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## Lost Ladies, New Women: Narrative Voice and Female Identity in Willa Cather's A Lost Lady and Kate Chopin's The Awakening

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Lost Ladies, New Women: Narrative Voice and Female Identity in

Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

By

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Jordan L. Von Cannon

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degree of Master of Arts

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## Abstract

The impact of assigning gender to narrators, either by the author or reader, has recently become a point of interest in narratology. The increasing interest in gender, sexuality, and queer studies highlights gendered voices and their importance in narrative theory with its foundational questions that deal with who tells the story, why they tell it, and how it is told. The role of gendered and de-gendered narrators is particularly relevant to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women's literature because this period simultaneously drew strict gender lines while questioning and even dismantling these identities. In their novels, Willa Cather and Kate Chopin explored New Woman themes such as independence, sexuality, and complicating traditional female gender roles. This thesis examines the roles gendered and de-gendered narrators play in the formation of the female characters' identities in Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) and Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Cather's male narrator unsuccessfully attempts to control his female protagonist, who nevertheless manages to maintain her autonomy as a New Woman throughout the novel. Chopin's de-gendered narrator is neither male nor female and remains impartial in its description of the protagonist. Whereas Cather's protagonist is certain of her identity, Chopin's ambiguous narrator reflects the protagonist's own uncertainty about her sense of self. By analyzing Cather's 1923 novel first, then looking backward to Chopin this study establishes critical questions posed by feminist narratology, addressing feminist scholars' concerns about *The Awakening*, and interpreting *The Awakening*'s gender ambiguity by way of *A Lost Lady*'s New Woman certainty.

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## Introduction

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923), the first frequently anthologized, the second seldom acknowledged, each present female protagonists who push nineteenth-century social boundaries and enter the gender debates as prospective candidates for the turn of the century's New Woman. Unlike Frederick Jackson Turner's bold assertion on July 12, 1893 that the western frontier was now closed,<sup>1</sup> there is no precise date given for the New Woman's debut in American culture. Nineteenth and early-twentieth century American women writers had been exploring the ongoing process of female identity for more than a century in their works. The Woman Question, most likely, entered American thought as early as 1792 when Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* crossed the Atlantic; however, it would be more than fifty years before the question was taken up with fervor once again and explored extensively by Margaret Fuller's definitive feminist work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).<sup>2</sup> After the Civil War, the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by Southern reconstruction and Northern innovation, with no decade demonstrating capacity for change more so than the last. The 1890s saw the close of the western frontier, increased mobility and communication, the constitutionality of the "separate but equal" doctrine,<sup>3</sup> the founding of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and the birth of female-led Progressive Era reform movements. In a period when racial and gender lines were drawn almost as quickly as the western states' lines, there was no better time for Chopin to imagine and Cather to later reinvent the emerging New Woman's identity.

Although Cather would publish *A Lost Lady* nearly twenty-four years after Chopin's *The Awakening*, both novels wrestle with the traditions surrounding the dying old and the coming new. Cather's Marian Forrester moves to the small Midwest town of Sweet Water after

marrying a widower twenty-five years her senior who rescued her after she fell from a cliff.<sup>4</sup> The novel begins many years into her marriage, when Marian's discontent with her aging husband, social traditions, and the stagnant town begin to engulf her. Edna Pontellier marries a man, not from a different generation, but a different community. At twenty-eight,<sup>5</sup> Edna suddenly realizes the full weight of her unhappiness. She is unhappy as a wife, mother, and woman, and most troubling of all she is unsure of what to do about it. Marian and Edna both strain against confining nineteenth-century ideals that immortalize the True Woman as one wholly devoted to family, domestic and social duties, and female virtue because they are unwilling to succumb to these antiquated notions of femininity. The female characters Cather and Chopin create do their best to remake the restrictive female identities (wife, mother, lady) with which they are saddled. Marian and Edna, by acting as independent women, unconsciously combat these limitations, yet the extent to which they are able to self-govern depends on their authors' narrative frames.

In the twenty-first century, scholars can easily rehearse the New Woman's qualities, and her contributions to Chopin and Cather's times. Martha Patterson inventories the New Woman in her work *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (2005), stating that the New Woman "both promised and threatened to effect sociopolitical change as a consumer, as an instigator of evolutionary and economic development, as a harbinger of modern technologies, and an icon of successful assimilation into dominant Anglo-American culture, and as a leader in progressive political causes."<sup>6</sup> Chopin was aware of the New Woman's threat to female tradition and did not support the feminist political movements of her time. While Chopin was familiar with the critical debates surrounding the emerging New Woman, she could not know the New Woman's historical outcome twenty years in the future.



Chopin could only speculate as to the New Woman's outcome after radically breaking with nineteenth-century ideologies, and this uncertainty finds its way into Edna's character. Cather, on the other hand, witnessed the New Woman's development, maturity, and lasting presence. After recognizing the necessary qualities for a New Woman to thrive—such as self-determination and resourcefulness—she presents these qualities as inherent in her female character, Marian. Cather could successfully write the New Woman in a historical novel because she already knew this female figure's historical outcome. Although Cather and Chopin's protagonists face similar confining female roles, the authors' narrative strategies most reflect their differing perspectives on the New Woman's capabilities.

Cather and Chopin employ separate narrative structures to frame their understanding of the New Woman at the end of the nineteenth century. Cather creates a gendered male narrator to serve as a controlling antagonist to Marian's autonomy, while Chopin uses a de-gendered narrator, one without a recognizable male or female identity, to reflect Edna's resistance to traditional gender roles and inability to forge her own identity. Gender and sexuality studies in conjunction with narratology inform my discussion of Cather and Chopin's narrative frames. Feminist narratologists like Susan S. Lanser and Kathy Mezei define gendered and de-gendered narrators through biological as well as social categories. A gendered narrator is identified as either male or female through social, cultural, and even behavioral clues normally associated with one gender or the other. A de-gendered narrator is one without perceived or identifiable male/female qualities. Lanser further defines this narrator type as "queer" or "sexually transgressive" because it undercuts binary categories like male/female.<sup>7</sup> In this way, gender and sexuality studies intersects with narratology, building on narratology's foundational questions (who tells the story and why they tell it) by considering the impact gender or its absence can

have on formulating narrators and characters as well as the reader's response to these figures. Like all critical fields, various methodologies make up narratology. The original, more conservative practitioners like Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Wayne Booth, consider themselves purists and refuse to mix their formalist narrative studies with other fields' theoretical approaches. However, many aspects of narratology benefit from interdisciplinary work, particularly feminist theory, which, as Lanser and Mezei demonstrate, poses necessary questions for gender's role in narrative voice. It is useful to consider Cather and Chopin's gendered and de-gendered narrators through Lanser and Mezei's work because they illustrate both gender's categorical importance in the reading process and its significance as a source of opposition for identity formation.

The gendered narrator in *A Lost Lady* and the de-gendered narrator in *The Awakening* offer distinct depictions of female independence that depart from nineteenth-century notions of womanhood. Cather's male narrator idealizes the pioneer spirit, traditional female roles, and the fading western frontier, and as a result embodies nostalgic male voices critical of the emerging New Woman at the nineteenth century's end. Cather's narrator, Niel, is wary of the new, especially Marian Forrester's development as a New Woman. In an attempt to preserve the past, Niel paints a very controlled and precise portrait of Mrs. Forrester as a "lady." Marian, who is unaware that her self-determination thwarts Niel's plans for her, does not uphold the past but instead plans for the future. It is Marian, then, who has a future in the novel, while Niel does not. She successfully maintains her sense of self as it opposes Niel's idealized version of her, and she forges a path from the pioneer past to Progressive Era new womanhood. Cather constructs Marian's identity in implicit contrast to Niel's unreasonable ideals for a "lady." Cather understands that identities are formed when there is another identity to be worked against,

which is why she provides her female character with a narrator doubling as her character's antagonist.

While Chopin anticipates, to a certain extent, the critical voices who opposed her character's behavior and candid sexuality, she does not engage these voices by giving them narrative control of her work. Instead, she attempts to circumvent these gender debates by employing a gender-less narrator who explores Edna's character from a neutral stance. The de-gendered narrator suspends judgment of Edna's behavior, reporting her thoughts without censure. However, this neutrality leaves readers without a sense of who, exactly, Edna is, and how they are to evaluate her. Without a clear set of ideals to work against (save for the binaries Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent), Edna seems to abandon all categorical identities (True Woman/New Woman) that would identify her for her readers. Rather than achieving selfhood, she commits suicide, making definitive judgment impossible. As an exploration of female identity formation, Chopin's Edna is a fascinating character, but Edna's death is a disappointing outcome for a potential New Woman in 1899.

An analysis of gendered and de-gendered narrators informs our understanding of these female characters. First, I examine the ways in which Niel's idealized depiction of Mrs. Forrester makes her actual identity more evident. In contrast, the passivity of Chopin's narrator shows how important narrative framing is to the development of characters' identity. Furthermore, by considering *A Lost Lady* first, Cather raises constructive questions about gender hierarchies and the relationship between narrators and their characters. *A Lost Lady* re-envisioned the New Woman at the turn of the century, revising Chopin's narrative ambiguity by using a male narrator who does not resist moral judgments and offering a victorious female protagonist who, unlike Edna, maintains her sense of self without ever feeling trapped by the True

Woman/New Woman binaries.

Feminist narratology recognizes gender's centrality to life and evaluates the significance male, female, and ambiguous narrative voices have in literature. Lanser first proposed gendered narratology as an essential concern in her 1986 essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology," in which she asked whether feminist studies of women writers might profit from concerns of narrative voice.<sup>8</sup> She later expanded these ideas in *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992), claiming, "authorial voice has been so conventionally masculine that female authorship does not necessarily establish female voice."<sup>9</sup> Since a masculine voice is presumed to have greater authority, Lanser explores the ways women authors (mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) might take advantage of this bias by separating their narrators from their female characters or using a male narrator in order to establish such authority in their writing. Since a female authorial voice "risked being (dis)qualified," and traditionally "women's writing has carried fuller public authority when its voice has not been marked as female" (*Fictions of Authority* 18), Lanser argues that it is essential to consider the narrator types (especially when they are not female) women authors use to tell their stories. Overall, Lanser gives as much importance to gender categories as the more structuralist narratologists like Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Wayne Booth give to first-person, third-person, implied narrators, reliability, and point of view.

Kathy Mezei extends Lanser's work by discussing readers' dependencies on traditional categories. Mezei proposes that if traditional categories inform a reader's understanding, then familiar social hierarchies will concurrently inform their reading. In "Who is Speaking Here? Free Indirect Discourse, Gender, and Authority in *Emma*, *Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*" (1996), Mezei discusses problematic power structures between the author, implied author,

narrator, and character-focalizers.<sup>10</sup> She pointedly considers the probability that a male narrator might repress or silence a female character's voice through unfavorable contexts or ironic depictions of the character in question (Mezei 71). While Mezei correctly assumes that society's categories and hierarchies make their way into and potentially govern a reader's interpretation, she primarily analyzes these fluctuating gender voices as they relate to "free indirect discourse" in these narratives. This limits the time she has to spend examining the positive and negative outcomes for these gendered (or de-gendered) narrator and female character relationships that appear so governed by society's inherent prejudices. Ruth Page's more recent work emphasizes gender's centrality, calling it "a primary axis, which from birth onwards plays vital roles in processes of identification, social relationships and in various contentious ways might be implicated in macro-level structures of power."<sup>11</sup> Rather than extend her study to an in-depth analysis of gender as the primary axis, Page focuses the bulk of her work on the benefits linguistics offers feminist narratology.

While Lanser, Mezei, and Page represent the inception and ongoing evolution of feminist narratology, they are occupied, primarily, with British women writers, and, normally, neatly divide their studies by discussing author/implicit author/narrator relationships separate from narrator/character relationships. While my study would not be possible without the work of these scholars and others like them, inevitably these straight lines will cross, and my study occupies these intersections where gendered narratology meets the tangled implied author/narrator/character relationships amid these gender hierarchies in turn-of-the-century, American women writers. The growing field of gendered narratology would benefit from an analysis of writers like Willa Cather, who uses an independent female character to overthrow an authoritative male narrator, or like Kate Chopin, whose narrative voice is curiously devoid of

gender.

Most recent studies of nineteenth and early-twentieth century American women writers frame their works within social and historical contexts. These contexts inevitably raise gender questions highlighting the oppressive forces working against these female authors, but many feminist scholars showcase these American women writers' ability to make their work matter for contemporary and future audiences. Cather and Chopin have long been favorites of feminist theorists for their riveting portraits of independent-minded women and the intriguing backdrops given to their female characters. The physical and social environments in Cather and Chopin's novels, at times, prove so vivid that critics find it impossible to evaluate a novel like *A Lost Lady* without considering Cather's portrayal of the vast Midwest or to see Edna in *The Awakening* and not think about Chopin's commentary on the colorful New Orleans and Creole communities. These considerations have produced many fruitful readings of Cather and Chopin and separated their work, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, from much of the sentimental fiction that preceded it.

Elaine Showalter's *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991), frames writers like Cather and Chopin within a female literary history in order to show how this literary tradition informed women's writing. Nineteenth-century readers viewed *The Awakening* as an end to all things moral for women; nearly a century later, scholars like Elaine Showalter, among others, now praise Chopin's novel as a new "literary beginning."<sup>12</sup> Showalter frames *The Awakening* by the nineteenth-century sentimental literary tradition, stating, "Chopin could not have written without the legacy of domestic fiction to work against, and the models of the local colorists and New Women writers with which to experiment" (Showalter 67). However, Showalter does not classify Chopin as a New Woman writer and mentions that Chopin never

wanted to write didactic women's fiction (71). In comparison to Showalter's guarded discussion that, while Chopin identified with the New Woman, she was in no way a feminist activist (71), Ann Heilmann in "*The Awakening and New Woman Fiction*" (2008) works tirelessly to equate Chopin's candid treatment of female sexuality with themes found in New Woman Fiction. Heilmann rereads Edna's journey, claiming that by the end, Edna is reborn as the New Woman and declares economic and sexual independence from her husband.<sup>13</sup> According to Heilmann, Edna swims to her death at the end only in a realistic sense, "symbolically, however, she triumphs over her condition [...and her] suicide, if that is what it is, is a homecoming" (Heilmann 101). Despite Heilmann's attempts to make sense of Edna's death, it is impossible to view a dead woman as the New Woman.

Cather is frequently praised by scholars for her style and its unmatched "clarity, beauty, and simplicity."<sup>14</sup> As well, critics normally identify each of her novels as an experiment in literary technique. For example Jo Ann Middleton in *Willa Cather's Modernism* (1990) calls both *A Lost Lady* and *One of Ours* "technical masterpieces that resolve the issue of point of view" (Middleton 41). Middleton also gives great attention to the details Cather leaves out of her narratives, calling these gaps in the text by the scientific term "vacuoles." She adopts the meaning of "vacuoles," which scientists define as the empty spaces in a cell that help the cell to maintain its shape, for her discussion of empty spaces in Cather's work. Middleton demonstrates how these seeming gaps in Cather's writing actually support and hold the structure of her work and allow for a far more complex and full story than should be possible (55). Thus, Middleton gives as much, if not more, importance to what is left unsaid in Cather's work than to the subjects Cather treats on the page. Middleton's reading supports Susan Rosowski's claim that Cather's writing cannot be defined solely by period or region,<sup>15</sup> but as a woman writer, Cather

uses her unique point of view to explore more universal themes (Rosowski 51). Applying Rosowski's method to *A Lost Lady* proves extremely beneficial for analyzing the significance of Cather's male narrator. While Niel, the male narrator, may occupy a precise vantage point in the novel, his views, commentaries, and judgments all engage with the more general themes of his time, and the same can be said for Marian's self-determination in the novel.

Cather and Chopin employ different narrative structures to address female identity during the turn into the twentieth century. By idealizing the past's doctrine of male authority, Cather's gendered narrator Niel tries to control his female character Marian who, as a New Woman, rejects this traditional belief system. The dramatic conflict between Niel and Marian, narrator and title character, reflects the ongoing gender debates at the end of the nineteenth century. By creating a struggle between a narrator and a character, Cather allows Marian to win in the end—a victory not only for Marian over Niel but also for the New Woman over the social forces that sought to shape and tell her story. Likewise, Chopin explores the path to female self-determination but uses a de-gendered narrator. Her narrator, which is neither male nor female, parallels Edna's own uncertainty about categorical or binary gender identities. Since the narrator offers neither support nor opposition to Edna, she, unlike Marian, flounders in a figurative and literal sea of indecision. Nevertheless, both of these narratives present gender as crucial to identity formation. Identity itself is fundamental to humanity. More so, it is a central theme in literary study. Specific to these authors, in a time when female identity was severely mediated, Cather and Chopin interrogate traditional gender identities, striving for a more complex understanding of women and their opposing forces. By investigating the impact the gendered and de-gendered narrators have on their female characters, I demonstrate the way women writers combat limiting female identities by creating female characters who assert their independence



and attempt to dismantle traditional male authority from within the text.

## Chapter One:

### “I feel such a power to live in me”:

#### Gendered Narration and Female Autonomy in *A Lost Lady*

*A Lost Lady* is not normally mentioned in the same breath with Willa Cather’s other celebrated works like *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*. This oversight may occur because *A Lost Lady*, published in 1923, appeared in the middle of Cather’s writing career or perhaps because she won the Pulitzer Prize the same year for another novel, *One of Ours*. Contemporary reviewers, like Fanny Butcher of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, called *A Lost Lady* “a delicate, lovely, fragile piece of literature.”<sup>16</sup> However, few, if any, reviewers discuss *A Lost Lady* by itself, instead discussing it in tandem with *One of Ours* or drawing comparisons to *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. The reviewers seem to agree that while *A Lost Lady* “is a character study of strength and beauty”<sup>17</sup> and a simple but powerful novel, it is by no means epic when considered alongside Cather’s previous work. “It is a delicate miniature as compared to the almost heroic portraits which Willa Cather has made.”<sup>18</sup>

When compared to the rugged, frontier strength embodied by female characters like Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda, Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* may seem “delicate.” Unlike the desolate frontiers Alexandra and Ántonia face, Marian’s story begins in the settled and civilized Midwest. She lives in a grand house, receives frequent visitors by train from larger metropolitan cities, and enjoys “the generous, easy life of the great land-holders” (Cather 102).<sup>19</sup> As a conclusion to Cather’s pioneer trilogy (including *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*), *A Lost Lady* presents a frontier already civilized, unlike the previous novels that center on the challenges of settling the frontier. According to John Randall’s *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather’s Search for Value* (1960), this novel, in particular, depicts the

decaying pioneer spirit and the West's fading possibilities compared to the aggressive commerce and self-interest of the east (Randall 175). Randall, appropriately, recognizes tension in the novel between the fading pioneer spirit of the west and the encroaching industry of the east. Stephanie Bower similarly identifies divergent accounts in the novel, but she identifies this disparity as two different settler movements—the dreamers and pioneers like Captain Forrester and the cunning, amoral businessmen like Ivy Peters, a young man who preys on declining pioneers to make his fortune.<sup>20</sup> But neither Randall nor Bower examine the fundamental differences between the male narrator and the female character's versions of the western story. Cather's male narrator romanticizes the great pioneers, like Captain Forrester, and loathes the Ivy Peters who destroy this ideal; while Cather's female character, unconcerned with preserving the past, focuses on self-preservation for the future. Even as Cather's narrator immortalizes the waning pioneer west, her female character's story is one of triumph, not decline. Cather presents Niel Herbert as a controlling male narrator with rigid beliefs, but she also creates her main female character, Marian Forrester, to stand in opposition to many of those beliefs and disrupt the nostalgic narrative of the west Niel wishes to tell. This tense arrangement between Cather's male narrator and female character represents traditional gender hierarchies at the end of the nineteenth century, with the male assuming control over the female. However, as Marian continues to be her own woman in the novel despite Niel's many endeavors to write her story differently, *A Lost Lady* anticipates the Progressive Era's New Woman who would successfully dismantle male authority. It also attacks the idea that women were meant to be secondary to men.

Cather's male narrator, Niel, while much younger than Marian, hails from a similarly easy way of life like the Forresters. His uncle/guardian is a judge, and Niel never considers

physical labor for an occupation but attends M.I.T. back East for an architecture degree. Despite Niel's progressive college education (which we are not sure he ever completes), he idealizes the "Old West" (Cather 102). Niel believes the west "had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence," men like Captain Forrester who did not exploit the beauty of the land to make a living (102). These romantic notions permeate Niel's views as the narrator in *A Lost Lady*. Niel is nostalgic for a past of which he is not a part but only a descendent. His narration is, then, chiefly motivated by his desire to reclaim these past ideals, which include a rigid belief in traditional femininity. Amy Kaplan, in "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s," (1990) details the male desire to remain a fixed point amid changing political, economic, and social circumstances. Kaplan states, "In a period of the 'New Woman,' the 'New South,' and the 'New Empire,' the New White American Man was invented as a tradition [...] as nothing new at all, but an enduring recoverable past [...] as a temporal return to origins, literally as nostalgia, *nostos*, the return home."<sup>21</sup> As the "New White American Man" entrenched in the past's traditional gender hierarchies, Niel does not accept the independent-minded Marian Forrester's freedom.

Scholars frequently argue that "Mrs. Forrester's decline parallels the West's decline,"<sup>22</sup> as evident in both Rosowski's statement and a section in Randall's book entitled, "*A Lost Lady: The Decline of the West*." While these scholars pick up on the theme of longing for something that has, or will, pass away, Rosowski and Randall do not take into account that it is Niel's nostalgia, not Cather's, informing their readings and that Cather ironically constructs Niel, and his idealization of the past, as an antagonistic narrator. Readings which see *A Lost Lady* solely as Cather's conclusion to her pioneer trilogy not only lessen Niel's controlling attempts to write

Mrs. Forrester as a “lost lady,” but they also eclipse the events and textual clues that make Marian Forrester’s own story not one of decline but triumph. Cather employs the third-person limited narration made famous by Henry James in works like *Daisy Miller* and *The Ambassadors* so that Niel is both a character and a narrator. Niel is, as Stephanie Bower claims, “a ‘peephole’” (60) into the text and its characters. For clarity in my discussion of gendered narrators, “Niel” will refer to his primary role as the controlling narrator Cather creates. Although Niel, as a *character*, also attempts to control Mrs. Forrester, it is as *narrator* that he exerts the most power over the story.

Niel’s attempt to direct the story of Mrs. Forrester, in particular, is evident even in the first few pages. He exercises his authority through his idealized descriptions of and commentaries on the female character, interceding on numerous occasions to reframe what he considers to be Mrs. Forrester’s inappropriate behavior, to make her more like submissive women of the old west. Yet, despite Neil’s powerful position as the primary storyteller and voice of tradition, Cather’s Marian Forrester possesses agency as a character. Her feelings about her changing social status, relationship with her husband, and her potential for life after her husband’s death rarely align with Niel’s plans for her. Although Cather never shifts the narrative structure entirely to Marian’s consciousness or viewpoint, Marian’s dialogue with Neil and other characters reflects her true thoughts about her life’s changing circumstances and her willingness to see the past disappear if it means a new life in the present.

Cather’s controlling narrator is crucial for Marian’s formation as a New Woman. By taking advantage of what Susan Lanser calls “the conventional authoritativeness of the male voice in Western cultures” (“Sexing Narratology” 131), Cather creates Niel as representative of the masculine authorities that opposed the New Woman and worked to force her back into a

traditional, subservient female role. For instance, an 1896 letter to the editor published in the New York Times criticizes the New Woman and the change she represents.<sup>23</sup> The author, H.W.F., responds to the question, “what does the New Woman want?” by asking, “Or, rather, What does she not want?—this new woman, who literally ‘buttonholes’ one in the street and demands that one stand and deliver one’s opinion upon the latest subject agitated in any country or community.” H.W.F.’s chief annoyance with the New Woman is that she does all the things men do but still expects to be treated like a woman. Niel disapproves of Mrs. Forrester for similar reasons when she does not act like the ideal nineteenth-century “lady.” However, Marian is independent and confident in her identity as a woman, whether that makes her a “lady” or not. By adapting to the changing times, Marian resists Niel’s attempt to control her and ultimately succeeds. Cather structures her narrative through a traditional gender hierarchy that presents Niel’s critiques as one manifestation of views about the New Woman. In this fashion, she dismantles the hierarchy from within each time she reveals Niel’s narrative inconsistencies.

Niel’s attempt to control Mrs. Forrester grows out of his idealization of the “lady,” his moral convictions, and his unwillingness to accept her changes, but initially it stems from his allegiance to a past defined by rigid social structures and rules of decorum. Niel descends from a long line of like-minded men who traditionally viewed women as men’s helpmates, rather than active partners. Women, and their contributions to the American West, are notably absent from national narratives like Frederick Jackson Turner’s turn-of-the-century work “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Glenda Riley, in “Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies” notes the reason for this absence, explaining Turner as a product of his time: “Turner absorbed social constructs that not only subsumed women [...] but also viewed women as non-actors [...] as passive beings who were secondary in the overall theme” (222). Niel idealizes the

pioneer past where men were conquerors and women were “ladies,” and he is unable or unwilling to change with the times like Marian Forrester.

Niel uses his authority to frame the characters, settings, and plot dynamics within an idealized narrative of the pioneer west. He grows up in Sweet Water, “one of those grey towns” (Cather 7) that “[t]hirty or forty years ago” was made important by the Burlington railroad. From the start, Cather emphasizes the loss of Niel’s golden era and illuminates his stagnant and dated stance to all things new. Throughout his life, he watches and interacts with the Forresters, noted members of the “railroad aristocracy” (7). The Forresters’ home atop the hill in Sweet Water serves as a pleasant stopping point for the important “Burlington men” (8) traveling on business. Niel describes Captain Forrester’s pride in his house, land, and young wife. He also depicts Mrs. Forrester’s effortless hospitality for the great men passing through her house in even greater detail. “She was always there, just outside the front door, to welcome their visitors [...]. If she happened to be in the kitchen [...] she came out in her apron [...]. She never stopped to pin up a lock; she was attractive in a dishabille, and she knew it” (10). Niel’s initial descriptions reveal two important features of his opinion of Sweet Water and the Forresters: first, he believes in “two distinct social strata in the prairie States; the homesteaders and hand-workers who were there to make a living, and the bankers and gentlemen ranchers who came from the Atlantic seaboard to invest money” in the West (7-8); second, he is firmly convinced that Captain and Mrs. Forrester do, and will always, belong in the second, upper social strata. However, as Captain Forrester grows older and the Forresters’ fortune changes, it becomes increasingly difficult for Niel to maintain the Forresters’ social nobility in both the town and the text, though he tries tirelessly.

Although Captain Forrester’s status as a railroad man would seemingly oppose him to the

old West pioneers Niel idealizes, Niel manages to connect the two in pure fantasy. While Niel views Captain Forrester as a man of the old West who values the land's beauty too much to destroy it by farming, he does not realize that Captain Forrester can enjoy his land because his wealth comes from the railroad—a definitive mark of westward progress that Niel conveniently chooses to ignore. In fact, the Forresters are part of a second wave of settlers following the first homesteaders, who worked the land into submission. The Forresters buy property and build a house that initially serves as their “country” home when they visit from California a few months out of the year (Cather 11). By all accounts, the Forresters’ leisurely life does not reflect the hardships faced by the first pioneer families when settling the West. However, Niel anachronistically envisions the railroad man as the early pioneer. Therefore, his tribute to Captain Forrester as a great adventurer who conquered the west not only idealizes the past but completely fictionalizes it. Niel’s misplaced nostalgia only serves to further characterize his aversion to the realities of life, his present day, and the people he encounters.

Cather’s Niel contains not only a rigid devotion to the social order, but also stanch moral convictions that women, and to a lesser extent men, must uphold. Niel expects Mrs. Forrester to act like a lady by serving as a moral example to those around her. John Randall views Mrs. Forrester as a fading symbol of the declining west. He explains that Niel’s moral expectations of Mrs. Forrester stem from “the nineteenth-century view of women as cultural conservators and transmitters of civilization [...where...] Women—that is, good women—were considered fragile vessels, the slightest flaw in whose chastity was fraught with dire peril for the social order” (Randall 179). Niel’s definition of a lady also reflects the major tenets identified (and criticized) by feminist scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).<sup>24</sup> His attempts to depict Mrs. Forrester as a



“lady,” rather than a multi-faceted person, display his masculine need to control both the female character and her identity in the novel. For feminist literary critics, the “lady” label, originally used to denote class, remains a loaded appellation for women, diminishing their complex identities because it draws on eighteenth-century conduct books and the nineteenth-century “angel of the house” domestic philosophy which both prompted “young girls to submissiveness, modesty, self-lessness; [and reminded] all women that they should be angelic” (Gilbert and Gubar 23) rather than human. Mary Wood-Allen’s *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (1898) contains detailed instructions for a woman on her way to becoming the angel in the house. One gem in particular encourages humility and gratification in completing domestic activities within the home. One of Wood-Allen’s model women claimed that “she never felt more of a lady than when scrubbing her kitchen floor, and she was not ashamed to be seen by her friends at this work” (72). Amid his many accolades to Mrs. Forrester’s hospitality, Niel initially labels her a “lady” in a similar vein as Wood-Allen’s definition. “She had been known to rush to the door in her dressing-gown [...] to welcome Cyrus Dalzell, president of the Colorado & Utah; and that great man had never felt more flattered. In his eyes, and in the eyes of the admiring middle-aged men who visited there, whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was ‘lady-like’ because she did it” (Cather 10). However, this unlimited definition of “lady-like” behavior for Mrs. Forrester will not endure for Niel. As Mrs. Forrester’s behavior violates Niel’s (and the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity’s) rules of conduct for a lady, the tension between the male narrator and female character becomes more palpable.

In addition, to viewing Mrs. Forrester as a “lady” rather than a woman, Niel further posits her identity as a subset of her husband’s, exposing Niel’s preference for Mrs. Forrester as a “wife” above any other individual identity she possesses:

Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. 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; steel of Damascus. His admiration of Mrs. Forrester went back to that, just as, he felt, she herself went back to it. (Cather 75)

While Niel makes a slight effort to discuss "her other charming attributes," the qualities listed such as her ability to appreciate a great "railroad builder" coupled with her undying loyalty only serve to reinforce her identity, in Niel's eyes, as an extension of her husband's. Niel's "admiration" of Mrs. Forrester is reduced entirely to her role as wife to Captain Forrester. In the same way "[t]he Captain has the power in the marriage because he is a man and part of the hierarchical system,"<sup>25</sup> Niel has the power as narrator to stamp Mrs. Forrester the dutiful and doting wife. Although A. Elizabeth Elz in "*The Awakening and A Lost Lady: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers*" (2003) focuses primarily on Captain Forrester's abuses, which reduce his wife to a possession, she notes that nearly all the men with whom Marian comes into contact mistreat her (20). Niel participates in the mistreatment by his indifference to Mrs. Forrester, the woman, were she to try and be anything other than a "Mrs."

Niel further idealizes Mrs. Forrester by positioning her above Sweet Water and its small world in an effort to portray her as superior to those around her. At first, "[s]he was an excitement that came and went with summer" (Cather 29). These brief visits fuel the young Niel's construction of Mrs. Forrester as a mysterious, seasonal and therefore transient figure; she is bewitching and intrigues him in a way Sweet Water's year-round inhabitants do not. Niel identifies Mrs. Forrester as both separate and above nearly everyone else he encounters. He

takes pride in noting this difference even on his very first sighting of Mrs. Forrester on her way to church. “He was proud now that at the first moment he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known” (40). She is not just part of a higher social class but also from a superior world in Niel’s eyes, revealing his high expectations for Mrs. Forrester from the start. Niel does not just expect Mrs. Forrester to be a lady but to embody the nineteenth-century female ideals he establishes from the novel’s start. He holds her to a higher standard and continues to set her above the general female population. “How strange that she should be here at all, a woman like her among common people! Not even in Denver had he ever seen another woman so elegant. He had sat in the dining-room of the Brown Palace hotel and watched them as they came down to dinner,—fashionable women from ‘the East,’ on their way to California. But he had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester” (39). In this statement, Niel’s unadulterated praise masks his preliminary steps, as a male narrator, to control the female character. When comparing Mrs. Forrester to the fashionable women, Niel claims “he had never found one” like Mrs. Forrester. The word “found” to describe his connection with Mrs. Forrester subtly implies a possessor-possession relationship. Niel “found” Mrs. Forrester in the same way a person finds an inanimate object; he does not use one of many non-possessive terms appropriate for his commentary such as “saw,” “encountered,” or “knew” but instead selects a word that not only labels him as the finder of Mrs. Forrester (a female gem amid a crowd of commoners) but also as her primary possessor.

Niel’s idealized descriptions of Mrs. Forrester are an act of control, which he works to maintain by considering her to be incapable of change—since any change, when you are apparently already the perfect version of a lady, can only be for the worse. J. Gerard Dollar discusses the significance of the community versus the individual in *A Lost Lady*, suggesting that

because Niel is “disconnected from his own parents and birthplace, [he] tries to affirm an ideal community with Marian Forrester at its center, only to see that community succumb to forces from both without and within.”<sup>26</sup> Niel wants Mrs. Forrester to stay consistent with traditions. However, as Marian evolves as a woman, proving she is not a submissive “lady,” Niel must combat her newness by refusing to admit the legitimacy of her changes. For example, Mrs. Forrester playfully asks Niel whether she seems older, and Niel replies, “You seem always the same to me, Mrs. Forrester [...] Lovely. Just lovely” (Cather 37). Niel, as a character, is unwilling to see Mrs. Forrester evolve as a woman, and he, as the narrator, is averse to her development as a character. He wants the “center” of his narrative to hold, which is why he characterizes her as “lost” when she chooses a new direction. He even resists seeing Mrs. Forrester as a mature woman, reflecting that she and he “seemed about the same age. It was a habit with him to think of Mrs. Forrester as very, very young” (Cather 72). Of course, such comments are incongruous with previous narrative remarks that place Niel as a young boy when he first meets Mrs. Forrester. In fact, Niel confesses his propensity to confuse facts as a “habit,” especially when it comes to Mrs. Forrester. Niel’s resistance would not be problematic if it were not for the simple reality that the narrator brings the story into existence, wielding more control over the story than any character in it (“Sexing Narratology” 127). Thus, Niel’s desire to see Mrs. Forrester consistent with his definitions takes precedence over her own assertions.

Although Mrs. Forrester remains Niel’s primary target, Cather reveals, on occasion, the other women Niel similarly controls by his narration. When Mrs. Ogden, her daughter Constance, and Frank Ellinger (Mrs. Forrester’s clandestine lover, although Niel does not know it yet) visit the Forresters’ home, Niel cruelly describes Constance, who openly admires Frank Ellinger, as “[a] stubborn piece of pink flesh,” who was “certainly a fool about a man quite old

enough to be her father” (Cather 45). Mrs. Ogden receives similar abuse at the male narrator’s hands, being called “unpardonably homely” (42). However the greatest display of Niel’s control of these female characters is that he modifies their dialogue in the text: “Mrs. Ogden turned to the host with her most languishing smile: ‘Captain Forrester, I want you to tell Constance’—(She was an East Virginia woman, and what she really said was, ‘Cap’n Forrester, Ah wan’ yew to tell, etc.’ Her vowels seemed to roll about in the same way her eyes did.)” (49). While the narrator’s intrusion is brief, he interrupts Mrs. Ogden’s announcement with an insulting, but humorous, remark on her dialect, place of origin, and physical appearance; the reader no longer focuses on what this female character has to say but rather on the male narrator’s running commentary of the Ogden women.

While Niel, as gendered narrator, achieves a certain mastery over Marian, Cather weakens Niel’s credibility by highlighting inconsistencies in his version of reality. By destroying Niel’s credibility, Cather is also discrediting the views about the New Woman that Niel represents. Although the inconsistencies remain subtle because they are embedded in Niel’s narrative commentary, they are still present and illuminate the considerable faults in Niel’s perception of Mrs. Forrester the woman, while causing the reader to peer around Niel’s narrative to see Marian for herself. Susan Rosowski, in “Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*: The Paradoxes of Change” (1977), briefly comments on this tension, stating, “the reader must distinguish Niel’s criteria for her from those that emerge from Cather’s characterization of her. Niel interprets Mrs. Forrester by his abstract aesthetic ideal versus common reality” (55). Rosowski’s reading not only highlights the inconsistencies in Niel’s depiction of Mrs. Forrester as it compares to Cather’s, but also alludes to the superior ideals to which Niel holds Mrs. Forrester throughout the novel. It is in this way that Cather begins subtly undermining male authority in the text. Cather’s

female character does not need an open rebellion to differentiate her from Niel's version; she needs only to continue her business as an independent woman to gradually demonstrate the disparity between her reality and Niel's ideal.

While Cather places a male narrator in charge of the story, she also creates a female character whose fortitude render her a stronger woman than the male narrator can envision. Yet, Niel's presence so pervades the text that it is difficult to focus solely on Marian because he is still there trying to rewrite her as his ideal lady. Marian Forrester is vulnerable to his narrative devices and one-dimensional character depictions because she is not in control of her own story. However, through her self-assertions, she undermines Niel's one-sided portrait of a "lady." In some instances, Marian unwittingly disproves Niel's notions of a lady because her goal is not to disprove him but to adapt to a world without Victorian notions of womanhood. For instance, she responds to financial stress far more productively than Niel assumes she could do. When Niel senses a "foreboding gloom" settling on the Forrester's household with Captain Forrester's loss of fortune, "[h]e dread[s] poverty for her. She was one of the people who ought always to have money; any retrenchment of their generous way of living would be a hardship for her,—would be unfitting. She would not be herself in straitened circumstances" (Cather 79). Yet Marian Forrester's reaction to the news that she is now the wife of a poor man is not nearly the crushing identity crisis Niel assumes it to be. Instead, "Niel saw that Mrs. Forrester grew very pale, but she smiled and brought her husband his cigar stand. 'Oh, well! I expect we can manage, can't we?'" (84). Marian immediately adapts to the changed circumstances; she does not crumple under the "hardship" of poverty but brushes it aside with a smile and renewed resolve that they "can manage." Marian's response does not match Niel's anticipated one, revealing a disconnect between Niel's portrayal of Mrs. Forrester and Marian's own agency as a female character.

As Marian continues to disrupt Niel's constricted depiction of her as an ideal lady and wife, his need to reframe her actions within these headings becomes more fervent. Marian's affair with Frank Ellinger does not reflect the morality of a traditional woman but the sexual confidence of the New Woman. The affair, first revealed in dialogue between the two characters and an account from Adolph Blum, a poor boy in the town. Adolph Blum never reveals to Niel the interchange he witnesses in the woods between Mrs. Forrester and Ellinger because Marian "treated him like a human being" (Cather 65), and in turn, he prevents publication of her infidelities. Niel's own discovery of the affair many years later marks a notable shift in his feelings toward Mrs. Forrester, the lady. When Frank Ellinger comes to stay with Mrs. Forrester during Captain Forrester's business trip, Niel thinks the visit in "bad taste" (79) and is overcome with the need to protect Mrs. Forrester and preserve her propriety. He sets off for the Forresters' place early the next morning, hoping to arrive before Ellinger. On the way, "[a]n impulse of affection and guardianship" overwhelms him, and he gathers a bouquet of roses, "only half awake, in the defencelessness of utter beauty" for his "lovely lady" (81). He describes the roses he selects for Mrs. Forrester as beautiful in their "defencelessness," which is, of course, the way he prefers Mrs. Forrester in the text—defenseless in the face of his narrative control. Upon reaching the house, he hears the intimate laughter of Mrs. Forrester and Ellinger coming from her bedroom, and his world shatters:

In that instant between stooping to the windowsill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. 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. (Cather 82)

Despite the dramatic break Niel claims to suffer upon learning of his lady's infidelity, it is not long before his protective impulses resurface. He does not recover from this shock by questioning whether he ever really knew the complexities of Mrs. Forrester the woman; rather he explains her inappropriate behavior as a temporary manifestation of her mislaid or "lost" ladyhood. He longs to ask her "What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger" (95). Niel refuses to release his ideal lady completely from his clutches, even after her character proves him wrong. He instead reframes her actions, believing that she simply sets aside "her exquisiteness" when her behavior fails to reflect a lady's.

The fact that Cather wrote this novel thirty to forty years after the era in which it is set matters: Cather had the advantage of knowing that the New Woman would endure. The knowledge enabled her to reconstruct the path to female self-determination in *A Lost Lady*. When Niel returns from school, he finds Mrs. Forrester managing her household under the strains of a fortune gone and a husband who had suffered a stroke. The woman Niel claimed would not survive a change in income Cather presents as thriving under pressures much worse. "How light and alive she was! like a bird caught in a net. If only he could rescue her and carry her off like this,—off the earth of sad, inevitable periods, away from age, weariness, adverse fortune!" (Cather 105). Niel wants to "carry her off like *this*" (emphasis mine), referring to his image of Mrs. Forrester "light and alive [...] like a bird caught in a net"; he desires the "caught" or captured version of Mrs. Forrester, not the free-flying one. Niel values Mrs. Forrester most when her vulnerabilities keep her consistent with his definition of a lady.

When meeting Niel's requirements for a lady, Mrs. Forrester remains caught in his narrative net and preserves the social order; when adapting to the changing circumstances around her, Marian Forrester successfully demonstrates her feats and independence as a woman of a new



order. Marian, whether it upsets Niel or not, remains resolved and grounded in her will to survive the changing times. Rosowski too, reads Marian as an adaptable woman, noting that, “Like Captain Forrester, Marian Forrester is characterized within a framework of change throughout the novel, she grows physically older. Yet, unlike her husband, she is not helpless against time” (Rosowski 54). Although Niel is surprised by Mrs. Forrester’s adaptability and show of strength, stating “he had never seen her more in command of herself,—or more the mistress of her own house than now, when she was preparing to become the servant of it,” he does not allow these demonstrations to contradict his previous appraisal of her character, countering “[h]e had the feeling [...] that her lightness cost her something” (Cather 94). A. Elizabeth Elz believes Marian’s adaptability is evident in the dual “True Woman” and “New Woman” identities she manages to balance in the novel. “[S]he is strong enough to sustain herself, like the New Woman, but she selects the career of the True Woman in order to do so” (Elz 21). Marian is a wife, a widow, and then a second wife by the novel’s end; yet despite these shifting roles, her sense of self and determination to survive remain steady. Niel refuses to view Mrs. Forrester in a new light, but she nonetheless continues to maneuver her way through the shifting currents that include his censures, emerging triumphantly on the other end as Cather’s successful New Woman.

As a New Woman, Marian goes to great lengths to secure her economic independence. Marian asks Ivy Peters to invest her money through less-than-reputable business practices of which Niel heartedly disapproves. Disgusted by Ivy’s familiar manner, Niel questions, “Why do you allow him to speak to you like that Mrs. Forrester?” (Cather 117). Her reply is not one of defeat but of resourcefulness: “No, no, Niel! Remember, we have to get along with Ivy Peters, we simply have to!” (117). Her will remains firm, “You see, two years, three years, more of this,

and I could still go back to California—and live again. But after that...Perhaps people think I've settled down to grow old gracefully, but I've not. I feel such a power to live in me, Niel" (119). Marian Forrester's business with Ivy Peters is for a very specific purpose. She wishes "to get out of this hole" (120) the "hole" being Sweet Water, poverty, and her husband's decay. Marian is confident in her ability to emerge victoriously from this trial. After visiting her old friends, she reveals her motives to Niel, explaining, "I wanted to see whether I had anything left worth saving. And I have, I tell you! You would hardly believe it, I could hardly believe it, but I still have!" (120). Although Niel "[feels] frightened for her" and asks, "What hope was there for her?" Marian's proclamations, made more than halfway through the novel, are not the words of a woman in decline but a declaration marking her rise to power.

Marian continues to demonstrate greater determination as a self-possessed woman, despite Niel's intensifying need to control her actions. When Marian learns that her lover Ellinger is engaged to Constance, she ventures in the middle of the night through a torrential downpour to use Judge Pommeroy's telephone. Niel cautions Mrs. Forrester, feeling embarrassed by the implications such a phone call might have from a married woman to a reformed bachelor: "I'd rather, you know, publish anything in the town paper than telephone it through Mrs. Beasley" (124) who is the telephone operator. However, Marian, once again, is resolved and surprises Niel with her seemingly friendly, impersonal conversation with Ellinger rather than the passionate exchange he fears: "The voice, it seemed to Niel, was that of a woman, young, beautiful, happy,—warm and at her ease" (127). Of course, as soon as a hint of resentment rightly enters Marian's voice, Niel stifles her words by cutting the phone cord and once again assuming "he had saved her. [...] Her reproaches had got no farther than this room" (128). Niel restrains Marian's display of courage by ending her call to Ellinger early. Yet,

despite Niel's attempt to preserve her as a "lady," Marian is never confused about her identity. She is not floundering without Ellinger, nor is she in danger of losing her self-respect.

Marian, on occasion, suffers setbacks, and while Niel enjoys these vulnerable moments, they do not leave her vulnerable for long. Ellinger's marriage, followed closely by Captain Forrester's second, and more debilitating, stroke leaves Marian temporarily unable to run the household. Niel seizes the opportunity to regain the narrative edge, deciding to stay in Sweet Water rather than returning to M.I.T. Initially, not returning to school is difficult but then "he was glad" to stay on in Sweet Water and assist the Forresters: "He liked being alone with the old things that had seemed so beautiful to him in his childhood" (135). Marian is back to performing all her regular duties within a few days, but Niel chooses to remain in town, so he can continue idealizing both her and the past of which she is a part. In *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* (1990),<sup>27</sup> Middleton identifies Niel's consciousness as "the consistently romantic and idealistic view of life and its participants, remarkably unshakable when confronted with disillusioning reality" (Middleton 91). As Niel's previous disillusionment with Marian illustrates, he does not like living in the changing realities of his time; rather he prefers his nostalgia for the past. Susan Rosowski characterizes Niel's struggle as stemming from his inability to adapt:

Through his perspective we participate in the struggle of adaptation, a struggle made intense by the apparent disparity between man's ideals and the pressures of physical reality. Physical realities surround the characters: land is exploited; gentlemen pioneers move on; and people grow old. From these realities the primary question developed in the novel emerges. If seeming constants of the past are lost, what alternatives for value are available for people living in the present and preparing for the future? (52)

For Niel, the closing of the frontier is the closing of a past that he idealizes. However for Marian, the frontier's closing shifts its importance from an idealized past to the New Woman's pioneering spirit.

Although Niel insists on living in the past, Marian chooses life in the present after Captain Forester's death. At the height of Niel's distaste for the New Woman Mrs. Forrester has become, he states:

It was Mrs. Forrester herself who had changed. Since her husband's death she seemed to have become another woman. For years Niel and his uncle [...] had thought of the Captain as a drag upon his wife; a care that drained her and dimmed her and kept her from being all that she might be. But without him, she was like a ship without a ballast, driven hither and thither by every wind. She was flighty and perverse. (Cather 145)

Niel's pointed metaphor for comparing the "new" woman Mrs. Forrester represents to a ship that has lost the mechanism that keeps her "balanced" in the water and on a straight course is pointed, considering his primary struggle has been keeping this character on his straight and balanced path throughout the story. Niel holds Mrs. Forrester's freedom against her because it marks her departure from the past he idealizes. Marian Forrester's adaptability is a quality Niel describes as "flighty and perverse" since "she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms" (Cather 161). Marian insists on an identity that is larger than just the widow of Captain Forrester. She goes to great lengths to make her voice heard above that of her male narrator and to make her life one of consequence and regeneration despite the decay that surrounds her.

Marian's final triumph comes at the end of the novel, after Niel has already tried to write

her out. Marian eventually leaves Sweet Water and returns to California where Niel loses track of her. Niel's disenchantment with his "long-lost lady" (Cather 164) is presented through a series of memorializing recollections such as his description of her as a "a bright, impersonal memory. He came to be very glad that he had known her," and he had never known a woman "like her, as she was in her best days" (163). These comments, as the final petulant remarks of a narrator who has not got his way, appear hastily before Ed Elliot, Niel's childhood friend, brings him news of Marian's adventures after leaving Sweet Water. Cather elevates Marian as the clear victor when Ed Elliot explains "that [she] hadn't changed a particle" (164) even years after she escaped Sweet Water and married again. Ed Elliot's account of Marian Forrester's life after Sweet Water contradicts Niel's dismissal of her on the previous page. Ed explains that "[s]he seemed to have everything" once she married a "rich, cranky old Englishman" (164-5). Marian, it seems, had found a way to sustain herself after her first husband's death, despite Niel's claims to the contrary. Thus, the novel's title, *A Lost Lady*, is a paradox, by the end; while Cather allows Niel to detail Mrs. Forrester's presumed decline, the story actually ends with Marian triumphing over her circumstances. In *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (2005), Martha Patterson argues that while Cather's Marian anticipates the coming New Woman, Marian is not so extreme in her newness that she abandons all the old ways. As Patterson suggests, "Cather's New Woman characters pose only a necessary, albeit limited, threat to compulsory heterosexuality, [...] professional hierarchies, and the masculinized solid mechanics of the machine age" (Patterson 156). Marian, whose sense of self remains consistent despite Niel's severely altered perception of her, threatens Niel's masculine authority during her quest to survive. Although unconscious of herself as a character (and therefore unable to rebel against Niel), Marian does resist the traditional views Niel upholds only to a certain

point, since she remarries before the novel's end. Niel's narrative transforms her resistance into a conflict in which both the narrator and the character antagonize one another. Marian has always known what kind of woman she is, she has never felt "lost," and she remains confident that she has something to offer. Cather's subtle formation of Marian as the New Woman constrained by a male narrator brings her unconventional heroine into the mainstream literary world.

The carefully constructed relationship between Cather's male narrator and female character illuminates male-female dynamics and the varied debates surrounding the New Woman at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Patterson, in her work on America's New Woman, confirms Cather's interest in the evolution of female identity at the turn of the century. Patterson argues that despite "Cather's antifeminist statements, seemingly privileged male narrative voices, [...and...] portrayal of strong, often transgendered female protagonists," Cather uses the New Woman to explore her era's social and political concerns (155). The apparent disintegration of traditions and the misplaced angel of the house, which are both detrimental to Niel and his idealized past, actually represent the climb of the New Woman out of a Victorian past and into a new century. Originally published in 1923 but set during a period of twenty years in the 1880s and 1890s, *A Lost Lady* is Cather's re-envisioning of the New Woman's beginning in the pioneer west. During her lifetime, Cather witnessed numerous female-led Progressive Era reform movements, the working-girl's rise, and women's suffrage, all in addition to her own successful career as an independent woman, editor, and writer. Cather not only knew what the New Woman looked like before she wrote *A Lost Lady*, but she also recognized the qualities necessary for her victory. Cather, then, draws Marian Forrester, a woman of the previous century, as already possessing what is needed to survive in the new.

While Marian's determination, courage, confidence, and adaptability complicate Niel's ideal "lady" vision, they are the attributes most responsible for her success and power at the novel's end. Cather, therefore, creates a gendered narration to express the manipulative sides of the New Woman's antagonists while also laying the groundwork for the New Woman to triumph over such antagonism.

## Chapter Two:

### **Edna's Uncertainty: Narrative Distance and Absent Gender in *The Awakening***

Writing in the 1890s, Kate Chopin did not benefit from Cather's intimate knowledge of the New Woman's evolution at the turn into the twentieth century. While Chopin was conscious of the same gender debates Cather explored in *A Lost Lady* and must have been aware of the disturbance a novel like *The Awakening* would cause, Chopin attempts to elude the potential problems created by male narrators of female stories by creating a gender-less narrator as the storyteller in *The Awakening*. Even though Chopin was raised in a matriarchal household after her father's death and worked to support herself as a writer upon her husband's death, she was not a feminist, and she never publicly supported women's political or social organizations.<sup>28</sup> While Cather, likewise, was not an outspoken feminist (she never joined a woman's league either<sup>29</sup>), both she and Chopin demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the woman question in their writings. Despite Chopin's noted absence from women's movements of her time, many feminist scholars of the 1970s considered *The Awakening* (1899) a revolutionary novel about female sexual independence. More recently, however, scholars' opinions about *The Awakening* and its female protagonist in particular have become more varied and complicated. As Emily Toth notes, the novel's protagonist Edna Pontellier poses a problem for some modern readers who "wonder whether they are supposed to like [her], understand her, or loathe everything about her" (*Unveiling Kate Chopin* 209). While this does not represent every modern reader's reaction to the book, it does identify the ambiguity of Edna's character. This disillusionment with the female protagonist, in most cases, stems from Edna's death at the novel's end, and the fact that we do not know if the death is accidental or a suicide.

Barring their ends, Chopin's Edna and Cather's Marian possess numerous similarities



both as characters and as women in transition. A. Elizabeth Elz extensively discusses parallels between these two novels in her work, “*The Awakening and A Lost Lady: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers*” (2003). Yet, save for Elz’s work, very little has been done with these two novels together, a severe oversight considering Cather reviewed *The Awakening* for the *Pittsburgh Leader* (July 1899) as well as the analogous themes each female author explored in her respective time. *A Lost Lady* not only offers invaluable insights into *The Awakening*, as Chopin’s earlier attempt to question traditional gender roles, but is also a means for understanding why Edna remains such a perplexing, impressive, but at the same moment dissatisfying female character for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the same way that Marian’s fervent desire for autonomy parallels the fervency of Neil’s opposing narrative restraints, Chopin’s de-gendered narrator, who resists the traditional male/female binary and refuses to judge Edna, reflects Edna’s distaste for traditional gender roles and anticipates her ultimate failure to either assume a ready-made identity or forge one for herself. Whereas *A Lost Lady* dramatizes a battle between male narrator and triumphant female character, *The Awakening*’s de-gendered narrator reflects Edna’s desire to escape traditional roles and her skepticisms about female identity construction either within or outside of these roles.

Even the earliest reviewers of *The Awakening* detected the unsettling absence of an identifiable, authoritative narrator who guides the text and its readers through its sordid and unsettling themes. After Chopin’s successful career as a local color writer, *The Awakening* was not well received by her contemporaries. The fault was not in the novel’s language or style, but in its form and content. Nineteenth-century reviewers, troubled by Chopin’s exploration of female sensuality, felt it necessary to condemn the novel because of the “moral vigilance [they] felt compelled to maintain.”<sup>30</sup> In May of 1899, the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* remarked,

“It is not a healthy book; if it points any particular moral or teaches any lesson, the fact is not apparent.”<sup>31</sup> According to Charles Deyo of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Chopin’s novel explored “unpleasant truths” without a clear ethical framework.<sup>32</sup> While Deyo goes on to call *The Awakening* “all consummate art [...] handled with a cunning craft” (55), his concern for the missing “ethical framework” is actually related to the absence of a traditional didactic, moralizing narrator who resolves the novel’s moral ambiguity. *The Awakening* does not contain a didactic narrator probably because, as Mary Papke asserts, Chopin “evinced little sympathy for the propagandistic aspect of social problem fiction” and she did not value didactic or sentimental fiction.<sup>33</sup> While feminist critics search intensely for an inherent social agenda and a defiance against social convention, it is difficult to articulate Chopin’s motivations when she, herself, never reveals her subject or moral (Papke 30). Thus, *The Awakening* proves problematic for readers from numerous historical and social points of view. In addition to a narrator without distinct moral convictions, Chopin’s narrator is also without an identifiable gender, which further unsettles the reader and her response to the work. Having ascertained the significant role gender and narration play in Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, it is impossible to consider *The Awakening* without taking Chopin’s de-gendered narrator into account.

Chopin’s contemporaries knew her as a local colorist and regional writer. Nineteenth-century readers were familiar with the traditional narrative frame for regionalist literature. Nancy Walker describes this frame as “a narrative voice representative of the class and perspective of the reader, who introduces the ‘different’ characters and scenes and thus serves as a genteel barrier between the normal and the odd” (*Kate Chopin* 90). *The Awakening*, however, departs from this regional frame with a narrator who does not act as the reader’s guide or serve as a “genteel barrier.” Chopin’s narrator introduces characters and scenes without any context or

comment on their significance to the story. For example, in the first few pages the narrator records that, “The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished” (Chopin 3). Lebrun’s physical appearance, relationship to other characters, and personal history remain unspecified until later in the text. Mr. Pontellier, the protagonist’s husband, receives comparable sterile treatment from the de-gendered narrator, who reveals his physical features but nothing about his quality of character: “Mr. Pontellier wore eye-glasses. He was a man of forty, of medium height and rather slender build; he stooped a little. His hair was brown and straight, parted on one side. His beard was neatly and closely trimmed” (3). For the man who plays an integral role in his wife’s unhappiness, this sparse description provides the reader with few details about his attitude except what one can deduce about a man from a closely trimmed beard and slight stoop.

More importantly the narrator, because it is de-gendered, refuses to act as the reader’s guide not just in matters of character descriptions and scene setting, but also in opinions, moral judgments, and gender issues. The narrator’s neutral stance in *The Awakening* materializes in its impartial descriptions of characters and events and its refusal to evaluate characters such as Edna. On occasion Chopin’s narrator subtly critiques select characters. However, the narrator never judges Edna, the character who would benefit most from these evaluations. While Cather’s Niel is easily identified as male through cultural markers, like his name, and the fact that he adopts positions on women in the text typically aligned with a masculine perspective (“Sexing Narratology” 126), Chopin’s narrator does no such thing, remaining impartial in its commentary on both sexes. It exists without any obvious clues or markers for sexual identity. According to Lanser, readers look “for gender markers through which to constitute th[e] narrator’s sex—and hence sexuality and thereby to stabilize (an interpretation and evaluation of)

the text” (“Sexing Narratology” 128). Gender serves as a stabilizing force in the novel because it provides readers with familiar categories (male and female) in which to order the new or unfamiliar characters and voices. Chopin creates a third-person narrator, which immediately distances the storyteller from the story because there is no “I”; moreover, the narrator’s absent gender creates even more space because there is also no personal pronoun (“he” or “she”) by which to identify the voice. Although omniscient narrators similarly exist without pronouns, readers assign these identifying markers in order to construct gender, discuss the narrator, and stabilize the text (“Sexing Narratology” 128). As well, the distance between Chopin’s narrator and the reader seems more severe because the narrator approaches the reader so intimately at the novel’s start, presenting places and characters as if the reader already knows them. This familiar exchange is even stranger when considered alongside the narrator’s obscure identity, which proves unsettling for the reader.

From the novel’s start, the de-gendered narrator firmly establishes its objective and distant position. Unlike *A Lost Lady*’s opening, where Niel clearly identifies himself as male by providing details of Sweet Water, the Burlington railroad, and other facts “[w]ell known [...by...] men who had to do with the railroad” (emphasis mine) (Cather 7), *The Awakening*’s opening lines discuss animals, not people, making it impossible for the reader to construct the narrator’s gender by way of cultural clues: “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: ‘*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That’s all right!’ He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (Chopin 3). The only outright subjective remark in these lines is the narrator’s comment on the mocking-bird’s “maddening persistence.” However,

this mild irritation directed at the mocking-bird is not indicative of either a male or female response, leaving the narrator's gender ambiguous.

In the same way Chopin's narrator is gender neutral, it also maintains a neutral position throughout the novel by refusing to challenge Edna. By providing unbiased descriptions often from Edna's point of view, the narrator is able to maintain its gender-less identity. According to Elsa Nettels in *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*, "nineteenth-century critics *masculine* and *feminine* not only connoted qualities differentiating the sexes but also signified realities immutable as night and day, more definitively bounded than heat and cold or youth and age, as natural as the operation of the hearts and lungs."<sup>34</sup> With gender signifying certain realities for each sex, if the narrator were to censure Edna's behavior and sexual promiscuity in the same way Niel criticizes Marian's affair with Ellinger, then the reader would assume the narrator's male perspective<sup>35</sup> to play a role in those judgments. In the same way, if the narrator were to criticize Mr. Pontellier for neglecting Edna and forcing her to seek solitude elsewhere, readers would more than likely ascribe those views to a female narrator empathizing with Edna's plight. If gender is socially constructed, then a reader's interpretation is informed by basic social situations in which men are more likely to critique women and women are more likely to identify with their own sex. Therefore, in an attempt to minimize the "gulf between women and men" (*Unveiling Kate Chopin* 218), Chopin cannot allow her narrator to evaluate Edna's behavior but only describe it. Herein lies another noted difference between Chopin's de-gendered narrator and Cather's Niel.<sup>36</sup> Chopin's de-gendered narrator maintains its ambiguous identity by mediating its comments about Edna so as not to reveal any qualities or biases that relegate the narrator to one gender category or the other.

Chopin's narrator maintains its indistinct identity through passive recital of Edna's

questionable and, at times, scandalous behavior. In comparison to Cather's controlling male narrator in *A Lost Lady*, who is only too eager to assess the female character's morality, *The Awakening's* de-gendered narrator can appear detached from the story and its female protagonist. However, Chopin's aversion to a didactic narrator stems from her desire for her third-person narrator to remain gender-less, since moral judgments potentially insinuate *gender* biases. The reader finds no stronger example of the narrator's moral ambiguity than during an argument when Mr. Pontellier reproaches Edna during dinner for her unexplained absence on her "reception day" and the subsequent neglect of her social responsibilities (Chopin 48). After the argument, which ends with Edna finishing dinner alone, she returns to her room and in a fit of anger throws her wedding ring upon the carpet and "stamp[s] her heel upon it, striving to crush it" (50). Being unable to damage or "make an indenture" on the ring, the narrator continues to describe the scene: "In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear" (51). Beyond the narrator's simple and direct account, no additional commentary or assessment of Edna's actions is provided. The reader is left to judge whether Edna's outburst is valid or impetuous, whether her behavior is, as Cather's Niel would say, that of a "lady" or not. In fact, the only character to ever reflect on this outburst is Edna herself when, a chapter later, she "could not help but think that it was very foolish, very childish, to have stamped upon her wedding ring and smashed the crystal" (54). It is through Edna's brief reflection that the reader is given any hint as to how it should be received in the context of the novel.

The only characters ever given a clear context and evaluation by the narrator are Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. These two female characters represent the two distinct

categories for female identity in the novel as Chopin saw them in 1899. Madame Ratignolle represents the True Woman and expertly fulfills her traditional female roles (wife and mother), while Mademoiselle Reisz portrays the New Woman (independent but living a very solitary life) as Chopin perceived this figure at the close of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the de-gendered narrator's explicit commentary on these women is pointed because, on a grander scale, it is also a commentary on these female "types" in society. Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent an either/or identity choice for Edna. Either Edna can choose True Womanhood and be like Madame Ratignolle, or she can choose the New Womanhood of Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna's search for an identity wavers when compared to these two women rooted in their respective female roles. However, while these characters' identities symbolize the True Woman/New Woman binary Elz discusses, the de-gendered narrator portrays these identities as one-dimensional, each insufficient in itself for Edna.

Chopin clearly creates Madame Ratignolle as embodying the "True Woman role, the cult of domesticity" (Elz 16). Chopin's de-gendered narrator similarly labels Madame Ratignolle as the prime "mother-woman" vacationing at Grand Isle that summer. By placing "mother" in front of the hyphen, Chopin uses the adjective to modify Madame Ratignolle, eclipsing her "woman" self. The narrator defines "mother-women" as "women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 9). The narrator's ironic definition eulogizes the mother-woman's divine acts, which not only result in her lost individual identity, but also in her death as a woman, when she becomes a "ministering angel" to her family. Despite the many details provided in the definition, none of these comments directly judge Madame Ratignolle. Instead, the narrator waits till the following lines to subtly assess Madame Ratignolle's choice of a

traditional (and “effacing”) female identity: “There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (9). This comment establishes Madame Ratignolle’s True Woman identity as both static, when the narrator can find no new words to describe her, and medieval.

While Mademoiselle Reisz receives a similar description by the narrator at first, her identity is complex and more difficult to ascertain. She is not married; she does not have any children to live for, and instead gives herself entirely to her music. Therefore, as an independent, self-supporting woman, it might seem that Mademoiselle Reisz is Chopin’s New Woman example meant to serve as a foil for Madame Ratignolle’s True Woman status. The narrator first depicts Mademoiselle Reisz alone in her cottage at Grand Isle, while everyone else is at the resort’s dance. She was “dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby” in the adjoining cottage (25). Overall, “[s]he was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (25). By judging Mademoiselle Reisz as a disagreeable woman with a temper, the narrator treats her differently from Edna. Thus, if Mademoiselle Reisz is Chopin’s vision of the New Woman, then she is no more attractive an option for Edna than the archaic True Woman.

By refusing to provide a moral framework, the narrator presents Edna without marked boundaries for her behavior. Edna’s uncertain identity is mirrored by this absent framework and the narrator’s own ambiguous identity. Once she “begin[s] to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (14), Edna begins her search for an identity. Unlike Marian in *A Lost Lady*, who is sure of herself from the novel’s start, Edna does not know who she wants to be, and is only mildly sure



of the woman roles she rejects. The natural move for Edna would be to choose between the True Woman/New Woman examples she observes, but both are disagreeable, so she, instead, sets about constructing her identity through opposition. Edna is certain who she does not want to be in the text—the mother-woman “who would give her life for her children” (46) or the “disagreeable” lonely woman who leaves Edna feeling “depressed” and “unhappy” (46-7)—although her position sometimes wavers between these two.

For the most part, Edna’s identity formation is reactive rather than proactive. Her proclivity to simply react to a situation without weighing the options and possible outcomes has not proved successful in the past. The narrator explains: “Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident [...] She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband” (18-9). Thus, Edna’s marriage to Léonce, the same marriage in which she is currently unhappy, was a reaction to her father and sister’s disapproval of him rather than a premeditated choice. Emily Toth calls Edna’s interactions with Mme. Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz “female mentors” who help her to “regai[n] her voice,” with each drawing out separate mothering or artistic qualities in her (*Unveiling Kate Chopin* 210). For a time, Edna does work to appease both her mentors, attempting to embody simultaneously the True Woman and New Woman identities because “[i]f Madame Ratignolle has a profound impact on Edna, so does Mademoiselle Reisz” (Heilmann 98). Edna spends days in her atelier painting “with great energy and interest” and neglects “the comfort of her family” (Chopin 55), and on other occasions, she indulges her children and is thrilled to see them, talk to them, and play with them during a week at their Grandmother’s in Iberville (89). At these moments in the

text, Edna's actions are both impulsive and inconsistent, demonstrating that she cannot keep up both identities for long.

Edna's ambiguous identity results from her inability to be both a Mme. Ratignolle and a Mlle. Reisz, and is further affirmed by the simple fact that while she tries to be both women, Edna never really desires to be either woman but instead her own person. Chopin ultimately has Edna reject both the True Woman/New Woman categories because at Chopin's historical point female identity is still an either/or paradox where being one thing means sacrificing the other. For Chopin, there is no clear example of new womanhood. In 1899, new womanhood was still in its first wave. The National American Woman Suffrage Association, founded in 1893, maintained modest membership in the tens of thousands; however, by 1917, this association would contain nearly two million members (Patterson 5). Ann Heilmann, while analyzing literature's uses for constructing a national narrative for the New Woman, states, "If the transatlantic New Woman movement is conceived as the cultural and literary arm of first-wave feminist activism, with the underlying objective of many writers being the use of literature as a political tool for social change, Chopin was certainly not a straightforward New Woman."<sup>37</sup> For Edna, at best, identity formation remains a question of how to be both the "True Woman" (Madame Ratignolle) and the "New Woman" (Mademoiselle Reisz), since she cannot give up one for the other, and at worst it is a perpetual dread that she will never find an identity that works, which is why the gender-less narrator reflects Edna's indecision. According to Heilmann, "Neither the romantic lover (who turns out to be another conventionally minded male shocked at female sexual self-governance nor Mademoiselle Reisz's and Madame Ratignolle's female communities of sinister artists and coquettish mother-women offer Edna an adequate model for an alternative existence" (99). In the same way Chopin's narrator chooses to be an ambiguous

“it” rather than a “he” or “she”, Edna, unable to be a True Woman or New Woman, also chooses to be nothing, symbolized by her choosing neither identity but instead death at the novel’s end.

Chopin herself is a paradox of True Woman/New Woman identities (wife, mother, self-supporting writer, intellectual salon organizer in St. Louis, but never a feminist advocate). Limited by the literary conventions of women’s fiction, Chopin found it difficult to explore gender debates with these traditional forms.<sup>38</sup> Chopin attempts to manipulate gender hierarchies and literary traditions in *The Awakening* by disregarding the regional narrative frame and eliminating the problematic male authoritative voice altogether with her de-gendered narrator. If she used Edna as the narrator and presented the story entirely from her point of view, she potentially repels her readers. Lanser discusses the problems surrounding female narration and audience reception, stating:

A female personal narrator risks the reader’s resistance if the act of telling, the story she tells, or the self she constructs through telling it transgresses the limits of the acceptably feminine. If women are encouraged to write only of themselves because they are not supposed to claim knowledge of men or ‘the world,’ when women *have* written only of themselves they have been labeled immodest and narcissistic, and criticized for displaying either their virtues or their faults.”<sup>39</sup>

As Lanser reveals above, Chopin has no easy choice between a controversial female narrator or a male narrator who “would misinterpret, and malign, Edna.”<sup>40</sup> So she creates a de-gendered narrator to set *The Awakening* apart from other women’s writings and explore female identity without the suppressive force of a controlling masculine narrator. However, as the novel’s themes reflect, circumventing problematic gender debates does not cause these problems to disappear and the reader, instead, is left with a female protagonist who does not find a new or

acceptable sense of self, and does not gain any real autonomy as a woman.

In the most fundamental comparison between *A Lost Lady* and *The Awakening*, Cather's Marian is a successful New Woman, simply because Marian survives, while Edna does not. Yet, Marian does not just survive but triumphs over her controlling male narrator, emerging as the novel's heroine. Edna cannot create an adequate identity for herself, and she does not rise from the grave a heroine because heroines are deemed heroic after battling and defeating a villain of some sort. Marian's villain is obviously the judgmental Niel and the repressive society he represents, but Edna does not have a gendered narrator to whom she stands in opposition; she has only the ambiguous narrator who mirrors her own uncertainty, and proves completely inadequate as a villain and unfit for a battle. Edna does not triumph over the antagonistic male voices in 1899, and it is uncertain whether she would even if given the chance, since she never faces these judgments the way Cather's Marian does when she confronts Niel's criticisms head-on throughout *A Lost Lady*.

When Cather reviewed *The Awakening* for the *Pittsburgh Leader* in 1899, she called it a "Creole *Bovary*" and described Edna as a "hasty sketch" of a woman who idealized love and "whose development was one-sided" and hoped that next time "Miss Chopin w[ould] devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause."<sup>41</sup> There were few nineteenth-century American women writers for whom Cather had respect. She did not enjoy popular didactic fictions, and while she believed some "sensational" writers like Chopin had great potential, she did not consider these writers artists.<sup>42</sup> Cather cautioned against nineteenth-century romantic heroines like Edna, claiming these women's own romantic imaginations made them dependent on men, and they were "headed for annihilation, not awakening" (O'Brien 182). If Chopin was a "sensationalist" and Edna was her mere "hasty sketch," then, in relation to Cather's *A Lost Lady*,

*The Awakening* should be read as a transitional text with transitional characters not fully realized in Chopin's work but later realized and explored in Cather's. Elaine Showalter suggests as much when she proposes that "*The Awakening* belongs to a historical moment in American women's writing, and Chopin could not have written without the legacy of domestic fiction to work against, and the models of the local colorists and New Women writers with which to experiment."<sup>43</sup> Showalter does not read *The Awakening* as New Woman fiction nor does she read Chopin as a New Woman writer. Instead she recognizes the liminal space between the old and the new that Chopin occupied in the novel. In an effort to avoid problematic gender hierarchies, Chopin creates a de-gendered narrator to impartially relate Edna's story. However, ignoring these categories only brings attention to these binaries in the text. Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz quickly emerge as opposing versions of "woman" Edna can choose between. Edna is unable to forge an identity beyond the True Woman/New Woman types presented because she is never given her own converse example to work against. Unlike Cather's gendered narrator who clearly contrasts Marian to his ideal "lady," Chopin's de-gendered narrator never contrasts Edna to an ideal. Without opposition or evaluation, Edna can never be complete with a whole identity, so she remains a "hasty sketch," still incomplete when she dies.

## Conclusion

In this study of Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Chopin's *The Awakening*, I have analyzed the roles gendered and de-gendered narrators play in constructing the female characters' identities. Along with feminist scholars like Elaine Showalter and Susan Rosowski, Susan Lanser and Kathy Mezei's groundbreaking work on gendered narratology inform my work at the intersection of these two fields—feminist theory and gendered narratology. Published in 1923, *A Lost Lady* is set in the volatile late nineteenth century in which the coming New Woman threatens traditional Victorian values. Scholars who read this novel in conjunction with *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* see Cather concluding her pioneer trilogy by highlighting the West's decline and relating that decline to Marian's own journey. However, these interpretations do not fully examine the relationship between Marian and Niel nor do they account for Niel's dual role as character and controlling narrator since he writes the story of Marian's decline. As a man who idealizes the pioneer past, Niel as narrator seeks to control Marian by characterizing her as an ideal "lady" and wife who is incapable of change. Although these terms severely limit Marian's actual identity, her self-determined behavior undermines his controlling descriptions. Even when her actions disprove Niel's characterization, he reframes the situation under the guise of saving her, thereby maintaining his ideally passive woman. Despite Niel's authority, Cather creates Marian as an independent female character capable of defeating him. Marian cannot consciously rebel against her narrator, but she does rebel against traditional gender hierarchies that Niel embodies. As a New Woman, Marian adapts to changing circumstances, is unwilling to immortalize the past, and maintains her autonomy. For example, when the Forresters lose their fortune, Marian immediately responds by tending to her husband's needs while still reassuring all those present (Niel and Judge Pommeroy) that they will find a way to manage. Cather's

gendered narrator antagonizes her New Woman female character by holding her to unreasonable ideals and refusing to see her as an independent woman. By exploring these gender hierarchies only to supersede them with Marian's success, Cather dismantles male notions of authority and antiquated ideas about femininity.

*The Awakening*, steeped in controversy from its first publication, continues to be a debatable work, albeit for different reasons today than in 1899. Its nineteenth-century reviewers cautioned readers about the female protagonist's immorality and the novel's absent ethical framework. Despite Chopin's later qualification that she threw these characters together for pure entertainment,<sup>44</sup> I assume, as many feminist scholars do, that she was much more conscious of her narrative's construction, particularly Edna's role, than her 1899 "retraction"<sup>45</sup> implies. Writing during the period of change on which Cather only reflects, Chopin details the difficulties the independent woman faced were she to resist traditional female roles. Since gender is the source for these hierarchies, giving men authority and making women compliant, Chopin attempts to skirt these issues with a gender-less narrator. *The Awakening's* de-gendered narrator chooses *no* gender rather than selecting one gender over the other. However, the de-gendered narrator, rather than liberating Edna, instead mirrors her own uncertainty so that she too chooses no identity at all over an either/or choice. The de-gendered narrator does not judge Edna, leaving her without the oppositional force integral to identity formation. Unlike Cather's Niel, Chopin's narrator never presents an ideal identity for Edna to reject in favor of forging her own. The narrator only criticizes Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, who represent the traditional True Woman/New Woman identities, illustrating each identity to be unsatisfactory by following Edna's failed attempts to be one or both of these women. While Chopin recognizes the True Woman/New Woman identities as limiting, it is impossible for her to anticipate the

New Woman's complex identity in 1923 or find a way to articulate it in 1899. Chopin's work looks to her own time for gender debates, it demonstrates limitations in the female literary tradition that preceded her, all while attempting to anticipate future female identities and new literary traditions. As Priscilla Leder notes, "In telling the story of a 19th-century woman who searches for but fails to find a mode of living that allows for full expression of her being, Chopin reveals how the literary modes of her century prove inadequate."<sup>46</sup> Chopin lacks Cather's cultural retrospection that allows Cather to re-envision the New Woman's beginning, which is why Edna's end, an independent woman's death, proves so problematic.

This interest in gendered narrative structures is still in its beginning stages, when it comes to American women's writing. The feminist and narratologist scholars under review here each contain useful questions, methodologies, and theoretical concerns that are extremely beneficial for the other group's work. My study proposes a methodology for incorporating these two critical lenses in my investigation of gender's role in female identity formation and the impact gendered or de-gendered voices have on a story. While *A Lost Lady* and *The Awakening* serve as excellent comparative models both because of their similar theme and dissimilar narrative structures, other nineteenth and early-twentieth century works offer important gendered narration that would benefit from a similar analysis. Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is just one example of a woman author selecting not a male gendered or de-gendered narrator, but a female narrator to explore a predominantly female community. Unlike Cather's gendered narrator, Jewett's first-person female narrator glorifies female characters, like Mrs. Todd, rather than critiquing them. This study potentially leads to questions about the female literary tradition of which Jewett was a part, as well as gendered or de-gendered narrators' roles in regionalist writing and local color fiction. For example, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, as a local color



work, adopts a narrative voice to serve as intermediary between the different or odd characters and the presumed ordinary reader.<sup>47</sup> Despite Jewett's conventional move toward a didactic narrator who presents simple sketches of the community and its people, the female narrator depicts a community of self-possessed women who have expanded their traditional gender roles to include leadership positions and other traditionally masculine roles (doctor, philosopher, and mariner) left empty by Dunnet Landing's absent men.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Jewett's choice of a young, independent, woman writer to serve as her narrator potentially allows her to explore the more unconventional sides of her female characters. In the same way, *A Lost Lady's* gendered narrator enables Cather to dismantle traditional male authority.

Overall, gendered narratology reveals new critical avenues for considering the impact of gendered voices in women's writing. Kathy Mezei's 1996 essay collection *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology & British Women Writers*, as an overview of the feminist narratology field, illustrates that while it has reached into nineteenth-century women's writing, little to no attention has been paid to American women writers and their ambiguously gendered narrators. Even Susan Lanser's more recent work, "Sexing Narratology: Toward a Gendered Poetics of Narrative Voice" (2004) still presents a layered approach to feminist theory and narratology, analyzing one field through the lens of another (either narratology is enhanced by gender theory or gender theory is considered in light of narratology) in an attempt to unite the two. My work does not demonstrate the hypothetical benefits gender theory may possess for narrative theory; rather I am confident that gendered narratology is an essential critical lens for American women's writing as it incorporates current trends in literary theory (sexuality, gender, and queer studies), alongside traditional formalist features in the field (narratology and feminist theory). By adopting this still evolving critical theory for my own work with Cather and Chopin

and proposing a broader method for studying these narrative structures in nineteenth-century American women's writing, I present the necessary critical concerns for the gendered and de-gendered narrators women writers elect as speakers in their texts, as well as furthering the study and analysis of masculine, feminine, and queer voices in literature.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner originally presented his frontier thesis at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, Illinois on July 12, 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Fuller published “The Great Lawsuit” in the Transcendental magazine *The Dial* in July 1843. She then expanded the essay to a book-length work in 1845. See Abby Slater, *In Search of Margaret Fuller* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978), 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

<sup>4</sup> Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), Marian’s Story, 156-158; Captain Forrester’s story, 49-51.

<sup>5</sup> Edna turns twenty-nine during the course of the novel, celebrating her birthday with a select dinner party before moving out of her husband’s house (Chopin 83).

<sup>6</sup> Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Susan S. Lanser, “Sexing Narratology: Toward a Gendered Poetics of Narrative Voice” in *(Narrative Theory: Critical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2004, 123-39), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Lanser states, “My task is to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women’s texts” (342). (“Toward a Feminist Narratology” *Style* 20.3 (1986): 341-363).

<sup>9</sup> Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 18.

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Mezei, “Who is Speaking Here? Free Indirect Discourse, Gender, and Authority in *Emma*, *Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*,” (*Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, Ed. Kathy Mezei, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 66-92), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Page, *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing*, (New York: Clarendon/Oxford UP, 1991), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Heilmann, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Ann Middleton, *Willa Cather’s Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Susan J. Rosowski, “Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*: The Paradoxes of Change,” (*NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 11.1, Autumn 1977, 51-62).

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<sup>16</sup> Fanny Butcher, "Willa Cather's Story of *A Lost Lady* is Lovely, Fragile Work," (*Chicago Daily Tribune*. (15 September 1923: 9), *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor, New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 181-2.

<sup>17</sup> John Farrar, "Willa Cather: Long an Apprentice, She Is Now a Brilliant Technician" (*Time*, 2. (10 September 1923): 15, *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Fanny Butcher, "Willa Cather's Story of *A Lost Lady* is Lovely, Fragile Work," (*Chicago Daily Tribune*. (15 September 1923: 9), *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor, New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 181-2.

<sup>19</sup> The Forresters, for many years, refuse to drain the marsh on their property choosing to enjoy its natural beauty because they do not need to turn it into workable land to ensure their survival. The Forresters' class is detected by their leisure time and activities—Marian enjoys swimming in the stream (Cather 16), Captain Forrester tends his rose garden (103)—unlike their frontier ancestors they do not spend their days farming but make their money through the railroad.

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Bower, "'Something Coarse and Concealed': Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*," (*Legacy*, 17.1 (2000): 59-72), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Kaplan, "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s," (*American Literary History*, 2.4 (Winter 1990): 659-690), 664.

<sup>22</sup> Susan J. Rosowski, "Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*: The Paradoxes of Change," (*NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 11.1, Autumn 1977, 51-62), 51.

<sup>23</sup> The author, H.W.F., is presumably male because of the subtitle asking if the New Woman is losing a "man's" respect, as well as the critical differences noted in the letter between men and women. While some women opposed, and even openly criticized, the New Woman, the letter's tone and pronoun use does not suggest a female author citing the blunders of her own sex. See "The New Woman Criticised. Is She Unsexing Herself and Losing Man's Respect?" (*The New York Times*. 8 April 1896. <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9907E3D9123EE333A2575BC0A9629C94679ED7CF>>).

<sup>24</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edition, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> A. Elizabeth Elz, "The Awakening and *A Lost Lady*: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers," (*Southern Literary Journal* 35 (2003): 13-27), 20.

<sup>26</sup> J. Gerard Dollar, "Community and Connectedness in *A Lost Lady*," (*Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History (The BYU Symposium)*, Ed. John J. Murphy, Provo, Utah: BYU Humanities Publication Center, 1990,189-94),189.



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- <sup>27</sup> Jo Ann Middleton, *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique*, (Cranbury, NJ: Associate University Presses, 1990).
- <sup>28</sup> Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin* 102.
- <sup>29</sup> “Although Willa Cather never joined any women’s movement or took part in suffragist marches like [Ellen] Glasgow, she was a feminist to the core” (96). For an extended discussion on Cather see Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri’s *American Women Novelists: A Feminist Interpretation of the Role of the Male Protagonist in the Novels of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather*.
- <sup>30</sup> Nancy A. Walker, Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts, (*The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, Ed. Nancy Walker, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000, 3-21), 14.
- <sup>31</sup> *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, (*The Awakening: An Authoritative Text Biographical and Historical Contexts Criticism*, Ed. Margo Culley, New York: Norton, 1994), 163.
- <sup>32</sup> Charles L. Deyo, “From ‘The Newest Book’,” (*Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, Ed. Alice Hall Petry, New York: G.K. Hall and Company, 1996, 54-6), 54.
- <sup>33</sup> Mary Papke, *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 24.
- <sup>34</sup> Elsa Nettels, *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*, (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997), 6.
- <sup>35</sup> For a male narrator’s reaction to Edna, see Kate Chopin’s poem “The Haunted Chamber.” Emily Toth remarks, “Then, just after she read proofs for *The Awakening*, Chopin also wrote a rare poem in a man’s voice, foreshadowing how men would misinterpret, and malign, Edna Pontellier” (*Unveiling Kate Chopin* 218). The 22-line poem has a distinct refrain: “Yet the woman was dead and could not deny, / But women forever will whine and cry” (lines 16-7), “But women forever will whine and cry / And men forever must listen—and sigh—” (lines 21-2).
- <sup>36</sup> Niel’s describes Ivy Peters as a “well-grown boy of eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a shabby corduroy hunting suit, [...] He walked with a rude, arrogant stride, kicking at the twigs, and carried himself with unnatural erectness [...] There was something defiant and suspicious about the way he held his head” (Cather 17-8).
- <sup>37</sup> Ann Heilmann, “*The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction,” (*The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, Ed. Janet Beer, New York: Cambridge UP, 2008. 87-104), 92.
- <sup>38</sup> Kate McCullough, *Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women’s Fiction, 1885-1914*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 226.
- <sup>39</sup> Susan S. Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 19.
- <sup>40</sup> Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), 218.
- <sup>41</sup> Willa Cather, “A Creole Bovary,” (*Pittsburgh Leader*, *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text Biographical and Historical Contexts Criticism*, Ed. Margo Culley, New York: Norton, 1994), 170-72.

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<sup>42</sup> Sharon O'Brien discusses Cather's criticisms of *The Awakening* in 1899 explaining that they stemmed from her distaste of the subject matter, rather than Chopin herself. "Cather was distressed when she found the sensationalist's alliance of romantic love and feminine weakness in a novel by a woman writer she respected [Chopin]" (181). O'Brien continues, "Like the failed 'women of brains' [Cather] attacked in her review of Chopin's novel, the sensationalists struck Cather as potential but failed artists. Because they possessed the prerequisites of great art—passion and imagination—these authors annoyed Cather far more than writers like Stowe, whom she viewed as simply didactic" (182). Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 178-183.

<sup>43</sup> Elaine Showalter, 67.

<sup>44</sup> "Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late." Kate Chopin on *The Awakening* (Appeared in *Book News* "Aims and Autographs of Authors," August 1899, The statement was dated May 28, 1899).

<sup>45</sup> Margo Culley characterizes Chopin's response to severe criticism of the novel on May 28, 1899 as a "tounge-in-cheek" note presented as a "retraction." From "Biographical and Historical Contexts," *The Awakening*, Ed. Margo Culley, (New York: Norton, 1994), 178.

<sup>46</sup> Priscilla Leder, "Land's End: *The Awakening* and 19th-Century Literary Tradition," (*Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, Ed. Alive Hall Petry, New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), 237.

<sup>47</sup> For *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett adopts a traditional, regional narrative framework, which Nancy Walker articulates in *Kate Chopin: A Literary Life* as "a narrative voice representative of the class and perspective of the reader, who introduces the 'different' characters and scenes and thus serves as a genteel barrier between the normal and the odd" (*Kate Chopin* 90).

<sup>48</sup> In my research on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Mrs. Todd is the most notable example of a woman who wears many hats in the small forgotten sea town. In addition to her professional conversation and exchange of knowledge with the doctor (Jewett 4), and sought-after skills as an herbalist, she is also a "rustic philosopher," a "mariner" (32), and is immortalized by the narrator as a woman who "might belong to any age, like an idyl of Theocritus" (59).