

A Return to Hospitality:
The Role of the Hostess in Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather's Literary Imaginations
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*For the many hospitable women in my life:
my mother, my aunts, my grandmother, and my loving friends.*

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topic stems from certain discussions that took place among my friends and instructors while at NELP.

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Abstract

Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather were friends and professional writers, who found in each other a similar appreciation for country characters and independent women. Their literary imaginations are strongly influenced by their small-town upbringings and their appreciation for understated people. In welcoming readers into their fictional towns and acquainting them with the subtle exquisiteness of rural life, they create a vision of hospitality that impacts both how their readers relate to their narratives and how their characters develop or fail to develop into self-realized individuals. By working to expose the concept of hospitality as an overarching approach and reoccurring theme, this thesis illuminates the similarities between Cather and Jewett's heroines. The protagonists in Jewett and Cather's works of fiction, by developing themselves into devoted and empathetic hostesses, come to embody a form of hospitality that is at once selfless and influential.

Chapter one will begin by situating Jewett and Cather within the context of regionalist writing, which will provide insight into the authors' literary motivations and missions as women writers. The analysis will then diverge into a discussion of domestic fiction and domestic women, acknowledging their place in the literary canon, but also working to divorce our perception of the hospitable woman from the space of domesticity. Through a close-reading of the women-run households in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia*, the chapter will uncover the integrated reality of the hospitable home and establish the rural household as a simultaneously dramatic and harmonious center of life for Jewett and Cather's heroines.

Chapter two more deeply explores the reoccurring character of the hostess and what her role is in the hospitable process. By relying upon the studies of French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, and Jewett's own belief in the power of empathy and friendship, Cather and Jewett's hostesses reveal themselves to be intermediary beings with transcendent powers. Jewett and Cather's hostesses – such as Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, Mrs. Harling, and Antonia – use this transcendent ability to strengthen relations with their guests and welcome them into their communities. For some guests, this relationship can transform into an apprenticeship, in which the hostess trains her guest in the art of hospitality. This chapter, in tracking the development of these relationships, will also reveal how economic factors can disrupt a hostess' mission and create barriers between her and her guests.

Lastly, chapter three is used to describe the land as the ultimate host. This chapter extends the study of hospitality to both Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Jewett's short story, "A White Heron," because both works expose the land's apparent attitude towards its inhabitants. Additionally, the heroines of these works initiate sympathetic bonds with the landscape, which affords them agency within their respective environments. Acting as the land's advocate and friend, a hostess is able to create harmonious spaces where visitors can then access the restorative benefits of hospitality for themselves. The land is shown, however, only to form sympathetic bonds with Jewett and Cather's heroines, not with any of their male characters – an observation which naturally leads into a discussion of gender and the gendering of the land.

The themes of domesticity, religion, economy, gender, and the land all reveal themselves through Jewett and Cather's vision of hospitality, a vision that once recognized, illuminates the power of connection and friendship. Rooted in their foundational values as writers, hospitality weaves itself through the works of Jewett and Cather as a hopeful theme and mission. Untangling the complex portrayal of hospitality in *The Country of The Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia* allows the reader to unravel their webbed narrative structures and recognize the true heroism of the novels' hostesses. Cather and Jewett are delicately divulging the gospel of hospitality.

Keywords: hospitality, hostess, regionalism, women, domesticity, economy, land

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Short Titles

MA: Cather, Willa Sibert. *My Ántonia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924.

OP: Cather, Willa Sibert. *O Pioneers!*. Boston: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1947.

CPF: Jewett, Sarah Orne. *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Edited by Deborah Carlin. Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2010.

TH: Lynch, Paul, Jennie Germann Molz, Alison McIntosh, Peter Lugosi, and Conrad Lashley.

“Theorizing hospitality.” *Hospitality & Society* 1, no. 1 (2011): 3-24.

UOPaMA: Meyering, Sheryl L. *Understanding O Pioneers! And My Ántonia: A student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.

WCTEV: O’Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Introduction

The opening chapter of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is titled "The Return." It begins with an unnamed narrator returning to the small maritime village of Dunnet Landing, situated on the eastern coast of Maine, after her first short visit a few summers prior.¹ It is during this return visit that the narrator befriends Mrs. Todd, a woman of wisdom and sensibility, who first takes the narrator in as her summer tenant. Opening up a world of opportunities and intimate experiences, the friendship between these two women gradually unveils the treasures of Dunnet Landing – the people, the history, and the landscape. By beginning the novel with the narrator's return to this cherished coastal town, rather than with an initial arrival, Jewett implies that nothing can be fully understood at first glance, that there is always more to be known about a place and its inhabitants. Understanding is a recursive process.

Cather, the renowned author of *My Ántonia*, begins her novel with the theme of return as well. The novel begins with Jim Burden, the story's main narrator, traveling across the plains of Iowa with a friend. Together, the two friends reminisce about their childhood in Nebraska and a young Bohemian immigrant they once knew, Ántonia Shimerda. From Jim's perspective, Ántonia represents his past and his home. Being a cherished friend and an unexpected source of inspiration, Jim is driven to reconnect with Ántonia, an endeavor that has evidently proven to be successful: "Jim had found her again after long years, had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him, and out of his busy life had set apart time enough to enjoy that friendship".²

¹ Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, ed. Deborah Carlin (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2010), 41.

² Willa Sibert Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), ix-xii.

The story that ensues is Jim's recounting of his friendship with *Ántonia* and how they happily reconnect with each other in their later years of life.

Although Jewett's narrative describes a physical return to a lonely rural town and Cather's story is a return to the past through memory, both authors acknowledge the importance of coming back to what is familiar. There is always something to be gained through a return, and – like Jewett and Cather – that is exactly what this thesis aims to do. Through an examination of both the concept of hospitality and the way in which the theme of hospitality manifests itself in some of the most well-known works of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather, my goal is to complicate and deepen contemporary notions of how hospitality functions and the role the hostess plays in its successful operation. My analysis will provide my readers with improved tools for unraveling the complexity of Jewett and Cather's heroines, with a specific focus on the female characters in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Ántonia*.

The question still remains, however: why choose to examine the theme of hospitality between these two particular authors? The similarities between Jewett and Cather largely speak for themselves: they are both highly esteemed regionalist authors, they were real-life friends, and both women lived through the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth-century.³ Another fascinating development to track between these two women writers is that Cather was greatly inspired by Jewett's writing and career. They first met in 1908, by happenstance, in Boston. Jewett had already established herself as a successful literary author, being nearly twenty-five years older, while Cather was only just beginning. The two quickly bonded and are known to have communicated mostly through letters, with Jewett taking on the role of literary mentor and

³ Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 334-335.

friend.⁴ In one of Jewett's letters to Cather in 1908 – “perhaps the most important letter Cather ever received” – Jewett actually warned Cather that her job as managing editor of *McClure's Magazine* was distracting her from her true talent.⁵ “I do think that it is impossible for you to work so hard and yet have your gifts mature as they should,” wrote Jewett.⁶ Perhaps becoming one of Cather's most important cheerleaders, Jewett also provided considerate, gentle, and well-received feedback on a number of Cather's drafts and manuscripts.⁷ From Jewett's side of things, besides finding fulfillment in being a mentor, she also found someone to carry on her literary legacy.

Cather took much joy in their correspondence. She made multiple trips to South Berwick, Jewett's hometown, and even stayed in Jewett's house.⁸ After one of her visits, she left with a renewed sense of purpose and inspiration to write. In 1913, Cather published her first installment in her Great Plains Trilogy, entitled *O Pioneers!*. The novel was dedicated to Jewett, with the inscription, “In whose beautiful and delicate work there is the perfection that endures”.⁹ In explaining her decision for the dedication, Cather also wrote, “I dedicated my novel... to Miss Jewett because I had talked over some of the characters in it with her one day... and in this book I tried to tell the story of the people as truthfully and simply as if I were telling it to her by word of mouth”.¹⁰ Despite its quickly growing depth and sincerity, the friendship between these two

⁴ O'Brien, *WCTEV*, 333-339.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁶ Sarah Orne Jewett, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (London: Constable, 1911), 247.

⁷ O'Brien, *WCTEV*, 336.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁰ Willa Sibert Cather. *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, edited by L. Brent Bohlke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 9.

authors was made brief by Jewett's death in 1909.¹¹ This was a painful shock for Cather, but Jewett's influence over Cather clearly extended well beyond her death. Cather wanted to make sure that her dear friend was not forgotten. In 1925, Cather chose to edit an edition of Jewett's fiction for publication and wrote a powerful preface honoring Jewett's literary genius. Within the preface, in a bold attempt to ensure Jewett's place in the American literary canon, she stated that *The Country of the Pointed Firs* was – alongside *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn* – the book most likely to endure the test of time.¹² Cather viewed this novel as an American classic, a remark that reveals the depth of her admiration for Jewett. The friendship between these two female authors was brief, but the bond endured long after Jewett's death. It was a bond founded by respect and admiration for one another's talents, achievements, and point-of-views.

Jewett shared with Cather, among other things, a country background. While Jewett was no stranger to cosmopolitan life, having traveled internationally on multiple occasions and frequently residing in Boston, she still embraced her rural roots.¹³ She was a self-proclaimed “country person”¹⁴ and spent a good portion of each year in South Berwick, the small New England town where she was raised.¹⁵ She openly told other writers that her memories and observations from her childhood heavily inspired her fiction.¹⁶ Jewett's fascination with the past was just another reaffirming link in her friendship with Cather, and “the fact that the two women shared rural origins helped Cather to appreciate the literary possibilities of her Nebraska past”.¹⁷

¹¹ O'Brien, *WCTEV*, 335.

¹² O'Brien, *WCTEV*, 350-351.

¹³ June Howard, *The Center of the World: Regional Writing and the Puzzles of Place-Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 98.

¹⁴ O'Brien, *WCTEV*, 337

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 336

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

During an interview with Latrobe Carroll in 1921, following her publication of *My Ántonia*, Cather reveals that she also “had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people”.¹⁸ Jewett, having already become a successful author of regionalism, helped prove to Cather that these country people could become a part of a compelling narrative. At some point in their careers, both women came to the realization that creating persuasive fiction involved the use of their childhood memories. “It’s memory – the memory that goes with the vocation...” Cather told Carroll in 1921, “I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen”.¹⁹ Cather and Jewett were both writers whose “creative imagination was sparked by memory,” and that memory was steeped in rural landscapes and country folk. Their fictions largely focused on localities – and even more specifically the land, friendships, and women who resided in those regions. At the heart of the comparison between Cather and Jewett lies the truth that these authors shared a similar vision for literature and for life.

The personal decision to explore the theme of hospitality originally came about because, among their other similarities, Cather and Jewett also made unique and comparable choices when it comes to their female protagonists. They wrote about heroines who, for the dominant culture, are unexpected: older country women who geographically live on the fringes of society and have adopted, for the most part, very routine lifestyles. Past scholars have chosen numerous tactics for analyzing the authors’ respective heroines, but the lens of hospitality has proven to be especially surprising and subversive. Hospitality draws out similarities between these authors narratives in unanticipated and extensive ways, revealing itself to be an underlying and reappearing theme throughout. By examining how hospitality threads itself through the stories of each author, it

¹⁸ Latrobe Carroll, “Willa Sibert Cather,” *The Bookman* 53, no. 1 (March 1921): 212.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212-214

becomes more apparent why Jewett and Cather chose such inconspicuous heroines and it allows readers to better track the progression and purpose of the narrative as a whole. The fact of the matter is that, in analyzing the authors' heroines primarily as hostesses, one must simultaneously reevaluate what hospitality is and what it meant to Jewett and Cather, inciting questions about community both back then and today.

The concept of hospitality has been around for centuries, with its roots in literature stretching back to the books of the Hebrew Bible, ancient Mesopotamian texts,²⁰ and Greek mythology.²¹ In classical Greece and Rome, especially, hospitality is known to have “occupied a central place in social life.” Historians have since concluded that in those traditions, “hospitality entailed a sacred obligation not just to accommodate the guest, but to protect the stranger who arrived at the door”.²² As time has passed, both the concepts and the practices of hospitality have been altered, but never abandoned. It has spread across cultures, continents, and nations. Even extending into seventeenth-century England, scholars have noted that “the virtues of hospitality were highly regarded” and preached about by priests and scholars alike.²³ Throughout time, hospitality has caught the attention of a wide range of scholarly disciplines. Unfortunately, as Paul Lynch and his colleagues lament in their article “Theorizing hospitality,” “scholars working in these disciplines rarely engage with each other in substantial ways,” making a single definition

²⁰ Kevin D. O’Gorman, “Origins of the commercial hospitality industry: from the fanciful to factual,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 21, no. 7 (2009): 779-780.

²¹ Ana M. Manzananas Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture: Spaces, Bodies, Borders* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2017), 4-5.

²² Paul Lynch, Jennie Germann Molz, Alison McIntosh, Peter Lugosi, and Conrad Lashley, “Theorizing hospitality,” *Hospitality & Society* 1, no. 1 (2011): 4.

²³ Daniel O’Conner, “Towards a new interpretation of ‘hospitality,’” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 17, no. 3 (2005): 268.

of hospitality impossible to render.²⁴ It is partially because of the fact that historians, anthropologists, politicians, economists – just to name a few – have all spent time trying to uncover the complexities and workings of hospitality, but have failed to collaborate with one another, that it has become such an evasive topic: “there is neither a single definition of hospitality... nor is there a unified theoretical framework within which hospitality studies are situated”.²⁵ Hospitality has transformed and permeated so many aspects of culture throughout time that no one discipline can fully reflect its form. In summary, “hospitality is constructed as much by the disciplines that engage it as by the cultures and societies in which it is practiced and made meaningful”.²⁶ Since it changes with culture and with time, there is no comprehensive definition for hospitality or even a clear understanding of how it influences daily life. The process of hospitality’s construction, however, is not the only thing that makes it perplexing. The concept itself is inherently paradoxical.

In tracing the etymology of the word, one realizes that hospitality, since its beginning, has been shaped by contradiction. The origin of the word has been traced back to the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root “ghos-ti,” which informed the Middle English, Old Norse, Greek, and Latin adaptations of the word.²⁷ The term “ghos-ti” was originally most closely associated with the word “ghost,”²⁸ but as the term evolved it garnered other connotations – such as guest, host, power, and protection.²⁹ In Greek, “ghos-ti” transformed into the term “xenos,”³⁰ which experts in ancient Greek culture have most commonly taken to mean

²⁴ Lynch, *TH*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ Calvo and Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture*, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹ Lynch, *TH*, 5.

³⁰ Calvo and Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture*, 2.

“guest-friend”.³¹ However, it is also acknowledged that “xenos” can mean “foreigner” and “stranger,” as well as “guest” or “host”.³² Hospitality, therefore, since its earliest usages has held a variety of meanings and has at one point simultaneously encompassed nearly all persons involved in a hospitable exchange. Significantly, hospitality also “shares its linguistic roots with words like hostility, hostage, and enemy,” which has not gone unnoticed by many academics.³³ The notion that hospitality is intrinsically linked to hostility and opposition has raised many questions about the motivations that founded the concept and its hidden implications in contemporary society.

Recent inquiries into the concept of hospitality itself most often center around French philosopher Jacques Derrida. This is likely due to the fact that there is no more thought-provoking or disruptive starting point from which to enter into such an analysis. Concerning hospitality, Derrida fully accepts the instability of the term. At the foundation of his arguments is the recognition that hospitality still remains a mystery:

We do not know what hospitality is...
Not yet.
Not yet, but will we ever know? Is it a question of knowledge and of time?³⁴

Despite the fact that earlier philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Emmanuel Levinas provided the theoretical groundwork for the politics and ethics of hospitality, respectively, Derrida builds off these past theories to provide an even more intriguing view of hospitality, because he embraces the fact that “the difficulty of delimiting hospitality is intimately related to

³¹ Gabriel Herman, *Ritualized Friendship and The Greek City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 10.

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

³³ Lynch, TH, 5.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, “HOSTIPITALITY,” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2000): 6.

its condition as antinomy or aporia”.³⁵ This means that hospitality is unavoidably contradictory and paradoxical. Hospitality creates and exists in spaces that are indistinct and vague because it is, inherently, a force and practice that welcomes in the unfamiliar and unsettles routine. It requires the intersection of private and public life, and therefore has been termed an “interstitial virtue”.³⁶ There is a tension between hospitality’s ability to both bring down barriers and create connection, because there is both violence and vulnerability in disrupting boundaries. It is a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, of weaving together loose, independent elements.

It might seem counterintuitive to begin an exploration of hospitality by suggesting that this very endeavor could prove to be futile, but Derrida’s bold acceptance of hospitality’s inarticulateness and the recognition that there are numerous disciplines involved in this debate helps to raise an initial awareness of the ambiguity surrounding hospitality as both a term and a concept. It also provides an opportunity, from the outset, to clarify that Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather are not necessarily setting out to create a strict philosophical definition for what hospitality *is* but are instead providing a vitalizing depiction of what hospitality can accomplish and how it should ideally operate. Most importantly, as Ana Ma Manzananas Calvo and Jesus Benito Sanchez point out in their interdisciplinary discourse in *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture*, it is imperative to remember that hospitality actually finds its strength in being a wild and incoherent concept:

Instead of taming space, hospitality opens spaces up as forms of exchange; it dialogues with space and border theory, reexamines the roles of hosts and guests, mobilizes the

³⁵ Calvo and Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture*, 3, 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

notion of home and converses with hospitable and inhospitable languages as it rearranges the concepts of belonging, membership and citizenship.³⁷

In new and invigorating ways, hospitality brings all the elements listed above into question: borders, roles, language, identity, even one's perception of the home. This is arguably not even an extensive list. The fact that hospitality fights against the taming of ideas, binary thinking, and the limitations placed on human connection, proves its usefulness as a literary lens. Literary criticism is, after all, a practice that tends to admire complexity and dynamic thinking, rather than shy away from it.

Today, hospitality remains a fraught concept. Having been taken over by the business sector, hospitality is now overwhelmingly talked about in terms of services and accommodations. Thinking about contemporary hospitality only as a business is problematic explains Lynch: "Such a definition... is limited as it fails to address the essence of hospitality and constrains its intellectual possibilities".³⁸ People of the twenty-first-century have been left stranded. The tremendous amount of confusion over what the word "hospitality" stands for has left it void of its previous meaning and purpose. Adding to this frustration is the fact that "there has not been a suitable outlet to... debate the terms of hospitality and to share critical insights".³⁹ The crisis of the current era is that, as Andrew Shepherd summarizes it in his book *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality*, "for the vast majority of those in Western societies, the concept of "hospitality" is immediately associated with the — arguably oxymoronic — term: 'hospitality industry'".⁴⁰ By engaging in a philosophical and theological

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸ Lynch, *TH*, 4.

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰ Andrew Shepherd and Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 12.

exploration of the term, Shepherd attempts to redefine and restore power to the term ‘hospitality’:

[*The Gift of the Other*] contends that the practice of hospitality, offered as a corrective to the exclusions which blight our global village, is itself only possible if one first responds to the distortion of the notion of hospitality itself brought about by the ideologies of the contemporary world. That is, the recovery of the life-giving and redemptive practice of hospitality depends upon the concept of hospitality first being freed from its cultural captivity to the dual discourses of the market and fear, and also from the assumptions which underlie many postmodern philosophies offered in the name of “hospitality”.⁴¹

Shepherd postulates that in an increasingly open and connected world, areas of exclusion still exist, often remain hidden, and force certain people to live in the margins of society.⁴²

Unfortunately, according to Shepherd, the remedy for these harmful exclusions — the practice of hospitality — has been stripped of its power by contemporary society. His claim is that hospitality can only be restored to its most effective form through reconceptualization.

Jewett and Cather are, I believe, worthwhile sources to turn to for “rescuing” the concept of hospitality. They are writers who have grasped the power of hospitality in their writing, using it to refocus their readers’ view of the world and honor the complexity of a woman’s role in it. The most important thing to note, at this point, is that a singular concept of hospitality and its capabilities has been lost to contemporary understanding and consciousness. This thesis will attempt to reconceptualize hospitality from what it has become today, just as Shepherd does, but it will do so based primarily on the works of Jewett and Cather. Instead of adhering to

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

⁴² Ibid., 8-9.

Shepherd's belief that hospitality must be "reestablished upon theological foundations," this investigation will explore a version of hospitality that has been informed by Cather and Jewett's own literary visions and historical contexts. An analysis of Cather and Jewett's work will not only illuminate the authors' own powerful visions of hospitality, but it will also improve critics' interpretations of their heroic narratives and clarify why hospitality is an essential element in the creation of their stories.

At the same time, in bringing Jewett and Cather's portrayal of hospitality and their hostesses to the forefront of their readers' consciousness, the threats to the triumph of hospitality are also made more apparent. Misconceptions about how hospitality interacts with spaces of domesticity, economy, and the land can cause individuals to overlook the authority and agency that a successful hostess must come to possess. This thesis will acknowledge how the gendering of the land, in addition to longstanding perceptions of economy and domesticity, have restricted the power of hospitality and prevented certain figures from self-realization and claiming the title of hostess.

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The themes of domesticity, religion, economy, gender, and the land all reveal themselves through Jewett and Cather's vision of hospitality, a vision that once recognized, illuminates the power of connection and friendship. Rooted in their foundational values as writers, hospitality weaves itself through the works of Jewett and Cather as a hopeful theme and mission.

Untangling the complex portrayal of hospitality in *The Country of The Pointed Firs* and *My Ántonia* allows the reader to unravel their webbed narrative structures and recognize the true heroism of the novels' hostesses. Cather and Jewett are delicately divulging the gospel of hospitality.

Chapter 1: Quiet Dramas

I wondered why she had been set to shine on this lonely island on the northern coast.⁴³

To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain.⁴⁴

Many writers find purpose in discovering or rediscovering disregarded areas of culture and thought. American literary regionalism is a genre of literature that directly speaks to this purpose in that, as summarized by scholar Stephanie Foote, it "is deeply concerned with what is remembered and what forgotten, and how; with how local, particular people and places are incorporated or discarded".⁴⁵ A defining element of regionalism is that the narrative is focused around a particular location or community. It became an especially important genre within the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the aftermath of the Civil War. Embraced by many writers during "one of the most volatile moments in American history," when culture was "changing at an unprecedented rate," the genre allowed authors to explore the distinctiveness of specific regions and cultures at a fixed point in time.⁴⁶ It was also

⁴³ Jewett, *CPF*, 75.

⁴⁴ Cather, *MA*, xii

⁴⁵ Stephanie Foote, "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism," In *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, edited by Charles L. Crow, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

seen as a way to preserve the stories and identities of the different regions and cultures across the United States, in an era when the landscapes and ideologies of the nation were rapidly evolving.⁴⁷

With the spirit of imperialism and rapid urbanization pervading the turn of the century, the country's borders and communities were shifting unpredictably. These changes were intensified by sudden economic growth during the late nineteenth century, also causing rise to immigration and making class divisions more prominent.⁴⁸ Americans were facing a multitude of cultural uncertainties. According to Foote's historical analysis, people were living an "anonymous urban existence" in which "cities did more than produce a sense of anxiety; they produced a powerful form of nostalgia".⁴⁹ People were grappling with the memories of lifestyles that were already disappearing and grasping at opportunities to form a new, patchworked identity.

Regionalist literature in the late nineteenth century provided a glimpse into the regions and lives of people who were being disregarded by the dominant culture. Since the genre of regional writing dealt largely with characters on the outskirts of society, seemingly irrelevant to the greater development of the nation, this meant that "regional writing was associated with interests of persons who, for a variety of reasons, were themselves considered minor or marginal".⁵⁰ Despite the recognition of non-normative groups in regionalist literature, the firm focus on particular people and localities led to the unfortunate assumption that it was a "narrow,

⁴⁷ Donna Campbell, "Realism and Regionalism," In *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, edited by Charles L. Crow, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 93.

⁴⁸ Sandra A. Zagarell, "*Country's* Potrayal of Community and the Exclusion of Difference," In *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs*, edited by June Howard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 39.

⁴⁹ Foote, "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism," 29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

static, elegiac, eminently predictable genre”.⁵¹ Regionalism has been characterized by a sense of “rootedness” and “immobility,” which has in the past regrettably brought about the perception that it is a “minor literature about unimportant people in unimportant places”.⁵² And yet, scholars continue to study the works of Jewett, Cather, and many other American regionalist authors. As scholar Donna Campbell reminds modern readers, the genre has been more recently recognized by scholars for its ability to create “narrative spaces in which ideological conflicts about immigration, industrialization, urbanization, race, and above all national identity could be negotiated, if not resolved”.⁵³ Regionalism is not a static genre. It introduces outside readers to unfamiliar and perhaps neighboring regions, inviting them into a more nuanced understanding of regional knowledge and culture, while also revealing how those regions negotiate with national change. Put simply, it facilitates connections. What Campbell has touched upon is the fact that regional writing provides the perfect breeding ground for the theme of hospitality, and it is through this substructure of hospitality that Cather and Jewett are able to draw out numerous thematical tensions and compelling conflicts for their readers. The paradox of regional writing – that it advocates for “social and cultural difference” and can at the same time be viewed as a narrow, constrained genre – is what allows Jewett and Cather’s quiet dramas to unfold.⁵⁴

At a time when the majority of the population was leaving the countryside to pursue a more vibrant life in the city or had already forgotten what it was like to live outside an urban center, Jewett and Cather both turned their attentions toward unassuming muses.⁵⁵ They found

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² June Howard, “Unraveling Regions, Unsettling Periods: Sarah Orne Jewett and American Literary History,” *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (1996): 367.

⁵³ Campbell, “Realism and Regionalism,” 94.

⁵⁴ Foote, “The Cultural Work of American Regionalism,” 27.

⁵⁵ William Conlogue, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2001), 3.

their inspiration within the homes of the countryside – a world saturated by domestic responsibilities, natural landscapes, and women. But for Jewett and Cather, these worlds represented so much more. Having both resided in rural communities themselves, they recognized these places for what they were: nuanced and ever-changing, just like anywhere else. As a result, Jewett and Cather’s fictional households and the women who dominated those spaces were infused with sentiment and reflected the complexities of real-life experience. Jewett, having grown up in South Berwick, Maine, wrote mostly about the small towns along the northeastern coast.⁵⁶ She created the fictional town of Dunnet Landing, a place blanketed with a melancholic fog, where the days of seafaring and maritime trade were coming to an end and houses only lightly speckled the natural landscape. In a much separate region of the country, Cather gathered experience and inspiration from the vast prairielands of Red Cloud, Nebraska, where she spent a significant portion of her childhood, from 1883 to 1895.⁵⁷ While Jewett’s stories about Dunnet Landing are largely informed by her experience in South Berwick, Cather’s portrayals of nineteenth-century Nebraska reflect her observations of Red Cloud.⁵⁸ And yet, the source of these authors’ inspiration cannot be stated that simply. As Sharon O’Brien wisely points out in her biography, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, readers of *My Ántonia* and Cather’s other stories about the Nebraskan prairie need to understand that Cather had a fraught relationship with the American West. The period in Cather’s life when her family moved to Red Cloud was not necessarily an easy one. She found herself in very new, unsettling surroundings.

⁵⁶ Paula Blanchard, *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), xvi, 16.

⁵⁷ Bruce Baker, “Nebraska Regionalism in Selected Works of Willa Cather,” *Western American Literature* 3, no. 1 (1968): 19.

⁵⁸ Eleanor M Smith, “The Literary Relationship of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Sibert Cather,” *The New England Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1956): 475.

“Not her rootedness in Nebraska, but her transplanting from one radically different landscape and community to another at a formative, impressionable age powerfully affected her writing,” writes O’Brien.⁵⁹ In fact, most of Cather’s works about the West were written while she was living in the East.⁶⁰ Jewett, herself, chose to split her time between the country and the city.⁶¹ She loved the country, but as a professional writer, she was also aware of the benefits and opportunities that a city-life afforded her.⁶² Nevertheless, when it came to her writing, Jewett’s mind continued to return to the “farm and fisher folks of Maine”.⁶³ Similarly, Cather was not significantly deterred by her tense relationship with the West, as some of her most famous works provide an affectionate glimpse into the lives of the Nebraskan pioneers.⁶⁴ Even though Jewett and Cather’s regions of interest, Maine and Nebraska, were comprised of drastically different landscapes and people, the one thing these places both had in common was that a young woman once lived there and kept memories of the place close to her heart, eventually reproducing them on the page.

Jewett found her purpose in extending a hand to her readers; she wanted, perhaps most of all, for people to find connection with one another. “Her major interest...” writes scholar Eleanor Smith, “was centered in the misunderstood people of her countryside”.⁶⁵ During the nineteenth century, the once prosperous economy of the shipping villages along the coast was waning, and Jewett became ever more attuned to the fact that “the summer residents held in contempt the

⁵⁹ O’Brien, *WCTEV*, 59.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶¹ Donovan, Josephine. *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), 49.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶³ Smith, “The Literary Relationship of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Sibert Cather,” 475.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 475.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 474.

elderly inhabitants of the little seaside villages and inland farms and regarded their lives as inconsequential”.⁶⁶ Jewett, who held a much different view of country people, wanted to help eliminate such misunderstandings. As an author and empathizer, Jewett made it her literary mission to “to interpret what is best in the countryman to what is best in his city brother”.⁶⁷ Her work is an invitation to enter into another’s life and to better understand a stranger. Cather herself observed that for Jewett, “friendships occupied perhaps the first place in her life”.⁶⁸ Inspired by Jewett’s own mission and driven by a similar idea, Cather wrote out of a love for people. In her 1921 interview with Carroll, Cather recounted her impressions of the people she met in Nebraska:

I grew fond of some of these immigrants — particularly the old women... I used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbors... This was, with me, the initial impulse. I didn't know any writing people. I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition.⁶⁹

Cather, much like Jewett, was inspired by the people of the country. She wanted to tell their stories, and to share her enthusiasm for such people. Jewett and Cather’s writings are, simply put, an invitation to become better acquainted with one’s neighbor. But on a deeper, possibly even a subconscious level, the authors’ narratives brew up a quiet drama. By inviting readers and characters into their cherished regions, they are opening up opportunities to subvert preconceived notions about their “static” countryside heroines and subtly reimagine the significance of the rural household.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 474.

⁶⁷ Charles Miner Thompson, “The Art of Miss Jewett,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 94 (October 1904): 492.

⁶⁸ Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1936), 85.

⁶⁹ Carroll, “Willa Sibert Cather,” 212.

Disguised as Domestic Women

Stories that revolve around the site of the home are vulnerable to misinterpretation and oversimplification because the function and influence of the domestic sphere has, arguably, never been fully understood. One idea that has long pervaded the American consciousness is that women are the peaceful counterbalance to savagery, the antithesis of chaos, and that they help to establish nations through homemaking. To rely upon this idea is to overlook the delicate brilliance of Jewett and Cather's works, and yet to challenge "the time-worn cliché that women are the civilizing force on any new frontier" would require one to either redefine what it means to be civilized or reexamine what it means to be a woman.⁷⁰ An analysis of hospitality allows a reader to accomplish both. First off, it is crucially important to remember that hospitality is cast in contradiction. While the act of hospitality reflects and reaffirms the structure of an existing community, it is also a key way of preserving a healthy dose of wildness, untamedness, and mobility within a culture. Hospitality is intimately wrapped up in the circular art of blurring the perceived boundaries of the home and then seamlessly reshaping them in response to the uncontrollable changes brought about by time and circumstance. According to Jewett and Cather's concepts, at the ever-shifting center of this noble art is where the hostess presides. She is neither a figure of isolation or of liberation. She is a disruptive force just as much as she is a civilizing one. She is the voluntary servant of some greater design, presiding over the important and continuous practice of hospitality. It is her devotion to this practice that Jewett and Cather

⁷⁰ Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill:University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 12.

applaud and recognize as heroic, but it is also what has long kept the hospitable woman tethered to the confining notions of domesticity.

Conversations continue to arise among scholars about the function of the domestic sphere and its nearly indisputable association with the female. In relation to the novel, in particular, literary critics have nurtured an interest in the presentation of domestic settings as primarily female-dominated spaces. Nancy Armstrong's well-received book *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* intelligibly articulates the emergence of this phenomenon in late eighteenth-century British culture. She claims that the rise of "domestic fiction" served to "introduce a new form of political power" and solidified the role of "the domestic woman".⁷¹ The domestic woman quickly became a figure of authority and real-world desire, because she presided over "...all those objects and practices we associate with private life... over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations...".⁷² Armstrong's analyses are convincing, but her resolute recognition of the "domestic woman," which remains relevant within the field of literary theory even today,⁷³ presents a challenge for critics of Jewett, Cather, and potentially a number of other regionalist authors.⁷⁴ The fact that the "domestic woman" has become such a familiar and long-lasting concept is problematic because it allows for one to overlook the leaps that both Jewett and Cather took to complicate their heroines. The main difficulty arises from the fact that Cather and Jewett's protagonists are most often portrayed in a

⁷¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 11.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷³ Jonathan Arac, "Introduction: Desire and Domestic Fiction after Thirty Years," *Modern Language Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2019): 1,5.

⁷⁴ Leila Silvana May, "The Strong-Arming of Desire: A Reconsideration of Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*." *ELH* 68, no. 1 (2001): 267-268.

domestic setting, but they are not just domestic women. Their authority and influence extend beyond that of the household, leisure time, courtship, family, and moral development.

Armstrong's view of "the rise of the domestic woman as a major event in political history" should not be argued as false, but it also should not overshadow other literary perspectives on post-eighteenth-century female characters.⁷⁵ Even before the publication of Armstrong's book in 1987, scholar Vineta Colby published a book in 1974, entitled *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel*, in which she establishes a differing interpretation of the English novel as it was brought into the nineteenth-century: "The beauty of the nineteenth-century English novel is its sensitivity to its total world. That, alas, is also in the long run its chief peril to students, who can never hope to grasp and encompass its dimensions".⁷⁶ Colby is commenting on the nineteenth-century English novel's capacity to recognize a world beyond the domestic, suggesting that the concept of "the domestic woman" was already a long-outdated approach to modern literature by the time Armstrong was writing and theorizing about it.

The inherent problem with continuing to rely on any theory of "the domestic woman" is the implied exclusiveness of the domestic sphere, which does not properly describe later novels – especially those written in a postcolonial America. Colby argues that even at the beginning of the nineteenth-century the novel's focus was changing. The English novel's "focus remained the individual within the domestic scene, but the isolation and insularity of the English hearth and home were proved to be illusory".⁷⁷ The secludedness of the domestic world and the domestic

⁷⁵ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, 11.

⁷⁶ Vineta Colby, *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

woman was already a crumbling concept in nineteenth-century English literature, an occurrence that can be observed and extended to Cather and Jewett's works as well. If one chooses to acknowledge the rise of the domestic woman in eighteenth-century English literature as a major evolution in understanding the novel, then let the rise of the hospitable woman in American regionalism mark another.

Dramatic Centers

Cather and Jewett's vision of hospitality is not, and in many ways it fundamentally cannot be, solely concerned with the domestic sphere. Even the very existence of private spaces, secure from outside cultural and public influence, seems to be an implausible concept. In Alison Easton's essay "Outdoor Relief": Sarah Orne Jewett, Annie Adams Fields, and The Visit in Gilded Age America," she firmly argues that "we cannot align nineteenth-century women with the home, the domestic and the private in some starkly dichotomous opposition to a public world of men and work".⁷⁸ Before Cather's publication of *My Ántonia* and around the time that Jewett was writing *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, common perceptions of the division between public and private life were being reformulated. Politics, capitalism, and industrial technologies were changing national perspectives, and "it was the social world created by this new economic order that would eventually dislodge pre-nineteenth-century forms of domesticity from their almost exclusive role in defining most free white women's lives".⁷⁹ By the time Jewett and Cather were writing some of their most famous works, the nation was already complicating its view of

⁷⁸ Alison Easton, "Outdoor Relief": Sarah Orne Jewett, Annie Adams Fields and the Visit in Gilded Age America." In *Becoming Visible Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, edited by Janet Floyd, Alison Easton, R. J. Ellis, and Lindsey Traub (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2010), 131.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

women and the household. The distinction between private and public life was and still remains a perception powerful enough to influence daily behaviors, but still very much susceptible to alteration and distortion. The domestic, social, and economic worlds are not necessarily exclusive, and it is at the crossroads of these worlds that hospitality resides.

The character of Mrs. Almira Todd in Jewett's *A Country of the Pointed Firs* provides a suitable starting point for learning about Jewett's vision of hospitality and the role of the hostess, especially since the novel's narrator must become acquainted with Mrs. Todd's unexpected version of hospitality herself. The second chapter of the novel, aptly entitled "Mrs. Todd," begins with the narrator's remark, "... there was only one fault to find with this choice of a summer lodging-place, and that was its complete lack of seclusion".⁸⁰ Right from the start, Jewett is challenging any preconceived notions about the exclusiveness and secludedness of Mrs. Todd's domestic lifestyle. The narrator goes on to explain the reasoning behind her mistaken first impressions of Mrs. Todd's home:

At first the tiny house of Mrs. Almira Todd, which stood with its end to the street, appeared to be retired and sheltered enough from the busy world, behind its bushy bit of a green garden, in which all the blooming things... were pushed back against the gray-shingled wall.⁸¹

Based off its appearance, the "tiny" structure and arrangement of Mrs. Todd's home makes it appear withdrawn from society. It becomes clear, however, that the narrator based her judgments solely off the house's appearance. In all other respects, Mrs. Todd's residence quickly proves to be a popular destination for the locals of Dunnet Landing:

⁸⁰ Jewett, *CPF*, 41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

To arrive at this quietest of seaside villages late in June, when the busy herb-gathering season was just beginning, was also to arrive in the early prime of Mrs. Todd's activity in the brewing of old-fashioned spruce beer... it had won immense local fame, and the supplies for its manufacture were always giving out and having to be replenished.... The spruce-beer customers were pretty steady in hot weather, and there were many demands for different soothing syrups and elixirs...⁸²

Mrs. Todd's neighbors and acquaintances keep her busy through their consumption of her reputable elixirs and spruce beer, visiting the house regularly to purchase her products. This seemingly secluded home is actually a bustling site of business. The narrator reluctantly finds herself in charge of answering "all peremptory knocks at the side door" when her hostess is absent and soon abandons her hopes for solitude while lodging with Mrs. Todd.⁸³ She learns to accept the unavoidable visits from the locals – including the village doctor, who holds Mrs. Todd's role as town herbalist in high regards. With the narrator's burgeoning respect for Mrs. Todd's sociability and lifestyle, she also starts noting the intricacies of Mrs. Todd work. The older woman uses her homegrown herbs to brew different remedies, which "were dispensed to suffering neighbors, who usually came at night as if by stealth, bringing their own ancient-looking vials to be filled".⁸⁴ In sickness and in health, Mrs. Todd's neighbors depend on her. She is clearly a vital part of the community in Dunnet Landing and her home is a frequented destination within the town, both night and day.

Mrs. Todd's place of residence unmistakably doubles as a site of business. Neighbors and town locals visit Mrs. Todd's house to benefit from her expertise in gardening and brewing: they

⁸² Ibid., 43-44.

⁸³ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 43.

receive a service from Mrs. Todd and she, in turn, earns a profit.⁸⁵ The narrator acknowledges that it is a “slender business,” but she also admits to “acting as business partner” to Mrs. Todd and later describes certain changes in their “business relations” with one another.⁸⁶ Even Mrs. Todd views her work of growing, harvesting, and brewing herbs as a business, stating that the narrator could in time become ““very able in the business”” herself.⁸⁷ The narrator’s choice to board with Mrs. Todd also contributes to the hostess’ earnings, with the narrator explaining that the old widow uses the “income from one hungry lodger to maintain her”.⁸⁸ By taking a stranger into her home, Mrs. Todd is letting the reality of her home life evolve into something multifaceted. She earns a profit by taking in boarders, such as the narrator, and by mixing elixirs and herbal remedies for local customers. It is evident that Mrs. Todd’s residence serves multiple functions, establishing itself as a social and economic space, as well as a domestic one. This is no small achievement. The fact that Jewett portrays “the home as the site of business and therefore the foundation of economic life in the area,” is a boundary-abolishing move.⁸⁹ It allows her female characters to operate in a multifaceted and unbounded world, reminding her readers of the social relevance and impact of the rural household.

In addition to the permeation of the economic world, the boundaries of Mrs. Todd’s household also become blurred with the surrounding elements of her garden and the natural landscape. Respected Jewett scholar, Elizabeth Ammons, has brought attention to the fact that the domestic spaces in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are not rigidly defined or enclosed.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Ammons, “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs.” In *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs*, edited by June Howard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84.

⁸⁶ Jewett, *CPF*, 44-45.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁹ Ammons, “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs,” 84.

Ammons argument is specifically focused around the physical structuring of Mrs. Todd's house. In noticing the way Mrs. Todd effortlessly moves between the garden and the home, Ammons claims that, "In this domestic space outdoors and indoors intermingle... Establishing harmony between the worlds of nature and domesticity, this indoor/outdoor house also maintains that there is no split between public and private realms".⁹⁰ Jewett is again ignoring the typical divisions that plague the domestic space. As a result, Ammons is able to draw a significant conclusion about Mrs. Todd's house: "Although literally located on the edge of town, her house, in the narrator's reading, stands culturally at its center... the site of perfectly merged business, domestic, and sacred activities".⁹¹ In summary, Ammons is supporting the theory that Mrs. Todd's house is an integrated site, where outside influences become "perfectly merged" in one centralized space. More broadly, the home is a dynamic location infused with meaning and multiple realms of life, which Jewett uses to propel her stories forward.

Cather's portrayal of the household in her own literature is no different. In *My Ántonia* – one of Cather's most celebrated novels and the final installment in her Great Plains Trilogy – the final residence of the novel's protagonist, Ántonia Shimerda, is similar to Jewett's portrayal of Mrs. Todd's household in that it too encompasses a world of responsibilities and concerns much broader than the domestic. Cather emphasizes this point for her readers through a variety of techniques. One of the most obvious indicators is that Ántonia is in charge of a farm, which brings in a self-sustaining revenue for her and her family. Although Ántonia does not take in lodgers to earn money, like Mrs. Todd, her home does provide economic stability. "We got this place clear now," assures Ántonia's husband, Anton Cuzak, while standing on the family's

⁹⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁹¹ Ibid. 86.

property, “We pay only twenty dollars an acre then, and I been offered a hundred. We bought another quarter ten years ago, and we got it most paid for”.⁹² There are subtler hints earlier on in the novel that allude to the economic component of the Cuzak’s farmhouse life as well. *Ántonia*, for example, mentions to her visitor and friend Jim that her daughters will never have to be sent off to work in town, and she later offhandedly remarks that her home is plenty big enough for her eleven children and her overnight guest. These comments clearly suggest that the farm is earning a profit suitable enough to sustain their family. Even *Ántonia*’s children show some understanding of the economic component to their home life. Jim warmly notes that *Ántonia*’s young daughter Lucie “whispered to [him] that they were going to have a parlour carpet if they got ninety cents for their wheat”.⁹³ The reality of farmhouse life is made obvious. The entire Cuzak family, down to the youngest children, knows that their domestic existence is inextricably linked to the land they inhabit and the money they can glean from it.

More importantly, Cather deliberately leaves space in her novel to recognize *Ántonia* as the true driving force behind the success of the farm. Both *Ántonia* and her husband reveal that it is *Ántonia*’s own resilience and strong work ethic that has allowed their farm to thrive. They started with nothing, and they toiled in the heat and dirt until they were able to yield crops. ““We’d never have got through if I hadn’t been so strong,”” *Ántonia* confesses to Jim, ““I’ve always had good health, thank God, and I was able to help him [Anton] in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came””.⁹⁴ Later, in the presence of Jim, Anton himself admits that there were times when he wanted to give up on the farm: “Sometimes I git awful sore on this

⁹² Cather, *MA*, 412.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 392.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 386.

place and want to quit, but my wife she always say we better stick it out”.⁹⁵ In talking with both *Ántonia* and Anton, Jim realizes that the founding and success of the farm was primarily *Ántonia*’s achievement. It was “*Ántonia*’s special mission,” not Anton’s.⁹⁶ Since Cather makes the economic component of owning the farm so obvious and *Ántonia*’s role in managing the farm undeniable, it can easily be forgotten that Cather was writing during a period when many other American authors “kept farm women invisible by confining them to the house” and feminists were fighting against “the idea that only men [were] farmers”.⁹⁷ Scholar William Conlogue, in analyzing magazine publications from the first decade of the twentieth-century, concludes that the “typical view of the position of women in agriculture,” embraced by the larger culture of that time, “acknowledges farm women’s problems but refuses to grant women status as farmers”.⁹⁸ He goes on to claim that the labor of farm women has remained largely invisible and undocumented to this day.⁹⁹ The point to be made here, concerning Cather’s *My Ántonia*, is that establishing *Ántonia* as a farmer and not just a farmer’s wife was one of Cather’s ways of deconstructing the perceived insular domesticity of the rural household and recognizing *Ántonia*’s involvement in the realms of agriculture and economy.

In *My Ántonia* and in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, both *Ántonia* and Mrs. Todd, respectively, have amplified their domestic spaces to include – rather than exclude – the influences of the exterior world. The site of the home can be reimagined as a vital center of intersecting ideas, activities, and people. *Ántonia*’s farm is not just a secluded household; it is a site of production and economy that has been cultivated out of the red grasses of the vast

⁹⁵ Ibid., 411.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 413.

⁹⁷ Conlogue, *Working the Garden*, 64.

⁹⁸ Cather, *MA*, 64.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 65.

“unbroken prairie”.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, despite Mrs. Todd’s residence appearing as though it would be tucked away from public life, Jewett’s readers are actually introduced to a popular destination for town residents and visitors. A requirement for establishing a dramatic center of life, as has just been implied, is that these “centers” cannot remain static. They need to embrace the exterior world, just as much as they need to establish themselves as focal points on the landscape. This, again, gets at the intangible wildness of the concept of hospitality. June Howard summarizes the conundrum of localities best, stating in her work *The Center of the World: Regional Writing and the Puzzles of Place-Time*, “claims of centrality are always right, and always wrong. Studying regionalism has taught me that the center of the world is everywhere”.¹⁰¹ Recognizing houses and domestic spaces, in general, as dramatic centers clues the reader into the necessity of hospitality. It is because of Mrs. Todd’s and *Ántonia*’s hospitable habits that their domestic spheres can evolve into multidimensional spaces, distinct but ever-changing.

Brewing Harmony

Thinking of the home as an ever-changing space does not mean that it is altogether inhospitable. In fact, dramatic centers can complement and complicate their surroundings at the same time. Elizabeth Ammons, in her essay “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” focuses on the importance of houses – especially Mrs. Todd’s house – in interpreting Jewett’s narrative. Ammons argues that almost all the houses in Jewett’s novel “simultaneously blend into their natural environment... and they stand out from it, punctuate it brightly with their whiteness against the dark pines”.¹⁰² The houses are noticeable destinations

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰¹ Howard, *The Center of the World*, viii.

¹⁰² Ammons, “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” 83.

upon a relatively unmarked landscape, but they do not disrupt the visual coherence of their environment. Portraying houses in this manner was most likely intentional on Jewett's part. The houses are a reflection of the harmony that has been established at the site of the home, a harmony that has been facilitated by the hostess.

A natural effect of hospitality, of successfully welcoming people into informal and intimate spaces, of becoming a receptacle of outside influences, is that it begins to bring a variety of seemingly opposing things into connection with one another. The role of the hostess is to preside over and nurture these connections, so that an atmosphere of harmony and peace can be established. Jewett's vision of harmony, in addition to being revealed through material culture, also reveals itself through her hostesses' activities within and around the household. As observed by the unnamed narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Mrs. Todd's wide-ranging diagnosis and treatment of her customers' ailments mirrors this harmonious vision:

It may not have been only the common ails of humanity with which she [Mrs. Todd] tried to cope; it seemed sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy and adverse winds at sea might also find their proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd's garden.¹⁰³

The concurrent reference to such strongly opposing emotions – love and hate – and then the suggestion that these emotions could be remedied by Mrs. Todd's craft, all at the site of the home, alludes to the hostess' ability to guide the process of connection. Customers' suffering from all types of ailments are welcomed into Mrs. Todd's care, and not just those ailments that serve to counteract one another. Also listed alongside love and hate is "jealousy," suggesting that any concern on the chaotic spectrum of human experience might be cured by Mrs. Todd's

¹⁰³ Jewett, *CPF*, 43.

expertise. Even the “adverse winds at sea” can find rest in her garden. This vision of harmony is symbolized in Mrs. Todd’s practices themselves, as she cultivates a large variety of herbs and brings them into balance with one another through the brewing of her potions. She quite literally makes a living by managing the mixing of plants and prescribing them for the correct people. Mrs. Todd’s affinity for opposites and in bringing things together is manifested in her work: “[she] was an ardent lover of herbs, both wild and tame, and the sea-breezes blew into the low end-window of the house laden with not only sweet-brier and sweet-mary, but balm and sage and borage and mint, wormwood and southernwood”.¹⁰⁴ Again, Mrs. Todd is creating balance and establishing her home as a site of connection. She does not discriminate between “wild and tame” things or between sweet and bitter herbs. The mysteries of her trade that “once... belonged to sacred and mystic rites” are now transformed into “humble compounds brewed at intervals... on [her] kitchen stove”.¹⁰⁵ Under Mrs. Todd’s guidance, her garden and kitchen become integrated spaces where supernatural forces inform modest daily tasks and the herbal potions represent the unification of a diverse set of ingredients. Her craft requires an awareness of balance and transformation.

The vision of harmony that Cather expresses in *My Ántonia*, though still very much present within the novel, is different from that of Jewett’s in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in that it is not a result of welcoming various outside influences into a single, pre-established space; it is the result of grappling with chaos until an identifiable space is formed, until the clashing elements of an area are made to operate as a unit. The act of reordering things to establish a

¹⁰⁴ Jewett, *CPF*, 42.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

harmonious, all-enveloping space is an act of hospitality – perhaps the most important act of a hostess, as Cather devises it.

Ántonia is able to create a hospitable space largely because she is able to guide and order the chaos around her. The Cuzak's home life is very much characterized by a sense of harmony, especially in their relationships with one another. The fact that Ántonia is able to establish peace and order among her eleven children should not be overlooked as a simple feat. Each one of her children is drastically different from the next. As they all gather in the parlour for the evening, Jim begins to observe just how eclectic of a group they truly are:

Leo, with a good deal of fussing, got out his violin... But he played very well for a self-taught boy. Poor Yulka's efforts were not so successful. While they were playing, little Nina got up from her corner, came out into the middle of the floor, and began to do a pretty little dance... No one paid the least attention to her, and when she was through she stole back and sat down by her brother.¹⁰⁶

The contrasting of Leo's noisy appeals for attention and recognition with Nina's quiet, solitary pleasure from dancing is amusing and affecting. Even more touching is the image of these two disparate children returning to the floor to sit side-by-side with one another. Jim at one point notes that, "Clearly, they were proud of each other, and of being so many".¹⁰⁷ The family seems to take pleasure in both one another and their differences. The children's relationships with their mother, Ántonia, are just as varied as their personalities. Before falling asleep that evening, Jim reflects again on the family: "I was thinking about Ántonia and her children; about Anna's solicitude for her, Ambrosch's grave affection, Leo's jealous, animal little love. That moment,

¹⁰⁶ Cather, *MA*, 392.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

when they all came tumbling out of the cave into the light, was a sight any man might have come far to see".¹⁰⁸ There is something miraculous about the apparent unity of *Ántonia's* children. It is a grand accomplishment on *Ántonia's* part to be able to create a space for each of them. She is the mastermind behind it all. She is the leader in the family. Even in the physical movements of the children, Jim recognizes *Ántonia's* influence and control:

As *Ántonia* turned over the pictures the young Cuzaks stood behind her chair, looking over her shoulder with interested faces. Nina and Jan, after trying to see round the taller ones, quietly brought a chair, climbed up on it, and stood close together, looking... In the group about *Ántonia* I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony. They leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other.¹⁰⁹

As a guest of the household, Jim can clearly discern the harmony that exists between these family members. The way the children orbit around *Ántonia*, it is as though she is the gravitational center of their universe. She binds the family together and keeps them in harmonious relationship with one another, overseeing each of their movements.

Ántonia's harmonious oversight of the family extends to her husband as well. *Ántonia* is able to keep amicable relations with her husband even in the face of hardship and their fundamental differences. Jim, while spending time alone on the farm with Anton, realizes that "he was still... a city man. He liked theatres and lighted streets and music and a game of dominoes after the day's work was over. His sociability was stronger than his acquisitive instinct. He liked to live day by day and night by night, sharing in the excitement of the crowd".¹¹⁰ Anton has a disposition well-suited to city life. After all his years, he has not

¹⁰⁸ Cather, *MA*, 397.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 394.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 413.

outgrown that trait. Anton does not belong in the countryside, at least not in the same way *Ántonia* does. Earlier on, *Ántonia* tells Jim, “I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here...”.¹¹¹ In unexpected contrast to his wife’s sentiments, Anton confides to Jim that he nearly went “crazy with lonesomeness” when he first moved onto the farm.¹¹² The stark differences between this couple does not go unnoticed by the narrator. Jim recognizes *Ántonia*’s accomplishment, that she “had managed to hold [Anton]... on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world”.¹¹³ Somehow, *Ántonia* overcomes Anton’s natural fascination with the city and creates a space where he can be comfortable. She convinces him to “stick it out” and learns to foster her own sites of excitement and warmth, albeit more secluded ones.¹¹⁴ Anton himself concludes, “my woman is got such a warm heart. She always make it as good for me as she could”.¹¹⁵ His life is nothing to be disappointed over. He acknowledges his fortunes and comforts and seems at ease. Jim cannot help but acknowledge, however, that *Ántonia* is the one who is in control: “It did rather seem to me that Cuzak had been made the instrument of *Ántonia*’s special mission”.¹¹⁶ The farm, her large family, remaining in the countryside, it was all *Ántonia*’s doing. This is her success story.

While other characters in Cather’s novel are shown to be effective hostesses, like *Ántonia*’s former employer and mentor Mrs. Harling, *Ántonia*’s ability by the novel’s end to create an all-encompassing space – to bring together the city and the country, the rebellious and the obedient, a sense of community and of solitude, the natural world and cultivation of the land

¹¹¹ Cather, *MA*, 387.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 413.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 413.

– out of a landscape that was once nothing but “miles of wild grazing land,” is unparalleled.¹¹⁷ *Ántonia*’s equals can only be found in Jewett’s works, where women like Mrs. Todd have successfully established sites of connection and turned the site of the home into an inclusive, fluctuating, harmonious intersection of people, culture, and ideas.

Chapter 2: Hostess as Mediator

She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.¹¹⁸

Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from the little garden.¹¹⁹

The heroines of *My Ántonia* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are framed in epic proportions. Jewett and Cather, in general, wrote their stories as though they were about something far more powerful and enduring than an aging country woman. There is an underlying implication that some greater force, some transcendent realm has won the devotion of their heroines, making them manifestations of certain undying truths. In *My Ántonia*, for example, Jim is afraid to visit *Ántonia* because he knows how prairie-life can afflict a person, but during his visit he finds something unexpected: “I had not been mistaken. She was a battered woman now... but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things”.¹²⁰ *Ántonia* is unafflicted by age because she possesses “that something,” a perceivable level of depth and enduring vitality. Jim’s apprehension over reconnecting with his childhood friend,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 156.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 398.

¹¹⁹ Jewett, *CPF*, 45-46.

¹²⁰ Cather, *MA*, 398.

only to find her worn down and dejected, soon disappears. He is reminded that *Ántonia* possesses some great, mysterious truth: “She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body...”.¹²¹ Jim recognizes *Ántonia*’s devotion to her farmland, a bond that he views as inherently good and powerful. As Sharon O’Brien explains in *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, “Most of the heroic protagonists in Cather’s novels find happiness in this fashion, devoting their lives and energies to something larger than the self: the land, the family, art, religion”.¹²² *Ántonia* can be identified as the novel’s principal heroine because she is devoted to the land; she is intimately committed to an entity beyond herself. But how does that devotion imbue in her such power? Can words describe what “all the strong things” in *Ántonia*’s heart might be, or can those things only be observed and felt? Where does her power originate from?

The hostesses in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* beg this same question. Jewett shrouds her heroines in an air of untouchable mystery. Mrs. Todd, for instance, deemed “the female archetypal hero among Jewett’s fictional characters,” is a woman capable of transcending the corporeal realm.¹²³ She is described as a woman in whom “life was very strong... as if some force of Nature were personified in this simple-hearted woman and gave her cousinship to the ancient deities”.¹²⁴ As a heroine internally aligned with the supernatural world, Mrs. Todd’s powers become even more apparent when juxtaposed with her simple surroundings. Upon

¹²¹ Cather, *MA*, 398.

¹²² O’Brien, *WCTEV*, 3.

¹²³ Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative* (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 1.

¹²⁴ Jewett, *CPF*, 153.

conversing openly in the sitting-room one evening with her newfound friend and guest, Mrs. Todd's inner "force" emerges. The narrator perceives that Mrs. Todd's "height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from the little garden".¹²⁵ Although Mrs. Todd is a "simple-hearted woman," she is also the embodiment of something powerful and immortal. She is overtly referred to as a "sibyl," claiming the same title as the "powerful sibyls, repositories of primal wisdom" who relayed the messages of the gods in ancient Greece.¹²⁶ The role of the sibyl was largely one of mediation, in which a prophetess was divinely elected to mediate between everyday life and the supernatural.¹²⁷ The argument that Ammons makes in her analysis of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, that Jewett's "houses exist... as spiritual places, virtually shrines," also points to Mrs. Todd's transcendent status.¹²⁸ The households that the narrator visits throughout the novel act like signposts, guiding the reader through the narrative. Most importantly, the narrator's observations of Mrs. Todd clarify that these houses are not empty shrines. They are inhabited by something much more sacred and spiritual: the sibyl.

A Habitual Self-Forgetfulness

As readers are given a glimpse into what life is like within these sacred shrines, it becomes increasingly evident that the character of the hostess is allotted a number of meaningful responsibilities. As established in the previous chapter, Jewett and Cather's vision of a successful hostess is that she facilitates connections. An additional prerequisite for their heroines, though, is

¹²⁵ Ibid., 45-46

¹²⁶ Ann Romines, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 82.

¹²⁷ David Potter, "Sibyls in the Greek and Roman world," ed. B. McGing, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3, (1988): 471-477.

¹²⁸ Ammons, "Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs," 87.

that they must always be willing to receive the unexpected visitor. This is not any easy task, and Jewett readily acknowledges this fact through her narrator's reluctance to take on the role of the hostess. The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, in her process of witnessing and learning from Mrs. Todd's habits, has difficulty in adapting to Mrs. Todd's patient acceptance of unexpected visitors. She discloses to the reader that, "when there were signs of invasion, late in July, and a certain Mrs. Fosdick appeared like a strange sail on the far horizon, I suffered much from apprehension".¹²⁹ In many ways, Jewett's narrator has a common reaction to the arrival of a visitor. Preparing for company can be unsettling and disruptive. In awaiting Mrs. Fosdick's arrival, the narrator becomes agitated. Feeling less like the guest that she was before, she now has to partake in "the housekeeper's anxiety" and the two women must put aside their usual plans.¹³⁰ The "comfort and unconsciousness" that the narrator feels within Mrs. Todd's home, "as if it were a larger body, or a double shell," is now under threat of "invasion".¹³¹ Only to add to the narrator's irritation, Mrs. Fosdick's arrival is so far delayed that when she does finally turn up at Mrs. Todd's door, the narrator proclaims that the "unexpected happened".¹³² There is nothing about Mrs. Fosdick's visit that enthuses the narrator and she feels unequipped for such a disturbance.

Thankfully, Mrs. Todd is more than capable of guiding her narrator through the process of hospitality. Despite being taken by surprise and uttering a few soft comments about Mrs. Fosdick's inconsiderate tardiness, Mrs. Todd hastily and cheerfully welcomes her new guest, and she does so with such grace and ease that by the end of that evening the narrator and Mrs.

¹²⁹ Jewett, *CPF*, 81-82.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 82.

Fosdick “were already sincere friends”.¹³³ Mrs. Todd’s limitless ability to receive and facilitate harmonious connections is, once again, put on display. The unexpected or inconsiderate nature of the guest’s arrival is irrelevant to Mrs. Todd; the responsibilities of the hostess remain unchanged.

The graceful reception of a guest, which Jewett demonstrates through Mrs. Todd, is also shown through Cather’s valiant hostess. *Ántonia* lives in a state of readiness and preparation for her visitors. This is a trait that she has possessed since she was a little girl, new to the lands of Nebraska, unable to speak fluent English, and not well-acquainted with her neighbors. Jim Burden and his grandmother, one winter day, visit the household of *Ántonia*’s family. Upon entering the home, Jim and his grandmother are very poorly received. Through the unintelligible crying of *Ántonia*’s mother and the hungry, silent stares from the children, it is made clear that the Shimerda family did not prepare for the winter and are lacking essential provisions. As the frantic Mrs. Shimerda proceeds to scornfully wave an empty coffee pot in the air, “with a look positively vindictive,” *Ántonia* is the only family member to calmly step forward and welcome her visitors.¹³⁴ “You not mind my poor mamenka, Mrs. Burden. She is so sad,” apologizes *Ántonia*.¹³⁵ Young *Ántonia* then proceeds to answer Mrs. Burden’s questions, shows her around the small cave-like house, and acts as the translator for her family, all of which helps to ease the tension of the situation. *Ántonia*’s competent navigation of this stressful meeting reveals her initial aptitude for being a hostess and for receiving visitors. Much later in the novel, when Jim Burden unexpectedly shows up at *Ántonia*’s farmhouse after many long years, she does not hesitate to welcome him into her home and introduce him to her large family. She then

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³⁴ Cather, *MA*, 83-84.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

recommends to her daughter, “...why don’t we take him [Jim] into the parlour, now that we’ve got a nice parlour for company?”.¹³⁶ Even though there is no indication in the text that *Ántonia* receives regular visitors, she has nonetheless designed a parlour for entertaining company. This act of preparedness reveals *Ántonia*’s expectation that she will, at some point, need to host an unannounced guest – such as Jim. It is this same attitude of preparedness and diligence, which has remained with *Ántonia* since childhood, that makes her home such a welcoming and desirable destination.

Jewett and Cather’s vision of hospitality, evidently, is not dependent upon a stagnant set of principles that must be enacted in the presence of a visitor, but rather relies upon the environment the hostess has cultivated around herself. Hospitality is dependent upon actions that are habitual: it is about living a life always prepared for the visitor. This rather idealistic version of hospitality, of always being prepared for what has not yet arrived or occurred, is a topic well-established in the philosophical work of Jacques Derrida as well. It is an essential aspect of what he terms “unconditional” hospitality, a transcendent version of hospitality in which “whatever happens, happens, whoever comes, comes”.¹³⁷ This is the supreme form of hospitality, where there are no conditions placed on the guest who is seeking a place to stay. In tracking Derrida’s theory, the visionary extremes to which Derrida elevates this notion of an “unconditional” hospitality cannot be ignored:

... to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken [surprende], to be ready to not be ready, if such is possible, to let oneself be overtaken, to not even let oneself to be overtaken, to be surprised in a fashion almost violent. . . precisely where one is not ready to receive —

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹³⁷ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 129.

and not only not yet ready but not ready, unprepared in a mode that is not even that of the “not yet”.¹³⁸

The extremes to which Derrida takes this idea of being “overtaken,” of being willing to be caught “unprepared,” seems to be an attempt to rid the concept of hospitality of one of its many internal conflicts: that a host has agency in the space where a guest cannot. There is an inequality in the host-guest exchange, because the hostess has authority over her visitor and the space she is welcoming them into. To provide an example of this, Derrida lays before his readers “the question of the question”.¹³⁹ Derrida wonders whether asking a question of the visitor upon their arrival – such as simply asking them their name – is an act of love and consideration or an act of interrogation. What is a guest required to do or say in order to cross the threshold? What are the unspoken conditions that the hostess has set in place for their visitor, and how can a guest prepare themselves to meet these conditions? The only alternative to forcing such conditions and uncertainties upon a newcomer is to “begin with the unquestioning welcome”.¹⁴⁰ To receive someone without stipulations is to receive someone in a state of unpreparedness for what may follow. Unconditional hospitality is Derrida’s attempt to eradicate the paradoxical inequalities that arise at the threshold of the home, but it also sheds light on another crucial question that Jewett and Cather delicately pose for their readers. How can a hostess possibly prepare oneself for unpreparedness?

The key to forming habits and a lifestyle around unpreparedness, as Jewett theorizes in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, is to perfect the art of self-forgetfulness. As hostess, one must

¹³⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” In *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 361.

¹³⁹ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 29.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

learn to remove one's own desires and concerns from the equation of hospitality. Perhaps Jewett's most important character in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, as she pertains to the theme of hospitality, is Mrs. Blackett, the mother of the aforementioned herbalist Mrs. Todd. Mrs. Blackett is an elderly woman who lives on Green Island with her son and is visited one summer day by Mrs. Todd and the story's narrator. It is on this remote island, the most unassuming of places, that Jewett chose to situate her ultimate hospitable heroine. Mrs. Blackett is the epitome of what a hostess should be, and Jewett's insightful narrator is quick to take note:

Her hospitality was something exquisite; she had the gift which so many women lack, of being able to make themselves and their houses belong entirely to a guest's pleasure, — that charming surrender for the moment of themselves and whatever belongs to them, so that they make a part of one's own life that can never be forgotten. Tact is after all a kind of mindreading, and my hostess held the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart, and Mrs. Blackett's world and mine were one from the moment we met.

Besides, she had that final, that highest gift of heaven, a perfect self-forgetfulness.¹⁴¹

Mrs. Blackett surrenders herself to her guest. In doing so, she instills in her visitor a sacred, unforgettable moment. She occupies a part of her guests' lives, rather than simply introducing them to her own. The narrator claims that "Mrs. Blackett's world and mine were one from the moment we met," alluding to the underlying sense of equality between the two women. More importantly, the reason they can inhabit a shared reality is because of Mrs. Blackett's "final" and "highest gift... a perfect self-forgetfulness." It is the abandonment of one's own self-interests, then, that restores equality to the host-guest relationship and creates the foundations of an unconditional hospitality.

¹⁴¹ Jewett, *CPF*, 75.

Jewett's creation of a character such as Mrs. Blackett is bold and intriguing, as Derrida himself concludes that "unconditional" hospitality is "practically impossible to live; one cannot in any case, and by definition, organize it".¹⁴² While he understands the unconditional form of hospitality to be the greatest, the ideal form, he also understands it as "beyond being, unable to be expressed in language or laws".¹⁴³ There can be no explicit standards for unpreparedness. The concept of a "conditional" hospitality exists simply because it is the hospitality that results when unconditional hospitality is put into real-life practice.¹⁴⁴ Derrida clearly did not believe that humans were capable of a "perfect" self-forgetfulness, which presents a tension between Derrida and Jewett's works and allows for a provoking question to linger in the mind of Jewett's readers: what inspired Jewett to create a character with such transcendent abilities? Where did her belief in the unconditional hospitality of characters like Mrs. Blackett stem from?

Jewett's beliefs and her literary mission informed the creation of her characters. It has been aptly noted by Jewett scholars, such as Terry Heller and Josephine Donovan, that this respected author believed a "writer's job is to make one dream; that is, to make one aware of another realm, a transcendent realm by means of images drawn from earthly, everyday reality".¹⁴⁵ Jewett is an author who uses her fiction to cross boundaries, in more ways than one. She uses the theme of hospitality to break down barriers and describe something intangible, supernatural. Marcia Folsom, in her essay "'Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading': Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," attributes Jewett's ability to reach that

¹⁴² Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 129.

¹⁴³ Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 36.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Josephine Donovan, "Sarah Orne Jewett's Critical Theory: Notes toward a Feminine Literary Mode," In *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, edited by Gwen L. Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 216.

transcendent realm to her unique “empathic style” of writing.¹⁴⁶ The women of Jewett’s novel are able to interpret the world around them, without even having to speak a word. Jewett writes about characters whom she feels she knows and loves, and those characters also come to love each other. Due to this emotional investment in her work, Cather regards Jewett’s writing as “a gift from heart to heart”.¹⁴⁷ In her 1925 preface to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Cather describes the true work an author:

If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift... He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again.¹⁴⁸

Cather knew Jewett to possess this “gift of sympathy,” and it is this same sympathy that Jewett embeds in her heroines. The transcendent capabilities of her heroines are directly derived from their ability to love and sympathize with the world around them; they are “women who are able to read nature, the physical world, and the minds of other people... to identify the larger human significance of each small outer sign”.¹⁴⁹ Terry Heller expands on this very point in his essay “Living for the Other World: Sarah Orne Jewett as a Religious Writer,” where he observes through Jewett’s writing that she ascribes to a “religion of friendship”.¹⁵⁰ Jewett elevates the significance and power of friendship by connecting “the cultivation of loving relationships with

¹⁴⁶ Marcia McClintock Folsom, “‘Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading’: Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (March 1982): 66.

¹⁴⁷ Willa Cather and Marian Allen Williams, Preface to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), xvii.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁴⁹ Folsom, “‘Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading’: Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” 66.

¹⁵⁰ Terry Heller, “Living for the Other World: Sarah Orne Jewett as a Religious Writer,” In *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Madison: Popular, 2004), 1.

spiritual knowledge”.¹⁵¹ Creating connections between people was Jewett’s work in life. She shared her world with people by allowing herself to fade away “into the land and people of [her] heart,” and she expected nothing less of her heroic hostesses. Jewett’s belief in an unconditional hospitality and a “transcendent realm,” – however implausible it may seem to Derrida – is inspired and informed by her faith in the power of friendship. Everything that her female heroines, her hostesses, emulate through their actions and their attitudes in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is rooted in this vision. Jewett is an author who makes sense of the world through transformative relationships and transcendent connections.

Teaching in Circles

A similarity between *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Ántonia*, which can hardly be considered coincidental, is that both novels follow an irregular plot structure. The structure of *The Country of Pointed Firs* has been particularly subject to scholarly debate, due both to its complicated publication history and its perceived non-linear narrative. This has resulted in further debates about its classification within the genre of fiction. While *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is not considered a collection of short stories, there has been substantial apprehension over its categorization as a novel in the past.¹⁵² Scholars questioned whether Jewett’s narrative truly fit the definition of a novel, which generally requires that a fictional work contain “the development of characters through events or actions that are determined by plot”.¹⁵³ Instead of being linear and driven by a sequence of events, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has often been understood as a circular narrative, defined by its repeated themes of departure and

¹⁵¹ Howard, *The Center of the World*, 108.

¹⁵² Carlin, In *CPF*, 22-29.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27.

return. Elizabeth Ammons describes Jewett's structure as "...webbed, net-worked. Instead of being linear, it is nuclear".¹⁵⁴ *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a story marked by the pattern of return, and Ammons' claim emphasizes the subversiveness of Jewett's writing style. Previous struggles to detect progress and forward momentum within the narrative, though, have prevented Jewett critics from ascertaining its linear, more traditional plot structure. Although such deliberations about plot in the *The Country of the Pointed Firs* have since evolved – with scholars affirming that the story's chapters are significantly interrelated in theme and sequence – the original ambiguities surrounding the novel's structure are worth remembering.¹⁵⁵

Cather's novel, *My Ántonia*, has been viewed as episodic and resistant to any traditional categorizations in terms of its genre and form as well.¹⁵⁶ Being told almost entirely through Jim Burden's memory, the novel chronologically recounts specific moments from the past. Each of these moments amplifies the readers knowledge of Jim's life and the development of his personal relationships, but the memories themselves are contained. Scholar Sheryl Meyering posits that "*My Ántonia* suggests traditional patterns of plot and then either fails to fulfill them or fulfills them in unexpected ways".¹⁵⁷ By tracking the theme of hospitality throughout each chapter of Jim's memory, Meyering's latter suggestion proves to be true: Cather follows traditional patterns of plot in an unexpected way.

What the analysis of hospitality affords Jewett and Cather's readers is a means for viewing *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Ántonia* as both circular and linear texts. In

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Ammons, "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16, no. 2 (1983): 85.

¹⁵⁵ Carlin, In *CPF*, 28.

¹⁵⁶ Sheryl L. Meyering, *Understanding O Pioneers! And My Ántonia: A student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 16.

¹⁵⁷ Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 21-22.

both works, readers are able to follow the transformative relationships that develop between hostesses and their guests. More specifically, readers get to witness a process of conversion, as a woman transforms into a self-realized hostess through her apprenticeship with another, more experienced hostess. “*The Country of the Pointed Firs* begins with, constantly returns to, and ends in the relationship between the narrator and her landlady Mrs. Todd,” writes Ammons.¹⁵⁸ The relationship between Mrs. Todd and the narrator propels Jewett’s novel forward, just as Jim’s friendship with *Ántonia* inspires the narration of his childhood memories. Where Ammons’ strictly circular interpretation of Jewett’s novel falters is in her claim that Mrs. Todd’s relationship with the narrator, “deepens and broadens but does not undergo fundamental or unexpected change”.¹⁵⁹ On the contrary, the relationship between Mrs. Todd and the narrator undergoes numerous changes, resulting in the narrator’s departure from Dunnet Landing as a fundamentally different woman. The narrator, on her last day with Mrs. Todd, apprehensively confronts the realities of her departure: “At last I had to... return to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner”.¹⁶⁰ She knows that she is no longer a woman of the world. The theme of hospitality bolsters a more linear reading of Jewett and Cather’s works because it reveals how a hostess can transform their guests into natives.

Prior to Mrs. Fosdick’s arrival in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the narrator has ample time to adjust to her new life in Mrs. Todd’s house. She grows accustomed to Mrs. Todd’s regular visitors and even establishes herself as a promising “business partner” in the elderly woman’s herb-gathering affairs.¹⁶¹ The narrator’s transition from guest to “business partner” is

¹⁵⁸ Ammons, “Going in Circles,” 85.

¹⁵⁹ Ammons, “Going in Circles,” 85.

¹⁶⁰ Jewett, *CPF*, 138.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

the first significant shift in the novel, as she solidifies a more influential and permanent status within the household. Now learning about and participating in Mrs. Todd's economic activities, the narrator must adopt some of her hostess' habits and practices. The second shift in the novel, which occurs soon after, is the narrator's renunciation of her business responsibilities. Instead of continuing to assist in Mrs. Todd's affairs and earning a generous allowance, she chooses to focus on her writing, a decision which surprisingly only serves to strengthen the friendship between the two women: "Mrs. Todd and I were not separated or estranged by the change in our business relations; on the contrary, a deeper intimacy seemed to begin".¹⁶² Readers can see that as the economic component of the women's acquaintance fades, their friendship is able to blossom. Unsurprisingly, Jewett is prioritizing the power of friendship over economic power and control of the household, again reminding her readers that it is sympathy and self-forgetfulness which allows hospitality to thrive. The relationship between Jewett's hostess and the narrator "is an apprenticeship not in business but in wisdom," clarifies scholar Sarah Sherman.¹⁶³ Mrs. Todd is, above all else, teaching her narrator about the transformative power of friendship.

Nevertheless, just as the narrator becomes comfortably adjusted to her newfound security in Mrs. Todd's friendship, comparing Mrs. Todd's house to "double shell" of herself, she is given her next lesson in hospitality. Another momentous shift in the narrator's status within the household is when, as previously discussed, Mrs. Fosdick decides to visit Dunnet Landing. Under the guidance of Mrs. Todd, the narrator begins to take on the responsibilities of a hostess. She helps to "brighten the fire" and check on the dinner supplies, despite her childish worry of

¹⁶² Ibid., 45.

¹⁶³ Sarah Way Sherman. *Sarah Orne Jewett, an American Persephone* (Hanover: New Hampshire, 1989), 209.

being forgotten by Mrs. Todd altogether.¹⁶⁴ Mrs. Fosdick's arrival initially proves to be an uncomfortable adjustment for the narrator because she is no longer the main guest or the only friend inhabiting Mrs. Todd's home. She has become Mrs. Todd's fellow hostess and is partially responsible for how Mrs. Fosdick is received and welcomed. In taking on these new duties, the narrator furthers her conversion into a self-realized hostess and is learning what it truly means to live in a state of self-forgetfulness. Mrs. Todd is converting the narrator to her "empathic religion," a progression which provides linearity to the novel's overall structure.

By the end of the novel, the narrator has grown accustomed to Mrs. Todd's rhythms and is increasingly treated more as her equal than her apprentice. She even accompanies Mrs. Blackett and Mrs. Todd to a large family reunion. As the three women sit together in their wagon, traveling home from the festivities, the narrator silently admires her new friends: "Neither of my companions was troubled by her burden of years. I hoped in my heart that I might be like them as I lived on into age, and then smiled to think that I too was no longer very young".¹⁶⁵ It is a self-realizing moment for Jewett's narrator, as she happily embraces her growing resemblance to the women beside her. She has begun to emulate her companions, not just in agedness, but in their unburdened, empathic outlook on life. Side-by-side, these women are an inspiring image of both linear and circular progression. Mrs. Blackett has imparted her hospitable wisdom to her daughter, Mrs. Todd, who in turn has passed that knowledge on to the narrator. It is an intimate chain of teaching and friendship, which allows for the practice of hospitality to repeat many times over, in places still waiting to be known.

¹⁶⁴ Jewett, *CPF*, 83.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

Mrs. Todd is an especially compelling embodiment of the triumphs of hospitality. She is a master of the empathic religion, having established “complete familiarity with her world”.¹⁶⁶ She can wordlessly interpret the sentiment behind everyday situations and the emotions of the people she loves, whether immediate or from a distance. She also has a particularly strong connection to her childhood home on Green Island, where she can sense her mother’s feelings and movements.¹⁶⁷ As Ann Romines points out in *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, Mrs. Todd “has internalized the rhythms of her mother’s household” and “can read from afar the waxing and waning of the Blackett hearth fire”.¹⁶⁸ Yet, regardless of this intimate connection that Mrs. Todd has with her mother and her mother’s house, she chooses to leave Green Island and “establish an independent household and womanhood, on the shore”.¹⁶⁹ She is a woman who has used her capabilities as a hostess to create her own center of life in Dunnet Landing, and she has given her guest the proper tools and knowledge to follow in her footsteps. As the narrator leaves Dunnet Landing in the final chapter, she leaves with the same empowering opportunity that Mrs. Todd had — to establish her independence in a place of her own, using the harmonizing and connective powers of hospitality.

Imperfect Conditions

The mission of hospitality and the triumph of a hostess, however, is not always destined to succeed. The character of Mrs. Harling, in *My Ántonia*, who is first introduced as Jim Burden’s

¹⁶⁶ Folsom, “‘Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading’: Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” 70.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

¹⁶⁸ Ann Romines, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 62.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

hospitable neighbor, is Cather's portrait of an imperfect hostess. She is a woman of limited independence, and therefore practices a limited hospitality. Her imperfections, however, in no way diminish the significance of her role within the novel. It is because of Mrs. Harling's mentorship and guidance that *Ántonia* is able to reach her full potential as a hostess. Mrs. Harling first hires *Ántonia* as a housemaid and brings the young farm girl to Black Hawk, Nebraska. Becoming the primary hospitable figure in *Ántonia*'s life, Mrs. Harling resolves to "bring something out of that girl" and teaches her new housekeeper about gardening, cooking, cleaning, and all the skills needed to create a harmonious atmosphere.¹⁷⁰ Of course, Mrs. Harling herself already possesses these harmonizing powers and warmly attracts the company of her neighbors. Jim admits that whenever the disagreeable Mr. Harling was absent, he felt drawn to the Harling's home, describing it as a "warm, roomy house" with plenty of color, music, and storytelling.¹⁷¹ The period in which *Ántonia* works under Mrs. Harling and lives with the family is an all-around pleasant one and it proves crucial to *Ántonia*'s future achievements. In the later years of her life, *Ántonia* reflects upon her time in Black Hawk and expresses to Jim her gratitude for having Mrs. Harling as a teacher: "'Oh, I'm glad I went! I'd never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping if I hadn't. I learned nice ways at the Harlings', and I've been able to bring my children up so much better'".¹⁷² Since *Ántonia*'s apprenticeship with Mrs. Harling is so beneficial and positive, it comes as a shock when *Ántonia* is eventually pressured into leaving.

Mrs. Harling's imperfect hospitality and dismissal of *Ántonia* comes as somewhat of surprise, but it is not entirely her fault. The problem initially arises with Mr. Harling, an

¹⁷⁰ Cather, *MA*, 174.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 387.

“autocratic and imperial” figure within the Harling household.¹⁷³ Jim describes him as “a man who felt that he had power... carried his head so haughtily,” and possessed “something daring and challenging in his eyes”.¹⁷⁴ When *Ántonia* begins to frequent the town dances and attract the attention of unruly young men, her behavior outside the household is harshly admonished by Mr. Harling and she is given an ultimatum. “This is the end of it...” declares Mr. Harling, “You can quit going to these dances, or you can hunt another place”.¹⁷⁵ *Ántonia*, being a stubborn character, refuses to comply with Mr. Harling’s demands. Mrs. Harling tries to advise *Ántonia* otherwise and explains that she is incapable of advocating for the young woman: “I can’t go back on what Mr. Harling has said. This is his house”.¹⁷⁶ Caught between the desires of her husband and her housemaid, Mrs. Harling sides with her autocratic husband, because he is the figure who controls her finances and her home. As a result of her status within the home, Mrs. Harling cannot implement an unconditional hospitality. She is a hostess who lacks independence. The result of this unhappy decision, however, effectively ends the two women’s working relationship and *Ántonia* must leave Mr. Harling’s household.

There are two underlying factors that influence Mrs. Harling’s inhospitable decision: her economic dependence and her restricted authority within the home. These problematic factors, moreover, are embodied by a single person: Mr. Harling. The character of Mr. Harling is a representation of the conditions that threaten hospitality. He is one of the novel’s antagonists in that he hinders Mrs. Harling – a woman who possesses the gift of the hostess – from reaching her true potential and disrupts *Ántonia*’s own development. First of all, he is incapable of hospitality

¹⁷³ Cather, *MA*, 179.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

himself, being an overtly arrogant man who demands a quiet atmosphere and prohibits others from sitting in his designated chairs throughout the house. His standoffish personality is strangely contrasted by his acute investment in his household. Like many of the other men in *Black Hawk*, whom Jim describes as being the bill-payers and having “no personal habits outside their domestic ones,” Mr. Harling fastidiously governs his home.¹⁷⁷ He dictates the behavior of his children, controls who enters his house, and demands “all his wife’s attention,” and he is granted this power because he earns the family’s income.¹⁷⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century, the traditional designations of business and finance as patriarchal spheres, though under great strain, continued to linger, and Mrs. Harling is a character clearly trapped by such ideologies.¹⁷⁹ Her husband is the stereotypical economic patriarch. When Mr. Harling gives *Ántonia* an ultimatum, Mrs. Harling has no real authority to resist. Additionally, because *Ántonia* is a paid worker and not a family member or friend of Mr. Harling’s, her position within the household is unstable and provisional. She cannot challenge the decisions of the Harling family. The involvement of economy, therefore, both in how it controls one’s independence and creates barriers between a guest and a hostess, has the potential to turn hospitality into a conditional practice. Only once economic distractions are overcome, through financial independence and the prioritization of friendship – as demonstrated through the relationship between Mrs. Todd and Jewett’s narrator – can a hostess triumph. Fortunately, despite *Ántonia*’s misfortunes, she does just that. In becoming essential to the upkeep of her farm and by finding a husband who yields to her authority, *Ántonia* evades the restrictions that are regrettably placed upon Mrs. Harling’s hospitality.

¹⁷⁷ Cather, *MA*, 179.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Easton, “Outdoor Relief,” 131-133.

In summary, Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, Mrs. Harling, and Antonia are all women who, however imperfectly, mediate between worlds. Through their self-forgetful practices, they are able to participate in everyday life, while also empathically interpreting the world around them and transcending the merely physical realm. It is through such mediation that the relationships between visitors and hostesses are best able to thrive. When unconditionally welcomed into the same world as their hostesses, guests begin to transition from their status as a foreigner to that of a friend. In Jewett and Cather's narratives, certain guests are even trained in the practice of hospitality, carrying on the skill of the hostess to future generations and new places. Through this lens, the hostess can also be viewed as a kind of teacher. It is a useful and enlightening comparison when contemplating Jewett and Cather's vision of hospitality, because the character of the schoolteacher acts as a mediator as well. In June Howard's book *The Center of the World: Regional Writing and The Puzzles of Place-Time*, a full chapter is lent to examining the role the schoolteacher in regionalist writing. Howard argues that, "Teachers are... both (somewhat) powerful and (somewhat) vulnerable. They are both insiders and outsiders... They create, in the classroom, a mediating locality".¹⁸⁰ The teacher both governs and derives power from an in-between space, a room merging the ideas of the world with local knowledge and people. Jewett and Cather's hostesses are no different. They too exist in the "in-between" spaces, tethered to the transcendent realm of empathy and friendship, but living the routines of everyday life. Additionally, the hostess is a woman situated both at the center of her world and, as perceived by foreigners, living amidst the unknown. In her harmonious household and her garden, she too has established a "mediating locality," where she chooses to be vulnerable and welcoming. A hostess can take on many names and disguises – a sibyl, a prophetess, a teacher – but the underlying

¹⁸⁰ Howard, *The Center of the World*, 51.

principle is that she resides in an in-between space of her own creation. The ideal hostess, furthermore, in spite of her preferred vulnerability, must be in control of her own finances and make independent decisions. Only then can she fully devote herself, unchallenged and unencumbered, to what matters most.

Chapter 3: The Ultimate Host(ess)

The land – and to an equal extent, nature as a whole – plays an important role in both Jewett and Cather’s conception of hospitality. When looking beyond the host-guest relationship of hospitality, there is an even more important relationship that presents itself: the relationship between land and hostess. This chapter’s unveiling of the friendly bond that develops between the land and the hostess will be bolstered by an examination of two additional texts: Jewett’s “A White Heron” and Cather’s *O Pioneers!*. These texts were chosen for their narrative styles, literary prominence, and prioritization of their female protagonists. They are valuable resources for furthering an understanding of Jewett and Cather’s literary presentation of the land because they both relinquish the first-person narrative mode found in *My Ántonia* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and present the land as an individualized character, capable of feeling and judgement.

Cather actually dedicated *O Pioneers!* to Jewett, in recognition of Jewett’s mentorship and involvement in its creation. Therefore, one could only expect to find parallels between *O Pioneers!* and Jewett’s own literary themes and style.¹⁸¹ Much like Cather’s *My Ántonia*, furthermore, *O Pioneers!* is set in rural Nebraska and contains a female heroine: Alexandra Bergson. Alexandra’s intimate relationship with the Nebraskan landscape is more clearly

¹⁸¹ O’Brien, *WCTEV*, 349-350.

established in *O Pioneers!*, along with the other characters' connections to the land, because the novel is written from the third-person omniscient point-of-view. In *My Ántonia*, Jim is recounting his limited experiences from memory. In *O Pioneers!*, however, Cather forgoes the limitations of a first-person narrator and is able to personify the land to a much greater extent. With her unencumbered narrative power, Cather is able to establish the land as a focal point within the novel. "As she explores the themes of man's place in the natural world," writes Meyering, "she makes the landscape almost a character. It is important in every strand of the story..."¹⁸² By regarding the land as an individualized character, it becomes increasingly apparent as to how Cather's hostesses relate to the land and use this relation to further their hospitality.

For similar reasons, this chapter will also expand its study of Jewett's texts by relying on one of her most well-received short stories: "A White Heron." Published in 1886, one decade before the publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, it was almost immediately deemed a small classic.¹⁸³ Having been translated into a handful of different languages and analyzed by an array of scholars since its publication, it has had a notable impact on how critics understand Jewett as an author.¹⁸⁴ Additionally, in resemblance to Cather's writing, Jewett's short story works to reveal nature as "a powerful and seductive protagonist".¹⁸⁵ Nature is a prominent character within "A White Heron," and it plays a central role in producing conflict for the story's heroine, Sylvia.

¹⁸² Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 5.

¹⁸³ Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer's Life* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1993), 125, 164.

¹⁸⁴ Silverthorne, *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer's Life*, 125.

¹⁸⁵ Blanchard, *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work*, 242.

For the purposes of this chapter, the use of the term “land” refers to the earth and the soil and the vegetation that grows from it, while references to the “landscape” more generally denote the scenery, terrain, and visual appeal of a particular area. Nature can be slightly distinguished from these two terms in that it encompasses living creatures, as well as the soil and the plants. All of these terms are relevant to an analysis of hospitality and the land’s role within that process, because the character of the land is ever-present and inextricably linked to the survival of life. The systems of nature and the landscape cannot exist without the presence of the land itself. Each of these terms, furthermore, are used to describe both untouched wilderness and human-altered environments. Farms, woodlands, gardens, and the prairie are all classified in this chapter as the land, because the character of the land in Cather and Jewett’s works is shown to endure, in spite of human actions and the changes that are imposed upon it.

From Jewett and Cather’s standpoint, the land has an identity and agency of its own. It is important to remember, though, that any time an author chooses to characterize or personify the land, they are doing so through their own set of biases and motives, however unintentional or harmless those might be. The land, as humans are able to perceive it, does not have a voice. It cannot speak with humans as humans speak with one another, therefore it cannot welcome or deny its inhabitants in the same way a hostess can. It cannot advocate for itself. Nevertheless, it is a crucial variable to the equation of hospitality because the land is where humans survive. It is upon the land where a hostess must create a space for welcoming and receiving.

A Lifelong Affair

As Laurie Shannon summarizes it in “‘The Country of our Friendship’: Jewett’s Intimist Art,” Jewett “proposes friendship as a country, a creed, and a way of life”.¹⁸⁶ This is also the creed of Jewett and Cather’s hostesses. A self-forgetful, loving heart is the foundation of their hospitality, because it allows hostesses to welcome their visitors without a word, to understand a stranger at the moment of meeting. A common assumption is that this type of unspoken bond can only be formed between two people, but this was seemingly not the belief of Jewett or Cather. There is another force that partakes in their empathic religion, and that force is the land itself. The female protagonists in Cather and Jewett’s novels are hostesses of the land, rising to a level beyond that of a visitor on the landscape, because they have cultivated a relationship with it. They use their empathic powers to relate to and understand their natural surroundings. Their role as a hostess of the land, as complex as it may be to condense into a single definition, is beautifully stated in the beginning chapter of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*:

There was something about the coast town of Dunnet which made it seem more attractive than other maritime villages of eastern Maine... When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person. The process of falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift in such a case, but the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair.¹⁸⁷

Jewett, from the start, has clarified what it truly means to be a hostess. The empathic religion of Jewett does not just extend to other people; it also extends to the land. Establishing a relationship with a landscape, moreover, is a “lifelong affair.” It should be treated as a person would want to

¹⁸⁶ Laurie Shannon, “‘The Country of Our Friendship’: Jewett’s Intimist Art.” *American Literature* 71, no. 2 (1999): 229.

¹⁸⁷ Jewett, *CPF*, 41.

be treated, taking the time to understand it and convene with it. A loving friendship, whether between two people or between a person and their surroundings, can only strengthen and develop with time.

Cather, in particular, wrote often about “the importance of contact with the natural world”.¹⁸⁸ While she never juxtaposed the natural world with the world of culture, framing “the world of culture and refinement” as an inherent evil, as other authors of her time might have, she did stress the significance of her heroines’ relationships with the land.¹⁸⁹ The clearest indication of this in *My Ántonia* is when Ántonia tells Jim, “I’d always be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here”.¹⁹⁰ Ántonia’s statement indicates that she is on “friendly” terms with the land; it is her companion. She is not lonely in the country because she always has the presence of the ground, the trees, and the wild grasses. Surprisingly, it is the city – a place with people in abundance – that makes Ántonia lonely, because she is separated from the land that she knows best. Later on, when recounting to Jim her initial struggles with building a successful farm for her and her family, Ántonia reassures her friend, “No, I never got downhearted... I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have... I’ve never had them out here”.¹⁹¹ For Ántonia, the country is where she belongs. She needs to be with the land, to interact with it, to negotiate with it, in order to be happy. The work that Ántonia puts in to maintain her apple orchard, the deep affection she has for it, reflects this. The fact that the apple trees “were on [her] mind like children,” is the

¹⁸⁸ Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 17.

¹⁸⁹ Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 18.

¹⁹⁰ Cather, *MA*, 363.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 387.

very reason they have prospered.¹⁹² There is no doubt for the reader that *Ántonia* loves her land, is driven by her devotion to it, and works hard to maintain it. She has done so throughout her entire life, and it is one of the reasons why Jim views her as heroic and transcendent.

My Ántonia, however, omits one of the crucial components in a hostess' journey. Due to the narrator's limited knowledge of *Ántonia*'s lived experience, her "final" and "swift" moment of falling in love with the Nebraskan prairie is left undocumented. Through Jim's memories, the reader is able to track *Ántonia*'s deepening relationship with the land, but it is left unclear as to when this love affair actually begins. For this reason, Cather's renowned work, *O Pioneers!*, proves to be especially valuable in furthering the comparison between Jewett and Cather's vision of the land-host friendship. *O Pioneers!* is naturally meant to inform one's reading of *My Ántonia* already, with *O Pioneers!* being the first book in Cather's Great Plains Trilogy, of which *My Ántonia* is the final installment. Alexandra Bergson, like *Ántonia*, contrasts the other characters within her respective novel by maintaining a strong bond with the Nebraskan landscape. "It might be said," states Sheryl Meyering in her study of the novel, "that Alexandra's primary relationship is not with any of the characters in the story but with the land itself".¹⁹³ A special aspect of Alexandra's development in *O Pioneers!* is that one can actually pinpoint the beginning of this intimate affair, with Cather explicitly disclosing Alexandra's early feelings towards the land:

When the road began to climb the first long swells of the Divide, Alexandra... looked so happy... For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic

¹⁹² Ibid., 383.

¹⁹³ Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 6.

ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious.¹⁹⁴

For Alexandra, this is an intense moment of “love and yearning,” as she admires the landscape around her and cherishes it for what it already is.¹⁹⁵ It is an idyllic moment of, as Jewett terms it, “love at first sight” – a moment “as final as it is swift.” In this brief instant, Alexandra’s destiny is sealed because she is now intertwined with the land; she is bound to it in love. It is the beginning of a long friendship, brought about by Alexandra’s humble admiration for the land, but also by the land’s equalizing acceptance of its sympathetic guest.

Communion with the Land

The land is not represented by Cather to be an apathetic character. It is granted the power to choose its friends, to choose between selflessly welcoming its visitors or refusing to submit to human desires. The way in which the land receives Alexandra is much different from that of the other characters, who also attempt to cultivate their land and create a space for themselves on the landscape. For most of the pioneers in the novel, the land seems inhospitable. Carl, as a young boy and early companion of Alexandra’s, takes note of this harsh reception as he traverses his homeland on the Nebraskan plains, in a place Cather refers to as “the Divide:”

But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's [Carl's] mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too

¹⁹⁴ Cather, Willa Sibert. *O Pioneers!* (Boston: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1947), 65.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.¹⁹⁶

According to Carl's perception, the land wants to be left to itself, to remain a stranger. He views it as being fiercely protective of its solitude. It is strong and "savage" – a force whose strength and beauty would first need to be compromised in order for a community to thrive. Cather proves Carl's initial perceptions to be misleading though. While he may have correctly identified the land's "vast hardness," he fails to root out its cause. The hardness of the land is inextricably linked to Carl's own bitterness. He views the relationship between the land and human cultivation as one of struggle and sorrow: one must prevail over the other. For Carl, the enduring "sombre wastes" are only a reflection of man's weaknesses, which emphasizes the pride and despair in his perception of the land.

In contrast, Alexandra fosters a positive relationship with the land. She approaches the land with a heart of sympathy and admiration. Returning to the moment when Alexandra mounts the "first long swells of the Divide" and is brought to tears by her overwhelming sense of awe, Cather completes the scene with a description of the land's response. Making decisions with as much authority as a human character, the land chooses to humbly receive and yield to Alexandra's will:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning... Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 15.

human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.¹⁹⁷

Alexandra loves the land. Its overwhelming strength is not a threat to her, not in the same way it is for Carl. Its “free spirit” and wildness is not a despairing reflection of human failure. In response to her love and sympathy, the personified land submits itself to Alexandra. Scholar Patrick Dooley reports that despite Cather’s acknowledgement of the “vast hardness” of the prairie, “once the key is found and the puzzle solved, the land submits to the human hand that develops, tames, subdues, orders, masters, controls, and improves... it”.¹⁹⁸ Solving the puzzle, however, does not prove to be excessive or complex. Cather’s characterization of the land is simply that it wishes to be treated kindly, as one would treat an acquaintance or friend. All Alexandra has to do is open her heart to the land, and it willingly bows before her. The land’s selfless gesture is significant because it is, metaphorically, the same gesture a hostess makes with the arrival of a visitor. The land is allowing Alexandra to ‘cross the threshold’ and be received as an equal.

The land is the ultimate host in Cather’s novel and it chooses who it will become friends with. What Alexandra’s story reveals is that one cannot truly have an impact on a place until it is understood and appreciated, until one communes with it. Alexandra “represents a person in harmony with nature, even one in control of it...”.¹⁹⁹ She achieves this heroic feat partially because of her own heart and volition, but also because the land allows it. Alexandra is able to turn her farmland into a profitable industry and the reader is informed that “her affairs prospered

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹⁸ Patrick K. Dooley, “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” In *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*, edited by Susan J. Rosowski (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 67.

¹⁹⁹ Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 8.

better than those of her neighbors,” but this does not come about by mistake or happenstance.²⁰⁰ Becoming a successful farmer-owner and making something of “the wild country” was a “struggle in which [she] was destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died”.²⁰¹ What sets Alexandra apart from the other characters of the novel, characters like Carl and her father – who are unable to prosper as farmers – is that she first looked upon the land with admiration. Dooley takes note of such distinctions in Cather’s works, stating that “once humanized, the land becomes vastly more productive and fruitful...”.²⁰² Since Alexandra treats the land as a friend, as a living being, it returns her sympathies by being accommodating and generous.

What Cather’s *O Pioneers!* explicitly lays before the reader is the idea that just because a person is on the land does not mean they inherently have the right to possess it, take charge of it, or even belong to it. Guests can traverse it or exist upon it for a time, but they cannot achieve anything worthwhile until they first acknowledge it as their friend and companion. By the conclusion of the novel, Alexandra has come to the realization that, “we come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it — for a little while”.²⁰³ The question of ownership churns up numerous conflicts throughout the novel, as Alexandra’s brothers fight for control over their sister’s farmland and income. Alexandra, in the end, chooses to ignore all their claims of ownership over the land and her inheritance: ““Suppose I do will my land to their children, what difference will that make? The

²⁰⁰ Cather, *OP*, 203.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁰² Dooley, “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” 67.

²⁰³ Cather, *OP*, 307-308.

land belongs to the future”²⁰⁴ It is an interesting claim for Cather to have her heroine make, and it is a statement capable of opening up Cather’s text to current debates and discussions surrounding conquest and land ownership that she likely never anticipated, particularly concerning indigenous peoples.

At a time when Native Americans were being confined to reservations and displaced from their homeland,²⁰⁵ Cather is shockingly oblivious to her characters’ intrusion upon previously inhabited land, absentmindedly suggesting that Alexandra is perhaps the first person since “geologic ages” to look upon the Nebraskan plains with “love and yearning”.²⁰⁶ She even implies that the pioneers were the first humans to give the country a history, a documented and valuable past. Yet, despite her insensitivity to the tragedies faced by the Native Americans, Cather promotes a very nonaggressive approach to land ownership. Dooley argues that Cather’s ecological ethics in *O Pioneers!* are “geared to a gentle, live-and-let-live, appreciate-your-place lifestyle where humans pause and settle for a while but do not dominate”.²⁰⁷ Founded on the principles of stewardship and theocentrism, Dooley continues to point out that Cather’s moral stance on land ownership is actually similar to that of the Navajos and Hopi.²⁰⁸ She makes the novel’s heroine aware of the fact that the land is not hers to possess indefinitely. Alexandra vocally determines that any attempt to own the land through money or claims is insignificant and irrelevant; only “the people who love it... are the people who own it — for a little while”.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 307.

²⁰⁵ Renee M. Laegreid, “The Good, The Bad, and The Ignored Immigrants in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*” *Great Plains Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2007): 102.

²⁰⁶ Cather, *OP*, 65.

²⁰⁷ Dooley, “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” 75.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 74.

²⁰⁹ Cather, *OP*, 307-308.

While this does not excuse Cather's ignorance regarding the plight of indigenous peoples, Alexandra's conviction does acknowledge that the land is not a possession for the pioneers to claim and it complicates the discussion of hospitality. Cather's vision of a successful hostess is not necessarily dependent upon her establishment of land ownership, only emotional connection.

Tested Loyalties

Reconceptualizing the character of the hostess as someone who is in a "true friendship" and "lifelong affair" with the land improves one's understanding of hospitality because it clues the reader into where a hostess' true priorities lie. A successful hostess must prioritize the land over her personal desires and even her guests, because it is her relationship with the land that allows for her harmonious and prosperous lifestyle. To betray the land is to betray a friend, dishonoring the empathic foundations of hospitality.

Jewett's "A White Heron" further illuminates the purpose and effects of a hostess' land-centric reasoning, because its central conflict revolves around a young girl being forced to choose between her guest and Nature. The story opens with the young girl, Sylvia, meeting a stranger in the woods near her grandmother's house. This stranger, who turns out to be an ornithologist and a huntsman, requests to stay with Sylvia and her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, for the night. His purpose for coming to the woods, which he readily reveals to Sylvia and Mrs. Tilley later that evening, is to find the elusive white heron. He aims to kill the bird and preserve it for his collections. Mrs. Tilley, being sociable and courteous, informs the huntsman of Sylvia's impressive knowledge of the woods: "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over,

and the wild creatures count her one of themselves”²¹⁰ Excited by this information, the huntsman enlists Sylvia’s help. After their first full day of wandering the woods together, with no heron in sight, a determined Sylvia decides to search for the heron alone. Sneaking out before dawn on the following morning, Sylvia mounts a tall pine-tree, hoping it will grant her a better view of her surroundings. Jewett writes about Sylvia’s climb up the tree as though Nature itself is encouraging the child onwards: “The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward... Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way!”²¹¹ It is apparent that Sylvia has already won over the approval of Nature, but this bond is soon tested.

With Sylvia high up in the tree, the white heron reveals itself, and Sylvia is suddenly faced with a dangerous decision: she can either reveal the white heron’s location to the huntsman and endanger the bird’s life or keep its location a secret and foil the ambitions of her friendly guest. The decision marks a pivotal moment in the narrative, as Sylvia ultimately chooses to remain loyal to Nature and sends her guest away dissatisfied. It is not so much a decision between right and wrong that Sylvia is being forced to make here. The decision is between her host and her guest – the companionship of the land or of human society. It is unclear whether Jewett wishes her readers to interpret the end of the story as a lament or a triumph, as she concludes only with a fervent plea to the woodlands on Sylvia’s behalf:

Dear loyalty, that suffered a sharp pang as the guest went away disappointed later in the day... Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, – who can tell?

²¹⁰ Sarah Orne Jewett. *A White Heron: and Other Stories* (Boston: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1914), 9.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!²¹²

Since Sylvia chose to protect the woodlands around her, rather than gratify her guest, the narrator is urging the woods to honor its confidante. Because she has proven her loyalty, Jewett's narrator feels as though the young girl should be rewarded with the woods' trust. Sylvia has chosen between her two companions and has sacrificed certain "treasures" as a result of that choice. Whether this was the correct decision or not, one thing is certain: Sylvia is a friend of the woods.

Jewett's "A White Heron" is intriguing in more ways than one. It highlights a critical moment in Sylvia's developing friendship with land, but it also explores the conflicts that arise when the interests of the natural world diverge from those of its guests. The hostess must choose what is more important to her. As was already stated, the land cannot welcome or deny guests in the same formal manner that humans can, so Sylvia takes on this duty herself. In choosing to keep the white heron's location a secret, Sylvia invokes her power as the woods' protector and mediator. She mediates between the desires of fellow humans, like the huntsman, and the interests of the land. She has become, in hospitable terms, the land's threshold. As she competently guides the huntsman through the woods and interacts with the landscape, the reader begins to realize that Sylvia is the link between the land and the guest, just like Jewett's other successful hostesses.

Gendered Gardens

To examine how Jewett and Cather's other hostesses intercede for the land and their visitors, one must begin by identifying the sites at which they personally commune and interact

²¹² Ibid., 21.

with the land. In the *Country of the Pointed Firs*, for Mrs. Todd, one of these sites would be her garden. In chapter one, Mrs. Todd's garden was shown to be a site of gathering and cultivation. She brings a variety of different herbs together, creating a space of nurtured growth and harmony. The garden is viewed by Jewett's narrator as a welcoming plot of land, allowing everything from "love" to the "adverse winds at sea" to find their respective places among the supervised herbs.²¹³ Although Mrs. Todd's plants appear "wild-looking," the narrator is well-aware of her landlady's proficiency in organizing and maintaining them, turning some into valuable mixtures and remedies for her dependent neighbors.²¹⁴

In *My Ántonia*, Ántonia's sacred place is her apple orchard and grape arbour – also a site of cultivation. She works tirelessly for many years to get her beloved trees to grow and bear fruit. The time she has devoted to maintaining them is not spent in vain though, because the orchard becomes a sacred space for her and her visitors. "There was the deepest peace in that orchard," attests Jim.²¹⁵ This peaceful spot, located somewhere on the great prairielands of the West, bears strong contrast to the Nebraskan landscape that Cather defines at the beginning of her earlier novel, *O Pioneers!* – which first describes the land as "a wild thing that had its ugly moods".²¹⁶ Cather understands the land to have a fluctuating personality: it can be harsh and it can be welcoming. Lovingly planting and tending to the land, however, can assist in the creation of peace, harmony, and connection. The land can be coaxed and eventually converted into a restorative haven.

²¹³ Jewett, *CPF*, 43.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

²¹⁵ Cather, *MA*, 385.

²¹⁶ Cather, *OP*, 20.

At the beginning of *My Ántonia*, before Ántonia even begins planting her sacred orchard, Jim Burden encounters a comparable place of peace and harmony. In his grandmother's garden, upon his initial arrival in Nebraska, Jim experiences a similarly intense moment of connection to the land. It is here, in only the second chapter of the novel, that Jim dissolves into the vast landscape of Nebraska:

I sat down in the middle of the garden... I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.²¹⁷

Jim is merging with the landscape, swiftly and serenely. The garden is doing exactly what Mrs. Blackett was capable of doing for the narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*; it is allowing Jim to inhabit the same world, the same reality as itself. Jim likens this experience to death, as he feels he has “become a part of something entire”.²¹⁸ Surprisingly, he actually enjoys this loss of individuality and ambition. He is content with being no different than a pumpkin under the sun. Perhaps the most important aspect of Jim's experience is that it came “as naturally as sleep”.²¹⁹ He did not have to initiate it or request it. He simply arrived in Nebraska, walked into his grandmother's garden, and sat down. There were no conditions which Jim had to meet in order to be subsumed into the landscape. The crucial point here is that the garden Jim is being dissolved into is just that, a garden. It is not the raw, untouched plains. He is in a space that has been

²¹⁷ Cather, *MA*, 20.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

cultivated and constructed by his grandmother, meaning that Jim is actually accessing the land through his grandmother. It is, essentially, his grandmother's relationship with the land that allows him to become a part of it, just as it is *Ántonia's* tireless commitment to her orchard that allows Jim to experience a moment of intense peace.

The question that has yet to be asked, though – and it does need to be asked – is why women? Why are there only hostesses and no hosts? Why is Jim only the recipient of his grandmother's gardening and hospitality? Can a man be a host (or hostess)? Even when thinking about such questions strictly in relation to Jewett and Cather's works, these queries remain difficult to answer. With Jim's grandmother and *Ántonia* being such skilled gardeners, it is intriguing that Jim never establishes a garden for himself. The absence of scenes where any male character is depicted in the garden, in fact, is somewhat remarkable, especially since cultivating a positive relationship with the land is such an important part of the hostesses' journeys. The implication is that either the act of gardening or the religion of hospitality altogether, is a responsibility reserved for women.

Turning to an investigation of national attitudes towards the American landscape, it is no secret that Manifest Destiny, the celebration of westward expansion and the settlement of the plains, was still a widely supported view in Jewett and Cather's time.²²⁰ The title of Cather's *O Pioneers!*, in fact, is a reference to a poem written by Walt Whitman, entitled "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" The poem was composed as a rallying cry to the brave-hearted pioneers of the West, in which Whitman is championing the conquest of the American frontier.²²¹ A prominent aspect of the poem is its male-centric and even violent language. It urges the pioneers to "get your

²²⁰ Meyering, *UOPaMA*, 5.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

weapons ready” and asks imploringly, “Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?”.²²² The voice of the poem is clearly preparing for a battle, declaring proudly, “Fresh and strong the world we seize”.²²³ The poem summons a posture or attitude similar to that of Carl’s in Cather’s *O Pioneers!*: the land is fierce and strong, and man’s great challenge is to conquer it. The most revealing line in Whitman’s poem, though, is the one that characterizes the land as a female: “we the virgin soil upheaving”.²²⁴ Not only does Whitman ascribe gender to the land, but he also incites violent against it. The image is one of rape, conquest, and human struggle to overcome a wild female force. Such an attitude toward the frontier is a threat to Cather’s depiction of hospitality. The desire to establish a harmonious friendship between a character and the landscape, the ultimate host, becomes difficult for an author to achieve. Personifying the land as a “virgin” means that a non-violent, intimate connection with the land can only be safely portrayed through a female hostess. Would a man’s relationship with the “virgin land” not seem inherently violent? Would it not carry unwanted connotations of rape and oppression?

It is in the face of, and partially in response to, the gendering of the land and the resulting sexual imagery that the idea of the female gardener became so prominent. As Annette Kolodny explains in *The Land Before Her*, the cultivation of the small home garden provided women “a socially sanctioned means of altering the landscape while delimiting the imaginable scope of that alteration”.²²⁵ Since the language surrounding gardening had not yet been gendered or otherwise tainted, women were able to interact with the land in way that was unmarked by violence, whereas men were not. During the first half of the nineteenth-century, the world unbounded and

²²² Walt Whitman and Gay Wilson Allen, *Poems: Selections With Critical Aids* (New York: New York University Press, 1955), 218.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 218.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

²²⁵ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, 7.

accessible to men was entrenched in “the initial fantasy of erotic discovery and possession”.²²⁶ When women realized that this world did not also belong to them, they turned to gardening and “avoided male anguish at lost Edens and male guilt in the face of the raping of the continent”.²²⁷ Unsurprisingly, however, as women collectively avoided the rhetoric of violence in altering the landscape, their relationship with the land began to be defined by their perceivably less destructive pursuit. Gardening, as Kolodny portrays it, seems to have become a woman’s work. Mrs. Todd, *Ántonia*, and Jim’s grandmother have the opportunity to design harmonious gardens because such work has been allotted to them.

The larger point that emerges from such discussions of nineteenth-century attitudes towards the land is the implication that, perhaps, hospitality is not gendered at all. It is the concepts that hospitality incorporates – such as domesticity, economy, the land, the garden – which are gendered. It is possible, therefore, that having become so intertwined with the gendered rhetoric surrounding the garden, the land, and the home, Jewett and Cather viewed hospitality as a woman’s work. If this is so, then it is not because hospitality is inherently intended for a hostess and not a host, but because it has become that way over time, as perceptions of the land and the household have themselves evolved.

There are few ways to unequivocally prove whether Jewett and Cather were subconsciously, or maybe purposefully, allowing these gendered concepts to influence their vision and depiction of hospitality. It is, nevertheless, undeniable that the male characters are overpowered by their female counterparts in both *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Ántonia*. Even more perplexingly, there is little reason given as to why. In *My Ántonia*, while the

²²⁶ Ibid., 4.

²²⁷ Ibid., 7.

majority of Cather's female characters secure rewarding occupations, both in the city and the country, almost all of her male characters are given troublesome conclusions, many of them dying before the novels end. Both Mr. Shimerda and Wick Cutter commit suicide, and Cather even confines her narrator, Jim Burden, to a marriage of boredom and indifference. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, similarly, the lonely widow, Elijah Tilley, is left mourning his wife and Captain Littlepage continues to be haunted by the stories of his past. Even Mrs. Todd's brother, who supposedly takes after his hospitable mother, is described as a disappointment. When it comes to the secret behind her brother's shortcomings, Mrs. Todd at least attempts to unravel the mystery for the narrator and Jewett's readers, but she struggles to interpret his character: "William... He ought to have made something o' himself, bein' a man an' so like mother; but though he's been very steady to work, an' kept up the farm, an' done his fishin'... he never had mother's snap an' power o' seein' things just as they be. He's got excellent judgment..."²²⁸ Just when the reader thinks Mrs. Todd is going to reveal some deep truth, to explain what is holding her brother back from making that "something o' himself," the wise woman falls short. The narrator states that Mrs. Todd "could not arrive at any satisfactory decision upon what she evidently thought his failure in life," and instead she commends William for openly accepting the quiet life he has been given on Green Island.²²⁹ Perhaps William reflects Jewett's own uncertainty about men and their powers within the household and the garden, or maybe his personal shortcomings are irrelevant. Perhaps Jewett's only motivation was to create opportunities for her hostesses to thrive.

²²⁸ Jewett, *CPF*, 76.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

The characters of Mrs. Blackett, Mrs. Todd, and *Ántonia* are able to succeed as hostesses because they are independent. They are not being overpowered within the home. This allows them to welcome visitors in a manner of their own choosing. Unlike the character of Mrs. Harling, whose proud husband prevents her from making decision autonomously, the heroines in Jewett and Cather's novels are allowed to prioritize their friendships over other economic and social factors. Additionally, their relations with the land remain untainted by violent rhetoric, allowing for the formation of a vulnerable relationship between the hostess and the land that receives her. With the male characters in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Ántonia* being relegated to minor roles within their respective narratives, Jewett and Cather's hostesses are given the opportunity to enact their self-forgetful lifestyles, peacefully and unchallenged.

Conclusion

Hospitality blurs the boundaries of the region and the home, but it also disrupts simplistic notions of belonging, ownership, sacrifice, and reception. The narratives that Jewett and Cather designed are subtly subversive. They do not present obvious claims about how one should interact with immigrants or navigate racial divisions. Instead, they show the progression of transformative friendships. They encourage a lifestyle of empathy and vulnerability. Situated at the center of this practice is the inspiring character of the hostess. She brings harmony and cohesion to Cather and Jewett's narratives. Through the humble reception of her guests and her active participation in the formation of her surroundings, she becomes a defining part of the landscape and an enduring symbol of friendship.

Scholars such as Andrew Shepherd and Paul Lynch have voiced the opinion that hospitality needs to be debated and discussed differently, in order to rescue it from the

misconceptions of the current era. Turning to literary analysis as a way of addressing this concern has proven to be a productive endeavor. By engaging in a study of Cather and Jewett's works, specifically *My Ántonia* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the theme of hospitality has emerged as a central concept. Although harboring numerous internal contradictions, hospitality is able to gently weave together disparate themes in Cather and Jewett's novels – such as domesticity, economy, religion, gender, and the land – while complicating them at the same time. As this analysis has shown, literature is able to convey the function of hospitality in subtle and subversive ways without forcing a restrictive and inadequate definition upon the reader.

Looking back, the first chapter of this thesis reveals that Jewett and Cather's vision of hospitality encourages readers to reenvision the site of the home as an integrated space, where economic and social factors can intermingle and assist in the creation of dramatic centers. By welcoming strangers into their fictional worlds, including the reader, hostesses like Mrs. Todd and Ántonia are able to bring a new sense of importance to the rural household. The following chapter explores the depth of Jewett and Cather's vision, showing that hospitality is not just an act, service, or set of stagnant principles; it is a way of life. It is linked to Jewett's belief in the power of friendship, a power which, if prioritized over economic concerns, allows the hostess to receive visitors in a vulnerable and self-forgetful manner. She not only possesses the ability to convert strangers to friends, but she can also train her guests in the practice of hospitality. This analysis eventually ends with a recognition of the land as the ultimate host and the primary companion of the hostess. The hostess, as a result, lives a life of devotion to the things she loves most: the land and the people who visit it. Serving as the intermediary between the two, she is a woman of the world and of transcendence.

While this study has endeavored to expose the similar function and motivations behind Jewett and Cather's imagined hospitalities, it has also acknowledged certain threats to their missions. Among these threats is the prioritization of industry and land ownership over generosity. The basis of Jewett and Cather's hospitality rejects self-centered thinking, instead encouraging one to connect with the world outside and beyond oneself. As a hostess, the failure to establish independence and authority is also a threat to hospitality. Conflicts arise when a hostess is unable to make autonomous decisions and fully offer herself to her guests. Finally, this study warns against the restrictive gendering of concepts such as the land, the garden, and the household. By allowing these gendered concepts to influence one's approach to hospitality, individuals are denied opportunities to become self-realized hostesses and to empower others through their redemptive practices.

Looking ahead, this study has only glanced the surface of the issues involved in the practice of hospitality. Further analysis of land ownership and stewardship through the lens of hospitality could prove beneficial to environmental studies, while contrasting the hospitality industry with Cather and Jewett's own ideologies could present promising new concepts and explorations. It is my hope that this study of hospitality not only opens up new modes of thought for investigating Jewett and Cather's literary works, but that it also provides new ways for imagining the world today and engaging in current social debates. There is much to be gained from an increased awareness of how people have chosen to interact with the land and the strangers they meet.

Jewett and Cather wrote about women who were champions of hospitality, but at the core of the story lies an essential belief in the power of friendship and connection. It is unsurprising, in hindsight, that hospitality is so firmly woven throughout the works of these two authors. They

were both writers driven by a fascination and passion for people. In desiring that the world become more acquainted with one another, they extended an invitation to their readers and welcomed them into their innermost worlds. Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather are empathetic hostesses, and any reader who picks up a copy of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* or *My Ántonia* becomes a guest of their written word.

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