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# Rereading and Rewriting Women's History

Jacqueline Harris

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REREADING AND REWRITING WOMEN'S HISTORY

by

Jacqueline Haley Harris

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2008

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## ABSTRACT

Rereading and Rewriting Women's History

by

Jacqueline Haley Harris, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2008

Major Professor: Dr. Evelyn Funda  
Department: English

In Margaret Atwood's nonfiction book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), Atwood discusses the importance of the female writer's responsibility, that to write as a woman or about women means that you take upon yourself the responsibility of writing as a form of negotiation with our female dead and with what these dead took with them—the truth about who they were. By rereading and rewriting our communal past, women writers pay tribute to our female ancestors by voicing their silent stories while also changing gender stereotypes, complicating who these women were, and acknowledging their accomplishments.

In her 1999 novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier revisions the unknown object of Vermeer's famous painting of the same name. By so doing, Chevalier takes a painting created from a male point-of-view and brings the historic female in the painting to life by giving her a backstory. In Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, published in the same year, Vreeland also follows this female framework as she writes of

a woman named Saskia who discovers a Vermeer painting and who invents and imagines the female perspective behind the artwork's female subject. In so doing, Saskia finds value in remembering the life of another woman and hope that someone will remember her life as well.

In Willa Cather's 1931 novel *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather depicts female characters who challenge traditional stereotypes while also rereading women's objective historical past. 'Toinette Gaux, prostitute and descendent of King Louis XIV's *filles du roi*, and Jeanne Le Ber, Quebec's religious recluse, have historical credibility as the unappreciated mothers of Canada through their defiance of the use of their bodies as colonial commodities within revolutionary gender roles.

And in Cather's short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) she includes characterization and imagery recollective of French artist Fernand Léger depicting artist Eden Bowen as another female who owns her sexuality and body and will not let herself be objectified by the painter Don Hedger.

Atwood, Chevalier, Vreeland, and Cather all demonstrate rereading and rewriting of women in women's history in order to add missing female perspective to our male-authored past while also giving voice to female dead who need to have their stories told.

(85 pages)

## DEDICATION

To my mom and dad, LuAnn and Ronald Harris, brothers Casey and Jeffrey and angel Rondie for the constant love and encouragement along the way. I love you all.

Jackie

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Evelyn Funda for the many months of mentoring and friendship as I tried to tackle what seemed like an unachievable goal. Thank you for all of the hours you spent helping me produce my best work. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Anne Shifrer for her guidance throughout her course and my meetings with her, and Dr. Steve Shively for his support and willingness to take a chance on a new student. Thanks to Dr. Kristine Miller for her encouragement and guidance since my first graduate course. Thank you to my friends and librarians Deleyne Wentz and Pamela Martin for your assistance along the way, particularly for Pam's help finding the lost Fernand Léger images.

And special thanks to my family, roommates, friends, professors, and colleagues for their moral support and patience throughout the entire process. Much love to you all.

Jackie Harris



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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE DEAD WANT US TO KNOW

In Margaret Atwood's nonfiction book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), Atwood discusses the importance of the female writers' responsibility, that to write as a woman or about women means that you take upon yourself the responsibility of writing as a form of negotiation with our female dead and with what these dead took with them—the truth about who they were. Atwood's call provides a theoretical framework for how we should read women writing about history.

Women have been the subject of writing for hundreds of years and much of this characterization of women has been done by men. While women can now write, gain educations, teach, and top the book-selling charts, to do this is simply not enough. Women writers owe it to our female ancestry, suggests Atwood, the women before us who were denied the opportunity to write about themselves and their lives, to rewrite our literary past. Rewriting this past means changing the authorial perspective from male to female. Women are not simply characters objectively placed in stereotypical categories—the mother, the daughter, the virgin, the harlot, the angel, the seductress. Instead, women are complex humans, capable of both right and wrong, action and inaction, love and hate, and better yet, a combination of all of these characteristics. By researching the past and the women who lived in it with this new female perspective, women writers can pay tribute to our past by changing, complicating, and enhancing who we know these women were, something they cannot do for themselves.

In *Negotiating with the Dead* Atwood writes, “The premise is that dead bodies can talk if you know how to listen to them” (162). Atwood references women’s bodies because women’s stories are missing from our textbooks. Here Atwood suggests that listening to women demands a different type of listening, that the women of our past want to speak, but that we must figure out how to hear them. Part of this listening connects to the need to view the past with new perception. In doing standard research about these women, we readily see that most of the accounts have been written by men. The question, then, becomes how can we reread these male-authored accounts with the lens of what is missing? What has been overlooked? What has been stereotyped? Journals, letters, and other first-hand accounts reveal priceless individualized experiences and people capable of unique thoughts and feelings. However, these recorded resources do not always exist because women didn’t have the power to publish, and so it is essential to reinterpret history with a female point-of-view listening for what has never before been written. Atwood’s metaphor of hearing suggests that we haven’t been listening.

Atwood questions, “What else might the dead want?” (162). She refers to our past as the “dead” and not as ghosts for specific reasons; ghosts of our past haunt us with their lives and are thus still a part of our present, but to Atwood, our female past is “dead” because it has been obliterated from historical existence. Part of what these unaccounted dead want is to continue living in our contemporary world. Knowing who your ancestors were affects how you live today. These lives are not to be forgotten, but to be captured, read and reread so that their stories can continue to influence our own. Atwood states that the dead “want us to sit down beside them and hear their sad stories” (162). This image of

sitting beside paints a picture of equality, a coming together on equal grounds. We cannot look down on our female past, dismissing their experiences and “sad stories” because we live in different times with greater opportunities (162). As women we must sit down together, as equals and give the dead what they have due, a chance to speak. These women “want to be recounted” and want their lives to matter in an on-going world. Furthermore, “They don’t want to be voiceless; they don’t want to be pushed aside, obliterated,”—by ignoring their voices, we ignore them, making their accomplishments and failures of no importance (163). But they did live, their choices have affected how we live as contemporaries today and thus we need to pay tribute. The stories these dead have to tell are relevant and “they want us to know” (163).

What is it that the dead want us to know? As demonstrated in the writing of Tracy Chevalier, Susan Vreeland, and Willa Cather, the dead want us to know that the history we have is incomplete. Even if we cannot know for sure the intimacies, intricacies and difficulties of those who have gone before, we can complicate stereotypical portrayals, give women of the past layered personalities, aspirations, accomplishments, and failures. We can make flat characterizations of women round. We can add to these accounts and fill in the possibilities.

Letting the dead voices speak isn’t a task that can be done by one author alone. Atwood states that, “All writers learn from the dead” (178). Her call is not just to women writers, but all writers. No matter the century or physical boundary, writers all over the world and throughout all time have learned from our communal past. Atwood explains that, “As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who

have preceded you” (Atwood 178). Thus as we write into the future, we must also look behind into our past. We are built upon our past and you cannot write today without knowing what has been said before. In all of our precious individuality, we are still amazingly, dependent upon and linked to each other. Even as Atwood writes in the twenty-first century, she remembers those women who have gone before her. Because of this connection, “you also feel judged and held to account by them” (178). By saying that pioneer female writers judge you, Atwood means that you will be held to need to remember them. Generation after generation of women want to claim to be the first and thus the first fully-realized, the first to vote, the first to write, the first to teach, the first to fly. These achievements are paramount to the female experience, but we as women must never claim to be the first accomplished generation of women altogether. There are hundreds of generations who have gone before, and each of their lives and choices were built upon the lives and choices of the previous generation. Instead of making these accomplishments small, this long line makes our feats greater and stronger, because women have worked so long for them. We cannot silence those who made your first possible. We are to “account” to them how we’ve heard their voices to enhance our own (178).

History is incomplete. How can it be complete when it doesn’t represent every gender, every race, every religion, or every voice and experience? Challenging history’s incompleteness motivates us to find more of what is missing—the truth the dead have to tell us. Atwood encourages women: “[D]on’t learn only from writers—you can learn from ancestors in all their forms. Because the dead control the past, they control the

stories, and also certain kinds of truth” (178). In addition to our literary heritage, we also have countless other roles women have played throughout history, both stereotypical and not. Because history is not as objective as we teach it to be, our writing needs to interact with our multi-faceted past in order to more realistically portray its reality. Of this need to re-imagine history Atwood says, “so if you are going to indulge in narration, you’ll have to deal, sooner or later, with those from previous layers of time” (178). Atwood’s “layering” depicts a past full of facades that need to be pulled away to get at the underlying truth. Our goal as female writers includes finding these layered, unspoken narratives and giving room to them in our writing.

But how do we re-imagine, reread and rewrite our past? Atwood suggests that, “All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept” (179). Atwood’s vision suggests that women writers might need to engage in historical invention. We cannot always know what was, so we must postulate what could have been. We must also confront the “once upon a time” or the fairy tale ideals of many literary renditions (178). Women are not always the innocent and helpless Snow White, or the evil Queen—this much should be obvious, that women’s writings of women should give room to a much wider, individualized perception of females, both good and bad and more importantly, a combination of both. It is within these imaginings of what happened, who women might have been, that we begin to hear the voices of the dead, and more importantly, we begin listening to what they are saying, translating these pictures into our writing, for just as Atwood says, these places of unexplored past are “where the stories are kept” (179).

In further analyzing why we should react against a male-centered version of the past, Atwood writes, “all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past” (179). It is easy to be halted by a rigid sense of the past, but it is vitally important that women writers break through those who would police a rigid version of the past advising that “The dead may guard the treasure, but it’s useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more” (179). In rewriting the past as Atwood suggests we literally enter the progressive nature of time, always moving forward. There are discoveries to be made in exploring the past and listening to the dead. This new perspective and act of narration means “to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change” (Atwood 179). If women want to change history, the “realm of change” lies within this rereading and rewriting of the past. By listening to the dead, women writers can bring about change and begin to explore the truth about who the women in our communal female past might have been.

Margaret Atwood’s text *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, which was compiled from a series of guest lectures and keynote addresses, was published less than six years after the publication of her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*. The inclusion of negotiation within Atwood’s title suggests acts of give and take, important because undoubtedly each party will come with personal agendas. The mission with which Atwood challenged women writers was one she herself demonstrates in her own writing in *Alias Grace*, set in nineteenth-century Canada as a historical fiction novel that rereads history’s real-life account of the 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and his supposed lover Nancy Montgomery by the accused jealous paramour Grace Marks. The life of



Grace Marks was one that captured Atwood's interest for decades, she having first tried to write about Marks in her 1974 *The Servant Girl*. But from the time she first began conceptualizing her 1974 work until 22 years later when she published *Alias Grace* and changed her viewpoint on Marks' guilt. The result is a historical fiction novel that paints Marks as a complicated woman, not solely a naïve paramour or a jealous murderer, but as a female with a backstory, a woman with a family, a history, friends, interests, hopes, and faults. Moreover, Atwood tells Marks story in a way that that leaves open room for interpretation. The dead speak through Atwood's imaginative retelling of a female who comes into existence as more than the harlot the newspaper articles painted her to be. In so doing, Atwood novel stands as a story that gives one historical woman limitless possibilities, something history has never before allowed.

But just as she admonishes her audience in *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood does not ignore the work of the writers who proceeded her; Atwood's re-imagining of history in her novel *Alias Grace* builds upon an invitation extended years prior in Virginia Woolf's text *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929.

In this non-fiction book, Woolf discusses the historical perception of women, and calls for a change and a rewriting of history. Of the historical perception of women and womanhood, Woolf observes, "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?" (26). Woolf's word choice, of women as historical animals, references female representations as purely instinct-based creatures, void of agency or complexity. Woolf's argument

complements Atwood's in that neither accepts the female past as history has written it; both listen to the dead and rewrite their stories from a female's perspective, one that allows for greater room for interpretation. Woolf demonstrates one way of reinterpreting the past by re-imagining history and the possible existence of a "Judith" Shakespeare (46). What Woolf does here is to suggest that if a female with the same talents as her brother had the same opportunity to be educated and to write, then women would have a greater literary heritage. In creating Judith, Woolf is daring to question history and to rethink our communal past from a female perspective. Atwood builds on Woolf's words in her own writing, just as she invites others to build on hers, all the while looking back at the past from a new point-of-view.

Woolf's comments on the amount of literary space devoted to the female subject by a male-authored perspective can be restated to comment on the abundance of the general portraiture of women in both visual and written media. There are many female characters within Shakespeare's works, but all of them are male-authored. The historical portraiture of women is an issue that needs to be challenged in the work of female authors as they open up the possibilities of our past and listen to the untold stories of the dead.

The novels of Tracy Chevalier, Susan Vreeland and Willa Cather all participate in this mission to re-envision the past as they imagine historical characters while also serving their characters' historical need to be heard. Margaret Atwood's rewriting of *Grace Marks* looks back and allows room for interpretation in an court case and newspaper headlines and Marks as a person that has never before existed. Virginia Woolf's imagining of the silenced potential of a possible Judith Shakespeare as

representing also looks back as history while at the same time looking forward to help build an argument for women writers in the 1920s. So too do Chevalier's, Vreeland's, and Cather's texts look both to our past and to our present as they investigate the possibilities of the unheard voices of our female past.

In Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (both published in 1999), these authors are not just revising history, but also recreating women as subjects within that history. History has portrayed Vermeer as the important personage, but his models led lives just as significant. The models were shaped by experiences that shaped their look, thus it was their own individuality that inspired Vermeer in the first place. As each investigates a female's relationship to a Vermeer painting, Chevalier and Vreeland are able to grant these female subjects a complex humanity in novels where Vermeer becomes the secondary character. Taking paintings of women from a male perspective and imagining the female within the painting with greater complexity than a two-dimensional perspective can allow, both authors create backstory that enrich viewers' perspectives of Vermeer paintings. If history has tendencies to make females into its "most discussed animal" yet all from a male point-of-view then women writers have a responsibility to enlarge that view (Woolf 26).

As Woolf notes in *A Room of One's Own*, women's portraiture in both visual and textual mediums have had the male gaze informing their creation. In Kate Cunningham's article in the inaugural edition of the *Woman's Chronicle* she writes,

No one is so well calculated to think for woman kind as woman herself. In the province of administering to the wants of her sex, no one can be so well

adapted as she. Her advancement is in no better way proven than by her progress in medicine and literature, to say nothing of the reform movements which she is steadily carrying on for the benefit of her sex. (qtd. in Bressler 167)

It is vital that female portraiture be conducted by female's authorship. Part of the goal of feminist studies is to ensure that women are equally represented in all aspects of life, that any portrait of a woman allows for multiple interpretation and not just a framed reading (Bressler 167). When the annals of female portraiture and representation are largely derived from male aesthetic and psychological frameworks, the need to revise these female subjects is clear. This is even more apparent in Chevalier's complex creation of Griet in relationship to Vermeer's *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Vreeland's Saskia in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* in their telling of historically-based women who struggle against stereotypical categories, each wanting to be seen for her whole self and not just history's objective portrait of her.

This feminist framework also coincides with new historicist aims, that history is not always an accurate writing of truth, nor is it a full account of all of the voices of those who participated (213). Of this intellectual revisioning Charles Bressler writes that "history is one of many discourses, or ways of seeing and thinking about the world" and that by including these missing worldviews society gains a more "complete understanding" of a text (214). How do we gain this fuller understanding? Feminist scholar Lillian Robinson says the answer is not a "reiterated attack" but rather "a series of suggested alternatives to the male-dominated membership and attitudes of the accepted canon" (573). The answer lies in the revisioning that women authors like Tracy Chevalier

and Susan Vreeland accomplish in their novels as they broaden historical views of women.

Willa Cather (1873-1947) also participates in the female writing tradition as she re-evaluates women's roles in history and art, and more specifically notes how women's bodies have been viewed as commodities throughout our history. While literary criticism on Cather is extensive, the evaluation of how she was rewriting women's history, specifically in *Shadows on the Rock* and "Coming, Aphrodite!" can be furthered. Cather investigated and wrote about the commodification of women's bodies in our predominately male-written histories after she herself completed reading Francis Parkman's histories of Canada. Cather rewrote the females in seventeenth-century French-Canadian history in her novel *Shadows on the Rock*, and re-evaluated French artist Fernand Léger, in her short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" Cather is rethinking female traditions of her female protagonists by grounding them in historical accuracies but also exploring the never-before analyzed of issue of how they might have existed within that history.

Margaret Atwood challenges women writers to listen to the dead and tell their stories of silenced lives. Virginia Woolf wrote so that envisioning these women would not only help us in our contemporary social aims, but also to pay tribute to their under-appreciated lives as well. Tracy Chevalier, Susan Vreeland, and Willa Cather look both back and forward at women's history as they reread and rewrite women's history to serve both parties and give voice to those who want to be heard. The structure of this thesis will follow that challenge and those who are rewriting the female dead. Chevalier's and

Vreeland's novels look to our male past to find the missing women within in. Next follows Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* in which she looks to our female past that has not been given its deserved attention. Lastly, Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!" looks to our male and female past (the male paintings of Fernand Léger and recollections of the first female artists in the characterization of Eden Bower) as her perspective informs how we can use all this deeper understanding of the past to inform our future.

## CHAPTER II

TRACY CHEVALIER'S *GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING* &SUSAN VREELAND'S *GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE*

In her novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier revises the object of Vermeer's famous painting of the same name. By so doing, Chevalier takes a painting created from a male point-of-view and brings the historic female in the painting to life by giving her backstory and thus a female perspective. Chevalier enhances Vermeer's visual projection of a woman by creating a whole human who's no longer an object of male gaze but a subject of human complexity with her own perceptions. Chevalier gives the unnamed female a name (Griet), an age (sixteen), a family, and intense emotional complications that result in a greatly enriched revisioning of a historically portraited face. Chevalier creates Griet's full humanity for Griet by showing her interaction with the painting and painter as she symbolically searches for an identity that the portrait will never fully deliver because of its sexualized and objectified nature.

In Chevalier's novel, Griet works as a maid in the Vermeer household. Through the isolation and class change of this move, Griet slowly begins to lose her sense of personal identity. Everything that was once secure to Griet has been lost. Her father loses his sight and thus his employment, her brother leaves home to find work, and her family must send Griet out to work. This drastic change in circumstances takes its toll, and Griet's sense of loss begins to affect her fading sense of self. To her brother and parents, she is changed, and to the new household she works in, she is nothing more than the

lowest of servants. Griet now lives a life of isolation, nothing more than a servant to her new household, and feeling as if she is little more than a source of income to her parents. This isolation is compounded in the secretive nature of Griet's relationship with Vermeer, as well as the context in which he paints her. Vermeer's framing of Griet within his portrait symbolizes how she is continually viewed by others. With nothing left to hold onto, Griet begins to search for something stable, something she'll mistakenly find in her growing relationship with the household's master, Johannes Vermeer.

In imagining a historical character, it was vitally important for Chevalier to establish Griet's character upon this sense of loss and confusion, so that her pursuit of her true identity becomes all the more significant. This lost sense of self correlates with history's dismissal of Griet's life. To art lovers, she is simply the face with no story. Even to Vermeer, her name was not worth mentioning in the title thus emphasizing her physicality and not her individuality. Her complexities and personality were demeaned in his portrayal of her as he entitled the piece "Girl with a Pearl Earring," making her life and self on equal terms with the jewelry she wears. If no one knows who Griet is, if history never records her life or recognizes her existence, then she becomes nothing more than a nameless pretty face. The novel's theme of Griet's search for an identity reflects this historical loss and is also established to inform readers of how Vermeer's process of painting Griet will help inform her new self as she accepts and rejects the definitions and meanings others place upon her. Griet must find out who she is on her own because Vermeer's painting will never reflect that.



When Griet first learns that Vermeer plans to paint her portrait, she associates this act with the story she has heard of the maid in the red dress and van Ruijven (126). As Vermeer's financier, van Ruijven holds a reputation of taking sexual advantage of Vermeer's models. Griet hears this and cannot allow herself to become the stereotypically helpless female. Consequently, she cannot place trust in a painter who would knowingly put her into such a position. When Vermeer approaches Griet as an object to be painted, Griet's knowledge makes her afraid. To have done to her what was done to the nameless maid in the red dress, to be similarly symbolically stained with the sin of a fallen woman, will make her nothing but a nameless rumor too, thus taking away one of the few possessions she still owns, the smallest portion of an identity. To be used as an object for a painting is equal in Griet's mind to being used as a sexual object. Both options disregard her humanity as they make her a body simply to be acted upon, framed and used to further some else's needs and aspiration. Within the novel of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, these acts run parallel:

“What do you want, sir?” I asked. . . . I shivered, although I was not cold. “Don't talk.” . . . I could feel my jaw tightening and my eyes widening. . . . My face began to stray with the fear that I was not giving him what he wanted. . . . My eyes filled with tears I did not shed. I knew now. . . . He was going to paint me. (169)

By beginning the portrait, this fictionalized Vermeer takes away the last definite shred of identity that Griet has—her name, as evidenced by the portrait's later title “Girl with a Pearl Earring.” It is significant that Griet does not find being painted an honor, the way history often portrays the reaction of female subjects when being asked to model. Griet is not like everyone else, something she is repeatedly denied is her role as the silent servant.

It has been said of Johannes Vermeer that “seeing was commensurate with looking inside” (257). In her article “Finding the Self in Mind: Vermeer and Reflective Function,” Rosemary Rizq writes concerning the psychological relationship of seeing and being seen, and notes the effect this would have had upon the real-life Griet (as opposed to the character) as the looked-upon subject of Vermeer’s portrait. Rizq finds the relationship containing the “generative aspect of seeing ‘inside’: of finding psychological potential in others” (257) and also calls the relationship “therapeutic” (257). Thus Vermeer’s “looking inside” refers to his attempt to find a type of potential in others (Rizq 257). While Rizq finds this relationship therapeutic, it can only be for the artist himself as he frames another for his own psychological needs, as the toll it takes on the model is scarring. While it will take Griet some time to find a stable identity as she is continually thwarted from making herself anything other than an object to fulfill others’ needs (servant, painting subject, potential sexual partner), she eventually will find that she is gaining a fuller sense of self as she wrestles with the painter, the painting, its surface-level meaning, and her lack of significance in society at large.

As Griet searches for her new identity, she begins to metaphorically enter the painting Vermeer creates of her. Griet tries to see herself only as how Vermeer sees her, a physical object, but of course she finds this reading limited in completing who she fully can be. Griet tries to be self-sufficient while under his male gaze, not allowing his eyes to tell her who she is, but wonders if his gaze may search for more than just colors, angles, and light, conveying also erotic messages. At times she enjoys this male gaze yet outside the studio she must oppositely avoid his gaze, feel shame for her participation in the

portraiture, and fight against the male eyes of van Ruijven. The act of being painted has real-world implications. Just as van Ruijven would use her as a sexual object, so too does Vermeer's painting turn her into nothing more than a physical body. So even though Vermeer saves Griet from her van Ruijven fate, it may only be to use her for his own personal ends. As Griet battles to define herself amidst all the definitions others impose upon her, she is demonstrating a complex human identity—that perhaps she can be all of these things to different people at the same time, and still something else to herself.

Chevalier extends the depth we apply to Vermeer's paintings to Griet also. She is a daughter, a sister, a friend, a servant, a painting's subject, and an erotic object (to both van Ruijven and Pieter), all of these identities dependent upon the gaze of another.

Rosemary Rizq writes concerning this exchange between what we apply to Vermeer and can also apply to Griet:

Who is she, and why has she been painted? Who is she looking at? More importantly, what does Vermeer see in her, and what is he trying to convey to us? The viewer is constantly asked to look beyond the surface, beyond the static appearance of the girl on the canvas, towards the dynamic psychological reality she embodies. She fascinates us, not only as a beautiful woman, but as a signpost to interiority. (258)

It is this “signpost to interiority” that Chevalier gives us in Griet's characterization in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*; in Chevalier's novel Griet stands as an invitation to look deeper, to reread what has been given to us. The signpost is that the real-life Griet has never had the allotted interiority of a complex human. Vermeer's portraiture of her has been the only way she has been viewed, but there is a lot more to her interiority. Thus, Chevalier is rereading and rewriting women in history, giving voice to what has been silenced. Chevalier is is revisioning the past and adding a female perspective and developed

personality that history has lacked. Chevalier is making Griet a round, human character, and at each new situation allowing for moments of further depth, analysis and insight to be found.

An example of these “signposts to interiority” lay in the titular pearl earrings and fur mantle that Vermeer has Griet don in her portrait. Griet is but a servant, yet these physical items would denote that she has a much higher place in society, a greater value than that of just a servant. Griet recognizes the beauty of these objects, and is not ignorant of their value, but does not think it is fitting that she wear them—perhaps because she has not yet found this value in her own identity:

I understood. He was having me do things a lady would do, but I was wearing a maid's clothes. I thought of the yellow mantle and the yellow and black bodice, and wondered which he would ask me to wear. Instead of being excited by the idea, though, I felt uneasy. I did not feel right holding books and letters, pouring myself wine, doing things I never did. As much as I wanted to feel the soft fur of the mantle around my neck, it was not what I normally wore. (Chevalier 178-179)

But when Griet requests that she do things that a “maid does” (179), Vermeer refuses and puts a spin on the clothing and atmosphere, in new words that eventually Griet will understand: “I will paint you as I first saw you” (179). Thus Vermeer's attention to the titular earrings deceives the reader. Not only do readers not get Griet's real life story in the painting, but they get a false one. Furthermore, the earrings receive more attention in the title than Griet does. She does not even get referenced as “Young” or “Servant” or even “Beautiful,” rather she is just the nameless “Girl.” By continuing to paint Griet in a setting elevated above her rank as servant, Vermeer does however show Griet that she has value. As she searches for her identity she will always remember that Vermeer, even

from the beginning of their relationship, saw her as more than she herself could. But at the same time, Vermeer's projection of Griet to a higher social rank refuses to see Griet for who she is. By imposing his portrayal upon her, Vermeer ignores Griet's pleas to be painted in clothes and a manner that would reflect her true nature in order to paint her in whatever ranking is most helpful to him. Just as Griet thinks that someone is helping her, she also finds that they are hurting her. Griet does not benefit from the act of being painted, rather she is once again asked to adopt someone else's definition of what they need her to be. She can never be as she is.

Griet interprets Vermeer's steady gaze in multiple ways. At times when Vermeer looks intently upon Griet, she finds the experience erotic. This is difficult for Griet because she knows Vermeer does not love her even if at times she reads lust in his eyes. She is just an object for his painting pleasure (a similarity between Chevalier's Vermeer and Don Hedger in "Coming, Aphrodite!") and still feels demeaning rank of a servant. Yet Griet finds pleasure in Vermeer's looking, finds joy in having such a master painter enjoy the way she looks. Partly this may be because no one else ever looks at her, even if what they see is not who she truly is. And then at other times, Griet knows Vermeer looks at her as nothing more than what is to be painted (a figure, color, shape, line, light, etc.):

He looked at me as if he were not seeing me, but someone else, or something else—as if he were looking at a painting. He is looking at the light that falls on my face, I thought, not at my face itself. That is the difference. It was almost as if I weren't there. (Chevalier 180)

If Griet is just a collection of shapes and shadows, she is never herself, just a dead body. Chevalier may have felt this when she looked at Vermeer's painting and saw the painting's object as a ghost of her true subject, thus by writing the story behind the

painting, Chevalier gives an existence and reality to Griet that the painting never will.

While some may argue that Vermeer's painting of this girl captured her image for centuries, Chevalier's characterization of the person behind the painting suggests that Griet will resist this portraiture, even if it's the only portraiture that will be done for centuries, because it is a one-dimensional picture of who she is and Griet knows she is more—a full human; Chevalier's text helps her to be just that.

Yet even as Chevalier has written Vermeer as trying to give Griet a stronger sense of self and identity, Griet will not yet be able to see that, a complex but nonetheless realistic portrayal of a human's struggle with an ever changing self-worth. Even as Vermeer completes his painting of Griet, she still cannot understand why he forces her to wear both pearls, an experience she will never have again. By writing a character that does not easily find herself but asks questions as she tries to find herself amidst a painting, Chevalier is writing Griet as a full character, a woman of complexities and depth and worthy of full sight and representation, the same depth we assign to Vermeer's works. During the experience of Vermeer demanding she wear the pearls for the painting, Griet is only able to see the exchange as benefitting him and belittling her:

I reached over and took it. I did it for him. I got out my needle and clove oil and pierced my other ear. I did not cry, or faint, or make a sound. Then I sat all morning and he painted the earring he could see, and I felt, stinging like fire in my other ear, the pearl he could not see. (Chevalier 209)

As Vermeer paints Griet, she experiences the physical and emotional scarring pain of becoming an objectified creature. The experience of being objectified transforms her body. Griet knows that there is a pearl within her that Vermeer cannot see, yet she knows

it is there. Griet knows she is more than a one-dimensional snapshot. She has begun to discover her worth and that it is more than society, and history, will grant her.

Further frustrating Griet's search for an identity, Vermeer does not allow her to see the finished painting. At its completion, Griet regrets that at that moment when she feels she needs inner-strength more than any other, Vermeer will not show her the painting; to show her the painting now would be to impose his ultimate view of Griet on Griet herself. But Griet must discover who she is first, she must wade through her life struggles to claim her identity—to take Vermeer's impressions of her would be the easy way out. Even Griet herself had once admitted, "I was reluctant, too, to discover how it was that he saw me. It was better to leave that a mystery" (Chevalier 184). Ultimately, it does not matter what Vermeer thinks of Griet, because his portrait of her will never be complete—he has never discovered the complexities within her character but has chosen to capture solely what he sees on the surface level.

Once Griet is turned from Vermeer's household, for the first time in her life she is presented with opportunities to choose her future for herself. As she stands at the heart of Delft, she realizes all of the "I could"s she has before her (216), all of the chances for choice. The decision is now her own—who does she want to be?: "When I made my choice, the choice I knew I had to make, I set my feet carefully along the edge of the point and went the way it told me, walking steadily" (216). For the first time in her life, Griet is making her life decisions instead of having them made for her—she is free to claim her identity and make of it what she wants it to be.

Now that Griet has embraced her identity, and become a full human, can she go forward, not until the completion of the painting itself, after years have passed, Vermeer has left, and her portrait does stand nameless amongst all his others, does Griet realize her self, the worth she has been searching for and will not find in others versions of herself. It is symbolic that in Vermeer's painting, Griet, the name Chevalier gives to this girl, looks over her shoulder at the painter. To him this pose may have added to her mystery, sexuality, and physical quality as he objectively framed her to satisfy his artistic desires. But Chevalier's narrative allotment allows Griet to become a real woman and her pose takes on a different meaning. Griet looks behind her at those who would objectify or limit her, yet the inferred action that the woman in the painting would take next would be to turn her head away from the viewer, thus symbolically looking away from those who have trapped her.

This idea resounds in Chevalier's closing of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* as Griet reflects on herself in her final words as, "A maid came free" (233). The pearl which burned in her ear then has helped Griet realize her self-worth, and her identity as a woman, as complicated and ever-changing as the definition may be, all this done through Chevalier's historically imagined narrative.

In *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Susan Vreeland also participates in this critical and theoretical feminist framework. As the Vermeer portrait of the *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* is traced throughout history, one chapter stands out as an example of Vreeland revising women's history. In the chapter "Morningside," a woman named Saskia discovers a baby and a painting in her family's boat during the flooding of their town. The rest of the



chapter shows and questions Saskia's motives, desires and connection to the Vermeer painting as Vreeland gives her a full, round female representation. The narrative that Saskia invents in the Vermeer painting allows her to rethink her own life and the creativity she has also been denied. The finding of the infant suggests that Saskia too has a potential for growth and becoming. Thus Saskia's and Vreeland's historical rewritings mirror each other as two women finding meaning in the stories that have not been told.

In a *Publisher's Weekly* review of "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," the novel is described as following "the lives of eight people profoundly moved and changed by a Vermeer painting—a thing of beauty and a joy forever" (*Girl in Hyacinth Blue* 28). While this is true, the chapter on Saskia exemplifies the depth to which a relationship between a viewer and a painting can go. Saskia's musings about the story implied in the painting influence the way she lives her life. Vreeland's novel suggests that paintings mean different things to different people throughout time. The visual portrait of the painting *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* is subject to different interpretations by its multiple owners, which is a key element of rereading our past, whether historical, literary or visual. The value of the individual experience and perception is immense, which is why what Vreeland and Chevalier is doing is so important. But what the painting does for Saskia is to allow her to be as complex as the painting itself and to place in herself the value that others would place in the painting, defiantly suggesting that she too is of great, unknown worth. Through Vreeland's novel, readers see how a painting can mean many different things depending upon the person giving the interpretation—an idea Saskia wishes would be applied to herself. In the character of Saskia, Vreeland imagines a female character in

history, and more importantly remembers a female past and perspective that has been ignored. Saskia's own historical rewriting is what allows her to question her own motives and actions.

In an interview with Penelope Rowlands for *Publisher's Weekly*, Susan Vreeland said of her writing, "Fiction fills in where history leaves off. . . .I'm very much interested in the process by which a historical figure becomes a fictional character. Fiction is the process by which our time grasps the significance of a life in another time period" (Rowlands 35). These ideas directly connect back to the women writers' mission Margaret Atwood discussed in her book *Negotiating with the Dead*, that fiction can help us gain the missing female perspective that history is lacking. The significance of Saskia's life is demonstrated in the questionable actions and motives Vreeland gives her in connection to the Vermeer painting she comes across.

In the article "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture," Harry Berger states that "A painting ought to change as you look at it, and as you think, talk, and write about it" (87). Thus a painting should resist single interpretations or one-dimensional readings; it should allow for multiple perspectives just as history should. The same can also be said of the viewer of a painting, that they too change (or at least ought to change) as they study a painting and think about it—such is part of the priceless value of art. But there are some who would say that there is a limit to how much you can be changed by a painting, or more so a limit to the value you place in it. This all depends upon the piece's possibilities—if there are multiple perspectives captured, there is more

room for understanding. But if there is just one objective view, what can be learned besides a similarly objective and narrow reading?

Vreeland first establishes the complexity of Saskia's world through its male favoritism. Saskia must announce to her husband, Stijn, that they have been charged with the baby she found in the boat when she says, "'It's a boy.' She knew that would make him more acceptable," suggesting that the arrival of a female baby would have been unacceptable (Vreeland 115). While Stijn remains distant to the painting, the baby, and Saskia, Saskia's love for the painting and baby grows.

A poor farmer's wife, whose life and livelihood depend upon the weather, Saskia spends time with the painting, imagines its creation, and comes to find worth in it, a worth that she does not yet believe she has: "That's the boy's mother when she was a girl, I'm thinking. Only fine folk have their portraits painted. I want him to know her. It wouldn't be right to claim him as ours" (Vreeland 124). Situation has erased the boy's mother from memory; her body is only necessary to history as a reproductive commodity. By imagining the mother's story from a female perspective, Saskia gives voice to a life that would otherwise be washed away. Saskia is wary to claim the boy as her own, because then she would be claiming the painting as her own, and the painting's narrative. While she cannot equate her social value with the value of the previous owner's, she refuses to draw that intimate connection because she refuses to ignore the life of a woman who knows once existed. Part of this social value is based in the possibility of imagination—of the many options the painting's history may hold, how it got to Saskia, where it was before that, who created it, etc. Saskia's life has no mystery, no options, no

imagination. No one will ever record her life. History will ignore her existence. Saskia wishes her life could be as deep a well of possibilities as the painting is to her, and thus she fights hard to hold onto it.

When Stijn tells Saskia to sell her beloved painting, to Saskia no price for the item seems high enough because, “The painting must be worth even more. It was certainly worth more than that to her” (Vreeland 131). Saskia cannot bear to part with the painting and against her husband’s wishes, keeps it in secret. To hide the lack of money, Saskia starts feeding her family from their seed potatoes to cover her lie. When Stijn discovers the truth, he tells Saskia how selfish she is and the two have the following exchange:

Stijn: “But a man’s seed potatoes are his future. It’s what he *is*.”

Saskia: “Nothing more? You’re nothing more than that? I don’t believe it. . . . All you see in life is the work. Just planting, hauling, shoveling, digging. That’s all life is to you. But not to me, Stijn. Not to me. There’s got to be some beauty too.” (144-145)

Saskia has taken her family into poverty, and finally sells the painting which she has named *Morningside*. While Stijn believes his future is in the seed potatoes, Saskia finds her future in the “morningside” or dawn of the painting, the hope for a new beginning. Of her relationship with Stijn after these events, Saskia says they “would never again be as they were” (154). The value of the Vermeer painting motivates Saskia to lie, to cover her choices, and to steal from the seed potatoes in secret. Was she right to do so? Is her relationship with the painting worth jeopardizing her family?

Readers will undoubtedly argue over Saskia’s decision to keep the painting for as long as she did. *She should have sold it. She lied to her husband. It’s only a painting. It’s her fault the relationship fell apart.* All of this versus: *But what about the beauty? It*

meant something to her. Why didn't her husband understand? And most importantly: To Saskia it wasn't just a painting, it represented a possibility of hope, of more, of life having some value in it. All of these are valid, complicated questions, which is why the story is so effective, because it demonstrates a well of historical possibility. Thus *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* acts much as a meta-narrative of Atwood's mission to women writers—to reimagine and rewrite the past. It may not even matter that the painting motivates Saskia to do something negative—to lie to her husband, because it motivated her to do something, to change, to mark that she could not go on living the same way that she had. Once Saskia had seen that life holds the potential for beauty and value, she can't let that go until she has figured out how to make her life beautiful and valuable too. Her musing on the history of the painting keeps her alive, because she connects with the life of a woman in her past, a woman whose life was also silenced by history.

When Saskia makes the decision to not sell the painting, her musings on the painting's possibilities reveal her searching for her story, the meaning in her own life. As Saskia muses about the painting's history and asks questions of it, she is asking the same questions of herself:

She was a desperate woman with frailties just like her, temptations just like her, a woman who had needs, a woman who loved almost to the point of there being no more her anymore, a woman who probably cried too much, just like her, a woman afraid, wanting to believe rather than believing, else why would she give away her son? A woman who prayed, 'Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.' Saying the words to herself clamped shut her throat and made her cry." (Vreeland 136)

Saskia has just revealed that she lacks faith in her life, in herself, and connects to the painting because she sees the same emotions in the painting's subject. Saskia is searching

for herself and the closest she can find to it is the connection she feels in the woman behind the painting. To give the painting away would be to give away the slightest glimmer of hope she has of finding herself. This connection between Saskia and the painting is further revealed as Saskia tries to tell Stijn of the connection: “Stijn, it’s like selling the boy’s mother. It’s making him an orphan” (Vreeland 138). If she gives away the painting, and forgets the story of the woman behind the painting that her mind has created, then she will be standing alone once again, all too aware of how history will forget her too.

After Stijn discovers Saskia was feeding the family out of his seed potatoes and the two fight, Saskia discovers hope that she can move on without the painting, because she has realized she will never forget the story connected to it. While Saskia has yet to find the same method for validating her own existence in the annals of history that she finds for the woman in the painting, she discovers hope in Stijn’s stubbornness because she will be stubborn too, and it is because of that hope, hope for what she’ll always remember about the painting that she is finally able to part with it:

It wasn’t that Stijn was unloving. It was just that after eight years, she still had trouble telling the difference between his love and his worry. She’d been wrong about one thing. Stijn’s hope. It was there, stronger than hers, but more deeply buried in the dark soil of his soul. (146)

That afternoon Saskia puts the painting back in its sack and sews it closed, the painting having given her all that it could—hope for the future that just as she remembers someone else, maybe someone will remember her. Now that Saskia has hope she has something she can move on with that cannot be taken from her, and so she takes action to do so.

As the chapter moves to its close and Saskia faces her future without the painting, she asks herself questions that she had been too afraid to ask before the painting came into her life: “What was it all for? To have excitement about life, about life together, about a farm and a new kind of crop that would feed the whole world, and then to see it dissolve into only work, work, and tiny, growing separations. How does it all hold together?” (148) What gives Saskia the strength to move on in her life, move on without the painting, was what the painting taught Saskia to see in her own life and to see in Stijn—hope. Hope is what life is for. Hope is why we try to improve the world. Hope is what holds all these dreams together. The value that Saskia saw in the story behind the painting and its act of remembrance, remembrance that her life lacked is why she had hope that somehow someone would remember her too. Hope is why Saskia names the painting *Morningshine* because it reminds her of the hope the sun brings anew each morning. And with this gift that the painting gave her, Saskia now knows that they, “Saskia and Stijn, would never again be as they were” (154).

In Susan Vreeland’s interview with Penelope Rowlands, Vreeland comments briefly on the connection between her novel, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, and Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, that they “had a positive effect on each other” (Rowlands 35). Vreeland also adds that she and Chevalier have become close friends through their interests in art and their writing pursuits (35). It is not surprising that Chevalier would reference the connection between her and Vreeland’s texts, because the method of their historical analysis and imaginative narrative seems so intertwined and complementary. While Chevalier’s text looks back on history and creates the story of a

female that has historically been objectified, Chevalier carries into the text her contemporary feminist aims and goals for expanding an already existing narrow, objectified portrayal of a complicated female. Vreeland's text also looks back in history and imagines the life of a historical woman, but as it acts as a meta-narrative, so too does Saskia look back historically into the life of the woman in *Morningside* and that looking back gives her hope for the power of remembrance.

It is not surprising that two authors who are writing about the same themes would find a deep support and friendship in each other and each other's works. As demonstrated by Griet's character in Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and Vreeland's chapter "Morningside" and her character Saskia in her novel *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, both authors are not just rereading and rewriting history, but also revisioning women as subjects in that history. Women that avoid binary points-of-view. Feminist and new historicist critical theory aim to allow for multiple views where historically there has only been one. Chevalier and Vreeland's rewriting of historical female portraiture (both in the visual mediums they are analyzing and the textual mediums they are creating) demonstrates the critical aspect of history that needs to be investigated by women and women's perspectives on and roles in history.



## CHAPTER III

CHAPTER TWO: WILLA CATHER'S *SHADOWS ON THE ROCK*

Throughout her writing career, Willa Cather created female characters that defied stereotypical gender roles. In *O Pioneers!* (1913) Alexandra Bergson fights to tame the Nebraska frontier against her family's circumstances as working-class immigrants. In 1915's *The Song of the Lark*, Cather chronicles the life of the struggling female singer Thea Kronborg and the sacrifices and challenges she will face to in order to pursue her art. In *My Ántonia* (1918) Ántonia Shimerda overcomes poverty and the male lens through which she is viewed. Marian Forrester in the Cather's 1923 *A Lost Lady* depicts Marian Forrester's battle against her restrictive life in a small town. And yet, with all of these progressive texts paving the way for her most revolutionary work, little has been explored on Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* and this novel's greatest rewriting and challenging of women's historic roles. In this novel, Cather continues to depict female characters who challenge traditional stereotypes but also rereads women's history, making *Shadows on the Rock* a culmination of her exploration into the reframing of women's lives, both past and present. Her writing deepens the understanding of female immigrant history, marginalized women, and the commodification of the female body, all within her rewriting of historical characters in a way that leads to a reinterpretation of the past. *Shadows on the Rock* is a text that invites readers to rethink our past and its historical women and give old definitions and stereotypical objective readings new, and much needed, individual perception.

Published in 1931 and based in seventeenth-century Quebec, *Shadows on the Rock* follows the lives, destinies, and commodification of three of the novel's female characters, two of whom would seem to serve minor roles in the text but in actuality refer to large historical events and renegade roles in women's history that have thematic repercussions in the novel: 'Toinette Gaux, descendent of *les filles du roi*, prostitute and mother of Jacques, and Jeanne Le Ber, "*la recluse de Ville-Marie*" Quebec's religious recluse (Cather 108). The third female character, Cécile Auclair, is the daughter of the colony's apothecary and is superficially read as the novel's main character, but her life is in actuality intertwined and dependent upon 'Toinette's and Jeanne's choices. Literary analysis of Cécile's character places her as the symbolic mother of Canada, yet the atypical life choices of 'Toinette and Jeanne make Cécile's life possible, and thus they rise as the historically unappreciated mothers of a new and free generation of pioneer women. In addition, Cather's characterization of these women and how they defy the historical use of their bodies as colonial commodities suggests her rereading of women's history as she depicts them within revolutionary gender roles.

In analyzing Cather's rewriting of the two historically-based female characters 'Toinette Gaux and Jeanne Le Ber, it is important to first discuss how Cather's subtle allusions to their heritage and colonial migration reveal that she was indeed rewriting women's history from a new point-of-view. 'Toinette Gaux, on the surface level, is portrayed as a "woman of ill repute" and nothing more (March 299); yet, Cather's inclusion that 'Toinette's mother was one of *les filles du roi*, or King's Daughter's, a group of French women and girls recruited by King Louis XIV to come marry soldiers

and populate the colony in New France, suggests that her character is far more symbolic. The factual history of *les filles du roi* is a significant story of female commodification and migration. By focusing on this unexplored dimension of 'Toinette's character and her genealogy, as well as the important connection to the *filles du roi*, readers and literary critics will find these influences as greatly bearing on new readings of these women, both in literary and historic terms.

In a letter to Governor Cross written on October 17, 1931, Cather writes about her state of mind in composing her novel *Shadows on the Rock*:

To me the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite. . . . There, among the country people and the nuns, I caught something new to me; a kind of feeling about life and human fate that I could not accept, wholly, but which I could not but admire. (qtd in Footman 125)

As evidenced in the historical analysis of Cather's female characters, part of the human fate that Cather cannot accept yet but can't help but admire is that of the emigrant women of Quebec, the migrations from which both 'Toinette Gaux and Jeanne Le Ber are a part.

In their article "*Shadows on the Rock: Notes on the Composition of a Novel*," Edward and Lillian Bloom skip over the character of 'Toinette Gaux, claim that Jeanne Le Ber is only important as far as religious atmosphere and dedication are concerned, and state that Cather "aims to present not depths of character but such varieties of pioneer personality as the circumspection of historical credibility will allow" (75). The Blooms' article stands as representative of all of other literary analysis of these two characters—little in-depth evaluation exists. It is as if Cather's inclusion of 'Toinette Gaux is dismissed as little other than an explanation for how her son, Jacques, came into being. It

is not coincidental that Cather's rereading of our female past comes just two years after Virginia Woolf's 1929 publication of *A Room of One's Own*, the revolutionary invitation to find what the women in our past are due. Cather's book as a response to Woolf's demands that readers look deeper into female writers' texts to find what is undoubtedly there; Cather's 'Toinette Gaux character represents a historically silenced woman just as Woolf's creation of Judith Shakespeare did. While Cather's descriptions of the women in *Shadows on the Rock* are brief, this is all that is needed because what is found within their characterization is plenty to suggest we question the role of these two minor characters. Cather is not conforming to "historical credibility," but is instead outright rebelling against it as she rereads history with a new perspective (Bloom and Bloom 75).

As evidenced in the Bloom article and many other literary criticisms of *Shadows on the Rock*, no in-depth critical analysis of 'Toinette Gaux's character has ever been written. The most that exists gives only a surface level reading and occurs in John March's *A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather*. In his book, March only identifies 'Toinette as a "young woman of ill repute" and fails to include reference to her royal heritage, entirely focusing instead on her reputation: "After her short-lived marriage to a sailor, she and another woman opened a 'lodging-house' for sailors and lured them there with promises of culinary delicacies, frogs and snails" (299). By evaluating 'Toinette's character in relation to her historically-based background, readers find Cather rethinking women's roles in history. Referred to as the frog ("*La Grenouille*" [Shadows on the Rock 41]) and defined as "a young woman who was quite irreclaimable," readers are told that 'Toinette Gaux's mother was one of *les filles du roi*, translated as King's

Daughter's, a group of French women and girls recruited by King Louis XIV to come marry soldiers and populate the colony in New France (40-41). Readers are told that 'Toinette herself fell in love, made promises of reform from her promiscuous ways, but that after her marriage and the birth of her son, she "returned to her old ways, and her husband disappeared" (41). 'Toinette's return to prostitution suggests her actions and choices are purposeful.

Using the information Cather gave her reader about 'Toinette, much can be found regarding her and history, which ultimately results in providing readers with a fuller context for painting 'Toinette with a more informed point-of-view. Because Cather was an avid art lover and had said that art was "immortally joy-giving and immortally young" (qtd. in Hirsch 13), it isn't a stretch to imagine that she was likewise aware, both artistically and literarily, of the symbolism behind images. In addition to the humorous façade of luring sailors with the fine French cuisine of frogs and snails, it is appropriate to look again at the symbolism behind this animal imagery in connection to 'Toinette's character, particularly that of the frog or *la grenouille*.

According to James Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art*, the frog's symbolism (closely related visually to the toad) makes references to the Greek mythological story of Leto, the mother of Apollo and Diana (192). During her travels Leto wanted to stop at a lake in Lycia to relieve her thirst, she was unable to do so due to the peasants who wouldn't stop their work in the lake's willow beds. Consequently Leto punished them all by turning them into frogs, a theme that continues to appear in art and gardening (Hall 192). Regarding the toad's symbolism, Hall details their connection to

the naked female personification of Lust, which was, he says, “To the medieval Church, supreme among the Deadly Sins” (196). Hall identifies the toad as an attribute of death and explains that the Church related lust as pertaining to women (196). Gothic and Romanesque sculpture depicting the Last Judgment of Christ, says Hall, often contains “the rather repellent image of a naked woman whose breasts and genitalia were eaten by toads and serpents. The Church’s explanation was that sinners in hell were punished through the bodily organs by which they had offended” (196).

Knowing that the use of a frog or toad alludes to ancient religious stories of both the punishment of peasants and the eternal physical punishment of lustful women in hell, it is not surprising that the colonists with whom ’Toinette lived would stereotypically refer to her character as *la grenouille*. If on the surface, Quebec and society at large objectively labeled ’Toinette as a whore deserving of what she gets (recalling the religious consequences of the connection), then Cather’s additional allusion to *les filles du roi* within the same passage suggests that there is something more to be explained regarding the historical context; in so doing ’Toinette will gain larger humanity and the reader and critic will have an informed perspective with which to evaluate ’Toinette’s life path.

According to the official Canadian organization *La Société des Filles du roi et soldats du Carignan*, a French Regiment was sent to New France after the colonists pleaded for help in their struggle with the Iroquois. In the summer of 1665, 1200 soldiers arrived in Quebec under the leadership of Lt. General Alexander de Prouville. Forts were established along the river, which led to peace and prosperity. King Louis XIV, however,

wanted the settlement to be permanent, so an estimated 450 troops remained behind to colonize (para. 1-2). Thus, the migration to New France largely consisted of men. Less than one-fifth of all immigrants were female, and according to Peter Moogk, during the 1660s in Canada there “were twelve single men, aged sixteen to thirty, for every eligible woman in the same age group” (106). In addition, according to Peter Moogk’s historical account *La Nouvelle France*, there were “discriminatory measures against bachelors” in the Quebec colony, including a 1670 interdict on hunting and trading by single men which was meant to “compel men to wed and to make a home in New France” (106).

Between 1663 and 1673, some 770 young girls and women referred to as *filles du roi* (King’s daughters), were financially sponsored by King Louis of France to go to Canada (Verney 104). King Louis was motivated to recruit these females in order to “provide brides for the surplus bachelors” to help balance the gender ratios of New France which was thought to have a “moderating effect” upon the unruly male soldiers and promote further colonization and stability in the colony (Moogk 166; Verney 104). Based on the 10 percent mortality rate of transatlantic crossings during the seventeenth century, Landry guesses some 850 women originally embarked on the trip (90). Most of the women came from Paris and the remainder from northwest France, thus making French the dominant language (Eccles 89). Most, but not all, of the French females were single and many were orphans or widows. Of this female transaction, Peter Moogk writes

Jean-Baptiste Colbert regarded the women being sent as breeding stock so that the colony’s population would grow without extensive emigration from France. He specified that they be “of an age suitable for reproduction,” healthy, strong, and not “outwardly repulsive.” In 1667 Colbert wrote, “the king will send . . . four hundred good men, fifty girls, twelve mares, and two stallions . . . and next year, I will ensure that a

larger number of girls will be sent so that the soldiers who had settled in the country and the new colonists will marry, and thus give rise to the multiplication of people.” (106)

Note how people are listed as commodities amongst mares and stallions, and how their role is fundamentally for the same reproductive purposes—they like the animals are nothing more than “breeding stock” (106). Either way, as a bride to a bachelor or as the town prostitute, 'Toinette's purpose was to serve the needs of the colony's males; she had no inherent value as a human or in any historical context. It is ironic that King Louis XIV would refer to these females who were paid in exchange for reproductive purposes and male needs, services similar to that of a prostitute, as “King's Daughters.” When women are paid to prostitute themselves for the good of the colony, they are referenced as royal. And yet when 'Toinette Gaux prostitutes herself, she is ostracized.

According to Landry, the women chosen to come to Canada came from backgrounds of poverty; one-third came from the General Hospital of Paris where “the diet was meagre enough to cause stunted growth” (15). Landry reemphasizes the tragic lives of the girls by reporting, “Declarations on their marriage certificates and contracts suggest that close to 65 percent of them had lost their fathers before they reached adulthood” (15). The population benefit of the exchange is greatly complicated by the fact that the some of these females were literally starving, and additionally that the matrimonial ages of these females ranged from age fourteen to fifty-nine, and that only an estimated 23 percent were literate and thus able to read the government contract and sign their own name (Eccles 91). Furthermore, Moogk points out that as attested by their low fertility rates, it is suggested that these females “were malnourished in France and



had accepted emigration as an escape from harsh circumstances. Canada was chosen as the least of many evils” (Moogk 106). Whether or not society or history has found it surprising that King Louis XIV would choose impoverished and vulnerable females to seduce with offers of money and marriage does, however, point to our need to reread this event in French/Canadian history, and what reevaluations of these women’s lives bears on ’Toinette’s story in Cather’s *Shadows on the Rock*.

King Louis XIV paid for *les filles du rois* transportation to Canada and the colonial settlements there. The females (or rather their husbands) received a dowry of 50 *livres* only upon marriage to one of the many male colonists (*La Société des Filles du roi et soldats du Carignan* para. 1); evidence of these dowries can be seen in some of the marriage contracts. It is estimated that 50 *livres* is equal to the modern day American currency value of approximately \$200 (French livre, para. 19). If this calculation is accurate, this small dowry to females from backgrounds of poverty added to the motivation to agree to the binding contract. This Canadian settlement promotion resulted in a population boom and thus girls and women served as paid commodities for the good of King Louis XIV and New France. The Society of the King’s Daughters and Soldiers of Carignan states, as a point of great national pride, that most of the millions of French Canadian descendents, both in Quebec and the rest of Canada, are descendents of these females—thus making ’Toinette the true mother of Canada, and not Cécile, yet because ’Toinette is a contemporary prostitute she is quickly dismissed (para. 2). Thus even today, few seem to realize the tragic role all of these females played in French-Canadian

history, and furthermore conversely label 'Toinette as an outsider when her inherited prostitutional-sexuality is celebrated under the different name of *les fille du roi*.

In his book *The Good Regiment*, author Jack Verney writes about the soldiers of the regiment, and only comments briefly on the role of the King's Daughters. Regarding the marriages Verney states, "it is unlikely that romantic love was as important a factor as it is today," and cites the example of seventy-one-year-old soldier's marriage to a fifteen-year-old girl named Denys. Verney believes their marriage seemed to work because Denys had the "moderating effect" upon her husband (103). Verney also states that most of the soldiers were likely to have been motivated by the promise of monetary dowry or other "practical considerations" (104). Also reported is the fact that marriages involving *filles du roi* were made in haste and society excused the extreme age differences:

In seventeenth-century Canada, the moment a girl reached puberty, pressure was brought on to bear, both on her and on her parents, to marry; that pressure originated in the need to increase the size of the population and thus contribute towards consolidating and defending the colony. (105-106)

It is unlikely that with such pressure put on childbearing, that this role or contribution to the good of the country was not emphasized in order to persuade the females to sign the contracts, or rather have them signed in their behalf. Landry's article records that King Louis' orders were that "courtships were to be kept to a strict minimum" (18). Landry goes on to report that a ruling was made in 1670 that ordered, "all Voluntary Companions and other persons old enough to enter into marriage to marry within fifteen days of the arrival of the ships carrying the *filles* under Pain of being deprived of the rights to any kind of fishing, hunting, and trading with the natives" (qtd. in Landry 18).

According to Edith Lewis, Willa Cather was “always very painstaking about her facts—she intensely disliked being careless or inaccurate, and went to much trouble to verify them” (161). Knowing that Cather knew her Canadian history supports the tie between ’Toinette’s ancestry of Canada’s *filles du roi* in the same passage regarding her employment as prostitute; Cather is not simply writing the story of a girl gone wrong—she is reading women’s history from a fresh and informed point-of-view, one that connects ’Toinette’s prostitute heritage to her current lifestyle and yet highlights the hypocritical nature of celebrating the one and condemning the other. Knowing that some of the *filles du roi* were decades younger than their husbands, as well as impoverished, illiterate and thus unable to read the marriage contract, and only received dowries upon marriage points to our male history smooth over something female commodification with a royal title, an act that belittled the whole value of these females more than a name can ever correct. This also alters the quick judgments of ’Toinette and how she would have historically perceived her female sexual role in connection to men—as nothing more than a commodity or monetary transaction. This information suggests ’Toinette’s character wasn’t the whore-ish one Quebec painted of her, that she as continuing on the sexual transactions that had been started before her was a contemporary *filles du roi* and thus remained the symbolic mother of Canada, a fact that literary critics have seemingly ignored.

Before *Shadows* was published in 1931, Willa Cather would have been aware of Canadian historical societies that proudly commemorate pioneer ancestry and trace lineage to key events. In addition, it would have been and continues to be common for

people in the Americas to try to trace their genealogical ancestry to the patriotic pilgrimages of the *Mayflower* and the like. Cather recasts the historic detail of the King's Daughters through her *Shadows* character and prostitute 'Toinette Gaux by taking a character of royal and celebrated lineage and portraying her as a woman with a misunderstanding of the ownership and usage of her sexuality as a form of power or simply a commodity and means of survival. In so doing, Cather as a female writer is rereading women's history in a defiantly new way, with prostitutes at the helm.

After Cather's rereading of the character and history of 'Toinette Gaux and *les filles du roi*, the environment of another female lead in *Shadows on the Rock* begs examination—that of Quebec's religious recluse, Jeanne Le Ber who was influenced by the emigration of Mother Juschereau. Female emigration to Canada began to lapse following the end of *les filles du roi* (Choquette 627). Leslie Choquette writes concerning the numbers of female lay and religious missionaries who soon thereafter “demanded to emigrate on their own initiative” (628). Choquette quotes records of this movement: “you would say [the female missionaries] are competing to see who can be the first to mock the difficulties of the sea, the mutinies of the ocean, and the barbary of these lands” (628). Not only did these female missionaries forcefully board ships when necessary (628), but they also chose to make it clear that they were going on their own initiative. In response to the commoditized *filles du roi*, these women chose to trump the authority King Louis XIV would give himself to trade people as commodities and prostitute France's females and instead chose to identify themselves as *les filles de la Charité*, translated as Charity's Daughters, Charity being capitalized and referencing their

divine nature. By claiming God as their only father, *les filles de la Charité* made a statement against the inhumanity of putting a price on a person and reducing their value to prostitution and thus showed the way Canada could have been colonized without resorting to such demeaning trade—willing and able volunteers who knew what they were signing up for.

In the mid-seventeenth century, these female missionaries made the long journey to New France following the footsteps of the King's Daughters. Not surprisingly, King Louis XIV was not in favor of the influx of female missionaries and “began to place stringent limits on the number of nuns allowed in each foundation, for ‘it was not advisable for a colony to have so many people shut away in religion; it was more advisable to facilitate marriages’” (Choquette 629). This fact reemphasizes King Louis's view of females as colonizing commodities, in conflict with the service missions of the female missionaries. Reevaluating the historical situation, questions of priority arise—women serving as “spiritual directors,” vs. men and government's “practical considerations” (Choquette 630, Verney 104). What ultimately remains as an answer, is the freedom to choose, which is why 'Toinette's and Le Ber's choices will later enable Cécile to choose for herself.

While 'Toinette is a fictional character representative of a historical group of women, Jeanne Le Ber is a character Cather drew directly from real life. In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather summarizes and fictionalizes the life of Quebec's Jeanne Le Ber in order to promote historical rethinking, not of Le Ber specifically, but of women's roles and what Jeanne represents as an independent cultural thinker. Jeanne Le Ber left Quebec

to study with the Ursulines as a young girl. As part of her religious training, Le Ber's education included "wakening her conscience and then teaching her the basics and 'works of her state' so that her parents could plan and organize her 'establishment in the world,' namely marriage and housekeeping" (Angelitti para. 11). In 1677, Jeanne returned home at the age of fifteen and was reportedly "exceptionally beautiful. Her impressive dowry was the largest in Montreal and, without a doubt, in New France" (Angelitti para. 15). In a state where marriage and pressure to populate the colony were the emphasized roles of a female in society, it was very independent of Le Ber to make this religious decision when her age, beauty and fortune would have been of great benefit to the men of the community and in "much in demand" (Angelitti para. 15). But according to Angelitti, Le Ber felt "called to a life of solitude and silence. . . dividing her time between three activities: prayer, work and rest" (Angelitti para. 18). Le Ber spent her time on activities that she not only chose to do, but also activities that resist the commodification of the body in response to the historical over-sexualization of *les filles du roi*. In 1680 after consulting with a priest, Jeanne was encouraged and ultimately made her own decision to lead a reclusive religious life (Angelitti para. 19).

The dichotomy between the King's Daughter's and female missionaries lies in the *filles du roi* being sanctioned by the monarchy and motivated by the money and new land as an opportunity to escape their impoverished, uneducated lives, whereas the missionaries chose to come and yet were viewed by the monarchy as being interlopers. In order to emphasize this difference, in the beginning of her novel Cather's character Cécile muses on a missionary immigrant named Catherine who serves as Le Ber's alter

ego, an echo of the kinds of decisions Le Ber would have had to make. Desirous of coming to Canada to serve, Catherine was finally allowed to migrate with other additional sister missionaries in 1648 (Shadows 33). Of Catherine's pilgrimage Cather writes, "When, after a voyage of many months, unparalleled for storms and hardships, Catherine and her companions anchored under the rock of Kebec and were rowed ashore, she fell upon her knees and kissed the earth where she first stepped upon it" (34). This contrasting image of women kissing Canadian soil when they've traveled on their own agenda and yet being viewed as interlopers, as opposed to the monetary exchange of the commoditized females of *les filles du roi*, demonstrates Cather's modern rereading and reversal of these two events in women's history. Catherine kissed the ground because she welcomed it, welcomed being grounded on soil where she could choose to lead the life she wanted.

Yet it is not Canada, per se, that these religious women were triumphantly celebrating; rather it is the freedom to break away from standard female roles and represent a role of their own choosing, even a rebellious one. Knowing that King Louis the XIV did not want an influx of nuns in Quebec's colony adds to the renegade choice of these women to come uninvited. In Susan Rosowski's article "Willa Cather's Women," she explores the female protagonists choices and how they continually break from tradition. While Rosowski focuses on Cather's earlier novels, her ideas, can be extended to incorporate Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* and its female characters as well. Rosowski's argument bases itself on the idea that "Just as Cather's women embody themes concerning the pioneer, artist, and materialism, so they embody themes

concerning female experience” (261). Continuing this idea, Rosowski postulates that Cather’s women have within themselves two contradicting selves, only one of which can ever be satisfied in the struggle to claim identity; thus, as Cather’s career progresses and her novels become more and more saturated with this struggle, the novels too become “increasingly complex examinations of social roles assigned to women and of the implication of those roles for individuals caught in them” (261). As Toinette fights the commodification of her female ancestors and if even confusedly attempts to claim her sexual self in defiance of that past, so too does Jeanne represent a fighting against a standard, rebellion against obeying a superior male’s orders to stay at home and not disturb colonial progress.

But Jeanne does disturb Quebec and moreover, chooses to follow her own path and reject Canada altogether, as it symbolically manifests itself in the form of Pierre Charron. As pointed out by Jo Ann Middleton in her article “Historical Space in *Shadows on the Rock*,” within this Cather novel, Pierre represents Canada at its best (51). Charron is described as “hero of the fur trade and the *coureurs de bois*” and “quick as an otter and always sure of himself” (*Shadows* 137). Furthermore, in connecting his presence to that of the idealized colony of Quebec, it is said

To both Auclair and Madame Auclair, Pierre Charron had seemed the type they had come so far to find; more than anyone else he realized the romantic picture of the free Frenchman. . . He had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the New. He was proud, he was vain, he was relentless when he was hated, and quickly prejudiced; but he had the old ideals of clan-loyalty. . . His goods and his life were at the disposal of the man he loved or the leader he admired. (*Shadows* 139)



Charron embodies the “realized. . . romantic picture of the free Frenchman” during a time when Quebec is still in its infancy, and Charron, though a man, is described as “still boyish” (Shadows 139).

But Charron is not loved by all; more importantly, he is denied marriage by Jeanne Le Ber. Le Ber, the representation of the renegade woman pursuing her own desires, however inconvenient to the male sex, further shows her feminine sagacity by rejecting Charron’s marriage proposals. What would undoubtedly be beneficial to him when considering her physical beauty and large dowry, Le Ber rejects, thus also rejecting a permanent union to Canada. Le Ber’s interests are her own—for her religious beliefs which trump others demands of her and how they believe she should use her body for the good of the colony. So too did *les filles de la Charité* choose their own path, no matter the inconvenience to the cultural demands of their gender. They arrived uninvited and unwanted and led lives of service and seclusion to contradict the “cultural restrictions imposed upon a female character” (Rosowski 262).

Through her portrayals of ’Toinette Gaux and Jeanne Le Ber, Willa Cather has recast women’s history by rereading motivations of female migration to Canada in the seventeenth-century. Writing the only known *filles du roi* descendent in her novel ’Toinette as a woman who continues to use her sexuality as her sole commodity, versus Jeanne and the female missionaries who were put upon by their government for desiring to migrate to the same colony, shows Cather complicating male historical characterizations of these women and her rereading women’s history. Both of these actions recall Cather’s epigraph to *Shadows on the Rock*:

*Vous me demandez des graines de fleurs de ce pays.  
 Nous en faisons venir de France pour notre jardin,  
 n'y en ayant pas ici de fort rares ni de fort belles. Tout y est  
 sauvage, les fleurs aussi bien que les homes.  
 --Marie de l'Incarnation, Lettre à Une de Ses Sceurs,  
 Québec, le 12 août, 1653*

Both *les filles du roi* and *les filles de la Charité* came to France to help what was to be *notre jardin*, our garden, and each ultimately had different experiences as they searched for their roles in a male-dominated society. But what are we to make of the third female character to evaluate according to this pattern in Cather's writing? What of Cécile Auclair?

Attempting to fit Cécile into this renegade pattern becomes immediately troublesome, yet it is what her character represents about women's destinies that completes Cather's rereading of Quebec's history. The motherless daughter of Quebec's apothecary, Cécile Auclair is raised by her father and is friends to 'Toinette's and Le Ber's male cast-offs and admirers, 'Toinette's son Jacques Gaux and Le Ber's slighted lover Pierre Charron. As Cécile later marries Charron and bears his sons, "the Canadians of the future" (Middleton 50), it has been said that she ultimately gives herself to Quebec in ways that neither 'Toinette or Le Ber would, that "it is indeed her own country" (51). However, all this leads back to Rosowski's invitation to see how all of Cather's women are breaking molds, and that "It is not enough, of course, to escape limitations; one must develop also the positive qualities that enable growth" (263).

Summing up Cather's text by ignoring 'Toinette's and Le Ber's influence on women's history, and simple referencing the hope for the future of Quebec with Cécile as the mother of Canada is incomplete at best. Why would Cather end her novel that has

reread women's history and shed light on female emigration then go back to women in typical roles? Why would she undo what for hundreds of pages she artistically established? The answer lies in the fact that Cécile does not undo the past, neither does she erase it. By including two characters who come from two separate female emigration pasts, Cather rereads the context of these women and their choices. Cécile is the only one of these three women who is an entirely fictionalized character, without any historical antecedent. So too is Cécile a rereading of the typical historical past of the mother figure.

Cather has written a novel rereading history, rereading women, and rereading mothers—'Toinette a woman who cannot resolve her commodified mother ancestry and her own role as a prostitute and mother, Jeanne Le Ber as a religious mother over the city of Quebec and yet a woman who refused to marry, and Cécile with her deceased mother and becoming the new mother of Canada. The cycle of motherhood affects each of them, and yet how Cather recasts the final role does not undermine her previous characters, but rather confirms them. Cécile could choose to ignore Jacques Gaux, just as the rest of the colony of Quebec does, he being an eyesore to the city set on a hill. But she does not ignore him, she embraces him, and furthermore even becomes a mother figure towards him. In so doing, Cécile does not ignore 'Toinette, her role, or her choices, but accepts them. By marrying Pierre Charron, Jeanne Le Ber's refused lover, Cécile likewise supports Le Ber's choice to live a life of religious seclusion by physically removing the one man who would continue to try to stand in her way—Charron. Ultimately, Cécile befriends Jacques and marries Charron to support the women who have gone before her, and it is to them that this final chapter points. While up to this point literary critics have

pointed to Cécile as the new hope for Canada, it is in actuality her pointing back to 'Toinette and Le Ber that is most significant, for it is them and their choices and their refusal to accept cultural roles that should triumphantly ring in the readers' ears.

## CHAPTER IV

## CHAPTER THREE: WILLA CATHER'S "COMING, APHRODITE!"

In 1920, Willa Cather's second collection of short stories entitled *Youth and the Bright Medusa* included the short story "Coming, Aphrodite!," a fictional account about the relationship between painter Don Hedger and opera singer Eden Bowen, and their disagreements concerning art. Cather, a so-called Francophile (Wagenknecht 29; Woodress 426), had made her first trip to Europe with Isabella McClung some eighteen years prior, to tour the English and French cultures and see artists she had for so long admired. It was during this journey that "with all the fire and immediacy of the modern age, she first began to feel the admiration and love of French art [and] French form, which has set such an impress on her work" (Lewis 560). Of France's influence on Cather, Robert Thacker writes,

Poised as she was . . . on the verge of her most mature and complex writing, Cather was about to reach the goal she had set for herself while she was still living in Nebraska. Like Eden Bower in "Coming, Aphrodite!" who knew early "that she was to be Eden Bower," Willa Sibert Cather, the bearer of this passport, was about to become Willa Cather, author indeed, in the midst of her own major phase. (45)

The goal of immersing herself in French culture was one that greatly affected the resulting work Willa Cather produced. French history, culture, art, and language influenced Cather's writings for the rest of her career. In Cather's short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" she may have pulled from her knowledge of French art and the artist Fernand Léger in order to use this information within her own New York based story. The connection between French artist Fernand Léger and Cather character Don Hedger lies in

more than the coincidental sound of their names. The connection is found in the similar artistic backgrounds and stylistic choices. In “Coming, Aphrodite!” Cather demonstrates the important influence of art upon other artists, as well as rereading male texts (such as Léger’s paintings) within a female-empowered story (“Coming, Aphrodite!”).

From his first days as a artist, Léger’s work was revolutionary and eye-opening to the world of art it entered as he explored new genres of Cubism within his paintings (see Fig. 1); so too was Cather’s early short story revolutionary as it demonstrates a woman owning her sexuality, courage, and talent without excuse in a world that is not yet ready to understand, as shown through the characterization of Don Hedger. Just as in *Shadows on the Rock* where ’Toinette and Le Ber are in control of their sexuality, so too is Eden in control of how she chooses to use her body.



Fig. 1. *Study for Three Portraits* by Fernand Léger, 1910–11. Oil on canvas. Milwaukee Art Museum. <[http://www.mam.org/collections/modern\\_detail\\_leger.htm](http://www.mam.org/collections/modern_detail_leger.htm)>.

French painter Fernand Léger, whose art has been called a “special achievement” (Faerna 5), was born in France in 1881 and greatly influenced artistic movements and genres up until his death in 1955. Of Léger’s legacy, Serge Fauchereau writes, “when he died, the world discovered to its stupefaction that the man who had quietly practiced his painterly craft with such calm passion was a universal figure that his death left a major gap in the art of our century” (8). Because Cather initiated a love and appreciation for French art in 1902, and considering Léger’s artistic development and rise in influence during the years to follow and the similarities between his works and images created in “Coming, Aphrodite!,” he could well be the modernist/Cubist painter to inspire Cather in the artistic framing of her character Don Hedger. With his French exhibits coinciding with Cather’s repeated trips to France, it is likely that she would have been aware of his prominent rise in France’s modernist art movement during the times she was in France, and would have kept up on his work after her return. Robert Thacker comments on Cather’s need to see the world abroad and states, “Cather had first gone to France in 1902, a young woman of very serious literary ambitions bent to absorb as much of France—and of Europe generally—as she could” (45). Of Cather’s fascination with art, Polly Duryea writes, “Art was a religion for Willa Cather” (para. 20). That absorption demonstrates itself with Cather’s short story “Coming, Aphrodite!” as she shows the influence of art on literature, and vice versa.

In his book *Willa Cather*, literary critic Edward Wagenknecht commented on Cather’s first trip to Europe and her fondness for impressionism, cubism, and the Fauves (38); all three of these painting genres are reflected in the span of Fernand Léger’s work.

Edith Lewis wrote about the influence of the French on Cather in her own book titled *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. Of this influence Lewis records, “I think French culture, coming to it as she did in her most impressionable years, and finding it so new, so challenging and awakening, spoke more directly to her imagination, and more definitely influenced her writing” (56). Additionally, Cather once wrote that if France “were to take a landslide into the sea some day, there would not be much creative power of any sort left in the world” (Wagenknecht 29-30; Woodress 426). While Wagenknecht alludes to the French influence on Cather, verified by Edith Lewis, literary criticism has not yet pointed to French painters directly influencing Cather’s texts. However, Fernand Léger’s devotion to Cézanne, paintings, and work in Cubism are echoed in the artistic idealism and imagery found in Cather’s short story, even though Léger himself is not a direct prototype for the Don Hedger character.

Cather begins “Coming, Aphrodite!,” with an introduction to the painter Don Hedger and the city setting of his apartment studio. Wagenknecht referred to Cather’s introduction of Hedger’s home as her own “French postcard” (62). While Cather was depicting an artist in New York, her time spent in France observing artist studios is recalled in her city setting. In the short story, Hedger lives “on the top floor of an old house on the south side of Washington Square,” (“Coming” 93) a building later described as a place where the owner “sub-let her rooms, with their precious furniture, to young people who came to New York to ‘write’ or to ‘paint’—who proposed to live by the sweat of the brow rather than of the hand, and who desired artistic surroundings” (594). This art studio setting was one that Cather herself lived in. Just as Cather recalls French



descriptions in her short story, so too do Léger's paintings seem reminiscent of New York City. This connection can be seen in Léger's 1911 painting *Fumées sur les toits*, translated as *Smoke over the Rooftops* (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Fumées sur les toits* (Smoke over the Rooftops), 1911, oil on canvas, 60 x 93 cm, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts; rpt. in Yvonne Brunhammer, Fernand Léger: The Monumental Art (Italy: Grafiche, 2005) 31.

From 1908-1909, Léger also lived in an artists' studio, La Ruche ("The Beehive"), where he befriended painters Delaunay, Chagall and Soutine (Léger xxxi). Don Hedger lives in a similar artistic atmosphere with a "studio window that looked upon a court and upon the roofs and walls of the other buildings" ("Coming" 93). When Cather wrote this scene, she may have been inspired by Léger's painting series that depicted this view from La Ruche, one she could relate to from her experiences from 60 South Washington Square in Greenwich Village (Brunhammer 30; see Fig. 2), and would have seen in her own life and abroad as ideal artist living quarters. If Hedger is to play the role

of an influential painter, living the lifestyle that true artists as exemplified by Cather and Léger, placing Hedger into the same physical setting helps to validate his commitment to the artistic lifestyle.

As “Coming, Aphrodite!” continues and the Don Hedger character develops, the reader learns about his draughtsman experience and devotion to the French artist “C-----,” both details that connect with the life of Léger and further suggest that Cather was aware of this artist, his life and work (“Coming” 103). From 1897-1904, Léger was first apprentice and then draftsman to architects in France (Léger xxxi). Hedger is likewise described as an “expert draughtsman” who could draw upon this skill in doing commercial work when he was in need of money to support his painting lifestyle (“Coming” 96).

The “biggest man among the moderns,” described only as “C-----” in “Coming, Aphrodite!” is most likely Paul Cézanne who greatly influenced Léger’s cubist style. Originally painting in the impressionist style, Léger was stuck by Cézanne’s work after visiting one of his exhibitions in 1907. According to biographies Léger acknowledged that “it was from Cézanne’s work that he learned to love abstract shapes as entities in themselves and to concentrate on creating a composition that would be both precise and utterly devoid of sentimentality” (Faerna 10). The abstract shapes as entities is reflected in the depiction of Don Hedger, part of which he experimenting in “unusual lighting” (“Coming” 94). Of his admiration for Cézanne, Léger wrote, “one painter among the impressionists, Cézanne, understood everything that was incomplete in traditional painting,” and later that “Cézanne, I repeat, was the only one of the impressionists to lay

his finger on the deeper meaning of plastic life, because of his sensitivity to the contrast of forms” (Léger 5, 17). Léger began experimenting with cubist styles, eventually creating his own “tubist” form, a cylindrical version of cubism (Léger 5). Aware of Léger’s draughtsman background and connection to Cézanne, Cather may have been influenced by Léger to use him as a prototype of a true artist.

When Hedger first meets singer Eden Bowen, they cross paths outside their rooms in the hallway where they share a bathroom. Before their conversation begins, Hedger, sees her as an artist and observes Eden’s stature as a “tall figure in a flowing blue silk dressing-gown that fell away from her marble arms” (“Coming” 98). Rather than arms of flesh and blood, hers are “marble,” the medium of sculptors (98). Hedger sees Eden as a potential subject for his art, rather than as a living woman, just as how Vermeer saw Griet in Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Thus Hedger is enforcing his artistic, objective framework on Eden Bowen, a woman who will never give herself completely to him, but rather use her sexual power over him to please herself. In 1912 as Léger began to develop his own style, he painted *La Femme en bleu* (The Woman in Blue), an oil painting focusing on an abstract form of a woman in blue surrounded by multi-colored (including marble-toned) surroundings (see Fig. 3). This Fernand Léger painting is one from which Cather may have derived some artistic imagery for artistic moment in her short story.



Fig. 3. *La Femme en bleu* (The Woman in Blue), 1912, oil on canvas, 76 x 51 3/16" (193 x 130 cm), Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum. Gift of Dr. h.c. Raoul La Roche; rpt. in Carolyn Lancher, Fernand Léger (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998) 161.

Before Hedger becomes acquainted with Eden, he discovers a cleared knot-hole in the wall of his closet dividing his apartment from hers. “Without realizing what he was doing,” Don begins watching Eden through the hole as she either exercises or lounges “wholly unclad” (“Coming” 99). Hedger becomes transfixed with Eden and her body: “Nudity was not improper to any one who had worked so much from the figure, and he continued to look, simply because he had never seen a woman’s body so beautiful as this one,—positively glorious in action” (99-100). Hedger sees Eden’s body as one of movement, suggesting that his painting or sketching of her would likewise try to convey a sense of action. Léger’s early nude sketches can likewise be described as “positively glorious in action” as they depict women amidst multiple curving and abstract lines that

suggest action as seen in *Seated Female Nude* and *Seated Nude* (“Coming” 100; See Figs. 4 & 5).



Fig. 4. *Seated Female Nude* (left) by Fernand Léger, 1909-11, ink on brown wove paper, 12 ½ x 9 5/8 in., Norton Simon Museum, The Blue Four Galka Scheyer Collection. [http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse\\_artist.asp?name=Fernand+L%26%23233%3Bger](http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_artist.asp?name=Fernand+L%26%23233%3Bger).

Fig. 5. *Seated Nude* (right) by Fernand Léger, 1913, ink on paper, 15 7/8 x 12 ½ in., The Joan and Lester Avnet Collection. [http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A6624&page\\_number=3&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A6624&page_number=3&template_id=1&sort_order=1).

Hedger’s obsession with Eden grows as he repeatedly observes Eden through the hole as she reclines unclad in her apartment. Her body, and thus her sexuality, holds a power over him that he cannot understand. Afterwards, Hedger looks at the rest of the world without pleasure and says, “Everything here [is] different; he hated [it] . . . He felt desperate” (“Coming” 100). He’ll later say that Eden’s body has him “completely possessed” (101) and that he is unable to continue his work: “He was not painting at all

now. This thing, whatever it was, drank him up as ideas had sometimes done, and he sank into a stupor of idleness as deep and dark as the stupor of work” (101). Hedger’s sexuality leaves him impaired and unable to pursue his work. Thus Cather begins to turn the tables on her male character as he is now losing his power and sense of self to a woman, power that the characters in *Shadows on the Rock*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* were striving to achieve and maintain.

“Coming, Aphrodite!” continues and Hedger invites Eden to accompany him out to Coney Island where one of his painting models is going up in a balloon. Upon arriving at the location for the event, Cather inserts a key description of the Coney Island circus setting:

A red-faced man in a linen suit stood in front of the tent, shouting in a hoarse voice and telling the people that if the crowd was good for five dollars more, a beautiful young woman would risk her life for their entertainment. Four little boys in dirty red uniforms ran about taking contributions in their pillbox hats. (40)

Having established this circus background for the readers, complete with red-faced announcers and red-uniformed boys, the balloon begins to rise and we for the first time see Hedger’s model, Molly Welch. As Molly begins to perform her aerial acrobatics, she is twice described as wearing green tights as she moves about the trapeze (108; see Fig. 6).

The themes of circus and acrobatics reappeared throughout Fernand Léger’s career, just as they play a key role in “Coming, Aphrodite!” Limiting ourselves solely to Léger paintings that Cather would have been aware of before the 1920 publication of

“Coming, Aphrodite!,” three paintings contain subject matter and similar description to Molly Welch, her costume, circus and acrobatics. In 1914 Léger painted *La Femme en*



Fig. 6. *La Femme en rouge et vert* (The Woman in Red and Green), 1914, oil on canvas, 39 3/8" x 31 7/8" (100 x 81 cm), Musée National d'Art Moderne, CNAC Georges Pompidou, Paris; rpt. in Gaston Diehl, *F. Léger* (Hungary: Bonfini P, 1985) 17.

*rouge et vert* (The Woman in Red and Green) which is reminiscent of Molly Welch's costume amid the circus background (see Fig. 6). In 1918, Léger painted a circus scene *Médrano*, which depicts a circus within a city setting, just as we've read in Cather's Coney Island scene (see Fig. 7). Furthermore, in 1918, Léger also paints *Les Acrobates dans le cirque* which depicts acrobatic spectacle at a circus setting (see Fig. 8). These three paintings when paired with the "Coming, Aphrodite!" text published just a couple of years later, pinpoint the connection between Cather's subtle allusions to Léger throughout her short story.

But these circus scenes are also important in what they say about Eden's control over her sexuality and her body as a commodity. The Coney Island scene in "Coming, Aphrodite!" shows Eden within a sexualized spectacle in which she is a willing participant, and her open showcase of her body makes Don Hedger the uncomfortable one, as he would only violate her sexuality in private as he peers in on her through the hole in his closet wall. But Eden owns her sexuality and participates in the circus and the scene in the hot air balloon because it both physically and symbolically puts her body on display and yet out of Hedger's reach. Eden resists letting Hedger the artist define or control who she is, as we saw occurring with Griet in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Eden refuses to be objectified in Hedger's one-dimensional sketches of her, choosing instead to be a three-dimensional force in real life.



Fig. 7. *Médrano (The Circus)*, 1918, oil on canvas, 58 x 94.5 cm, Centre Pompidou – MNAM – CCI, Paris; rpt. in Yvonne Brunhammer, Fernand Léger: The Monumental Art (Milan, Italy: Grafiche, 2005) 45.





Fig. 8. *Les Acrobates dans le cirque* (Acrobats at the Circus), 1918, oil on canvas, 38 ¼” x 46 in. (97 x 117 cm), Kunstmuseum, Basel; rpt. in Serge Fauchereau, Fernand Léger: A Painter in the City (New York: Rizzoli, 1994) 55.

Part of Hedger’s purpose in telling the story “The Forty Lovers of the Queen” to Eden later that evening is to try to reassert his power over Eden, power that he recognizes he lost at the circus, or perhaps realized he never had. Hedger wants to show Eden he can shape a female’s story from his own perspective within his verbal storytelling as another type of creative depiction separate from his art. But Eden will once again show Hedger that she will not allow him, or any other male, to ever have that control. In “Coming, Aphrodite!” Eden later comes up to join Hedger on the rooftop and Cather describes the commencement of their love affair:

Standing against the black chimney, with the sky behind and blue shadows before, they looked like one of Hedger’s own paintings of that period; two figures, one white and one dark, and nothing whatever distinguishable about them but that they were male and female. The faces were lost, the contours blurred in shadow, but the figures were a man and

a woman, and that was their whole concern and their mysterious beauty—it was the rhythm in which they moved, at last, along the roof and down into the dark hole; he first, drawing her gently after him. (“Coming” 57)

Even as suggested by Cather’s word choice, Hedger views Eden as something to be sketched as he “draw[s] her gently after him” (57). The scene Cather describes, which the narrator comments looks like one of Hedger’s own paintings, could in fact be an allusion to *La Noce* (The Wedding; see Fig. 9) painted in 1910 by Fernand Léger. The title *La Noce* would have been ironic for Cather to reference as there will be no marriage or spiritual union between Don and Eden.

Of this painting, Fauchereau describes the content as “a multiple perspective which disperses the subject and breaks it up with non-representational planes...those elements are still indicated by shading...they become flatly geometrical areas of pure colour” (10). Even an unskilled eye can discern the “one white and one dark” abstract forms in Léger’s painting. As Hedger tells his story of the consequences of female sexuality to Eden, a woman he wants to control, the artistic framing of their conversation connects to an artist’s depiction of a wedding, the ultimate commitment of men and women. But Eden will never submit herself to Hedger or give him that power over her by uniting with him; what Eden wants from Hedger is temporarily satisfying her pleasure, until she’s ready to move on.



Fig. 9. *La Noce* (The Wedding), c. 1910-11, oil on canvas, 1010 1/8" x 81" (257 x 206 cm), Musée National d'Art Moderne, CNAC Georges Pompidou, Paris; rpt. in Gaston Diehl, *F. Léger* (Buda, Hungary: Bonfini P, 1985) 11.

Cather recast French art with the descriptions in her short story, thus giving Fernand Léger's artwork another form in her writing. But how is Cather rereading women within the same space? Cather gave great capacity and agency to her character Eden Bower. In her article, "Coming, Willa Cather!," Marilyn Arnold begins pointing towards this freedom when she states that,

Eden Bower is the *whole* woman. . . Eden is all of them and more; she is elemental woman, she is sexual. . . but her sexuality is more open, joyous, harmonious, unconscious, essential. . . Almost nowhere else in modern American fiction has elemental passion, the mystery of innate feeling between men and women, been described with more grace and sensitivity." (248)

Arnold's argument, however, loses Eden's import when she turns the remainder of her focus to Don Hedger. What needs to be considered in Willa Cather's story is how Eden Bower defies Hedger and his telling of "The Forty Lovers of the Queen" with how she

has control over her sexuality, never fully surrendering it to Hedger, and at the same time still choosing to pursue her art. Eden's refusal to submit to Hedger's painting of her recalls Griet in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and how she also objects to the sexual objectification in Vermeer's painting of her, something inherent to the process that would obliterate their individuality.

"The Forty Lovers of the Queen" tells the story of a woman who is punished for her sexual promiscuity, and ultimately her punishment ends in her burning at the stake. Hedger tells the tale as a warning—she cannot be sexually promiscuous, similar to his interpretation of her actions at the circus, actions that were acceptable when done by his model Molly, but not acceptable for her. His hypocrisy continues in his attempt at scare-tactics with insinuating that Eden will have a nasty end if she too follows that path. But Eden is not thwarted. After Hedger's telling of the story, the narrative voice switches to Eden and she says, "Now she was looking at the man he really was. Nobody's eyes had ever defied her like this. . . .He was testing her, trying her out" ("Coming" 112-113). While Eden is definitely disturbed by this machismo, she still knows what she wants and will proceed anyway, now knowing more than ever that she will never submit to Hedger's objectified role for her to play in his life, and his life alone.

Hedger and Eden's affair continues, but they ultimately fight about their conflicting definitions of success. Years later when Eden inquires after the painter, she learns "he is one of the first men among the moderns. That is to say, among the very moderns...He is a great name with all the young men, and he is decidedly an influence in art" (72-73). This description of Hedger could be the concluding paragraph in any

biography on the life of Fernand Léger. His movements from impressionism to cubism, creating Tubism (Léger's cylindrically shaped version of cubism), and then moving towards abstraction and the machine age in his career following the publication of Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!," Léger was an artist best described by Cather as one who was "original, erratic, and who is changing all the time" ("Coming" 73). Cather's subtle allusions to Fernand Léger throughout "Coming, Aphrodite!" serve as a tribute to both the "special achievement" of his art (Faerna 5), and the life-changing influence of the French on Willa Cather.

Returning to Eden's choices to leave Hedger at the end of Cather's short story in order to pursue her singing in France, it has often been said that Cather believed that one could not be both an artist and a sexual being at the same time—only one pathway could be pursued. This is supposedly demonstrated in Eden's leaving of Hedger to travel to Paris. What has been ignored, however, are the subtle implications throughout "Coming, Aphrodite!" that suggest that not only is Eden in control of her sexual influence over Hedger, but that he holds no power over her. She in fact uses Hedger shamelessly, and when she's had enough, continues on with another man, thus never abandoning her sexuality, but rather abandoning one of her subjects—Hedger. Thus Hedger becomes the objectified and the sexual roles are reversed. Eden, the female, is now the one in control, and the male artist, Hedger, is the one unable to objectivity portray an unwilling subject.

"Coming, Aphrodite!" reads with Eden fully in control. When Hedger finds the empty knothole in his closet wall and watches Eden exercise and recline "wholly unclad," she is both aware of his peeping and also performing for him on purpose, knowing the

power she will have over him once he becomes transfixed with her and her god-like (Aphrodite) control over him. After Eden leaves and Hedger finds one of her dressing gowns in his closet, he also finds that the knothole has been refilled with the same paper on which Eden wrote the note. Eden wanted Hedger to watch her. Eden is no longer the skillfully played object of physical pleasure, Hedger is.

Moreover the story of “The Forty Lovers of the Queen” has often been read as a warning to sexually dominant women, a path that will ultimately end in death. However, Eden never suffers for her sexual domination over Hedger, as the Queen of the Aztecs does in Hedger’s story. Instead, Eden uses Hedger. She gets what she wants from Hedger, but when she’s finished with him, she is still able to travel to Paris to pursue her singing career, and is able to become very successful at it. Thus Eden succeeds where Griet in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* does not; Eden is never limited by Hedger’s sexual use of her as a model in his art because she refuses to pose for him. While Hedger too finally returns to his painting after Eden leaves and likewise has similar success, there is never an indication within “Coming, Aphrodite!” that during the course of their relationship, Eden never sets aside her singing with the same abandon that Hedger is forced to with his painting. Hedger’s submission to Eden’s sexuality leaves him powerless to create art while Eden’s control of Hedger never interrupts her artistic pursuits. She is able to have the best of both worlds, a new rereading to Cather criticism.

What is to be made of the final scene, of Eden’s triumphant return to New York and her discovery of Hedger’s success? Many would say that the “hard and settled” (Cather 120) appearance of Eden’s face at learning of Hedger’s success points to her

disappointment—that Cather’s final sentence, “But a “big” career takes its toll, even with the best of luck” (120) shows that Eden couldn’t have it all. But critics and readers need to remember one thing, as demonstrated in her rereading of the history of *les filles du roi*, of *les filles de la Charité*, of the rock of Quebec, of the art of Fernand Léger, and of the sexual power of Eden Bower, that females need to be allotted the same complex characterization that men have given themselves as the main protagonists throughout our biased history. By rereading our historical past, imagining the women who would have existed within those times, and giving voice to their silenced tales, history and literature gain a new female perspective that enhances the record we’ll remember of those generations of women who have come before, and those that will come after us.

Eden’s face is described as looking like a “plaster cast; so a sail, that has been filled by a strong breeze, behaves when the wind suddenly dies” (“Coming” 120); this description indicates that Eden, once again, is in control. Moreover, her face is the one captured in a plaster cast, a way of remembering someone after they are gone, just as women’s rereading of the past helps us to remember our female ancestry as well. Further, Eden’s plaster cast is a cast rather than a sculpture; her cast is taken directly from her body itself as opposed to a sculptor’s interpretation. She is playing a role, the role of a thwarted lover, but she was always the one in control, she lured Hedger to her, she transfixed him with her body, she made him worry when she traded places with Molly Welch, and she left him when she did not want him anymore. Eden Bower is an actress, capable of fulfilling whatever role she need play for the moment, and now too playing the role of someone disappointed, when in actuality “Tomorrow night the wind would blow

again, and this mask would be the golden face of Aphrodite” (“Coming” 120). Cather’s final words leave us with reminders of another female whose life and power will not be forgotten.

Time and time again Willa Cather invites us to reread her texts and characters just as she has been rereading art and history and humanity in her own writing. By so doing, Cather gave the past a new female authorship and perspective and demonstrated that things are not always as they appear.



## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION: FICTION AS THE NEW META-HISTORICISM

Rereading and rewriting women's history in literature represents the avenue of literary criticism that was missing from scholarship before the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s. This methodology also stands as the literary technique that women writers have been practicing unnoticed. Challenging our history and expanding our imagination gives us choices. These reimaginings of our female past are limitless in their multidimensionality. Discovering the connection between feminist criticism, new historicism, reader response and the act of writing fiction culminates in the discovery of a new theoretical approach—that of fictionalizing as a new meta-historicism. Meta-historicism, then, represents the process of creating a female past through the process of writing fiction. This differs from historical fiction in that meta-historicism proposes to fill in the blanks as opposed to playing within known boundaries. This approach to evaluating literature affects both readers and writers alike.

Authors like Virginia Woolf, Susan Vreeland, Tracy Chevalier, and Willa Cather are not defining who our female ancestry were, but rather they are creating full and rounded options. To say that Chevalier correctly depicts the true, unacknowledged Griet would be to say that she is doing the same thing as Vermeer—choosing who this person was and will forever be; but to believe that statement would be an equivalent mistake. Chevalier, as well as the other authors, opened up possibilities for us as readers, scholars, and citizens of the world. In giving us another possibility about who individuals in our unwritten female past might have been, they push us to create other possibilities as

well—fiction as a mode pushes us to do that. Our engagement in reader response is part of the theory. We do not know that the woman in Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* ever even existed. Yet Chevalier's fiction give us an option and thus demonstrate a way to invent the missing accounts of our female past.

Likewise in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Susan Vreeland is extending a call to readers and scholars to expand imagination within our art and fiction. The path Vermeer's painting takes in Vreeland's novel, from owner to owner, demonstrates the practice of narratizing and fictionalizing the past as a way to contend with history. Just as Saskia sees her own historical creation in "Morningside," Vreeland is giving us other choices about rewriting our past; by so doing Vreeland suggests that even if we are to reject her version of history, there are other versions available to us.

Willa Cather's invention of 'Toinette Gaux pushes her readers to examine the recasting of *les filles du roi* in a way that the history books have never included. Cather's portrayal of 'Toinette suggests a complicated image of a woman connected to her past. But just as Griet and Saskia, 'Toinette may never have existed, but certainly descendents of *les filles du roi* have and can likewise reimagine their silenced female ancestry. In "Coming, Aphrodite!," Cather extends the reimagination of history to art and literature as she invents Eden and rereads the paintings of artist Fernand Léger. This meta-historicism is a methodology based on recreation, exactly what fiction does—create possibility.

The creations of all of these women—Woolf's Judith, Chevalier's Griet, Vreeland's Saskia, and Cather's 'Toinette and Eden—all give women choice, choice about who the women in our past might have been. Their portraits, however, are not

intended to be the sole possibility; their characters instead suggest that the practice of rereading and rewriting the past through our imagination can help us to explore the past. Now there is choice.

Discovering this methodology suggests that there is much to be done within the scholarly world. If this theoretical approach can be found within Woolf, Chevalier, Vreeland and Cather, what other writers have reimagined our past in their writing? Within what other texts is the new meta-historicism occurring? Just as these women writers are not the sole possibility, neither are the imaginations found within this thesis. Exploring women writers who have been rewriting the past has created multiple possibilities, just a few of which have been elaborated herein. How else can the female characters in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* be seen? Where else within Cather's novels and short stories can she be seen demonstrating a fictionalizing of the past? Before Woolf's seminal declaration that women should be the ones to write about women, what other female authors were trying to recreate and redefine history?

Our challenge is to continue to expand these imaginings. Only within this new methodology of fiction as meta-historicism does disagreement become not only acceptable but valuable, because it suggests that we as readers, scholars and writers are taking upon ourselves the challenge to recreate the past. As we read texts, evaluate them, and create them, we are invited to participate in the rereading and rewriting of women's history. Each time this methodology is practiced, we are enriching the possibilities of the past as we contend with history.

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