally avoided.

The initiation of suffrage movement in America had already instilled the much needed confidence in women to stand for their rights. Nevertheless, the final granting of women suffrage empowered them with self-assurance that caused mass trespassing in the male dominated territory. The contemporary scenario almost equally influenced the identities of men and women, where the former was negatively and the latter was positively affected.

The various psychological theories chosen for this research work set in the changing gender notions of the time, furnishes the mind to attempt for a comprehensive analysis of the human self.

(II)

The quest for identity is a continuous process of making and breaking of the self. This pursuit is rarely a lonely task, as the search for self is a social activity which is inseparable from its immediate culture, society and the natural setting. Society provides an individual with a consolidated image of his/her self which otherwise is scattered in pieces.

Willa Cather gifts to her country an aesthetic ideal of American wilderness which shall be eternally preserved in the pages of American literature including the farfetched landscape imageries, her environmental imagination, the frontier life and her own

experience. The remarkable physical space and unique immigrant culture enabled her to locate the characters in vast panorama of the wild prairie land of Nebraska.

The active role of landscape, place and space in her fiction gives voice to the other social aspects like gender, ethnicity and social status. The nature imagery evokes the need to balance industrial progress and preservation of nature. It works as a catalytic centre that awakens the consciousness of self and its relation to the outer world. As other nature writers, Cather too attempts to create relation between nature and mankind. This quest for identity is accomplished by means of finding oneself in the Mother Nature. Almost all the characters in her fiction either directly or indirectly get influenced by environment but for Thea the Mexican landscape becomes the catalytic centre that awakens her spirit from within. Professor Wunsch had once remarked that there is “something unconscious and unawakened about her” (*SOL* 63) but what that something was and how it could be awakened was inexplicable by both the teacher and his student. However later in the novel this ‘something’ evokes as an epiphany in the artist’s life.

Cather allows her characters to get inspired and feel protected in the arms of nature. Alexandra Bergson’s apprehension over her own decision of buying more land when others were selling theirs, finds consolation under the starry sky whose vastness and methodical march has always inspired her; moreover, has given her the sense of affirmation and security. In addition to Alexandra, other characters such as Jim Burden, Thea Krongborg, Claude Wheeler and Godfrey St. Peter find consolation in the companionship of nature conveying a mutual connection between man and his physical environment.

Willa Cather’s characters discover their selves and even get awoken through the landscape. Her fiction responds to the contemporary discussions of modernization and preservation in addition to her personal encouragement towards a national ecological awakening. Her possessiveness towards land and country-life as depicted in her fiction is clearly traceable however; giving her the designation of a true conservationist is debatable. In light of Cather’s Nebraskan fiction it can be inferred that she uses land not solely for its integrity and value but for using it as a background to narrate the immigrant stories of growth and development. Nevertheless, it’s in the coexistence of industrialization and environmentalism that depicts an environmental balance and originality in her fiction. As already discussed in detail, it is the life and profession of Jim Burden that this environmental balance is best portrayed. He also becomes the author’s

mouthpiece in bringing out her own perplexity of choice between city and country life, where the former promises freedom and career, but the latter promises happiness in totality.

The most significant element of the author's personal life as well her fiction is migration. The writer faces a twofold migration: first from Virginia to Nebraska at an early age followed by her eastward migration from Nebraska to Pittsburgh to explore her literary flair. Her fiction reflects the bearing of both. Migration interposes a person's self-identity; its significance lays in the uprootedness as well the rootedness of a person to his/her land and socio cultural environment. Relocations force individuals to accustom to the new environment thereby imposing a mandatory erasure of personality. Urgo remarks that the image of American culture as reflected in her fiction "is one of continuous movement, of spatial and temporal migrations, of intellectual transmission and physical uprooting" (1995, 17).

Willa Cather fittingly comprehends that migration has implications on a person's identity which is evident in her fiction by means of the characters that are all set on a voyage in search of their identities either overtly and covertly. It seems that in treating the character of Claude Wheeler, Cather becomes more vocal and comes straight to the point of a person's psychological dilemma about his identity; however in the case of Jim Burden we find concealed traces of identity crisis. As already asserted that Jim mirrors Cather's childhood memories and very particularly her migration phase, we find him to be a person who "carries the burden of identity", and a person who is seeking answers to the questions such as – "what does it mean to be an American? Am I an American? Where do I fit in American society?" (Rabin 33).

The aforementioned queries appear to be a big question on a person's identity. In general the reply to the enquiry 'Who are you?' could simply be 'I am Jim from America.' However, when a person is all muddled up in deciding over what exactly his/her roots of origin are: then this confusion becomes central to their personalities. This could be the reason why Cather's text persistently talks about possession. With context to the great American migration, considering Jim as an immigrant, the answer to his question "Am I an American?" could suitably be that he is an-

American figure, not because of any distinctiveness of cultural heritage but for exactly the opposite reason, namely, because he (or she) exhibits in extreme degree the 'character structure' produced by the *American* experience of change, mobility, and loss of contact with the past" (qtd in Rabin 33).

The various elements of her fiction seem to be almost driven by the unconscious of her mind. To Cather the realisation of her love towards Nebraska and its people comes only after her second migration. This great turning point comes in her life in the year 1912 when she revisits the Southwest and realises that the same region she as a young woman wanted to flee off so desperately, has the deepest impact on her imagination. Her sense of homecoming and its pleasure are clearly visible in her personal letters. In her letter to Elizabeth Seargeant written on April 20, 1912, she acknowledges this connection, and mentions that “The West always paralyzes me a little”; she used to sense a kind of fear of losing something, but what always unsure as to what that something was (Cather 2013, 150).

When one reads a Cather fiction, he/she instantly becomes aware of the writer’s environment- her love for land. When Cather revisits Nebraska a few months later, she shares her experience of the sight and smell of the “ripe wheat as if it were bread baking” (Cather 2013, 164). The above cited words give a clear indication that Cather’s art germinate from the land beneath her. The distinct description of Western style and culture as depicted by her in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* can be effortlessly paralleled with her personal memories of land.

Being a migrant herself, Cather in her fiction convincingly portrays the theme of possession which finds its origin in her compelling uprootedness at a very young age. *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia* and *The Professor’s House* explicate different facets of possession. The former two elucidate possession with relation to land where on one side, Alexandra considers herself merely a custodian of her land whereas the other minor characters namely Oscar, Lou, their respective wives and Carl cannot look beyond the picture assuming themselves as the ultimate owners without being thoughtful towards the immortal nature of land and the fragility of their own selves. Alexandra’s assertion “The land belongs to the future” (*OP* 122) is a strong message to the fast changing materialistic society which deems that a legal deed provides them with an enduring ownership status, while in reality the people “who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while” (*OP* 122).

As Bergsons, the Shimerdas too experience the ugly face of poverty, but are certain of the fact that their industrious labour shall surely bring to them good luck. The success of the Bergsons lie in the efficiencies of Alexandra’s decisiveness, however unlike Alexandra, Antonia and her complete family along with her disabled brother

participate in the field work. The account of Antonia's competition with Ambrosch in breaking sods reveals the complexity of her personality that denies patriarchal supremacy. The other perspective in this context comes from the Burdens who in comparison to their European neighbours are comfortably well off, but even they recognize the significance of possessing land and retain their ownership by leasing it to the Steavens, when planning to shift to the Black Hawk.

The 'prairie trilogy' demonstrates life and experiences of the pioneer immigrant settlers, their bearing on the future generations, empowerment of women and the gradual changes in the gender roles. The characters of John Bergson, Mr. Shimerda and Captain Daniel Forrester are amongst the early pioneers who courageously fight with the adversities of nature but face different corollaries. On one hand where the incapability of Mr Shimerda to sustain his family forces him to take his own life, Mr Bergson's strength breaks only at the hands of death; on the other extreme the highly successful and reverend Captain Forrester, sacrifices his riches and comforts to maintain his morality. While the select novels introduce numerous characters, the legacy of pioneering spirit is conceded by a few - Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Antonia and Claude Wheeler. Alexandra heroically tames the moods of nature; Thea rebels against the small town conventions to live her dream; Antonia joyously accepts her austere life to eventually become the mother earth. Unlike the energetic and positive rustic women characters, Claude Wheeler exhibits the psychological perplexities of a young man in search of his identity who catastrophically finds gratification in the ruins of World War.

In various instances the author deliberately makes the country life win over the city; many of her characters crave for the simplicity of the rustic life which also offers the love and concern of Mother Nature. Alexandra and Antonia are amongst those characters that come in terms with land and finally achieve nature's consolation on the other hand like the author herself, Carl, Thea and St. Peter consider themselves misfit to the materialistic city life, consistently yearning to return back to the country but could never make it happen.

Besides physical adversities, Cather's characters go through an acute internal unrest that brings forth the rebelliousness of their spirit eventually contributing in peculiar self-identity. Erik Erikson accentuates the interpersonal, social and cultural influences in shaping an identity and the analysis of the writer's work duly validates the contribution of these factors. The characters search their self through the eyes of others and even demand

the acceptance of the society in a few cases. On the basis of the discussions in the chapter, it could be certainly inferred that both the socio-cultural and physical factors have a direct bearing on the characters of Willa Cather.

(III)

In giving the world her inimitable super heroes she actually shares her own understanding of life. The harsh realities of her childhood, technological advancement and fast changing society make the backdrop for her novels which focus on characters rather than plot. Being a naturalist she depicts the true struggles of survival of the lower class presenting the disillusionment in life which can only be released by death. Willa Cather is such a writer whose life spans through both nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She too was going through the same mental turmoil which was being faced by the general populace owing to a sudden overhaul of beauty and peace by machinery and destruction. A strange gloominess entered the twentieth century, the apparent presence of which could be seen in her novels. She took almost forty years to start with her first novel and it is only her early novels, in particular the 'prairie trilogy' that conveys the confidence in man and his hopefulness towards life which totally ceases after the world broke in two for her. Whatever the critics may say, but the writer's personality and her fiction certainly endure the changes of her era.

In exploration of the select novels, it has been realised that a direct relationship may be seen between the novelist and her characters. If studied in the light of biographical information, the writer's life and experiences could be undoubtedly sensed to have a straight bearing on the plot and its characters. They take shape from her experience and perception towards life. A general analogy can therefore be lined between the two – both her characters and she demonstrate a mysterious yet convincing life which is empathetically reasonable and even acceptable with all their follies. These personal experiences and memories either compose the fiction's milieu or are personified in terms of the character itself. On Jewett's advice the writer looks back on her own life for material and inspiration to finally meet those childhood memories of old people and places that were always there, as fresh as a blooming flower in her memory. All the select novels have their real life inspirations as Hilda Kron, Olive Fremstad, Annie Sadilek Pavelka, G. P. Cather, Mrs Silas Garber who serve prototypes to Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Antonia Shimerda, Claude Wheeler and Mrs Marian Forrester

respectively. Moreover, the characters of Jim Burden, Thea and St. Peter are partially inspired by the writer's own life, vocalizing the struggles and anguish of her inner self.

Cather was an extreme reticent personality, comfortable in her own personal wraps. The growing age distanced her even more from public as is represented through the character of Godfrey St. Peter who at the same age behaves almost similarly. Marriage of Isabella, several demises through time including that of her father, mother and her two brothers brings to her the realization that absolute control and possession is unachievable. Through the character of Godfrey St. Peter, the writer acquaints the reader with her own mid-life crisis who possesses everything but paradoxically nothing. The vulnerability of the protagonist in his reluctance to accept future and retain past may be well paralleled with the state of a helpless child screaming loud to hold on to his much-loved toy; the only visible variance lays in the fact that St. Peter's sobs are voiceless and find exposure only in the quiet of his attic. By means of St. Peter's asphyxiation, Cather shares her own realization for possession and lets him do the same which she might have done, that is losing oneself to become part of a greater unit as she had once said with context to Jim in the pumpkin garden "that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great" (*MA* 12).

The writer earned the title of being a perfectionist for she used to extensively revise and re-revise her own writings, paid minute attention to the editing details- the novel's jacket, front cover, binding and was "neurotically controlling and selfconscious" (qtd in Romnies 10) in both - her writings and personal life. Conversely, this also hints toward the apprehension of revealing her secretive life and future regrets, for which she destroyed most of her letters to avoid any assessment. The assertion relies on her declaration in which she clearly forbids for verbatim insertion of any of her remaining letters. Even though the writer did not like to be explored on personal grounds, scholars have shown interest in her in the recent decades pertaining to the mysteriousness of her personality and the direct relation it possesses with her characters.

(IV)

Cather's characters can be seen as disturbed - in a constant struggle with their surroundings. The protagonists fight against the social conventions to build their self. They stand different from others, live in their own world, and speak about their depressed selves, constantly lamenting for one or the other thing. She gives her reader the chance to probe deep into the typical human self to find out the harsh realities of life that led to the

distinctiveness of the person. In her fictional world she has elaborately discussed the issue of materialism ruining the lives of modern man, city-country conflict and traditionalism giving way to modernism. She perfectly weaves her own feeling of crisis in the characters to make them her mouthpiece. The select novels depict the survival strategies of their protagonists in the hostile world, overlooking the importance of human relations. The sense of void therein created is the essence of the identity crisis of her characters. The consequential self is the quest of the soul through the dark and dismal experiences of life.

A fundamental contribution by Cather has been her inputs in defining the gender-identity. The analysis of her novels helps to attain a clearer vision of the changing gender conventions of her times and her version of male-female identity where she strives hard at establishing the identity of the 'New Woman' and the weariness of the seemingly confused male of twentieth century.

Willa Cather herself was in all means a 'New Woman' and she seems to have very well understood the plight of the males. Most of her novels emphasize the making of female self-identity consistently stressing on the portrayal of complex female protagonists showcasing heroism, in contrast to the male roles portraying confusion and lack of confidence. Willa Cather models some of the most peculiar personalities of the American Literature- Alexandra Bergson, Antonia Shimerda, Jim Burden, Claude Wheeler and Godfrey St. Peter. Most of them are androgynous that blur the boundaries of age-old gender conventions. The shift in the nature of gender roles is best observed in the characters of Alexandra, Antonia and Thea who do masculine jobs, wear male clothing and the strength of their character is not bound to affirmation from the prejudiced society. Conversely, the tension and anxiety shown in Professor St. Peter, Carl Linstrum, Jim Burden and Claude Wheller present a sharp contrast, mirroring the insecurity and ambiguity of the twentieth century men. The conception of identity offered by the writer depicts constant crossing between the gender lines making them androgynous by nature; ascribing masculine characteristics to the female characters and feminine characteristics to the male characters, "She is both Jim Burden, who moved from Virginia to Nebraska as a child, and Antonia, who wears men's clothing" (Rabin 22).

In interpretation of these six novels it has been observed that the writer's female characters are more certain of their identities which can be seen in the personalities of Alexandra, Thea and Antonia. Conversely, the characters of Jim, St. Peter and Claude can be witnessed to be suffering from an identity crisis. Even though the writer carves some

of the most representative figures who could be acknowledged as 'New Women', it is certain to assert that she cannot be thoroughly called a feminist, for all the reasons discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover in her treatment of identity, she bestows power and privilege to women yet attaches and at times even validates the patriarchal social control laid upon them depicting an antagonistic relationship to feminism which is evident in the egotistic behaviours of Oscar and Lou, apprehensions of Jim and expectations of Godfrey. Furthermore, the personal traits of the writer correspond not with the characters of Alexandra or Antonia but with Jim and St. Peter.

As mentioned in the first chapter, it is quite possible that the patriarchal control and mannerisms that surface in Cather's fiction in reality intend to implore attention of the society to reflect the true picture of the vulnerability of the early twentieth century's women. The women suffrage brought them freedom of expression and possession yet the autonomy appeared more superficial than real. Alexandra Bergson's life most convincingly explicates the above assertion where the sovereignty may equip one to conquer the outer world but not over the family. When the family was in a financial crunch and Alexandra was under the obligation to lead, Oscar and Lou did not intervene much. However, later in the novel when the family is seen to enjoy affluence under the able guidance of the protagonist we find Alexandra to be no exception. She too faces the patriarchal control when she resolves to take a single decision for her own self. She realises the plight of a woman's life that is bestowed with power and autonomy to serve others but not to her own self. The fast permeating greediness and prospering materialism of the contemporary American culture are skilfully unveiled in the behaviours of Lou and Oscar. The writer reflects upon the gender prejudices of the society and exposes the reader to the dark veracity of the then patriarchy which had its branches deep inside. No matter how successful and independent a woman is, the fear of losing patriarchal control over her makes the society anxious.

This gives an opportunity to further explore Cather's outlook towards male-female relations. A common characteristic that is present in almost each narrative written by the author is - the unhappy relations between the sexes. Her characters share a strange relation where they are either unable to conceive a human bonding or if they do so, it lacks the emotional fulfilment. Randall aptly says, "Nearly all the man-woman relationships she presents are either unsatisfactory to the participants, or, if satisfactory, end disastrously" (72). We find the characters replacing human relations with impersonal

things such as land, music, books, etc. Her protagonists also display a very strong sense of independence standing at revolt with their social surroundings and do not allow any interference in their way of living. It is popular about Cather to rig a plot against marriages in her fiction, where almost all the logics suggest her fear towards emotional entanglement. It also suggests that impersonal things could suitably substitute the human relationships.

Despite being a significant contributor to the American cultural imagination, she does not receive the same recognition as her contemporaries – Hemingway and Fitzgerald. This study explores and reflects on ‘environment’, ‘self’, ‘identity’ and their inseparable relationship with the major characters which also show apparent traces of the writer’s personal self. Apart from this, it also reveals the inner struggle of the writer on being traditionalist and modernist, masculine and feminine, loved and rejected, rustic and urban, idealist and realist at the same time. The perplexity in Cather’s personality and in the portrayal of her characters is actually the perplexity of her enveloping environment. Although she has often been criticised for not reflecting upon the changes taking place in her present times, her fiction clearly echoes the transitional phase of the country, if not overtly than surely covertly.

The present study has its own limitations. Like most of the other works, the research done is based on understanding of the term ‘Environment’ as being presented by the author, writings of the people who have researched on her and her environment, in addition to the general encyclopaedic elaboration of the term with reference to America. In absence of a personal touch to the physical terrain and feel of the socio-cultural environment of the then America, the thesis might have a few perceptual differences pertaining to the understanding of the researcher.

This research leaves scope for further investigation in the subject by exploring her later novels for self and identity. As already mentioned her growing age added to the pessimism in her fiction. It shall be rewarding for aspiring scholars to enquire in her later novels and attempt a comparison to look for the resemblances and deviations in her writing style and how she addresses the issues of self and identity through her characters. Another aspect of vital scope for her scholars is the exploration of autobiographical elements in her fiction. My research already discusses the same in brief in her early novels. An extensive study could be attempted to look for the personal elements in her

long as well short fiction. Likewise a comparison could be attempted in her early and later fiction with reference to the autobiographical elements.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Ms. Shveta Tripathi is serving as Assistant Professor in Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Government Women Engineering College, Ajmer. She is a research scholar in Malaviya National Institute of Technology Jaipur and is qualified with Master's degree in Arts (American and Post-Colonial Literature), Business Administration (Human Resource and Marketing), and diploma in Software Engineering. She has an excellent academic career. She has received numerous certificates for academic achievements and a gold medal for her Master's degree in Arts. So far she has published two research articles and has ten years of teaching experience. She has contributed papers in many international/ national conferences, and participated in seminars, workshops and faculty development programs etc. and is interested in American Literature, Personality Development and Soft Skills.