Queer Landscapes:

New England Female Farmers and Masculinity in the Midwest

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Abstract

This article outlines expressions of female masculinity in writing from rural New England. An initial framing of the enclosed New England garden as symbolic of feminine normalization allows for an analysis of two forms of subversion of this norm in regional short stories from the nineteenth century. The article begins with an exploration of the figure of the female farmer (and the resulting rejection of the traditional True Woman) in short stories by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. It continues with a comparison to newly emerging depictions of the masculine New Woman symbolically situated in the open expanse of the Midwest, as found in Willa Cather's short story "Tommy, the Unsentimental." Such a comparative line of questioning enables deeper reflection on regional literary expressions of female masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century.

Keywords

Female Masculinity; Inversion; Mary E. Wilkins Freeman; Nature; New England Regionalism; Sarah Orne Jewett; "Tommy, the Unsentimental"; Willa Cather.

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The French figure of the female *flâneuse*, embodied by people such as George Sand, reveals the connection between female masculine freedom and the modern city streets during the nineteenth century. Likewise, in the United States, the traditional emphasis on feminine domesticity began to be increasingly questioned by women who aspired to differing ideals of autonomy; a gendered rebellion that often played out against the backdrop of the cityscape.[1] From Plato and Aristotle to the Middle Ages, female bodies have been traditionally representative of the private realm, the natural world, passivity, and the biological immanence of reproduction, with male bodies affiliated with public culture and reason. This gender dichotomy was increasingly complicated in the nineteenth century, evolving toward new figurations of cultural femaleness in which the feminine "True Woman" of the early and mid-nineteenth century came under threat from changing attitudes to the politicization of gender. As the more masculine figure of the "New Woman" strode out to take her place in what had been previously considered the male domain (through economic independence, politics, and suffrage), she served to transcend traditional spaces of femininity: private domestic space, flower gardens, and the ever-symbolic hearth.[2]

Jack Halberstam's quintessential *Female Masculinity* (1998) catalogues the diverse gender expressions of masculine women across history (and thus the construction of masculinity itself), reimagining masculinity through queer and female bodies. With her bobbed hair, independent spirit, and masculine-tailored attire, the fin-de-siècle New Woman is often thought to be an early queer figure, and the city her domain.[3] An intrinsic product of modernity and civilization, she is an exponent of urban contexts, and thus her placement within agrarian locales appears somewhat curious. The following article will nonetheless underline the depiction of two forms of the rural "New Woman" in various short stories by three nineteenth-century writers: Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Willa Cather. It will move chronologically from a contextual framing of the traditional True Woman—as symbolized through the feminized enclosed flower gardens of New England—toward the figure of the female farmer, arguably a form of New Woman found in the rural US East. It will extend further outward, both figuratively and geographically, via a close reading of Cather's depiction of the New Woman in the rural Midwest in "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (1896). Cather's story is not only an example of emerging questions of queer sexual identity in regards to the New Woman, it also contains references to queer sexual desire. Such a line of questioning will provide a deeper understanding of regional literary expressions of female masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century, moving the argument away from the urban New Woman as the only turn-of-the-century figure of queer female masculinity in the United States and therefore adding to criticism on

the myriad transgressive gender expressions from the period.

"Planting potaters . . . jest like a man": The Female Farmer

Flowers have traditionally been gendered feminine in Western culture, while domesticity (including floriculture) is also considered a conventionally feminine domain. From the traditional gender roles delineated in gardening and housekeeping manuals to the constructed notion of separate spheres, the horticultural practice of an enclosed New England flower garden was commonly associated with the figure of the feminine True Woman in the early nineteenth century. In 1966, the critic Barbara Welter derived the social concept of the "Cult of True Womanhood," in which the middle-class True Woman was considered sentimental and submissive, pious, and pure. Certainly, by the early nineteenth century, the work role of domestic labor that had previously determined a woman's lot had now come to define her very "womanhood," one demarcated by traditional "feminine" virtues. New Hampshire-born Sarah Josepha Hale, writer and editor of *Godey's Ladies Book* from 1837 to 1877, wrote that young women should "cultivate those virtues which only can be represented by the fairest flowers" (v). The early nineteenth century thus drew a clear connection between the feminine woman of what Welter calls the "Cult of True Womanhood" and the beauty of a bloom. J. Samaine Lockwood points out how, more specifically, the region of New England was "repeatedly personified" by the end of the nineteenth century "as feminine and spinsterly" (6). The flowers of a New England garden were reflective of this, assemblages of symmetrical borders, enclosed by high walls, and planted according to popular taste in the early nineteenth century: the "old-fashioned flowers our grandmothers loved," such as phlox, larkspur, pansies and hollyhocks (Thaxter 44-45).

While the flower garden was indeed considered part of the feminine sphere, the rougher activities of vegetable gardening and farming were thought to be of the masculine domain. The delineation between the feminine flower garden and the masculine vegetable garden is made clear in Jane Wells Webb's *Gardening for Ladies* (1840), in which the author notes that "whatever doubts may be entertained as to the practicability of a lady attending to the culture of culinary vegetables and fruit-trees, none can exist respecting her management of the flower garden, as that is pre-eminently a woman's department" (qtd. in Davidoff and Hall 374). This is reflected in New England fiction, as Jewett's "A Garden Story" (1886) details how although Old Mike O'Brien is unable to take care of Miss Ann Dunning's flower garden he nevertheless "might be trusted to take the whole care of her six short rows of beans and forty hills of potatoes" (106). There is clearly a gendered distinction between flowers and vegetables in Jewett's writing, and while flowers are feminine, farming is not, meaning

that masculine female farmers of New England fiction are considered "queer" in a way that often invites suspicion from the local community.

The motif of the female farmer can be found throughout US fiction. Janet M. Labrie's "The Depiction of Women's Field Work in Rural Fiction" (1993) outlines the importance of agricultural tasks and independent farming to the autonomy of female characters in novels of frontier rural life written by US women writers. Female farmers find "satisfaction" in agricultural work that is "freely chosen," and a positive connection to the landscape, with rural landscape "offer[ing] women a potential for escaping gender limitations" and removing them from "the centers of socially constructed relationships and behaviors" (Labrie 119, 120). Labrie further argues that farming allows these girls and women to "transcend [their] otherwise limiting domestic role" and that these female farmers take pleasure from the work as "a creative effort and as a method of self-enablement" through which they are able to "slip past the restrictions of the typical female role" (123, 130). While Labrie's examples are taken from early twentieth-century novels based on the frontier rather than New England, gender role-defying female farmers can be traced back even further to the regional short stories of Jewett and Freeman, published half a century earlier.

In Jewett's "Farmer Finch" (1885), the failing family farm and the subsequent threat of starvation means that Polly must leave her job as a schoolteacher to become a vegetable farmer. The pleasure she takes from the change in situation, as well as her repeated wish that she had "been a boy" ("Farmer Finch" 63), allows the narrator to outline her "queer" nature: "'I always had a great knack at making things grow, and I never should be so happy anywhere as working out-doors and handling a piece of land. I'd rather work with a hoe than a ferule any day,' and she gave the queer little laugh again" ("Farmer Finch" 64). Domesticity as the antithesis of farm work is emphasized by Polly herself, who replaces "house-keeping" with "farm-keeping" ("Farmer Finch" 65). In a further step away from traditional femininity, she becomes increasingly distant from her previous courtship with her neighbor to the point that she is "repulse[d]" by him ("Farmer Finch" 71). Polly's mother's fears concerning her daughter's rejection of the suitor are clearly based on her understanding of traditional gender values, as she tells Polly, "[a] woman's better to have a home of her own" ("Farmer Finch" 71). It is another neighbor, a woman this time, who offers Polly an alternative source of hope through the story of a woman named Serena Allen: "she run [sic] the farm, and lived well, and laid up a handsome property. She was some years older than I, but she hasn't been dead a great many years. She'd plow a piece of ground as well as a man. They used to call her Farmer Allen. She was as nice a woman as I ever knew" ("Farmer Finch" 75). Farmer Allen's transgressive masculinity

is emphasized through language such as "handsome," alongside her ability to work "as well as a man," and Polly, excited by her own possibility to become "a boy," readily vows to become "renowned as Farmer Finch," choosing to farm instead of the alternative option of marriage ("Farmer Finch" 76).

Much like Farmer Allen who farmed "as well as a man," Polly becomes increasingly less of a "woman." She is described as having "uncommon shrewdness and business talent" and beats the men at the market with her haggling ("Farmer Finch" 81). Her body becomes more masculine, a "capital of strength," and her hands grow bigger ("Farmer Finch" 79). The narrator's ambiguous language both compares Polly to a man and names her as one: "[t]here never was a young man just 'out of his time' and rejoicing in his freedom, who went to work more diligently and eagerly than Polly Finch, and few have set their wits at work on a New England farm half so intelligently" ("Farmer Finch" 79). While "out of his time" here implies an apprentice who has completed his training and is ready to go into business, it might also be understood as Polly being "out of her time" in her refusal to adhere to the traditional gender roles of her era.[4] The ignominy of such gender transgression is underlined when the narrator notes that "some people laughed a good deal, and thought she ought to be ashamed to work on the farm like a man" ("Farmer Finch" 80-81). Social criticism does not deter Polly from her task to turn the farm around, however, and she does so with great dedication.

Polly's masculinization enables her to position herself as the son of the family.[5] At first, any discussion of newfangled crop methods inspired by the *American Agriculturist* enrages her ailing father, who is unconvinced by her talk and angry with the exorbitance of the land she wants to sow, believing it to be "his daughter's imprudent nonsense" ("Farmer Finch" 77).[6] However, when he sees Polly's ability to take charge, her enthusiasm to make decisions, and her hopes to turn the fortunes of the farm around, her father grows confident: "'Polly's got power,' he told himself several times that day, with great pride and satisfaction" ("Farmer Finch" 78). She discusses the farm with her father and he begins to treat her like the son to whom he was never able to pass on the farm. Instead of relying on inherited knowledge, Polly is self-educated, eventually teaching her own father in a form of gender and generational inversion. Her knowledge of new farming methods and her diligence in emulating them results in her ability to claim a stake in the landscape and achieve "power."[7] For Jack Halberstam, masculinity is the connection between maleness and power and can be accessed through drag-king performances, butch identity, or trans identity (2). Polly's emulation of a farmer, and thus power, emphasizes her queer subversion of the True Woman, for while she initially adopted this role to save her family from poverty, it nevertheless also allows her to achieve her repeated wish that she had "been a boy" ("Farmer Finch" 63).

If flowers are indeed feminine, Polly's loss of femininity through farming is reflected by the lack of flowers in the surrounding landscape, which is desolate with the "leafless bushes and fluffy brown tops of the dead asters and golden-rods" and the "tattered bits of blackberry vine" that grow stark against the winter sky ("Farmer Finch" 40). Nonetheless, it is ultimately the barberry bush that symbolizes the breakdown of uniform understandings of the world. Initially, Polly sees the bush as "gray and winterish," but when looked at from a different direction it is "glowing with rubies" in the evening sun ("Farmer Finch" 40). The plant symbolizes Polly's escape from binary thinking when she concludes that "[t]here are two ways of looking at more things than barberry bushes" ("Farmer Finch" 41). While this is initially understood as a message of hope in the face of poverty, it might also reflect on Polly's gender transgression in her decision to become a farmer. The sterility of the landscape, as well as its concealed berries, also represents Polly's decision to step into the boots of the farmer's son, for it underlines further how she has chosen to discontinue (or at least complicate) notions of inheritance. Polly refuses marriage and the potential promise of a future son, choosing instead to nurture the fertile earth.

The figure of the female farmer is repeated in sketches by Freeman, Jewett's acquaintance and contemporary. In "Louisa" (1890), Louisa Britton's decision to farm instead of marrying a rich local suitor queers her in the eyes of her mother, who is livid at her daughter's rejection of Jonathan Nye's courting:

> Once in a while her mother, after a furtive glance at Jonathan, engrossed in a town book, would look at her and gesticulate fiercely for her to come over, but she did not stir. Her eyes were dull and quiet, her mouth closely shut; she looked homely. Louisa was very pretty when pleased and animated, at other times she had a look like a closed flower. One could see no prettiness in her. ("Louisa" 714)

Louisa's floral femininity is replaced by the masculinity of a farmer, as she works the earth to feed her family. The odor of the farm begins to permeate her body, and she smells earthy, "[l]ike a breath from a ploughed field," her face is "as sunburnt as a boy's," and her hands are "brown and grimy with garden-mould" ("Louisa" 714). Knowing that her suitor could save her and her ailing family from abject poverty, Louisa stubbornly prefers to plant "potaters [. . .] jest like a man" or to rake hay "with the men" ("Louisa" 714, 715). Her masculine attire and departure from femininity is a direct contrast to her mother's expectations:

> Mrs. Britton had turned white. She sank into a chair. "I can't stan' it nohow," she moaned. "All the daughter I've got."
> "Don't, mother! I ain't done any harm. What harm is it? Why can't I rake hay as well as a man? Lots of women do such things, if nobody round here does. ("Louisa" 715)

This example of such other women who "do such things" hints at women's changing expectations while underlining the peculiarity of Louisa's step from farmer's daughter—or potential future farmer's wife—to farmer herself. Her mother's stricken face, her weakness as she needs to sit down, and her pained moans are all a response to the symbolic loss of her daughter ("[a]ll the daughter I've got"). While Labrie notes that the pleasure girls and women take in participating in active farm work depends on whether they are forced to do this field labor by their fathers or husbands, Jewett and Freeman's female farmers Polly and Louisa farm specifically in order to *escape* marriage. Likewise, they take a certain pleasure from masculinity, undaunted by the changes in their bodies and in the ways in which they are ostracized by the community that surrounds them.

Freeman's Mrs. King in "A Modern Dragon" (1887), on the other hand, suffers particularly deeply for her masculinity due to the opinions of her community. The "King," one might say, of her domain, she is a farmer who "worked in the field and garden like a man" and is described by the narrator as "coarse and unwomanly" ("A Modern Dragon" 71, 72): "an odd figure, short and stout, with a masculine width of shoulders. Her calico dress cleared her thick ankles, her black hair was cut short, and she wore a man's straw hat" ("A Modern Dragon" 63). Her masculine clothing, short hair, and unfeminine build result in her "oddness," which inevitably ostracizes her—and as a result, her daughter Almira—from society. As the narrator notes, "[p]retty as Almira was, no Dover young man had ever paid her the slightest attention, beyond admiring looks. They were kept aloof by the peculiarities of her mother" ("A Modern Dragon" 67). This becomes clear when Almira falls in love with a local man whose mother, Mrs. Ayres, refuses to allow the match. Her disapproval is due to Mrs. King herself, and when the latter asks the former's housemaid why, she receives the following response: "'Wa'al, I guess it's on account of your wearin' your dresses half-way up to your knees, and them cowhide shoes, and that hat, and hevin' your hair cut so short'" ("A Modern Dragon" 73).

Mrs. King's masculinity distances her from domestic femininity and she decides to change in order to persuade Mrs. Ayres to agree to the match. The next time the Ayres family sees Mrs. King is in church, where she has considerably "feminized" herself through her clothing and a clipped-in braid. The very performance of these gestures is emphasized by the narrator, who

notes that she does it in order to be seen:

> [s]he had on a decent long black dress and a neat bonnet. Her short hair had given way to a braided knot. She sat in the pew and listened solemnly to the sermon, regardless of the attention she excited. All she took pains to notice was that David Ayres and his mother were there. She made sure of that, and that they were looking at her. (Freeman, "A Modern Dragon" 74)

Mrs. King eventually worries herself to death over her daughter's unhappiness over the rejection, and Almira is only reconciled with David Ayres on her mother's deathbed. While Polly and Louisa are thus able to farm their way out of marriage, Mrs. King is forced to feminize her body in a sacrificial attempt to provide social acceptance and a betrothal for her daughter. It is only her death that enables Almira's marriage, and indeed the death of queer characters is a queer trope that spans centuries.[8] It certainly seems that masculine women for Jewett and Freeman, while powerful in their strength of body and mind, are at risk of ostracism, rejection, and death.

Constructions of Womanhood: From the New England True Woman to the New Woman of the West

Having to feminize oneself in order to be socially acceptable is a time-worn tactic. Early figurations of the New Woman, which developed throughout the nineteenth century, took the form of proto-feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose genteel aesthetic afforded them a certain amount of protection from public admonishment. Their caution was most likely a result of early attacks in the press, which continued throughout the nineteenth century. Journalists such as Harry F. Harrington wrote in "Female Education," published in *The Ladies' Companion* in 1838, that women who aspired to education were "mental hermaphrodites" and "semi women" (qtd. in Welter 173), while Edward H. Clarke argued several decades later in 1873 that educating women led to "a dropping out of maternal instincts, and an appearance of Amazonian coarseness and force," linking this to "[a]cute or chronic disease" and an "abnormal brain" (93, 92, 96).

By cultivating femininity in a conventional sense, as well as emphasizing the pious nature of their activities, this early generation of proto-feminists attempted to avoid the smear of "abnormality." However, these feminine-feminists hung on to feminine gender constructions to such an extent that for the next wave of "New Women," it became the very battlefront on which they engaged. This resulted in a new form of "New Woman" by the end of the nineteenth century, a figure who had begun to challenge what it even meant

to be a woman at all. Gender, indeed, had become political, with the gender-based backlash reaching a peak by the 1880s and 1890s, as the newly *masculine* figuration of the "New Woman" stepped into the public sphere.

When one imagines the typical New Woman, it is indeed her end-of-the-century incarnation that first comes to mind. Through their expectations of social equality and independence, these bicycle-riding women in breeches overturned traditional understandings of gender, fully embracing the "New" over the "True." In the 1904 essay "The Passing of Dora," the American novelist (and contemporary of Jewett and Freeman) Margaret Deland uses the example of Charles Dickens's Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield* (1850) to mount a scathing attack on the "modern girl" who has never heard of the "silly, pretty, useless" Dora (66). Nor does she care to meet her, Deland adds, who writes of "sniff[ing] at the mention of [her], and declin[ing] to read about her" (70). Deland notes further how "[i]t is evident that the feminine ideal of which Dora was the embodiment has gone out of fashion as completely as her hoop-skirt or her shawl or her queer little poke-bonnet!" (73), going on to comment on the new "fashion": namely the "masculinity" of modern girls. She writes that the modern "Jane" has "done her best to eliminate femininity. She dresses as much like the boys as she dares; she uses their slang; she plays their games; she imitates their hare-brained pluck, their apparently stolid indifference to prettiness and daintiness; she dreads being ladylike quite as much as they do" (75). For Deland, the symbol of "Jane" is a threat to femininity, her "artificial" emulation of masculinity both undesirable and untenable (80-81). Cather's "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (1899) offers a literary example of just such a "Jane" that Deland outlines so scornfully. Much like another infamous Jane, Cather's is tied firmly to the masculine-identified West.

The West is traditionally configured as a "masculine space" in literary and cultural discourse, and the realities of frontier life meant that gender roles were notably fluid. Cather's pioneer trilogy—with its demarcation of town and farm, an often sexualized emphasis on the laboring bodies of women, and references to masculinity and queer desire—is a rich source when considering questions of queer rural space (see Lindemann and Neill). Annette Kolodny notes that the literature of US women writers published between 1630 and 1860 viewed the Western landscape as space ripe to be converted into the domesticated space of the garden. Labrie notes this motif in Cather's *O Pioneers* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), in which the land is "gardened into a domestic center" (126).[9] Cather's Ántonia is the obvious comparison to Jewett's Polly and Freeman's Louisa and Mrs. King. However, instead of treading over already-furrowed ground through a queer reading of Cather's titular character (see Adams, Fetterley, Gonzales), this article will analyze a short story by the author in which female masculinity is not just linked to the open expanse of

the landscapes of the Midwest but is also compared to the New England True Woman in its depiction of sexual intimacies between women.

Michelle Ann Abate notes how "Tommy, the Unsentimental" aligns with modernist forms of queer sexuality, and indeed the figure of Tommy embodies these new conceptions of masculine women, particularly in the West. Tommy's masculinity is evident. She has been brought up by "old speculators and men of business" who have "been her advisers on many points upon which men seldom feel at liberty to address a girl" and have thus "taken her mother's place" (Cather, "Tommy" 6). This upbringing underlines Tommy's contrast to a traditional nineteenth-century middle-class American childhood in which girls were brought up within the intimate female sphere of their mother, and thus serves to question Tommy's departure from traditional "natural" concepts of womanhood.

Tommy's father has "big land interests" in Wyoming, his need to visit frequently resulting in Tommy's own increased autonomy as she is left to take care of his business, aided by the more common integration of women into public life in the West: "[p]eople rather expect some business ability in a girl there, and they respect it immensely" ("Tommy" 6). The notion of "big land" is what represents Tommy's masculinity, as expressed against the backdrop of the Midwest. Unlike the feminine, domesticated, enclosed gardens of the East, Tommy operates within the open expanse of "sun-parched bluffs" and "scorched corn fields and grazing lands" ("Tommy" 6, 7). The spatial metaphor of the landscape expands Tommy's corporeal limits and suggests the notion of pushing boundaries, whether in relation to land interests or, on a much deeper level, to gender and sexual desire. The comparison of gendered private/public space is often employed, yet here it is inarguably applicable: the Midwest allows Tommy freedom in the form of masculinity.

Like Cather herself, who masculinized her name from Wilella to "Willie," "William," or "Billy," Tommy aligns herself with a name that underlines her masculine proclivities (like Tommy, Cather adopted a masculine style, cutting her hair and wearing tailored clothing and ties). Etymologically, a "Tom" denotes a "rude, boisterous boy" while "Tomboy" has meant "wild, romping girl, girl who acts like a spirited boy" as well as "strumpet, bold or immodest woman" since the sixteenth century (*OED*). By the nineteenth century, its meaning was closer to the former than the latter, and Cather's character certainly "acts like a spirited boy." Cather describes Tommy as "of a peculiarly unfeminine mind," "logical" and oblivious to the attractions of men, taking "no particular interest in them, probably just because they were practical and sensible and thoroughly of her own kind" ("Tommy" 6). She plays whist and billiards, "distinguish[es] herself in athletics," and makes cocktails for her companions, an unfeminine activity that wins her a place in male

society: "professional compounders of drinks always bowed respectfully to her as though acknowledging a powerful rival" ("Tommy" 6). Tommy is boyish, with her "lank figure of an active half grown lad" and her "shrewd face, that was so like a clever wholesome boy's" ("Tommy" 6). The terms "boy" and "half grown lad" emphasize not just her masculinity but also her youth, a factor that allows her to be masculine within the unthreatening figuration of the "tomboy." Like the Midwest itself, Tommy is "mid," in-between; a "lad," but only a "half grown" one.

Labrie writes that "women soften the wilderness" in their ability to create comfort, "with their skills at making soap, candles, quilts, clothes, homes, herbal medicines, and babies" (121). To Labrie, this contribution to frontier family life provides women with equality, however Tommy does not choose such an egalitarian path. Instead, Tommy emulates the men who surround her, choosing to ignore the women who are only interested, in Tommy's opinion, in "babies and salads" (Cather, "Tommy" 6). It is upon her return from her schooling in the East, older, and with another girl in tow, that Tommy's masculinity poses a problem to her community: "it was a bad sign when a rebellious girl like Tommy took to being sweet and gentle to one of her own sex, the worst sign in the world" ("Tommy" 7). The very Western Tommy and the very Eastern Miss Jessica are a solid contrast, the gender difference between the two women exaggerated by Cather. Unlike the masculine Tommy, Miss Jessica is "a dainty, white languid bit of a thing, who used violet perfumes and carried a sunshade" ("Tommy" 7). Miss Jessica thus emulates the New England True Woman—and her enclosed garden—through Cather's reference to the floral feminine. Tommy is baffled by Miss Jessica's genteel nature, as symbolized by the flower: "a maiden most discreet," she is modest and a shrinking violet (emphasized by her violet scent and her recoil from the sun). This modesty results in Tommy finding her difficult to read, and indeed "Tommy sometimes wondered if [Miss Jessica] were capable of having any [feelings] at all" ("Tommy" 7).

Miss Jessica does have intense feelings, however, and they are firmly directed toward Tommy. When out riding their bicycles, Tommy is cruel to Miss Jessica and the reader is allowed some insight into the latter's thoughts:

> It flashed upon Miss Jessica that Tommy was not only very unkind, but that she sat very badly on her wheel and looked aggressively masculine and professional when she bent her shoulders and pumped like that. But just then Miss Jessica found it harder than ever to breathe, and the bluffs across the river began doing serpentines and skirt dances, and more important and personal considerations occupied the young lady. (Cather, "Tommy" 7)

Any keen cyclist will be quick to note that a ride in what Cather describes as the "sickening, destroying heat" of the Midwestern United States wearing heavy nineteenth-century skirts would make anyone out of breath ("Tommy" 7). Nonetheless, Miss Jessica's breathlessness in the face of Tommy's "aggressively masculine" posture on the bicycle implies more lust than lassitude ("Tommy" 7). The serpentine nature of the river suggests temptation and the "skirt dances" the figure of Salomé. Miss Jessica is flustered by her attraction to Tommy, the use of the word "pumped" teasingly sexual. Tommy notes Miss Jessica's romantic inclinations as she remarks the following to a friend: "I think the lack of romance in the escapade did her up about as much as anything; she is essentially romantic. If we had been on fiery steeds bespattered with foam I think she would have made it" ("Tommy" 7). Here we can find the New England modest violet, withering in the Western sun, contrasted with Tommy's masculine "indifference." Tommy's inability or lack of interest in Miss Jessica's "romantic" nature is underlined in the title of the story. She is, in fact, "sentimental" (a word closely tied to femininity), while Tommy, as clearly stated by the title, is not. "Tommy, the Unsentimental" thus underlines the clear distinctions between a feminine "violet" from the East as compared to a more masculine "New Woman" from the Midwest. The opposition between East and West is stated clearly, as not only do Tommy's companions consider the East "a sign of weakening," the vast rugged expanse of the West is also directly contrasted to the feminine floral culture emphasized in New England.

Miss Jessica's eligibility and unmarried status are underlined through the repeated emphasis on "Miss," in a way that the singular title "Tommy" avoids. Although the story concludes with a heterosexual marriage plot, in which Miss Jessica is linked to Tommy's acquaintance Jay Ellington, there are clues throughout the story as to the queer subtext. When Tommy assumes Miss Jessica's feelings for Jay, for example, she mutters to herself, "[w]ell, your kind have the best of it generally, but in little affairs of this sort my kind come out rather strongly. We're rather better at them than at dancing. It's only fair, one side shouldn't have all" (Cather, "Tommy" 7).

Another clue as to Tommy's queer "nature" might again be found in her name. Tommy was born Theodosia, a potential reference to Theodosia Burr Shepherd (1845-1906), also known as the "Pioneer Seed-grower" or the "Flower Wizard of California." Shepherd is considered the first female horticulturalist of the United States, her specialty being floral hybrids. Cather's choice of name may therefore be a subtle reference to the unnatural process of hybridization in the context of the potential masculine invert. By the end of the nineteenth century, the ideas and values of these New Women were increasingly subject to ridicule in the press, with medical and psychological discourses attacking their rejection of femininity through the vocabulary of

"natural" and "unnatural." Sexologists such as Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal and his disciple Richard von Krafft-Ebing created the notion of the "congenital invert" or "urning." In a description similar to Deland's "Jane," Krafft-Ebing noted the invert's exterior masculinization through cutting her hair, dressing "in male fashion," and participating in "manly sports" (264). She is a "rival" to boys, "preferring the rocking-horse, playing at soldiers etc., to dolls and other girlish occupations" (Krafft-Ebing 264). This "unnatural" figure was used to scare women away from any women's rights activism, as her existence thrust relationships between women that had been previously presumed innocent into a new spotlight of suspicion. Instead of presenting the role of Tommy as "unnatural," however, Cather's sketch serves to humanize her.

For Cather, both the East and flowers are used to express femininity, whether for men or for women. While Miss Jessica is described as a "violet," the character of Jay Ellington Harper, her eventual spouse, is communicated through the flower in his buttonhole. Jay is a Wildean "cad," with "charming methods" and "inclinations," who "had made a sad mess of his college career, and had spent too much money and gone at too giddy a pace down East" (Cather, "Tommy" 6). Tellingly, he wears a "white carnation in his buttonhole," symbolic of Oscar Wilde's own green-petaled statement ("Tommy" 6). Tommy tells Jay to marry Miss Jessica in what seems to be a marriage of convenience, or a "lavender marriage," and he does so, even if he is unhappy about it: "Jay Ellington Harper dropped into a chair and turned a shade whiter. 'Theodosia, what do you mean? Don't you remember what I said to you last fall, the night before you went to school? Don't you remember what I wrote you—'" ("Tommy" 7). What is the reader supposed to understand from this m-dash? Presumably that Jay is in love with Tommy. However, if one considers the white carnation in his buttonhole, a glaring reminder of Jay's "inclinations," it might be suggested that this epistolary revelation was a confession of homosexuality, with Tommy replying as follows: "we have been playing a nice little game, and now it's time to quit. One must grow up sometime" ("Tommy" 7). As Jay goes to propose marriage to Miss Jessica, his carnation is left crumpled on the floor. When Tommy picks it up, she "bit[es] her lip" in a gesture of silence that symbolizes the increasing difficulties of expressing queerness. Here queerness takes the form of gender subversion, as illustrated by Jay's conclusion, when he wearily remarks to Tommy, "You almost made a man of even me," to which Tommy replies, "Well, I certainly didn't succeed" ("Tommy" 7).[10]

Emerging Queer Expression: From New England Marriages to Masculine Masquerade

"Tommy, the Unsentimental" is a story of queer desire and gender subversion, an exploration of both female masculinity and male femininity through the

use of rural space and, more specifically, the flowers that can be found in it. Nevertheless, Cather was wary of depicting blatant homosexuality in her writing. The reason for this can be found in a 1908 letter to Cather from Sarah Orne Jewett. The letter underlines the clear transition from so-called feminine writing to a more "masculine" kind, and the significant generational shift it signifies. It also highlights Jewett's connection to femininity in her understanding of desire between women, as the author was curious as to why Cather felt the need to hide behind a masculine-signifying narrator:

> [W]ith what deep happiness and recognition I have read the "McClure" story,—night before last I found it with surprise and delight. It made me feel very near to the writer's young and loving heart. The lover is as well done as he could be when a woman writes in the man's character,—it must always, I believe, be something of a masquerade. I think it is safer to write about him as you did about the others, and try not to be he! And you could almost have done it as yourself—a woman could love her in that same protecting way—a woman could even care enough to wish to take her away from such a life, by some means or other. (*Letters* 246-47)

The "McClure' story" is "On the Gulls' Road," published in 1908, in which Cather's narrator falls in love with a woman [he] meets on the boat from Italy. The narrator is known as the "Ambassador," implying [his] role as representative of something else, potentially a female protagonist passing as a man.[11] Cather here marks the shift in attitudes toward female masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though she was indebted to writers like Jewett (her mentor while she lived in Boston), she nevertheless publicly distanced herself from "feminine" characters in her preference for male narrators (and later also from Jewett's own "confined" work; see Woodress). Sharon O'Brien notes how Cather "had to resort to male masks," because she "never completely freed herself from male constructions of femininity" ("The Thing Not Named" 596). Heather Love suggests that Cather's "virulent misogyny" (166) was born from what Love calls the "labor pains of a newly public 'homosexual identity'" (92). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls Cather an "effeminophobic bully," noting that she had publicly excoriated Oscar Wilde's "reprobated, putatively feminine love of artifice" (167).

Was Cather's need to use such a mask indeed due to changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality in late nineteenth-century New England society and her attempt to freely write about desire for women without fear of retribution? It certainly seems so, since as the masculine "New Woman" replaced the feminized "True Woman" it became less and less possible for women to love each other "in that same protecting way," as Jewett puts it,

in literature (*Letters* 247). It seems that Cather was unable to write of love between women in the way that Jewett—a woman from an earlier generation of writers—was only suggesting, implying the growing anxieties surrounding such desire. It was no longer possible to be explicit, an idea expressed by Cather herself as she writes of the "inexplicable presence of the thing not named" in her own writing ("The Novel Démeublé" 6). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that Cather used this "masquerade" precisely to "question her precursor's more utopian association of women and nature" (197), while Melissa Homestead writes that "Cather and [her partner Edith] Lewis lived in a different historical era from Fields and Jewett, one in which love between women was labeled as deviant and pathological and in which lesbians could be subjected to discrimination and brutal repression" (27).

Nonetheless, these writers still overlapped in their publication dates, and while Cather's correspondence shows her struggling with her own sexual feelings, Fields and Jewett were in an openly loving relationship until Jewett's death in 1909, only a year after the publication of "On the Gulls' Road." Homestead writes that it would be "a mistake to read, in circular fashion, the absence of literary representations of romantic love between women in Cather's fiction back onto Cather's life as evidence that she was afflicted with shame and lived a secret life in the closet" (27). Cather's relationship with Edith Lewis from 1908 to 1947 was known to many: "Cather and Lewis's relationship was open and visible to their biological families, their professional colleagues, and their circles of friends and acquaintances" (Homestead 21). Nevertheless, Cather was clearly anxious about portraying such desires openly, and thus her queer characters are either concealed, masked, or suffer an unhappy ending.

Fields and Jewett's tolerated coupledom implies that the acceptability of middle-class female relationships in New England accordingly hinged on their perceived femininity, with the notion that women were able to caress one another under the pretext that it would not extend beyond that into a sexual relationship. The emphasis on the "femininity" of New England is derived from the economic and social specificities of the region in the nineteenth century. Jennifer Bailey notes that while "[m]ale New England was the provincial utopia of Emerson and Thoreau [. . . w]hen the cultural and commercial world ebbed away, it became a woman's world by default" (284). This "woman's world" (and thus a lack of men) resulted in the development of intimacies between women at a pace different to the masculine-identified West, and the domestic arrangement of the New England (or Boston) marriage was intrinsic to its regional connection. If a woman began to dress and act in a masculine way, this changed the nature of such intimacies. A feminine woman, even if she was living with another woman, even if their letters were loving, even if they wanted to be buried together, was thus beyond suspicion. Critic

Lillian Faderman writes that Jewett's letter to Cather "must have made Cather blush—but Jewett probably would not have known what she was blushing about" (202). While such a claim delineates the necessary performative femininity practiced by women such as Jewett, the assumption that Jewett, in her sexual naïveté, would "not have known" is thoroughly disproven by her use of sensual language in myriad letters and diaries.[12]

Jewett's relationship with Cather has been explored by various Cather biographers: Judith Fryer, Hermione Lee, Sharon O'Brien, and James Woodress write about the friendship between both women and the impact this had on the latter's writing. Nevertheless, in both the expanded version of the preface entitled "Miss Jewett" and in "148 Charles Street," which is contained in the 1936 volume *Not Under Forty*, Cather states that Jewett "confined herself" (91) to her depictions of New England life within the narrow context of a short story, her "little volumes" for "a limited audience" (92). However, it is arguable that New England writers such as Jewett and Freeman, in their general emphasis on femininity, actually protected themselves from the glaring light (or Midwestern sun?) that shone on intimacies between women due to the masculinity of those like Tommy (and Cather herself). In Jewett and Freeman, therefore, femininity allows queer desire space to grow, as undetected and protected as a violet, as well as providing shelter from changing assumptions about intimacies between women. Jewett's Polly and Freeman's Louisa stand alone, masculine farmers who nevertheless strive to avoid marriage and who take pleasure in their own autonomy.

In order to fully understand the alternative roots of contemporary queer and lesbian identity, it is essential to take gender into question. Thus, while the notion of a separate female sphere in the nineteenth century has been rightly questioned by critics including Kathryn Kent (3-5) and Sharon Marcus (30-31), it does allow one to analyze the emphasis on womanhood and femininity in New Englandly writing that allows for such queer nuances to blossom. A more comprehensive study of queerness in rural America might face inwards rather than outwards, toward the enclosed private gardens of feminine New England rather than masculine-identified public space, whether in the Midwest or New England itself. The rural settings of Jewett, Freeman, and Cather allow for the symbolic potential of nature to question nineteenth-century understandings of "unnatural" gender and sexuality, while also underlining the safety of concealing specific desires within the protective arms of femininity. However, while masculine women are shown to lose their lovers like Tommy, be ostracized like Polly, be shamed by their family like Louisa, or even die like Mrs. King, they are nevertheless depicted as the heroines (or perhaps heroes) of their own stories.

Notes

[1] For more on how domesticity was extended by publicly-minded women into civic housekeeping as well as women's clubs, see Sarah Deutsch's *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston* (Oxford UP, 2000) and Christine Stansell's *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Knopf, 1986).

[2] Before constructing an argument using terms such as "woman," "female," and "feminine," it is necessary to define each term. While "male" and "female" are no longer straightforward operable categories, they are nevertheless useful terms for a study of nineteenth-century writers who operated within strictly gendered modes. While I considered using the terms "AFAB" or "womxn," I eventually decided to use the term "woman" when discussing the writers under consideration who were assigned female at birth in an attempt to remain as close to nineteenth-century vocabulary as possible. These writers and the characters they created are understood through historical conceptions of "womanhood": whether "New Women" or "True Women," during a period in which notions of gender representation were undergoing significant change. This study consequently aims to avoid essentialist notions of womanhood but instead points out its very constructed nature, the words "man" and "woman" joining "masculine" and "feminine" as socially determined and historically contingent signifiers.

[3] I use the term queer instead of lesbian throughout the text for both critical and historical reasons. The official entry of the term "queer" in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as denoting same-sex attraction was made as late as 1913, in which it is defined as "[a]t variance with what is usual or normal; differing in some odd way from what is ordinary; odd; singular; strange; whimsical; as, a queer story or act," "[m]ysterious; suspicious [and] questionable" and "homosexual." Jewett wrote in a diary entry from January 1872 that the presence of her intimate friend Kate Birckhead gave her "the queerest feeling" (n.p.). By the 1890s, Cather was calling *herself* "queer" in letters to (or about) her lover Louise Pound (Lindemann 12). To Marilee Lindemann, Cather's use of such a term was a "private, terrified [act] of self-naming" (12). This marks the contrast between portrayals of New Englandly queerness and Cather's apparent anxious relationship with herself at the end of the nineteenth century.

[4] This might also be an indication of queer time, namely Polly's refusal to commit to heteronormative teleology (marriage, for example), which queers her and casts her out of normative time. See also Tommy's comments in Jewett's "Tommy, the Unsentimental," where she is described as a "half grown lad" (6), later telling Jay that "[o]ne must grow up sometime" (7). For more on notions of queer time see Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005).

[5] Labrie notes that several female characters in US novels written by women happily take on the role of farmer's son: Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical Laura in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), as well as characters in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925), Hope Williams Sykes's *Second Hoeing* (1935), and Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* (1935).

[6] The *American Agriculturalist* was an extremely successful magazine and was in print from 1842 until 1921. For more on the history of the publication, see Mott (728).

[7] Both Polly and Louisa face difficulties and objections from their male relatives. While Polly's father is merely initially skeptical of her ideas, Louisa's sick grandfather literally unearths her carefully planted potato crop.

[8] The symbolism of the "dead lesbian," initially inspired by French novels, was

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used increasingly throughout twentieth- and twenty-first century lesbian writing, continuing with the contemporary "Dead Lesbian Syndrome"/"Bury Your Gays" trope. For more on these tropes, see Liz Millward, Janice G. Dodd, and Irene Fubara-Manuel's *Killing Off the Lesbians: A Symbolic Annihilation on Film and Television*, McFarland and Company, Inc., 2017.

[9] Although Labrie notes the appearance of independent farming women in novels such as *Plow-Woman* (1906) by Eleanor Gates, *O Pioneers* (1913) by Cather, *So Big* (1924) by Edna Ferber, *Barren Ground* (1925) by Ellen Glasgow, and *Gone with the Wind* (1936) by Margaret Mitchell, she is careful to note that these characters remain secondary characters. Labrie additionally notes that there have been various autobiographies of women homesteaders, notably *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1913) by Elinore Pruitt Stewart and *Land of the Burnt Thigh* (1938) by Edith Eudora Kohl.

[10] While "Tommy, the Unsentimental" takes place in the rural Midwest, with the subversive influences of the urban East only alluded to, Cather's "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament" (1905) takes the reader to the city. The titular character's femininity is expressed through flowers. Paul works at the theatre, wears jewelry and velvet, and threads violets and carnations into his buttonhole; indeed, "there was something of the dandy about him" (Cather, "Paul's Case" 74). When he steals a large sum of money to escape his impoverished home for New York, his liberation is marked by flowers. He surrounds himself with violets and jonquils in his hotel room, and admires the flower-sellers on his walks through the city: "[h]ere and there on the corners were stands, with whole flower gardens blooming under glass cases, against the sides of which the snow-flakes stuck and melted; violets, roses, carnations, lilies of the valley, somehow vastly more lovely and alluring that they blossomed thus unnaturally in the snow" (81). For Paul, it is the unnatural quality of the blooms that gives him pleasure. When he takes his own life after fleeing the city, his death is represented by the fleeting life of flowers, and the death of the vibrant blooms he had admired on his walks: "[t]he carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed, their red glory all over. It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the glass cases that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass, and it was a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run. Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up" (83). Like the carnations, Paul's "glory" is "all over." His burial of the carnation symbolizes his weary acceptance that any resistance to the norm, or, as Cather puts it, "the homilies by which the world is run," is "a losing game." Paul would rather have "one splendid breath" than never experience the beauty he adores, and, like Wilde, he dies for his difference. When one reads Jay Ellington Harper alongside the example of Paul, it is clear that male femininity cannot survive, whether in rural or urban space, in Cather's writing.

[11] I am grateful to Stéphanie Durrans for pointing out to me the queer potential of the word "ambassador" in this context.

[12] The relationship between Jewett and Fields is indeed often desexualized by critics. Jewett biographer Margaret Roman writes that Jewett and Fields were in a relationship of "support and comfort," and she bases her argument against the existence of any further intimacy on modern conceptions of butch/femme dichotomies by making the claim that "neither Fields nor Jewett took on a specific male or female role in their association" (145).

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