

**AFFECTING DIFFERENCES: THE GENDERED PERFORMANCE OF AFFECT  
IN WILLA CATHER AND JOHN STEINBECK**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the performance of affect in relation to gender identity across some of the major works of Willa Cather's and John Steinbeck's careers. Throughout this discussion, I contend that Steinbeck—an author not often thought of as projecting feminist concerns—indeed approximates the feminist themes of Cather in his creation of characters who embody nonnormative castes of gender identity, even if Cather does perhaps exceed Steinbeck's feminist vision in her optimism for the potential of people of nonnormative gender identity to find peace, happiness, and acceptance in an often xenophobic early-twentieth-century America. Over the course of this thesis, I build on the work of affect theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Anu Koivunen by demonstrating the power of affect theory as a tool for understanding gender politics and gender identity.

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## INTRODUCTION: An Inventory of Feeling: Affect and Gender Identity

Celebrated modernists John Steinbeck and Willa Cather crafted works that challenged many of the popular views of early-twentieth-century America. Whereas previous criticism has long viewed Cather as a feminist writer concerned with gender, critics have seen Steinbeck as being primarily focused on issues of class and economic inequality. However, scholars to this point have yet to embrace Steinbeck as an outright feminist writer to the same extent as they have Cather. That said, Steinbeck's themes of class may also contain underlying notions of feminism, while Cather certainly addresses economic themes in her own works as well. Over the course of this thesis, I contend that though these authors' works differ in clearly defined ways, such as in their underlying optimism and pessimism as well as their larger focus on disparate issues such as gender and class, Steinbeck indeed approximates Cather's feminist vision, even if his works tend to project a far more tragic and unhappy tone than do Cather's. Particularly telling among these points of comparison is these authors' creation of characters who do not fit into traditional molds of gender—specifically in the way that these characters perform their gender identities with respect to affect, or the public performance of feeling and the forces and drives that encompass that performance of feeling.

To elaborate on my intended argument, I will examine cases of gender performance in these two authors' works and argue that both Steinbeck and Cather promote feminist attitudes in like-minded ways, despite the fact that their works also contain very important differences. While there have been many interpretations of what affect actually means as well as differences in the ways it is applied in scholarship, my interest in the theory is this: I am intrigued by both the way that nonhuman entities such as animals or objects can produce affect in human

subjects—that is to say, in how the nonhuman *affects* the human; I am also interested in the way that affect can trigger emotion in individuals—in the case of this study, in the way it can trigger performances of emotion that do not fit in with traditional models of gender identity.

While Steinbeck has not been widely seen as an author focused on gender identity, several of his works contain characterizations relevant to my argument. Mimi Gladstein's assertion that Steinbeck's depiction of women is a "puzzlement" (250), for one, points to the complexity of his treatment of women. Notable among his canon, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) presents life within an isolated, virtually all-male society on a Californian ranch, as the novella seems on the surface to be almost misogynistic in its treatment of women. However, the novella's lone female character, known only as Curly's wife, is indeed allowed a turn to speak of her struggle before she is accidentally murdered—a truth that favors the view that the novel is more than merely sexist storytelling. On top of Curly's wife's moment of lucidity is Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie Small and George Milton—two adult male characters who exist in a strange father/son, mother/son relationship, as Steinbeck subtly pushes the boundaries of gender norms in their characterization.

Steinbeck also deals with gender identity in a challenging manner in his acknowledged masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Mathew J. Bolton refers to the epic tale of migrant agricultural workers during the Great Depression as Steinbeck's greatest achievement (28), and the novel is notable in its subtle depiction of characters who push the bounds of acceptable gender identity. Ma Joad, for one—widely acknowledged as Steinbeck's most powerful woman character—embodies an empowered sense of leadership within her family and even undermines the decision making of the family patriarch Pa on numerous occasions. In his portrayal of Ma,

Steinbeck creates a character who is at once a traditionally feminine domestic worker, but who also embodies leadership traits that would have been thought of as typically masculine.

*East of Eden* (1952), likewise, presents a challenging treatment of gender identity.

Gladstein acknowledges Steinbeck's positive depiction of Abra—a thoroughly wholesome young woman—yet Gladstein, at the same time, also points out Steinbeck's seemingly negative characterization of Cathy Ames (245). Indeed, Cathy is a polarizing character: she is at once obviously evil, but she nevertheless has other positive characteristics, such as her unwavering desire to succeed—a desire that leads to her successful entrepreneurship as a brothel owner and her financial independence. However, regardless of whether Cathy is a positive or negative character, her use of empowered female sexuality to manipulate and control the men around her is highly challenging and controversial, and would certainly have been seen as even more controversial in 1952, when the novel was first published.

Cather also deals with gender identity in challenging ways in many of her works. “Paul’s Case” (1905), for example, is a powerfully imagined short story that deals with a young homosexual boy who takes his own life after stealing his father’s fortune and living a brief life of opulence in New York City. The story evocatively situates Paul as an outsider as Cather highlights his nonnormativity, and “Paul’s Case” has thus been seen as an important work in the canon of gay and lesbian literature.

Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918) likewise deals with gender identity as the novel’s titular heroine embodies many traditionally masculine traits. While the novel is often thought of in terms of its themes of economics, ethnicity, and immigration, Ántonia herself stands as an important example of a character who bends normative notions of gender performance.

In *A Lost Lady* (1923), Cather also addresses her interest in nonnormative castes of gender performance, as the novella's central character, Mrs. Forrester, displays an empowered sense of female sexuality. As Stephanie Bower observes,

[c]ritical discussion of Cather's *A Lost Lady* . . . has been occupied largely with charting the relationship between the novel's intersecting yet disparate narratives. The "three parallel plots," to use Hermione Lee's formulation, describe, first, the "grave, slow story of Captain Forrester's decline," second, the "quite different story of Marian Forrester, agitated, impassioned, contradictory," and third, the framing story that documents the values and attachments of the novel's narrator, Niel Herbert. (59)

The contradiction in Mrs. Forrester's character to which Bower and Lee refer lies in her seemingly happy acceptance of her role as Captain Forrester's wife—an acceptance that clashes with her daring conquests of much younger men in her extra-marital affairs. Cather creates in Marian a daring portrait of female sexuality that pushes the boundaries on normative performances of womanhood.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), meanwhile, stands as one of Cather's more celebrated works, and, as Melissa Homestead argues, represents a retelling of Cather's relationship and travels with partner Edith Lewis (409). That said, the novel contains challenging depictions of gender identity as Fathers Latour and Vaillant are subtly feminized, and, as such, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is often thought of as a critical work in the history of gay and lesbian literature.

Given these prominent readings of Cather's and Steinbeck's explorations of aspects of gender identity in some of their most celebrated works, affect theory—with its focus on the

public performance of emotion—lends itself well to my investigation of the differences and similarities in these two authors' creation of novels that interrogate themes of gender identity. Accordingly, contemporary critics have shaped my understanding of affect theory and the ways in which I will apply this term throughout this thesis. In the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg explain that,

There is no single unwavering line that might unfurl toward or around affect and its singularities, let alone its theories: only swerves and knottings, perhaps a few marked and unremarked intersections as well as those unforeseen crosshatchings of articulations yet to be made, refastened, or unmade. (5)

Affect is therefore difficult to articulate as one concrete, coherent theory; instead, affect represents a number of different takes on an overlying theoretical framework—namely on the almost-imperceptible yet not-quite-tangible theory of being affected—of the relationships between bodies, objects, and ideas that affect one another. Seigworth and Gregg further articulate the accepted definition of affect, writing,

affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (1)

Thus, we see that affect is about the relationship between bodies that affect one another and about the degree to which the given bodies are able to effect 'intensities' and 'resonances' on one another—in simpler terms, affect is about the ability of bodies to effect change (the intensities and resonances) on one another.

Sara Ahmed adds to this definition of affect theory by further examining the relationships between the intensities and resonances to which Seigworth and Gregg refer. In her 2010 article, “Creating Disturbance: Feminism, Happiness and Affective Differences,” Ahmed examines the role of objects in producing affect in individuals—in this case, the affect of happiness—observing that “[h]appiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life” (31). She goes on to contend that happiness may not indeed be an object that we seek, but instead may be found in the objects with which we interact (32). Individuals construct the objects that appear in their lives—for Ahmed, one such ‘object’ being ‘the family’—and happiness is then found within that constructed object. Defining affect “as ‘what sticks’” (32), Ahmed contends that “[h]appiness as a feeling might not belong to subjects: it might stick to certain objects, giving them value” (32). It is precisely this notion of affect—the notion of the ability of nonhuman objects or constructs to elicit affect in individuals—that I wish to examine.

Before I begin an in-depth analysis of these authors’ works, I think it is important that I address some of the potential confusion in Ahmed’s theory. While Ahmed seems at a glance to use the terms ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ interchangeably, she does indeed draw a distinction between the two. She figures emotion—in the case of her specific study, the emotion of ‘happiness’—as the product of affect, affect itself being “what preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed 29). By saying that affect is what ‘sticks,’ she means specifically that affect is what binds and holds together ideas, values, and objects, and that the emotion of happiness may indeed be found within our relationship with the objects with which we interact, precisely in that these objects elicit ideas within us that stimulate our values and trigger emotions within us. To illustrate Ahmed’s thinking, the idea of receiving a gift from a loved one at

Christmas could in a sense trigger the emotion of happiness within us—in this case, it might not necessarily be the material gift itself that engenders the emotion of happiness, but instead the idea of the love represented by the gift that causes the joy. This idea of the affection of a loved one combined with the object of a gift is then bound together with a value—perhaps the value of the importance of family or friendship, and it is in the sense that affect binds together these different streams that affect can be said, in the words of Ahmed, to ‘stick.’ In the sense that objects in our lives produce emotion within us, I contend (as does Ahmed) that affect—the glue that binds ideas, values, and objects together—may in turn be found in certain objects—or, more clearly, in our relationship with these objects.

While Ahmed’s efforts to define the “stickiness” of affect are helpful, her use of the term ‘object’ to describe institutions such as the family may be slightly confusing. I will hence employ the term ‘construct’ in place of Ahmed’s use of the term ‘object.’ By using this broader term, I hope to remove some of the potential faultiness and controversy in using a term like object so loosely—the looseness of this definition stemming from the fact that Ahmed’s objects are not literal, physical things, and are instead often broader societal institutions and constructions, or ‘constructs.’ In the following chapters, I will look at the ways in which constructs in these authors’ works produce affect that triggers nonnormative displays of emotion; this emotion causes Cather’s and Steinbeck’s characters to perform their gender identities in nonnormative ways, allowing Cather and Steinbeck to criticize normative models of gender identity.

Both Steinbeck and Cather employ the nonhuman to produce affect in their characters that causes these characters to perform their gender identities in ways that do not fit in with traditional gender stereotypes. In turn, the peers of these characters come to view them as

outsiders, which pushes these characters to the fringes of their respective societies. By traditional gender roles, I mean specifically the predominantly held notions of men as rational creatures and women as beings of emotion—roles fiercely upheld as late as the nineteenth century that still found footing in early-twentieth-century America. Former American President Theodore Roosevelt, whose prominence as a politician and deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles impacted the America of his time, echoes these gender stereotypes that influenced much of American culture on the early 1900s:

Oversentimentality, oversoftness, in fact, washiness and mushiness are the great dangers of this age and of this people. Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, gaining the civilized ones will be of little avail. I am particularly glad that you emphasize the probable selfishness of a milksop. My experience has been that weak and effeminate men are not quite as apt to have undesirable qualities as strong and vigorous men. I thoroughly believe in cleanliness and decency, and I utterly disbelieve in brutality and cruelty, but I feel we cannot too strongly insist upon the need of the rough, manly virtues. (Roosevelt, qtd. in Worden, 49)

As Daniel Worden observes, these views—of the need for men to be ‘rough’ and ‘manly’ as well as Roosevelt’s insistence that ‘mushiness’ and ‘oversoftness’ were a danger to the American people—influenced Roosevelt’s political agenda and much of the ark of American colonialism in this period. Worden writes,

Because of the beneficial health value attributed to strenuous activities by doctors . . . reinvigorated masculinity seems to provide a template for the imperialist citizen, and Roosevelt often uses the abundant masculinity of the American citizen as evidence of America’s global superiority. (39-40)

Donna Harraway, meanwhile, argues that views such as Roosevelt's were dedicated "to preserving a threatened manhood" (57). This 'threatened manhood' is of course the very manliness of America as a nation, and it is against this stereotype of America as a masculine nation and the American man as ruggedly virile that Cather and Steinbeck position themselves in their writing.

However, despite Roosevelt's insistence on the importance of manly values, he also was partial to a softer form of masculinity, and it is in the bending of these early-twentieth-century normative notions of gender that Steinbeck and Cather are interested. In the same chapter of *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism*, Worden writes that for

Roosevelt, domestic space is not necessarily feminine. Instead, Roosevelt's emphasis on maternity is a curious way of reforming gender roles. Indeed, Roosevelt consistently casts himself as maternal. In *An Autobiography*, he describes himself as a "vice-mother" and even "an uncommonly moist patriarch." These associations with shared parenting duties and with moisture resonate with the sentimental side of Roosevelt's masculinity. Emotion, intimacy, attachment, even weeping are all facets of the masculine self. Roosevelt's manufactured masculinity crosses binaries (public/private, active/passive, imperial/domestic, stoic/sentimental, unity/multiplicity) rather than maintaining their separation. (48)

This notion of the sentimental man, and, likewise, the manly woman, finds its way into these authors' characterizations, as Steinbeck and Cather create characters who challenge normative castes of gender identity. Indeed, there is a dichotomy present in thinkers such as Roosevelt's conception of masculinity that posits the 'moist,' sentimental man against his 'barbaric,' rough, manly brethren. This dichotomy suggests not only that a man should be physically powerful and

not overly sentimental, but that he should be able to feel emotions at times when they are called for, though he should not allow these emotions to rule his behaviour too abundantly, lest he tend too strongly towards ‘moistness.’ Steinbeck time and again creates characters who display this moist behaviour, even while some of these characters also simultaneously embody important male stereotypes—the herculean, but overly ‘soft,’ Lennie Small standing as a paramount example. Where Steinbeck works within these stereotypes to challenge normative ideas about gender identity, Cather, somewhat similarly, creates men, such as the highly sentimental Father Latour, who push the boundaries of normativity even further, seemingly eradicating stereotypical notions of masculinity altogether.

Social historian Michael Kimmel writes extensively of American gender roles and likewise explores these notions of ‘gender stereotypes.’ In the introduction to his 2018 work, *Manhood in America*, Kimmel observes that competition has been one of the defining features of American masculinity from as far back as the nineteenth century. Kimmel begins unpacking his definition of American masculinity by explaining that, on a global scale, men are often expected to project a sense of “manly stoicism” and “sexual prowess.” These traits, he offers, find footing in many aspects of American culture (4). Kimmel explains, “[t]hroughout American history, American men have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened” (5). He further articulates that the history of American masculinity has been about the need of men to prove themselves in relation to one another, and that masculinity has often been defined in popular American culture in relation to the perceived definition of femininity—a sense of femininity against which men position themselves in their need to prove their virility to one another (5-6). Kimmel observes that a negative definition of homosexuality is often tied in with this opposing definition of femininity—not so much the act of homosexuality, but the fear

of men of being observed or figured as homosexual by other allegedly heterosexual men.

Kimmel also points out that American men have traditionally been motivated by the fear that they are not financially powerful or successful enough, particularly in relation to other men (7). It is this definition of American masculinity that I adopt for my use of the term ‘stereotype’: the idea that American men seek to define themselves as stoic, manly, strong, brave, successful, powerful, active, virile, and ardently anti-feminine and anti-homosexual. As Kimmel argues throughout his book, this definition of American masculinity began in the nineteenth century became particularly toxic in the 1900s.

Later in *Manhood in America*, Kimmel analyses the turn to athletics and physical manifestations of masculinity for American men in this period—a turn which arose as a response to the growing popularization of feminist attitudes at the turn of the twentieth century (101). Commenting on the apparent rise in men’s need to constantly affirm their maleness as a response to the threat of femininity, Kimmel writes,

[a]t the turn of the century, *manhood* was replaced gradually by the term *masculinity*, which referred to a set of behavioural traits and attitudes that were constantly contrasted with a new opposite, *femininity*. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question—lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine. (103)

This threat of being seen as feminine—of being feminized or seen as lacking in virility and masculinity—popularized the need for men to prove their manhood in increasing ways. The traits associated with masculinity—physical strength, toughness, rationality, action—were seen by men as constantly threatened by the opposite traits of femininity—physical softness, sensitivity, emotion, and passivity. The stereotype of the American man as the embodiment of

these apparently anti-feminine characteristics grew, and it is these stereotypes that Steinbeck and Cather challenge in the body of their works.

Similarly, early-twentieth-century American ideals of womanhood drew largely on the established ideals of the nineteenth century and its doctrine of the spheres, even while these stereotypes were beginning to be challenged in popular culture. In “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Barbara Welter defines these ideals of womanhood that were still prevalent during Cather’s and Steinbeck’s lives, observing,

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (152)

As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, many of Steinbeck’s and Cather’s male characters perform aspects of these traditionally feminine traits, just as these same male characters in many ways fail to demonstrate the more masculine characteristics defined by Michael Kimmel. It is through this often-subtle depiction of characters who bend the normative identifiers of gender that these authors criticize the twentieth century’s restrictive definition of gender roles.

Affect theory has likewise addressed these notions of gender stereotypes. Examining the work of Alison M. Jaggar, affect theorist Anu Koivunen argues that “philosophical thinking is constrained by a gendered mind-body hierarchy according to which emotion is associated with ‘the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and of course, the female’ (11). I am interested in the way that both Steinbeck and Cather employ affect as a means of

challenging gender roles in their contemporary, early-twentieth-century society—the “gendered mind-body hierarchy” to which Koivunen refers that predominantly views men as public creatures of reason and rationality and women as domestic creatures of raw emotion. Eileen Boris and Lara Vapnek weigh in on these sexist stereotypes of female gender roles, pointing out the dominant traits of American society over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that were prevalent when Cather and Steinbeck were writing, and to which Koivunen refers:

Global economic forces, family responsibilities, and individual aspirations shaped women’s experiences of work. For nearly two centuries, new jobs for women drew on old stereotypes about women’s docility, nurturing qualities, and limited ambition. The domestic ideal obscured the extent of free women’s labor, but women’s status as workers remained entangled with their family positions. (187)

Boris and Vapnek elaborate on this point, explaining that women did not begin to find any semblance of equal footing with men in the labor market until the latter half of the twentieth century (185-188). While women would win the right to vote in 1920, women’s struggle for equality with men in both the economic as well as domestic spheres would continue for the rest of the century and to a large extent continues to this day (Boris & Vapnek 171). Stereotypes about women’s behavior were thus prevalent while these authors were composing these works, and it is specifically these stereotypes that I argue they challenge. I demonstrate that these authors use affect as a means of forwarding a feminist vision—a vision that challenges the way gender was viewed by the majority of American society in the first half of the twentieth century.

Still, even with these explanations by Boris and Vapnek, a more complete definition remains to be provided for my use of the term ‘gender stereotype,’ specifically as it applies to women. As Jeanne Boydston explains in “The Pastoralization of Housework,” early-twentieth-

century stereotypes about women's roles in society originated with the doctrine of the spheres in the nineteenth century and the emphasis of that set of beliefs on opposing roles for men and women. Boydston explains this belief system in her article, quoting from the *Providence Ladies Museum* of 1825:

Man is strong—woman is beautiful. Man is daring and confident—woman is diffident and unassuming. Man is great in action—woman i[n] suffering. Man shines abroad—woman at home. Man talks to convince—woman to persuade and please. Man has a rugged heart—woman a soft and tender one. Man prevents misery—woman relieves it. Man has science—woman taste. Man has judgement—woman sensibility. Man is a being of justice—woman of mercy.

(*Ladies Museum* qtd. in Boydston 155)

As we see, nineteenth-century Americans believed deeply in opposing roles for men and women—men were seen as the actors, and women as the passive leaders of the household. Building on this definition provided by Boydston, Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane observe that notions “of masculinity and femininity, passed down from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century notions of separate spheres, assume that boys and girls are intrinsically and unalterably different in terms of personality” (232). And, as Boydston argues at the end of her article, this ideology of gender roles trickled down well in the twentieth century and to some extent still resonates in the twenty-first century, with slight vestiges of its biased and sexist characterizations still finding footing in contemporary popular society (163). The social conditioning of women as primarily passive contributed heavily to the patriarchal economic structure of America, as Stephanie McMurry observes in her article in *Women's America* (146). I argue that Steinbeck and Cather subtly position themselves against this type of biased, stereotypical definition of gender identity and

that their use of affect is one of the chief means by which they explore the limitations of stereotypical gender roles.

Yet Cather and Steinbeck wrote well into the twentieth century, and not only at the century's beginning; thus, definitions of gender stereotypes were constantly evolving throughout these authors' careers. While normative notions of gender identity in the early 1900s drew heavily on stereotypes established in the nineteenth century, these values evolved slightly as time went on. Michelle Nickerson observes that latter-twentieth-century conservative notions of womanhood "drew from a corpus of beliefs, ideals, and assumptions passed down from generations of political forbears about the natural conservatism of women—the female instinct to protect the young and preserve the order of society" (528). She continues, writing

The history of women and American conservatism, indeed, shows uninterrupted decades of female activist vigor. Organizations, issues, alliances, and parties varied, but the ability to preserve, protect, and organize remained a celebrated feminine skill—even as some conservative-minded women pushed against the archetypes. An appraisal of women's involvement and ideals about women in conservative politics over the twentieth century reveals how the Republican Party, Progressivism, both sides of the suffrage movement, isolationism, anticommunism, and the Religious Right reformulated, while nevertheless maintaining, nineteenth-century notions of a female instinct. (528)

And, thus, though it certainly became socially acceptable for women to join the workforce, though women won the right to vote in 1920, and though working-class women were certainly held to different standards in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of what types

of work were acceptable for them to perform, conservative views of gender roles still drew on dated notions of women as domestic labourers and childrearers.

Boris and Vapnek likewise add further commentary on the discrepancy in the value accorded to women's and men's work in the latter twentieth century. Here, they comment on the lack of gender equality in the American workplace as well as the uneven distribution of domestic labour in American homes:

A "woman's wage," however, ignored women's responsibility for family support, and it vacillated from about half of men's in the nineteenth century, to about seventy-eight cents to the dollar earned by men in 2015. As the history of EEOC underscores, equality has proven elusive if measured only by comparing women to men without improving female-dominated jobs. As working women and their advocates have argued since World War II, family responsibilities inhibit women's position in the labor force without paid family leave and quality day care. While European social policies generally allow women to more easily combine family life with wage work, the United States maintains a general hostility to federal provision of social benefits and a lingering attachment to the domestic ideal of a wage-earning father and a stay-at-home mother. (187)

This passage establishes the economic inequality in gender roles present in the latter-half of the 1900s—an inequality that has trickled down to our present time. As these aforementioned social historians have established, much of this inequality stems from outdated notions of gender stereotypes— notions that were established in the 1800s and that continued to influence American society into the next century and beyond. Cather and Steinbeck position themselves—

sometimes subtly and sometimes ardently—against these outdated stereotypes, and it is in these authors’ explorations of nonnormative gender roles that I am interested.

A look at some of the literature that preceded Cather’s and Steinbeck’s careers reveals some of the earlier discussions of normative notions of gender stereotypes that occurred before these authors were writing. This literature also identifies some of the earlier challenges to restrictive definitions of gender roles—a conversation into which the two authors place themselves. Edward Bellamy was a widely influential author in the 1800s, and his works are representative of some of the earlier conversations about gender roles that took place before Cather and Steinbeck were writing. Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1887) highlights the gender stereotypes of the nineteenth century that Steinbeck and Cather sought to undermine later in the twentieth century. In the novel’s third chapter, Julian West’s description of Edith Leete not only points to these stereotypes but also reveals a subtle challenge to popular ideals of womanhood:

Her face was as bewitching as deep blue eyes, delicately tinted complexion, and perfect features could make it, but even had her countenance lacked special charms, the faultless luxuriance of her figure would have given her place as a beauty among the women of the nineteenth century. Feminine softness and delicacy were in this lovely creature deliciously combined with an appearance of health and abounding physical vitality too often lacking in the maidens with whom alone I could compare her. (25)

West’s qualification of Edith’s ‘feminine softness and delicacy’ points to long-held notions of women as delicate creatures in need of the protection of men. Yet, at the same time, West’s assertion that Edith also has ‘health and abounding physical vitality’ attempts to challenge the

idea of women as passive and physically weak, even if Edith's apparent strength stems mostly from the fact that she is physically healthier than the women of the nineteenth century rather than arising from an inherent physical characteristic. Bellamy therefore both invokes and challenges the traditional view of women as passive and physically unimposing.

In later chapters, Bellamy further articulates the 'softness and delicacy' of Edith Leete as well as her caring attitude towards West, thereby asserting the stereotype of women as nurturers. In Chapter 8, West remarks:

As I looked up into her compassionate face and her eyes moist with pity, my brain ceased to whirl. The tender human sympathy which thrilled in the soft pressure of her fingers had brought me the support I needed. Its effect to calm and soothe was like that of some wonder-working elixir. (48)

This description of Edith points towards the doctrine of the spheres and its restrictive definition of womanhood as West sees Edith as a great beacon of tender healing and empathy, pointing to the notion that restrictive notions of gender identity were an ideal upheld by even forward-thinking writers such as Bellamy. It is against this long-held ideal that Steinbeck and Cather position themselves in their creation of characters who do not fit into traditional norms of gender identity—characters whose performance of affect runs counter to the gender expectations established in the nineteenth century and popularly held well into the twentieth century.

Yet, while Bellamy's text points to nineteenth-century stereotypes in that West is no doubt a man of the period and therefore (at least initially) bears the prejudices of his time, the novel's latter chapters highlight some of the forward-thinking notions of gender identity held by progressives in this period as we see that women in twenty-first-century Boston have obtained total financial equality with men. Bellamy writes:

“It was thought one of the most grievous features of our civilization that we required so much toil from women,” I said; “but it seems to me you get more out of them than we did.”

Dr. Leete laughed. “Indeed we do, just as we do out of our men. Yet the women of this age are very happy, and those of the nineteenth century, unless contemporary references greatly mislead us, were very miserable. The reason that women nowadays are so much more efficient co-laborers with the men, and at the same time are so happy, is that, in regard to their work as well as men’s, we follow the principle of providing every one the kind of occupation he or she is best adapted to. Women being inferior in strength to men, and further disqualified industrially in special ways, the kinds of occupation reserved for them, and the conditions under which they pursue them, have reference to these facts. The heavier sorts of work are everywhere reserved for men, the lighter occupations for women. (151)

In this passage, West’s incredulity at modern women’s roles as financially equal members of the workforce demonstrates his difficulty in grasping a world where women do not toil either exclusively in the household or in relative poverty to men. Meanwhile, Bellamy’s depiction of a society where men and women operate as financial equals points to some of the progressive notions of the nineteenth century upon which Cather and Steinbeck sought to build. Yet, importantly, Bellamy’s vision acknowledges that there are fundamental differences between men and women, given that the women in the novel’s modern-day Boston are not expected to perform difficult manual labour or many of the other jobs that were traditionally reserved for men. But where Bellamy still clings to notions of men and women as starkly different beings, even while

granting women roles in the workforce and financial equality to men, Cather and Steinbeck push the boundary further by creating characters who perform their gender identities in manners more often thought of as being reserved for members of the opposite sex.

Using the work of Sara Ahmed and Anu Koivunen as a focal point, along with the ideology of gender stereotypes, I track the depiction of affect in relation to the nonhuman through several of Cather's and Steinbeck's works, starting with examples of nonhuman constructs that appear the least human and moving towards those that appear more human. In applying the term 'construct' to categories of the nonhuman, I mean that these examples of nonhuman entities are constructed by human judgement or are actually products of human engineering: animals are a construct in that they are deemed nonhuman by the human-created distinction between ourselves and the lump sum of the rest of the creatures on the planet; farming and the land is a construct in that it represents our relationship with the land that we cultivate; the home and domesticity are constructs in that they are a distinctly human creation. In turn, animals are the least human of my examples in that their distinction from us is biological. Farming, though related biologically to the land, is more human than animals, given that cultivation itself is a human activity. Finally, the home is the most human of my examples considering that it is a primarily human-created construct. I argue that both authors employ affect in relation to the nonhuman in order to challenge their contemporary society's stereotypical views of gender roles. By 'contemporary society's stereotypical views,' I refer specifically to the aforementioned stereotypes of women as passive, domestic, and emotional, and men as active, public, and rational that were especially prevalent in roughly the first-half of the twentieth century—stereotypes to which Boris and Vapnek refer.

Beginning with an examination of affect in relation to animals, I demonstrate that this example of the nonhuman in turn engenders the greatest amount of normative affect from these novelists' characters—at once challenging the gender norms of the early twentieth century, but at the same time allowing for the most normative behavior of the examples of the nonhuman that I will examine. By applying the term normative, I mean specifically that this behavior falls more acceptably within these given gender stereotypes of the early twentieth century (nonnormative respectively refers to unacceptable behavior in light of these stereotypes). Next, I look at the performance of affect in relation to farming and the land, arguing that this seemingly more human example of the nonhuman engenders more alienation in the face of society for the novelists' characters than animals do, allowing Cather and Steinbeck to challenge gender norms to a greater degree. Finally, I examine affect as it relates to the undeniably most human of these examples—the home and domesticity—and argue that it is in relation to this very human construct that these writers' characters display the greatest degree of nonnormative behavior. Throughout the arc of this discussion, I illuminate the ways that these constructs produce affect that drives these novelists' characters away from performing their gender roles in normative manners, which in turn causes their peers to view them as outsiders. For these characters, the alienation produced by their peers brings into focus the alienation that these nonnormative individuals feel in relation to society at large, and it is through this feeling of alienation that Steinbeck and Cather forge their criticisms of their contemporary society—a society that did not value the contributions of outsiders and misfits, and in particular, the contributions of those who did not fit into widely accepted molds of gender. Additionally, I contend that Cather indeed offers up a more optimistic view of abnormal gendered affect performance than does Steinbeck:

where she is able to imagine worlds wherein these characters can thrive and succeed, Steinbeck is only able to demonstrate the flaws in societies that do not tolerate this type of behavior.

My approach of pairing these authors together in a joint study presents a new turn in these writers' critical history, since the pair have seldom been studied together. In "John Steinbeck and Willa Cather: Almost on Speaking Terms," John Ditsky focuses on the authors' respect for the land and remarks that Steinbeck openly admired Cather's writing and outlook (105). Though the article is brief and does not make a lengthy comparison, Ditsky acknowledges the lack of scholarship conducted on the pair together. In *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: John Steinbeck*, Harold Bloom argues that there is little of redemptive quality in Steinbeck's writing outside of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1), while Nellie Y. McKay, in the same volume, offers that the aforementioned novel projects a stereotypical depiction of women, although she also contends that this same depiction testifies to women's strength of character (33, 50). In "Steinbeck's Dysfunctional Families: A Coast-to-Coast Dilemma," Mimi Reisel Gladstein suggests that Steinbeck projects a traditional vision of gender and family roles (45), though in "Steinbeck and the Woman Question," she acknowledges the complexity of his depiction of women. Barbara A. Heavlin meanwhile points to the dichotomy of good and evil in Steinbeck's fiction (190), while Stephen K. George, contrary to Harold Bloom, argues that there is still plenty more work to be done in the study of Steinbeck's works (xiv).

In terms of scholarship on Cather, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points to Cather's early conservatism, but also grants that Cather did important feminist work in expanding the depiction and acceptance of homosocial or subtly homosexual characters, namely in the author's portrayal of Godfrey St. Peter's homosocial relationship in *The Professor's House* (165, 173). Christopher Nealon also points out the importance of Cather's challenge to straight sexuality and nuanced

championing of non-traditional gender roles (34). Likewise, Jonathan Goldberg writes of Cather's happy relationship with Edith Lewis and how Cather used male characters to convey the struggles of her lesbian tendencies. What none of these aforementioned works accomplish, however, is a side-by-side comparison of these authors on feminist grounds, and thus my work will help to establish the extent to which Steinbeck, though perhaps falling short of Cather's higher standards and certainly tending more towards conservatism, nevertheless projects a concern for feminism that has not been widely acknowledged.

My first chapter compares and contrasts Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1929). The chapter examines the ways in which the affect produced by Cather's and Steinbeck's characters' interactions with the nonhuman construct of animals brings about nonnormative performances of gender identity for these same characters. For Steinbeck, Lennie Small stands as the paramount example of a character who, despite possessing many traditionally masculine traits such as a strong work ethic and raw physical strength, fails in many ways to embody some of the most important characteristics of maleness and even goes as far as to perform certain feminine traits, particularly in his mothering of the furry animals that come into his grasp. Similarly, Cather's Father Jean-Marie Latour displays an almost-feminine maternal instinct in his mothering of animals and humans alike, and his interactions with his mules and horses speak volumes to the means by which Cather feminizes this male character. Yet, where Lennie meets a thoroughly tragic ending, Father Latour flourishes as an important member of society and secures the respect of the community around him—a contrast which points to the conclusion that Cather is more optimistic than Steinbeck about society's potential acceptance of characters who do not perform their gender identities in normative ways.

My second chapter examines Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) and compares their characters' interactions with the distinctly more human construct of farming and the land. The affect produced by this seemingly human construct in turn brings about a greater degree of alienation for the novels' characters, particularly given that Steinbeck's Joads are left destitute by novel's end and given the hardship that Cather's Ántonia faces. In his portrait of the indomitable Ma Joad, Steinbeck plays within the traditional gender framework of the early twentieth century to create a character who in many ways represents the traditional domestic woman but who also pushes the boundaries of those stereotypes by displaying tremendous leadership. Cather's Ántonia, meanwhile, displays a distinctly masculine gender identity when she insists on performing the work once done by her dead father on her family's farm, while she in turn arouses the ridicule of her middle-class peers by failing in some ways to embody the trappings of a 'proper girl.' In both of these novels, their characters' interactions with the nonhuman construct of farming produce affect that takes them towards nonnormative performances of their gender identity as Steinbeck and Cather push the boundaries of acceptable gender roles.

The third chapter of this thesis focuses on Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952) and Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923), comparing these pieces' characters' performances of affect in relation to the most human of my three examples of nonhuman constructs: the home and domesticity. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck's infamous villain Cathy Ames displays an empowered sense of predatory sexuality—a sexual identity that borders on being masculine and that pushes her characterization towards the highly nonnormative. Cathy turns her back on the idea of a traditional domestic role and abandons her children, only to become a financially independent woman and successful entrepreneur in her role as a brothel keeper. Yet, still, the tremendous emotional strife she faces

throughout her life argues for a reading that accounts for the alienation faced by Steinbeck's characters in relation to the more human aspects of American society. Similarly, Cather's 'lost lady,' Mrs. Marian Forrester, also embodies a masculinized, empowered sense of female sexuality as she fills the void created by her unhappiness in her domestic role as Captain Forrester's wife with the seduction of much younger men. Like Cathy, Marian faces tremendous hardship throughout her life in her interactions with the home, and thus the argument that these authors find the most human aspects of American society the most alienating holds true here as well. But whereas Cathy only momentarily finds a sense of peace in her adopted brothel home, Marian is able to find happiness and domestic harmony by novel's end, which argues for the view the Cather presents a more optimistic vision of characters who do not fit normative castes of gender identity.

Although an obvious conclusion might be that Cather does find a degree of happiness for her characters in all of the works that I have previously examined, this is not so with her celebrated short story "Paul's Case" (1905). In this work, the titular character is unable to happily and cohesively adapt to the society around him and as a result takes his own life. Because Paul is a homosexual, he is shunned by his peers: his teachers and principal chastise him for being different, and his father punishes him extensively for not fitting in. After Paul steals a sizeable sum of money from his father and flees to New York City to live temporarily in glamour, the young man is forced to confront the truth that he will eventually need to own up to his crimes and face the persecution of his peers—a truth that Paul realizes as his funds run out—leading him to take his own life. Here, Cather refuses to imagine a world where outsiders—in this case a young gay man—can happily merge with the society around them—a feat that problematizes my conclusion that Cather is more optimistic than Steinbeck, even if many of her

other works end on happier notes. The pessimistic ending of “Paul’s Case” suggests that there may indeed be cases where nonnormative individuals cannot find peace—a conclusion with which Steinbeck is all too familiar, given the tragedy present in the aforementioned examples of his work.

Throughout this thesis, we see that Steinbeck—an author typically not thought of as having a strong feminist bent—indeed creates a feminist vision that approximates the work of Cather—a much-lauded feminist writer—even if Steinbeck’s feminism in some important respects falls short of the more optimistic vision more dominantly produced by Cather. Looking at the works of these authors over the span of their careers, one might conclude that Steinbeck became increasingly optimistic as his life progressed, given that *East of Eden* ends on a more optimistic tone than the two earlier works, even if Cathy Ames suffers a tragic death. Though Steinbeck suffered through two unsuccessful marriages, he nevertheless found greater optimism in his works towards the end of his career, perhaps coinciding with his relationship with Elaine Scott, which lasted the remainder of his life. Cather, similarly, begins her career with the less-optimistic “Paul’s Case” and moves towards happier conclusions in her latter works—a truth that may stem from her own personal experiences of finding peace with life-long partner Edith Lewis as a lesbian writing in a period where homosexuality was not openly tolerated. With these conclusions in mind, this project expands on the ways that Ahmed and Koivunen view affect: for Ahmed, on the power of the nonhuman to produce affect in individuals, and for Koivunen, on the power of affect to challenge traditional models of gender performance.

## CHAPTER ONE: Of Mice, Bishops, and Differences

In both Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, affect arises from and is found in the interactions between characters and constructs. Although it may seem strange to refer to animals as constructs, a deeper look at this term reveals its applicability: humans, in a purely biological sense, are just another example of Earth-dwelling animals—we are biologically one species among the great number that inhabit this planet—yet, it is our own distinction of ourselves as separate from the rest of the animal kingdom that sets us apart. In the sense that we see ourselves as separate from all other animals, animals are indeed a human-formed construct. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to animals as a construct, and in doing so, I refer specifically to the human-created distinction between us and them. Lennie, in *Of Mice and Men*, very clearly fails to see animals as distinct from himself, and perhaps this fallacy—the failure to acknowledge animals as autonomous creatures in their own right—plays into his nonnormative performance of affect throughout the novella. Yet, although Lennie fails to grant animals their autonomy, it still remains that the creatures are in fact distinct from him, particularly given that he crushes and kills all the of the animals that he obsessively pets. As the example of Lennie and the mice and puppies reveals, this construct is perhaps the least human of my nonhuman examples: animals, at least according to popular human thinking, are distinct from humans, while farming and the home are direct products of human engineering. In turn, this least human example brings about the most acceptable display of affect for these two writers' characters, at least as far as these characters find acceptance among their peers, while the seemingly more human examples of the latter chapters engender a greater degree of

nonnormative behaviour and alienation, pointing to the idea that Cather and Steinbeck find the most human aspects of their culture to be the most alienating.

With these observations in mind, it is important to grasp how affect operates in these writers' works. Ahmed's notion that affect binds together values, ideas, and constructs points to the assertion that nonnormative displays of affect are found in these animal constructs: Lennie, for example, displays a strange, misplaced sense of sexuality in his interactions with animals, and animals themselves connect the idea of Lennie as a childish, even feminine, outsider with the values of the expected male gender norms of early-twentieth-century America—gender norms that Lennie in some ways fails to display. However, even while nonhuman constructs in these examples lead to a nonnormative performance of affect, this affect still remains the most normalized of the three types of human-nonhuman interactions that I will examine, and interestingly, it is this seemingly least human of my examples that brings about the most normative display of affect.

Both Steinbeck and Cather expand upon these forward-thinking notions of gender identity present in Bellamy, revealing their criticism of normative models of gender identity through their characters' performance of affect in relation to the nonhuman. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* features several examples of human-animal interactions, and among the most obvious is Lennie's obsession with small, furry creatures. Early in the novel, as Lennie and George lie about the grove on their way to finding work at the ranch, Lennie pets a dead mouse that he claims to have found in that condition. After George admonishes him for keeping a dead animal, Lennie responds, "I could pet it with my thumb while we walked along" (6). The affect produced by Lennie's interactions with the dead mouse immediately undermines his normativity, as he projects an attitude of childishness and immaturity. It also becomes clear from George's

comments that Lennie has indeed killed the mouse by petting it too hard, and, hence, his relationship with the animal fails to account for the desires of the mouse itself, which clearly does not wish to be crushed by Lennie's thumb. Lennie's failure to consider the mouse's feelings later comes into play when he similarly neglects to consider Curly's wife's wishes moments before he accidentally strangles her, although the denial of animals' subjectivity might indeed be the usual way that humans relate to them. The scene with the dead mouse thus sets the tone for Steinbeck's exploration of nonnormative gender identity through the lens of character-animal relationships.

Ahmed's theories provide a powerful tool to further explore Lennie's relationship with the mouse. The affect that sticks to the mouse—at once binding together Lennie's childish motives with his reputation as an outsider and the construct of the mouse—casts Lennie in a nonnormative light. Likewise, his childish desire to pet furry creatures runs counter to the hyper-masculine persona performed by most of men that the pair encounter at the ranch soon after the scene with the mouse—a persona whereby men were expected to project an attitude of hardened self-sufficiency the way characters such as Curly and Carlson at least outwardly appear to do, even if Curly does display nonnormative behaviour beneath the surface of his hardened veneer. Steinbeck, hence, uses affect to undermine the normative behaviours of the men in the bunkhouse (emblematic of twentieth-century male stereotypes)—the relation of affect to the nonhuman in this case proving to present distinctly nonnormative behaviour in Lennie.

Later in the novel, this petting performance is further re-enacted when Lennie adopts a pup from Slim—another animal that Lennie unintentionally kills, despite longing to do no more than nurture and care for it. After Lennie brings the puppy into the bunkhouse, George takes it away from him, as Steinbeck describes that George “reached down and picked the tiny puppy

from where Lennie had been concealing it against his stomach” (42-43). In this instance, Lennie performs affect in a distinctly maternal fashion, even if that maternal nature is misguided in that he winds up killing the puppy later in the novella. Lennie holds the puppy against his body much like a mother cradling a baby on her stomach while breastfeeding—the image of the puppy against his stomach seemingly signaling pregnancy and the mother’s womb—and this moment demonstrates Lennie’s desire to care for and nurture creatures that are more helpless than him. Yet, while Lennie longs to nurture, that longing is invariably misguided in that he kills all of the creatures with which he interacts. In this case, a nonhuman construct—the pup itself—produces a form of affect that sticks and binds together the idea of Lennie’s longing to nurture with the view of Lennie as an outsider in the bunkhouse and his lack of the important stereotypical male characteristics, or, as Ahmed would say, values, displayed by some of the other men. Ahmed’s use of the term ‘values’ rather than characteristics is important given that ‘values’ more clearly echo the assumption that men should be virile and potently masculine, while ‘characteristics’ would simply point to the given traits themselves without taking into account the idea of these traits as societal stereotypes. The fact that the men view Lennie as a sort of child specifically because of his unusual behavior towards the pup highlights Lennie’s nonnormative behavior, while George’s euthanizing of Lennie at the novella’s conclusion merely illuminates the extent to which Steinbeck is unable to imagine a world wherein people who perform affect in nonnormative ways can happily and peacefully exist. Lennie’s death at the same time points to the terrible difficulties faced by people who embody affect in manners that are out of character for their respective gender, particularly since Steinbeck’s description in this instance casts Lennie in a slightly feminized light.

This mis-performance of motherhood only intensifies as the novella progresses. Later on, Lennie mishandles his new pup to the point of killing it. This moment furthers the idea that Lennie relates to animals through a human sense of affect in that Lennie projects his own human desires onto the young dog. Here, Steinbeck describes Lennie's reaction to inadvertently killing the puppy, focusing on the degree to which Lennie seems to wish that he were indeed a good mother: "Lennie sat in the hay and looked at a little dead puppy that lay in front of him. Lennie looked at it for a long time, and then he put out his huge hand and stroked it, stroked it clear from one end to the other" (85). Lennie clearly feels a great deal of remorse for having killed the puppy, although this sense of remorse seems born less out of a true care for the well-being of the pup, and more out of his fear that George will punish him. If Lennie is indeed being cast as mother-type figure, his fault may lie in the fact that he fails to empathize with his child (in this case the pup) and instead views his pet through an anthropomorphic lens wherein he feels the puppy must desire to be petted and over-handled simply because he, Lennie, desires to pet it in such a manner. Here, the animal—a distinctly nonhuman example of a construct even though it is domesticated and perhaps more human than a wild creature—is figured in very human terms: Lennie projects his own human desire to mother and nurture onto the puppy; the puppy affects Lennie by bringing out his flawed maternal instinct.

Later in the same chapter, after Curly's wife confronts Lennie over the dead puppy, we see Lennie's mothering instinct turn almost sexual—the violence of bad parenthood is then transposed into a severe instance of borderline sexual violence. In this passage, Steinbeck highlights the pleasure that Lennie gets from stroking Curly's wife's hair—a pleasure that very quickly turns violent:

She took Lennie's hand and put it on her head. 'Feel right aroun' there an' see how soft it is.' Lennie's big fingers fell to stroking her hair.

'Don't you muss it up,' she said.

Lennie said, 'Oh! That's nice,' and he stroked harder. 'Oh, that's nice.'

'Look out, now, you'll muss it.' And then she cried angrily, 'You stop it now, you'll mess it all up.' She jerked her head sideways, and Lennie's fingers closed on her hair and hung on. 'Let go,' she cried. 'You let go!' (90-91)

As Lennie's strokes Curly's wife's hair, he is overcome by a deep sense of pleasure and enjoyment—a pleasure not unlike that which he feels when he strokes a small, furry creature. Yet the truth that Lennie remains fascinated by Curly's wife throughout the novel, as well as the truth that Lennie has had similar mishaps with women in the past, seems to indicate that Lennie is able to satisfy a sort of unrequited sexual longing when he strokes women's hair. Here, the idea that Lennie is a bad parent is taken even further—he in fact becomes a bad lover, and an unwanted one at that. While Lennie's killing of Curly's wife is brutal and truly unfortunate, Steinbeck may be drawing our attention to the idea that Lennie commits these heinous acts precisely because he is unable to perform affect in a manner that would be more normative someone of his gender: Lennie is at once feminized as a bad mother, yet he remains immensely physically powerful and masculine at the same time. This combination of feminine and masculine traits causes Lennie to perform affect in a faulty way: he simultaneously longs to stroke fine objects (Curly's wife's hair being another instance of a soft object), but at the same time he lacks the carefulness and tenderness of a true mother. Lennie kills Curly's wife, just as he kills the mice and the puppies, specifically because he does not perform affect in a normal way.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler argues that American male writers are unable to imagine happy heterosexual relationships because the American man is forever caught in a permanent cycle of emotional immaturity and adolescence—an emotional state that speaks to Lennie’s inability to assume the role of a good lover. Commenting on the lack of happy heterosexual relationships in the American literary canon, Fiedler writes,

There is finally no happy heterosexual solution which the American psyche finds completely satisfactory, no imagined or real consummation between man and woman worthy of standing in our fiction for the healing of the breach between consciousness and unconsciousness. (332)

The ‘breach between consciousness and unconsciousness’ that Fiedler refers to is the conflict in the male characters of American literature who unconsciously desire homosocial or even homosexual relationships but instead seek ‘conscious’ heterosexual partners and are in turn left unhappy. The idea of the American man as a perpetual boy is not a new one, and by having Lennie fail so miserably, both as a mother and as a lover, Steinbeck highlights the moral void in a culture that bought too heavily into restrictive models of gender identity. If Lennie is a perpetual child, in addition to being a feminine character in some respects, perhaps he is so because American notions of manhood at this time were perpetually childish. Though Lennie performs aspects of the female gender, he is still biologically a man and is hailed one by his peers. The aspects of manhood that Lennie does embody therefore are very childish in nature, much like the concept of the childish American man postulated by Fiedler. And because Lennie comes into contact with Curly’s wife in the murder scene specifically because he is off on his own in the barn petting the pup, the affect produced by Lennie’s interactions with the puppy

serve to highlight his nonnormative behaviour, showing him to be at once a bad mother as well as a bad lover.

Like the work of Fiedler, Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* is useful for helping us to understand Lennie's bizarre sexual behaviour. In this short book, Freud comments on sexual difference, pointing to the difficulties faced by people who do not fall under heteronormative bounds in their sexual preferences:

The requirement, demonstrated in these prohibitions, that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone, disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings; it cuts off a fair number of them from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the source of serious injustice. The result of such restrictive measures might be that in people who are normal—who are not prevented by their constitution—the whole of their sexual interests would flow without loss into the channels that are left open. But hetero-sexual genital love, which has remained exempt from outlawry, is itself restricted by further limitations, in the shape of insistence upon legitimacy and monogamy. Present-day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race. (27)

Lennie's obsessive petting of furry creatures and women's hair may be a form of heterosexual genital love whereby Lennie substitutes soft objects for the female genital itself. However, because of the bizarre nature of this substitution, Lennie's behavior is viewed by his peers as

highly nonnormative, and his repeated acts of nonnormative petting cast him as a true societal reject, particularly since the men desire to shoot him for killing Curly's wife. While Lennie in some ways embodies some of the main characteristics that Michael Kimmel highlights as demonstratively masculine for men in this era, such as abundant physical strength and a hardworking attitude, Lennie fails to embody normative masculinity in the most important way of all—chiefly in his sexuality. It is perhaps this final failure—his status as a bad mother and a bad lover as a sublimation of his misguided sexual longing—that ultimately seals his unfortunate fate, and that fate is revealed and even foreshadowed by Lennie's violent interactions with animals as Lennie's killing of the mice and puppies precedes his murder of Curly's wife.

Later in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud discusses the concepts of Eros and Thanatos as he underlines the ageless human struggle of life against death—concepts that shed further light on Lennie's struggles. Eros, Freud argues, represents the human desire for the life—the desire for sexuality, and the desire to reproduce and create children. This drive is simultaneously countermanded by Thanatos, or death, which represents the human instinct for competition and for putting one's own interests ahead of those of all others. This instinct, Freud argues, is the destructive impulse of society—the death instinct of society itself—and ultimately works against and alongside the civilizing impulse of Eros. Freud explains:

I may now add that civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this has to happen, we do not know; the work of Eros is precisely this. These collections of men are to be libidinally bound to one another. Necessity alone, advantages of work in common, will not hold them together. But man's natural aggressive

instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this programme of civilization. This aggressive instinct is the derivative and, the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world dominion with it. (38)

Since Lennie's impulse to pet people and creatures is born out of a misguided sexuality (Eros) and ultimately leads to his own destruction and death, as well as the deaths of those he touches (Thanatos), it is as though Lennie at once represents the latent motives of society. It should be noted that Freud was notoriously patriarchal and that it is thus perhaps controversial to include his ideas in a thesis about gender identity and feminism, but I still do believe that this specific idea of his allows us to better understand Lennie's behaviour. Lennie's affective relationship with animals therefore exposes the depths of Lennie's troubling behaviour, as his actions mirror societal forces that, to Freud, are some of the most basic driving impulses of society.

With Lennie's nonnormative behaviour in mind, this upsetting of gender expectations is also seen in some of the novella's other characters, such as George. An examination of the particular way that George tells Lennie the story of the pair's dream to acquire land of their own (and rabbits, as Lennie so fondly imagines) furthers the idea that George and Lennie are out of place in their society and indeed represent a challenge to normative notions of gender identity.

Shortly after the previously-quoted passage, George tells Lennie the story of their dream:

“O.K. Someday—we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—”

“*An' live off the fatta the lan'*,” Lennie shouted! ‘An have rabbits!’”

“Well,” said George, “we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to

work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof." (14-15)

While the dream of having animals of their own may seem to normalize George and Lennie's relationship with animals, the truth remains that this dream is never realized and may only serve to alienate the pair further. Here, the affect found in the nonhuman—in this case the chickens and rabbits at the pair's dreamed-up homestead—is at once distinctly human and normalized in that it common to dream of having a home, yet the affect is also alienating in that the pair never get to realize this dream.

Additionally, George, in the previous passage, as well as throughout the novel, tells Lennie this story almost as if he were a mother telling a bed-time story to a small child. George's voice indeed becomes "deeper" and he speaks "rhythmically" (13) as he tells Lennie the story of which the latter is so fond, and though the deeper voice suggests masculinity, George's performance of what is essentially an act of childrearing casts him in a subtly feminized light. While it is certainly possible that a father could tell a child a bedtime story, the job of childrearing in the early twentieth century was primarily the duty of women, and, thus, Lennie's attempted mothering of the pup mirrors George's apparent mothering of Lennie while the pair in turn seem destined to live in their dreamed-up homestead paradise less as a pair of friends and more as a mother/son/father/son duo. And since George is the one who tells Lennie these stories about furry animals that excite Lennie so much, it could be that George in essence raises Lennie to become the nonnormative individual that Lennie grows into. Lennie perhaps represents George's own misgivings about his lack of normativity, while Lennie's outward hyper masculinity (he is a giant man who easily crushes the mighty Curly) is perhaps a ruse behind which George hides his own supposed shortcomings (at least insofar as they would be perceived

as shortcomings in the eyes of his peers). Just as Lennie displays nonnormative performances of affect throughout the work, so too does George seem less than normative at times, and it therefore may be that George has to kill Lennie at the novel's conclusion in order to dispel George's own nonnormative identity, particularly since he heads off to the brothel with the other men the moment Lennie dies. Once again, Steinbeck creates a portrait of feminized masculinity that challenges gender norms, even if he is unable to imagine a world wherein this feminized masculinity can flourish harmoniously.

While George and Lennie to a large extent serve as examples of feminized masculinity, other characters in the novel, such as Carlson, stand as counterpoints to the feminized masculinity of George and Lennie; with Carlson, the hyper-masculine affect he displays is found primarily in his relationship with animals. Midway through the novella, Carlson criticizes Candy for keeping an elderly dog; in Carlson's view, the dog has worn out its usefulness and deserves to be put down, yet Carlson lacks Candy's compassion—a compassion that is in many ways similar to that displayed by Lennie and George—and Carlson fails to realize that Candy has a strong emotional bond with the creature and is actually willing to care for it in its old age. As Carlson berates Candy for keeping the animal, Steinbeck writes:

“Well, I can't stand him in here,” said Carlson. “That stink hangs around even after he's gone.” He walked over with his heavy-legged stride and looked down at the dog. “Got no teeth,” he said. “He's all stiff with rheumatism. He ain't no good to you, Candy. An' he ain't no good to himself. Why'n't you shoot him, Candy?” (44)

Carlson's lack of empathy is played out specifically in relation to the dog—in this case, once again, affect is found in a nonhuman construct, yet in this case the affect displayed is more

stereotypical of early-twentieth-century masculine behaviour in that Carlson displays a distinct lack of emotion. The affect in this case elicits a dearth of emotion that is played out against the counterpoints of Lennie, George, and Candy, who in turn display an abundance of empathy and emotion in the scenes I have examined. Candy is clearly affected by the thought of putting down his beloved dog following Carlson's rant; thus, it seems that Steinbeck is contrasting two different types of male behaviour: one being stereotypical of a male-dominated society such as the bunkhouse, the other less normative and far more empathetic.

Curly likewise serves as a prominent counterpoint of toxic masculinity. When Curly is first introduced, his swift temper and penchant for physical violence are immediately apparent as Steinbeck writes,

His eyes passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a slight crouch. His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously. Curly stepped gingerly close to him. "You the new guys the old man was waitin' for?" (25)

Curly's tendency to start fights becomes obvious from his first description as he intimidates Lennie and questions he and George. His 'pugnacious' attitude is matched by his tense body language and prize-fighter's mannerisms as his hands bend into tight fists and he projects an intimidating, cold-hearted image. Steinbeck portrays Curly as a counterpoint to the more sensitive, feminized men in the novel like Lennie and George, and it hence follows that Steinbeck is seeking to expose the potential problems with stereotypical, toxic masculinity, particularly since Curly is set up as the novel's chief villain.

However, Curly also demonstrates some feminine characteristics as well. Throughout the novella, he walks about repeatedly with his hand in a jar of Vaseline to soften his touch to his wife's liking, and it therefore appears that even hardened men like Curly still embody in some ways a sense of softness and femininity, even if Curly's softness is wholly misplaced since he remains a violent menace. Additionally, Curly's paranoia over his wife's doings and his eagerness to constantly affirm his masculinity point to an underlying sense of lack and insecurity. Much like the values highlighted by Michael Kimmel, such as the need for the American man to constantly prove his manhood in opposition to homosexuality, and Leslie Fiedler's assertion that American men are forever caught in a state of boyhood, Curly's performance of male affect seems rife with insecurity—the likely cause of his violent and combative attitude. The jar of Vaseline—literally meant to soften his prizefighter's hands for his wife's pleasure—thus also seems a symbol of Curly's superficial softness—a softness that he is unable to properly cultivate because of his deep insecurities. Furthermore, since Curly's wife is allowed to speak her peace moments before her death, it follows that Steinbeck may be taking issue with a world that lacks a proper female perspective—the world in this case being the bunkhouse itself, which in turn stands as a microcosm of the stifling of women's voices in early-twentieth-century America, from the days of the suffragettes to emancipation and onwards. The truth that Lennie is unable to properly fit into the world of the bunkhouse as well as the truth that his relationship with George ends violently indicates that Steinbeck is unable to imagine a world where feminized men like George and Lennie can comfortably live in peace; thus, while Steinbeck is able to criticize a world with no female voice, he is unable to imagine a world wherein a pair of men might be able to provide that feminine perspective.

While one of the main problems with the bunkhouse society may be its lack of a female perspective, it is important that Curley's wife does in fact get to tell her story in the moments before Lennie accidentally kills her. Towards the novella's conclusion, Curley's wife briefly tells Lennie the tale of her struggles as a woman trying to survive in a patriarchal world while Steinbeck's writing is mournful and powerfully acknowledging of women's struggle at large, especially given Curley's wife's inability to support herself on her own—a truth that compels her towards her unhappy marriage with Curley (88-89). While many critics have taken issue with *Of Mice and Men*'s lack of a female voice—even going so far as to accuse Steinbeck of outright misogyny—it is a telling detail that Steinbeck allows Curley's wife to speak the truth of her struggle moments before she dies. While Steinbeck deprives Curley's wife of her proper name and at times describes her more as an object than as a sentient human being, these factors could be taken more as a reflection on the perspective of the men of the bunkhouse, who do not care to learn her name and who view her as no more than a possession of Curley's—a perspective on the novella's potential misogyny that finds further footing when taking into account Steinbeck's compassionate description of Curley's wife's struggles. If the bunkhouse does indeed lack a female voice—and it seems clear that it does—it is perhaps this lack of female perspective supplied only in brief by Curley's wife that is the greatest flaw of this all-male society—a society that not only fails to recognize the merits of outsiders but that also refuses to allow women the right to speak their mind and at the same time denies women their autonomy.

Steinbeck scholar Mimi Reisel Gladstein has written extensively on Steinbeck's characterization of women, and a close look at some of her scholarship provides further nuance to the argument in favour of Steinbeck's championing of nonnormative gender performance. In “Thematic and Stylistic Resonance,” Gladstein offers that Steinbeck and some of his

contemporaries (Faulkner being one) were in tune with the plight of women in a largely patriarchal America (92), as she recalls quite accurately the type of mistreatment that Curly's wife undergoes at the hands of the men of the bunkhouse. Meanwhile, in "Steinbeck and the Woman Question," Gladstein recounts some of the author's most famous woman characters, pointing out that some of them seem outright misogynistic (Cathy Ames—I will comment on this character in my last chapter) while others seem truly heroic (Ma Joad—subject of my next chapter). Yet, where some critics such as Harold Bloom, as I have previously suggested, have completely written off Steinbeck as a sexist writer, Gladstein at least acknowledges the dichotomy in his writing—that within his often-stereotypical depiction of women, there lies something far more progressive and much more appreciative. Steinbeck, much like Bellamy before him, may be unable to fully escape the stereotyping of women—see the description of Curly's wife's hair as sausages, for example—but he does nevertheless succeed at subtly challenging the accepted gender norms of the early twentieth century, even while at times working within these stereotypes—his challenge to these stereotypes being revealed through the interactions between characters and the nonhuman construct of animals.

Cather, meanwhile, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is able to take her argument even further by imagining a world wherein characters with abnormal affect are able to thrive and succeed in peace and comfort. Her central character, Father Jean-Marie Latour, is extensively feminized throughout the novel—from as early as the opening chapters where he interacts affectionately and maternally with his horses as he searches for his bishopric. Latour demonstrates a maternal instinct in relation to animals throughout the novel—an instinct that is mirrored in other aspects of his life, such as his nurturing of plants and the familial leadership that he provides for the various communities that he touches. The affect produced by Latour's

nurturing care for these animals and plants produces a vision of Latour as a great maternal character; yet, where Lennie is cast as an outsider in the Steinbeck novella, Latour becomes a pillar of his community here in Cather, whose challenge to gender stereotypes is similar to Steinbeck's but differs in that she is able to imagine a world wherein characters with unusual affect are able to succeed. This feat is replicated throughout most of her other works that I will examine. Here, the production of affect in relation to animals—a distinctly nonhuman construct—indeed engenders the greatest amount of humanity from these novelists' characters of the three domains that I will examine, forwarding the idea that more-human constructs such as the home proved even more unwelcoming to nonnormative characters in Steinbeck's and Cather's depiction of twentieth-century America.

Cather displays Latour's maternal instinct from the novel's outset. Early in the novel, as Latour searches desperately for water on his journey to his bishopric, Cather writes,

He began talking to his mare in halting Spanish, asking whether she agreed with him that it would be better to push on, weary as she was, in hope of finding the trail. He had no water left in his canteen, and the horses had had none since yesterday morning. . . . The animals were almost at the end of their endurance, but they would not recuperate until they got water, and it seemed best to spend their last strength in searching for it. (19)

While Father Latour may in one sense be guilty of projecting his own humanity onto the animal in that he speaks to it in human language, he at the same time chooses to speak to the mare in Spanish, presumably the human language with which the horse is more familiar, even though he is less comfortable in the language as evidenced by his 'halting' speech. Latour acknowledges the horse's fatigue, taking into account the animal's individual feelings, rather than simply

projecting his own human emotions onto the animal the way Lennie does in *Of Mice and Men*.

In this early moment, Father Latour comes across as incredibly nurturing and caring<sup>1</sup>; yet the fact that he accounts for the animals' feelings in this great display of affect creates a positive image of affect performance, whereas the image of Lennie in Steinbeck remains a mostly negative one.

Later in the same chapter, we see further evidence of Father Latour's deep display of affect in response to his horse and mule—a performance of affect that casts him in a nurturing, feminized light, much the way of Lennie. In the following passage, Latour continues his search for water:

His mare stumbled, breaking his mood of contemplation. He was sorrier for his beasts than for himself. He, supposed to be the intelligence of the party, had got the poor animals into this interminable desert of ovens. He was afraid he had been absent-minded, had been pondering his problem instead of heeding the way.

(20)

The beasts engender such a strong sense of affect from Latour, as he feels more worried for their well-being than he does for his own, and the affect that arises from the horses at once binds together the idea of Latour's compassion with the values he embodies as the seemingly maternal caretaker of animals, plants, and communities. The fact that Latour sees himself as the brain of the party and the animals as the vehicles points to a sort of cooperative symbiosis: both parties rely on each other equally, and Latour appears to genuinely care for the animals' well-being. Latour is cast in a nurturing light in a manner very similar to that of Lennie, yet where Lennie fails to properly care of the animals in his charge and also fails to take into account their feelings, Latour succeeds on both fronts, as moments later, he is able to find water.

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<sup>1</sup> While it may be true that a priest should be expected to be nurturing and caring, I will later demonstrate that Latour's relation to affect indeed does cast him in a subtly feminized light.

Whereas Steinbeck creates characters whose performance of affect in relation to the nonhuman challenges normative notions of gender despite the fact that these characters fail to find prosperity and comfort in their respective societies, Cather takes these ideas further and creates characters who are able to perform affect in non-traditional manners without failing to adapt to the societies around them. While Steinbeck is only able to see the problems created by normative notions of gender identity and point to them without offering a happy resolution, Cather is able to envision a world wherein people are able to solve these problems and live together harmoniously despite their differences.

Later in the novel, we see this nonnormative affect displayed by Father Latour's closest friend and cohort, the priest Father Vaillant. Father Joseph Vaillant displays this nonnormative affect when he for the first time encounters the mules that he and Father Latour will eventually adopt and rely on so heavily in their endeavour to bring Christianity to New Mexico. In this scene, Cather writes:

[Lujon] exhibited with peculiar pride two cream coloured mules, stalled side by side.

"Their names," said Lujon, "are Contento and Angelica, and they are as good as their names. It seems like God has given them intelligence. When I talk to them, they look up at me like Christians; they are very companionable. They are always ridden together and have a great affection for each other." (59-60)

We see Father Vaillant's acknowledgement of the animals' intelligence in Cather's portraiture of the creatures. The mules look up to Lujon and Joseph 'as if they are Christians,' and also display a tremendous amount of affection for each other. Moments later, Father Joseph takes account of their autonomy when he echoes Lujon's words and states that he too wishes to have companions

that look at him like Christians moments before he manages to pry them away from the wealthy rancher. While Cather's depiction of these creatures relies heavily on anthropomorphism, not unlike the relationship between Lennie and the creatures he touches, she still acknowledges the animals' feelings, especially since Lujon comments that it would be unfair to separate the pair who have so much affection for each other (63)—a comment with which Father Vaillant fully agrees. Cather depicts Father Vaillant's unusual, even nonnormative, performance of affect towards these creatures from the novel's early pages, a display of affect that mirrors that of Father Latour.

Latour's and Vaillant's display of affect towards their mules is one of the primary ways that Cather feminizes the pair, thereby subtly creating a mirror reflection of her own domestic relationship with Lewis. Shortly after adopting the mules, Father Latour takes account of their needs during an arduous journey, stating: "The mules are certainly very tired, Joseph. They ought to be fed" (66). Cather elucidates Father Latour's empathy in this passage, which, coupled with the substantial care that he takes for the spiritual well-being of the communities he touches, feminizes Latour much the same way that Steinbeck feminizes Lennie and George, creating a maternal portrait of a character whose nonnormative display of affect runs counter to early-twentieth-century gender stereotypes.

Scholars have long pointed out that Father Latour and Father Vaillant are likely stand ins in their homosocial relationship with each other for Cather's lifelong partnership with Edith Lewis, which is perhaps one of the reasons that Cather takes careful pains in subtly feminizing the two friends. Melissa Holmestead has written extensively on the biographical aspects of Cather's work and in "Willa Cather, Edith Lewis, and Collaboration: the Southwestern Novels of the 1920s and beyond" writes:

The Archbishop rides through the desert alone for two chapters of "The Vicar Apostolic," but most of his rides through the New Mexico desert take place in the company of Father Joseph Vaillant, just as Cather shared her rides with Lewis. By pasting these photographs in the book, Cather symbolically aligned herself and Lewis with Latour and Vaillant. (432)

Cather's feminizing of the two priests finds further importance given that Latour and Vaillant are subtle representatives of Cather's lesbian relationship. In the same article, Homestead continues:

While I am mindful of Lindemann's methodological caution against reading Latour and Vaillant as "'really' lesbians trapped in men's bodies" (123), Latour and Vaillant are, among other things, Cather's homage to herself and Lewis in the Southwest and to their love and collaboration. (433)

Given that Cather uses the two men to represent the intense love she had for Lewis, it seems all the more apt that the priests are portrayed as sensitive, wholly-compassionate and empathetic beings—indeed, ‘affective beings,’ whose abundant displays of affect are apparent in their interactions with animals. Jonathan Goldberg has likewise written about Cather's relationship with Lewis, and, in *Willa Cather and Others*, he offers, “[at] the level of representation, the secret radiates, so that lesbian desire masquerades as heterosexuality, heterosexuality as homosexuality, and, even more to the point, heterosexuality as social convention necessarily fails to satisfy the deepest nature of the self” (13). Yet, while the pair of men's statuses as representatives of real-life women could definitely seem to lessen the impact of their nonnormative behavior given that they may not be meant to represent men at all, it is important to note that their given society flourishes much as a result of the motherly care with which they provide it. Cather thus seems to be arguing for the potential good to be found in men who are

able to project a perspective that takes both male and female gender roles into account. Cather therefore creates a wonderfully optimistic depiction of two men who in many ways could be seen as outsiders but who nevertheless find a place in their society and with that place find acceptance. In this case, the affect produced by animals—the least human of the constructs that I will look at—produces a substantially optimistic vision—a vision that is clearly far more optimistic than Steinbeck’s in *Of Mice and Men*.

This chapter has examined some of the ways in which human-nonhuman interactions bring about nonnormative performances of affect in Cather’s and Steinbeck’s characters. While Steinbeck’s subtle challenge to stereotypical notions of gender performance builds on the work of his predecessors, such as Bellamy, in the nineteenth century, Steinbeck nevertheless at times falls into the habit of relying on these stereotypes in his characterizations. Rather than fully eradicate stereotypical notions of gender identity, Steinbeck works within these stereotypes to produce a subtle challenge to established gender norms. Where Steinbeck is unable to fully imagine a world wherein these nonnormative characters are able to happily exist, Cather produces a more optimistic vision, allowing Latour and Vaillant to live happily as productive, respected members of society, despite their subtly feminine traits. Yet, it remains that both authors succeed in creating fiction that pushes the boundaries of accepted gender performance and both work carefully to undermine stereotypical notions of gender identity.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### My Ma Joad:

#### Cather's and Steinbeck's Portraits of Masculinized Womanhood

As I demonstrated in my first chapter, the seemingly very nonhuman construct of animals time and time again produces in these writers' characters a performance of affect that challenges gender stereotypes and traditional roles of gender identity—at least those stereotypes that were prevalent in the nineteenth century and still found their way into twentieth-century popular culture. Yet, while the construct of animals appears on the surface to be the least human of my examples, it in turn produces the least alienation for these characters, given that Lenny temporarily finds happiness with his puppies and George and that Fathers Latour and Vaillant remain respected figures in their communities. This next chapter will examine the ways that an apparently more human construct—in this case, farming and the land—indeed produces far more alienation for Steinbeck's and Cather's characters while still bringing about performances of affect that contradict gender stereotypes.

Just as it may seem strange to refer to animals as a construct, so too may it appear unusual to use 'construct' as a blanket term for the land and farming. However, as in the previous example of animals, I am most interested in these characters' relationships with the construct: thus, it is the human-created relationship with the land that I wish to examine, and, likewise, the notion of farming as a by-product of the human relationship with the land. In the case of both of the novels that I wish to examine—Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Cather's *My Ántonia*—the characters' relationships with the land and farming play an important role in fostering the almost-tangible sense of affect that both contradicts gender stereotypes and

at the same time brings about their most heroic actions. It is both these products of nonnormative affect—the notion of difference and the notion of strength or perseverance—that I will examine throughout this chapter—these by-products of affect serving as examples of the ‘values’ to which Ahmed refers. On one hand, the notion of difference is a value in that it represents the capitalist power structure’s view of Steinbeck’s Joads as lower-than-human citizens and the townsfolks’ view of Cather’s *Ántonia* as a social outcast; on the other, strength and perseverance are values given that they represent the strong family values upheld by the Joads and the strong-willed nature *Ántonia* absorbs from her father.

In the first-half of this chapter, I contend that Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* stand as paramount examples of powerful femininity, while their roles as leaders of their family provide them the status often reserved for men, who were largely figured as the heads of households in the still-patriarchal 1930s. Preacher Casy likewise serves as an example of a character who performs a feminized sense of masculinity, as he repeatedly takes on the chores and tasks of the women of the family in order to contribute his share, just as Tom Joad time and again displays abundant empathy. With that said, despite these often-heroic displays of nonnormative affect, the Joad family finds itself destitute at the novel’s conclusion, with the family’s survival seeming less than likely. Though the Joads are never ostracized specifically for their nonnormative performances of affect, this alienation in the face of the land perhaps indicates Steinbeck’s level of unease with the institutions that governed American life in his day—farming being a prime example.

Similarly, in *My Ántonia*, Cather’s titular character provides a powerful example of masculinized femininity, while *Ántonia*’s willingness to perform the work and chores once done by her deceased father casts her as an outsider in her midwestern society. The townsfolk in the

novel ostracize and berate *Ántonia* for being less than a woman in their eyes, and her rejection by her peers produces a level of alienation that differs from the Joads' general acceptance by their peers in the Steinbeck novel. Yet despite her rejection, *Ántonia* does not suffer the hardships that befall the Joads—hardships that arise from the family's relationship with the land. Where Steinbeck concludes *The Grapes of Wrath* on a heartrendingly pessimistic note, Cather finishes *My Ántonia* with a much more optimistic tone as her heroine finds lasting happiness at the novel's conclusion.

In the Steinbeck novel, farming and the land—an at once very human construct in that it represents the human relationship with the earth and with the production of food—produces affect that is distinctly lacking in life and lacking in humanity. In chapter eleven, Steinbeck underlines the inhumanity of modern farming practices, writing “when a horse stops work and goes into the barn there is a life and vitality left, there is a breathing and warmth. . . . But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is as dead as the ore it came from. The heat goes out of it like the living heat that leaves a corpse” (115). In this passage, as well as throughout the novel, Steinbeck figures modern practices of farming as distinctly inhuman—an inhuman construct that leads to the forced removal from their land of families like the Joads. Later in the novel, when the Joads arrive in California, the men are worked like the cold tractor described in this passage then essentially discarded during the rainy season and left to starvation, much like the lifeless tractor when it is switched off. While this passage does not directly produce affect that challenges normative notions of gender, the mechanization of the capitalist farming industry itself drives the Joads from their land and forces the family to bind together, while some members of the family—Ma, Tom, and Rose of Sharon—prove to be its strongest members as they continually care for the others and encourage them to resist collapse. While Steinbeck in

some areas of this work suggests a more traditional view of gender roles—such as when Ma comments that it is proper for a man to hit his wife—the fact that the women prove to be some of the strongest of the Joads suggests a reversal of the patriarchal order, and the novel ends with a bleak moment of female heroism as Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving man in order to save his life, while the book at the same time offers some hope given that Tom’s political views represent the possibility of a better world in the future. The inhumanity produced by farming and the Joads’ relationship with the land sticks to the land itself—as emblemized by the object of the tractor described in the aforementioned scene—as the mechanization of capitalist society that engenders the Joads’ suffering upsets the gender dynamics within the family and causes them to rally closer together and to undertake courageous, life-affirming actions. Indeed, even as the Joads migrate westward, their subjugated relationship with the land fails to change, and the affect produced by farming continues to cause them more and more suffering, even while affirming their strength.

Of the aforementioned members of the family, Ma Joad stands out as one of Steinbeck’s primary means of challenging gender stereotypes: on one hand, she embodies a starkly conservative attitude towards women, since she is primarily a domestic caretaker; yet, on the other, she stands as the strongest member of the Joad family, and at several points throughout the text, the Joads rely on her to make their toughest decisions. Steinbeck foregrounds Ma’s unwavering strength from his opening description of her, where he writes that Ma

seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to

see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. . . . And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. (74)

Ma is thus the spiritual and emotional pillar of the Joad family. She guides them with love, and shelters them from ‘hurt and fear.’ She finds humour in the bleakest of situations, and we see that she is the “healer” and “arbiter” of the family (74). Although Ma is the emotional leader of the family, Pa is cast as the Joads’ patriarchal head. However, it is Ma who makes the toughest decisions throughout the narrative, often overruling Pa and asserting her own morality and judgement. While Ma in some ways falls into the stereotypes of early twentieth-century women given that she is a domestic worker and is charged with such tasks as caring for the family’s children and cooking the Joads’ meals, she nevertheless exceeds those stereotypes by proving time and time again to be the family’s strongest member. Steinbeck, much like Bellamy in the nineteenth century, at once works within accepted stereotypes of women (in this case the stereotype of the domestic woman) but still pushes the boundaries of those stereotypes enough to challenge traditional gender roles.

Steinbeck describes the Joad family dynamic in further detail in the novel’s tenth chapter. As the Joads prepare to leave for California, having been forced off their land and lacking any way of farming and sustaining themselves in the dust bowl, Pa debates whether the family can afford to bring Preacher Casy with them in their travels, as he argues that the preacher will merely take up space in the truck and burden the family with an extra mouth to feed (100). Though speaking his mind, Pa leaves the final choice in the matter to Ma, who then responds, at once proving to be a far more charitable individual than any other member of the family:

Ma cleared her throat. “It ain’t kin we? It’s will we?” she said firmly.

“As far as ‘kin,’ we can’t do nothin’, not go to California or nothin’; but as far as ‘will,’ why, we’ll do what we will. An’ as far as ‘will’—it’s a long time our folks been here and east before, an’ I never heerd tell of no Joads or no Hazletts, neither, ever refusin’ food an’ shelter or a lift on the road to anybody that asked.

They’s been mean Joads, but never that mean.” (102)

Pa then proceeds with his rebuttal, but the family sides unwaveringly with Ma as Steinbeck upsets the patriarchal structure of the family by allowing Ma’s charitable, compassionate attitude to override Pa’s more selfish outlook. Tellingly, it is Granma who voices the family’s decision to side with Ma by offering that a “preacher is a nice thing to be with us” (102), adding an additional female voice to Ma’s challenge to Pa’s authority.

The affect produced in this scene sticks to the construct of farming and the land and binds together the values that Steinbeck examines. Given that the Joads find themselves in this dire predicament as a result of having lost their farm, the affect produced by farming at once creates a sense of alienation since the Joads are driven away, but at the same time elicits a tremendous amount of humanity and compassion given that Ma convinces the family to act charitably even in the face of such dire poverty. In this moment, the affect produced by farming binds together the idea of the Joads’ struggle with the values of charity and matriarchy and the construct (or as Ahmed would label it—the object) of the land. Faced with this affective relationship, the Joads recover their sense of compassion while confronting grave circumstances—this compassion being recovered specifically by Ma Joad, who challenges the family’s patriarchal structure by openly disagreeing with Pa and convincing the others to side with her.

A deeper analysis of Ma's choice of words in her speech to Tom as he decides to leave the family after breaking the law further reveals the degree to which the negative affect that hinders the Joads is indeed produced by the family's relationship with the land. As Tom ponders going off on his own to save the family trouble since he has become a wanted criminal, Ma comments on the family's relationship with the land:

“They was the time when we was on the lan’. They was a boundary to us then. Ol’ folks died off, an’ little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An’ now we ain’t clear no more. I can’t get straight. They ain’t nothin’ keeps us clear.” (393)

According to Ma, the family's hardships arise specifically because they are displaced from their land—the land being the thing that keeps them ‘clear.’ The inhumanity of the farming practices in California causes the Joads to lose their way, as Ma remarks that Ruthie and Winfield, the two youngest Joads, are becoming “like animals”—indeed, losing touch with their humanity (393). The affect produced by the land, for the Joads, brings about a tremendous amount of hardship and alienation, even though it at the same time arouses the individual members of the family's courage and compassion in some of the most trying times. The Joads' hardship thus arises specifically from their relationship with the land they lost and the land they come to inhabit as that affect at once produces tremendous difficulty and alienation as well as powerful courage and compassion.

Ma likewise demonstrates her emotional fortitude and leadership when she is called upon to defend the family's honour at various points throughout the novel. After Mrs. Sandry accuses Rose of Sharon of being a sinner and suggests that Rose's dancing will cause a miscarriage, Ma consoles Rose of Sharon and provides much needed emotional support. Steinbeck describes

Ma's tough compassion, writing "Rose of Sharon peered down the road. 'That lady says I'll lose the baby—' she began. 'Now you stop that,' Ma warned her" (319-320). When Mrs. Sandry shows up to further berate Rose of Sharon moments later, Ma stands her ground and defends her daughter's dignity: "'Git!' she said coldly. 'Don you never come back. I seen your kind before. You'd take the little pleasure, wouldn' you?'" (320-321). Ma then succeeds at scaring Mrs. Sandry off and reminds Rose of Sharon that the Joads are no more sinners than any other family and that Rose need not worry about a miscarriage for those reasons. Here, as well as throughout the novel, Ma proves to be the strongest of the Joads.

Critics have likewise traditionally viewed Ma Joad as a symbol of strength. However, while these appraisals of Ma focus on her strength as a traditional woman, critics have perhaps failed to address her affective relationships and the ways in which Ma displays a pronounced sense of masculinity. In "Steinbeck and the Woman Question," Mimi Gladstein offers that

Ma Joad has few equals in terms of a characterization of woman. The portrait the narrator draws of her is a paean to woman as mother, a source of strength and love for her family—assertive, steadfast, and compassionate. Steinbeck's narrator portrays her as goddess, judge, and citadel; one could not ask for a more durable role model of endurance and indestructability. (243-244)

While Gladstein and others have focused on Steinbeck's portrait of Ma as a fundamentally feminine woman role-model, it still remains that Ma at various points in the narrative embodies a traditionally masculine role, such as when she openly contradicts Pa and makes decisions for the entire family. Rather than fully break the mould of traditional womanhood, Steinbeck thus seems to work within a traditional, even stereotypical, portrait to create a powerful woman who still manages to broaden the expectations of her gender. Accordingly, these gender traits are

revealed by Ma's affective relationship with the land and the corrupt capitalist structure that forces her family from their farm.

Ma's interactions with Rose of Sharon demonstrate Ma's fortitude time and again, and it is through Ma's support that Rose is able to attain the level of strength Rose demonstrates at the novel's conclusion. In the following passage, Ma comforts Rose, providing her daughter with sound guidance and emotional encouragement:

Rose of Sharon moved sluggishly about her work. Ma inspected her cautiously. "You feelin' pretty good? Your cheeks is kinda saggy."

"I ain't had milk like they say I ought."

"I know. We jus' didn' have no milk"

Rose of Sharon said dully, "Ef Connie hadn' went away, we'd a had a little house by now, with him studyin' an' all. Would a got milk like I need.

Woulda had a nice baby. (353-354)

Here, we see another instance of Ma's unwavering support of her family, as Rose of Sharon's mood improves moments later when Ma pierces Rose's ears (355). The affect in this scene, while not directly arising from the land itself, is still indirectly influenced by the Joads' unfortunate relationship with farming and the land: their loss of their land out in Oklahoma and their inability to financially support themselves as agricultural labourers in California are the root causes for Connie's unwillingness to stay with the family, and in turn, the Joads's inability to support themselves with farm labour causes most of the social problems that the family encounters. In this instance, the affect produced indirectly by the Joads' relationship with the land binds together Ma's strong family values of perseverance with the idea of the Joads' misfortune, creating a sentiment of both sadness and strength.

It is because of Ma's ongoing support that Rose of Sharon is able to find the strength to become the woman she is at the novel's conclusion. Although Steinbeck ends *The Grapes of Wrath* with the image of Rose of Sharon as a nurturer when the latter breastfeeds a starving man to save his life, his closing image is not exclusively rooted in gender stereotypes. The image of breastfeeding seems on the surface to feed on stereotypes of women as domestic labourers and child bearers, as Steinbeck focuses on Rose's maternity in his final scene. However, the truth that Rose of Sharon commits this act in order to help a grown man survive at the same time points to her tremendous courage and resilience. Much like Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backwards*, Steinbeck here works within an accepted stereotype—in this case that of women as child-nurturers—but still manages to push the bounds of gender performance as breastfeeding in this scene becomes an act of raw courage and survival. The 'mysterious smile' (455) that ends the novel and crosses Rose of Sharon's face as she commits this selfless act could stem from her final ability to understand and synthesize all of Ma's lessons of resilience and charity throughout the novel—lessons that lead Rose of Sharon towards finding the strength to help those around her the same way Ma supports the Joad family throughout.

Just as Ma Joad stands as an example of a woman who embodies certain characteristics of maleness, so too does Preacher Casy stand as an example of a feminized man. While some of Casy's predominant qualities, such as his unending willingness to provide counsel and emotional support to members of the Joad family, cast him in a feminized light, Steinbeck's feminization of Preacher Casy finds perhaps its most clear demonstration when Casy assists Ma Joad with some of her domestic chores. Here, Steinbeck details Casy's willingness to do work usually considered to be the responsibility of women:

The preacher stepped beside her. "Leave me salt down this meat," he said. "I can do it. There's other stuff for you to do."

[Ma] stopped her work then and inspected him oddly, as though he suggested a curious thing. And her hands were crusted with salt, pink with fluid from the fresh pork. "It's women's work," she said finally.

"It's all work," the preacher replied. "They's too much of it to split it up to men's or women's work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat." (107)

Perhaps most telling about this example is Casy's insistence on doing the work despite it being 'women's work,' a fact that demonstrates both Casy's willingness to bend the boundaries of gender performance, at least in terms of its relation to chores and work, as well as Steinbeck's desire to create characters who push the then-accepted definition of gender identity to new limits. The Casy example is also unique in that it demonstrates a self-aware willingness to test the limits of gender identity, particularly since there are no similarly self-aware examples in *Of Mice and Men*.

In addition to strong women characters who perform masculine notions of affect, the novel also features a handful of positive male characters besides Preacher Casy who perform feminine affect. Tom Joad is one such example. Time and again, Tom demonstrates a great degree of empathy for his family as well as for the other struggling people with whom he comes into contact throughout the Joads' travels. Over the course of the book, Tom slowly become more and more socially conscious as he absorbs Casy's leftist views on labour and social class. In this passage, midway through the novel, Tom imagines the effectiveness of a strike after hearing from a young man about the lack of empathy shown towards agricultural labourers—a

conversation that foreshadows the strike-breaking encounter that ends with the preacher's murder towards the book's conclusion. The young man explains:

They's a big son-of-a-bitch of a peach orchard I worked in. Takes nine men all the year roun'." . . . "Takes three thousan' men for two weeks when them peaches is ripe. Got to have 'em or them peaches'll rot. So what do they do? They send out han'bills all over hell. They need three thousan', and they get six thousan'. They get them men for what they wanta pay. If ya don' wanta take what they pay, goddamn it, they's a thousan' men waitin' for your job. So ya pick, an' ya pick, an' then she's done. Whole part a the country's peaches. All ripe together. When ya get 'em picked, ever' goddamn one is picked. There ain't another damn thing in that part a the country to do. An' then the, owners don' want you there no more. Three thousan' of you. The work's done. . . . So they kick you out, they move you along. That's how it is. (246)

Tom responds by saying, "[w]ell, s'pose them people got together an' says, 'Let 'em rot.' Wouldn' be long 'fore the price went up, by God" (246). The young man then acknowledges Tom's wisdom, remarking that Tom has "figgered out somepin" (246). This passage demonstrates Tom's empathy, as he sides with the maltreated labourers and imagines a way for them to improve their earnings.

This passage also reveals the alienation produced by Tom's affect in relation to the land. Tellingly, the affect produced by the land, here, invokes a strong, positive reaction from Tom, even though the affect at the same time bemoans hardship and alienation given that the labourers spoken of are used and discarded like commodities after conducting their labours—a sad truth of industrial society with which Tom clearly takes issue. More telling, still, is that it is the human-

created portion of the construct of the land—farming itself—that brings about this alienation, since the labourers are used as commodities specifically in relation to the farm labour that they undertake. It therefore seems that it is less the natural landscape itself that produces this hardship and alienation, but instead the human use of the land that creates the negative affect. In turn, it may follow that Steinbeck takes issue with the most human aspects of American society, given that agriculture is a staple of the American economy and here produces tremendous inhumanity for the farm workers.

Tom absorbs much of his empathy and political awareness from Casy, and the talk the pair have moments before Casy is killed spurs Tom towards the heightened level of conviction that he displays in his final speech to Ma. Here, Casy tells Tom to warn the other workers that their high pay is the result of the ongoing strike and that they ought to support the strikers:

“Well—tell the folks in there how it is, Tom. Tell ‘em they’re starvin’ us an stabbin’ theirselves in the back. ‘Cause sure as cowflops she’ll drop to tow an’ a half jus’ as soon as they clear us out.”

“I’ll tell ‘em,” said Tom. “I don’t know how. Never seen so many guys with guns. Don’t know if they’ll even let a fella talk. An’ folks don’t pass no time of day. They jus’ hang down their heads an’ won’t even give a fella a howdy.”

(383)

When the preacher is killed moments later, Tom internalizes Casy’s lesson about the need to stand up for one’s beliefs and the need to look out for the welfare of all. Tom’s empathy shows through clearly, given that he understands the Casy and the strikers’ perspective as well as that of the folk who are still working. Tom’s words to Casy also reveal Tom’s empathy for the poor morale of the labour camp, as he observes the lack of friendliness among the workers who do not

even greet one another. Overall, this passage demonstrates Tom's abundant empathy and positive affect—affect that once again arises in response to the inhumanity of farm labour in the America of the 1930s. The passage also foreshadows the abundantly leftist views that Tom adopts in response to Casy's death that occurs minutes after this speech takes place.

Tom's final speech to Ma before he goes off on his own after killing Casy's murderer testifies to the strength and conviction that Tom comes to embody by the novel's end. In this passage, the affect produced by the land once again provokes Tom's tremendous empathy, as he imagines a better future where people will once again be able to live off the land:

I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. (419)

Of all the Joad characters, Tom indeed represents the greatest amount of hope for a better future since he is self aware and perhaps more acutely cognizant of the machinery of oppression than are the other members of the family. Additionally, whereas Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon are not looked down on particularly because they are strong women but rather because they are poor, Tom winds up pushed even further to the fringes of society specifically because of his tremendous empathy which leads him to retaliate against Casy's unjust murderer and, as this passage indicates, propels him to continue to fight against injustice into the unwritten future. While Tom is not portrayed specifically as feminine, his abundant affect and the emotion and empathy he displays in relation to oppression cast him as a highly positive character who

does not shy away from his feelings the way stereotypes of the day dictated a man generally should. Tom is in essence the ‘oversentimental’ American man against which Teddy Roosevelt warns his readers in the passage quoted in my introduction, and as such, he may in fact display certain nonnormative gender characteristics; and although Steinbeck is unable to imagine a happy ending to the novel, the abundantly emotional Tom perhaps provides the greatest hope for a positive future beyond the novel’s end.

Yet, despite these challenging character portraits in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck has often been criticized by critics at large for adopting a conservative perspective on outsiders and otherness, particularly in his depiction of ethnic minorities and women. Matthew J. Bolton comments on Steinbeck’s literary reputation, offering that the “critical reception of John Steinbeck’s work is a study in contrasts. . . . He may be a late contemporary of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, but he is rarely deemed their equal” (21). Critics have perhaps overlooked Steinbeck because of his apparent lack of the stylistic innovation for which these other writers are praised. That said, one of the paramount reasons for the lack of present-day Steinbeck scholarship is clearly the sentiment that Steinbeck, while championing the causes of the poor and disenfranchised, at least outwardly appears to offer an unsympathetic view of the other, such as when one of his characters in an inter-chapter refers to a Black man as a “nigger” in *The Grapes of Wrath* (407) or some of his characters’ belittling of the Black Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*. With that said, the scholarship is divided, and some scholars, such as Reinaldo Silva, have taken a softer stance on Steinbeck’s work. In “Attitudes Towards Otherness,” Silva writes that as

Steinbeck became a more seasoned writer, witnessing the simplicity, generosity, and suffering of oppressed workers, immigrants, and Mexicans, . . . he realized

the error of such [denigrating] classifications . . . and that is why by the time he published *The Grapes of Wrath*, he had moved beyond this [racist] way of seeing Otherness. (71)

Steinbeck's appreciation of gender diversity thus seems just another example of his broadened perspective on otherness and outsiders, and it is with this appraisal of his work which I more closely agree. I believe this thesis demonstrates that there is still much to be gleaned from Steinbeck's work and that his writings deserve further scholarship and consideration. Likewise, the reasons alone for the lack of present-day research on his work merit further study. However, though Steinbeck subtly pushes the boundaries of gender identity in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Cather pushes those boundaries further in *My Ántonia*, at least in so far as she is able to find a peaceful ending for her characters.

Throughout this discussion, we have seen how Steinbeck creates characters who push the boundaries of normative notions of gender identity, and we have also seen how farming and the land produces affect that challenges the Joad family and causes them tremendous suffering and hardship. But what does all this mean? Given that many of the novel's nonnormative performances of affect—Ma's challenge to Pa, Casy's willingness to do women's work, Tom's abundant empathy—arise in the face of the inhumanity produced by the Joads' relationship with the land that they farm and the greedy power structure that governs their work, it seems clear that Steinbeck figures nonnormative gender identity as a positive response to hardship, particularly since he portrays these nonnormative performances of affect as thoroughly positive, and especially since the Joads are seldom looked down on for their nonnormative performances of gender identity outside of Tom's incrimination over his killing of Casy's murderer. However, despite Steinbeck's positive depiction of nonnormative gender traits, the Joads still suffer

immeasurably because they are so poor and financially destitute—a condition that is caused by their relationship with the land and their displaced circumstances. Steinbeck therefore figures farming and the land—a distinctly human construct—as harshly cold and alienating, while he posits moments of positive nonnormative performances of affect as a countermanding force that succeeds at easing the family's suffering. While this relationship between the construct of farming and the affect it produces points to the inhumanity present in the more human aspects of American society, this same relationship also reveals the positive aspects of challenging gender stereotypes. This novel thus differs from *Of Mice and Men* in the severity of the suffering produced by nonhuman constructs—Lennie, after all, takes tremendous pleasure from animals, while the Joads receive no such pleasure from the land—as well as in the positivity that its author associates with nonnormative gender identity, given that Lennie is looked down on where the Joads largely are not.

The dynamic between construct and affect present in *The Grapes of Wrath* differs slightly from that of *My Ántonia*, where Cather's heroine clearly arouses the ire of her peers for her nonnormative affect but at the same time meets a much happier fate than do the Joads. Cather, conversely, is able to realize a world wherein characters who do not fit normative moulds of gender are able to thrive and flourish. Observed through the eyes of the novel's male narrator, Jimmy, Ántonia is pictured as an emblem of female strength and perseverance—a perseverance that coupled with her desire to abandon the tasks typically considered fit for a girl her age and instead work the fields in her deceased father's place casts her in a highly masculinized light. Throughout the novel, Ántonia is described in masculine terms, both emotionally, through her abrupt, forward manner of speech, and particularly physically—her raw physicality having a

distinctly masculine tinge. Here, Jimmy observes *Ántonia* as she returns from working in the fields:

When the sun was dropping low, *Ántonia* came up the big south draw with her team. How much older she had grown in eight months! She had come to us a child, and now she was a tall, strong young girl, although her fifteenth birthday had just slipped by. I ran out and met her as she brought her horses up to the windmill to water them. She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her calves, over the boot-tops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. (113-114)

Cather describes her heroine in markedly masculine terms: her neck is strong and thick like the base of a tree, her sleeves are rolled up, and her skin is tanned and burned like a 'sailor's.' She is no longer the young child of whom Jimmy had grown so fond: instead, she is a strong young woman, intent on supporting her family and filling her father's role in the daily chores, as the fact that she wears the old man's boots and cap poignantly indicates. This masculinized description of *Ántonia* casts her in a distinctly nonnormative light, especially when she is compared to the other lower-class girls in her town who find work as maids and domestic labourers: she is a young woman bent on providing for her family—bent on doing the work of a young man. In this case, *Ántonia* is afforded a sense of peace and fortune that eludes the characters in the Steinbeck novels, as she eventually grows into a strong woman who is able to successfully raise a family and find marital peace despite her early struggles. That Jimmy does not seem to outright fault her for this masculinity, even if he does feel sympathy for the fact that

she has to work so hard, further endorses the idea that Cather intends us to see *Ántonia* as an emblem of strength and endurance who pushes the boundaries of gender expectations.

Additionally, the fact that other members of *Ántonia*'s society look down on her furthers not only the notion that she is an outsider in terms of her gender performance but also the idea that Cather casts *Ántonia* as a symbol of female strength. In this case, the affect produced by the construct of farming and the land seems highly alienating as it upsets the balance of gender norms even more than did the affect produced by animals in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Shortly after the previously quoted passage, Jimmy expounds his fondness for the girl, pointing not only to the degree to which she is an outcast, but also the extent to which he admires her for that very reason:

I knew, too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it. Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, "My *Ántonia*!" (117)

*Ántonia* is at once described as an outsider, as Jimmy references the 'nasty' jokes made by the male farm-hands who live in the area, yet Jimmy seems to admire her even more because of this fact as he identifies with the pride her father held for her. In these passages, the land and farming produce affect that steers *Ántonia* away from normalcy as she fully adopts the role of a man, which in turn estranges her from her community, even if Jimmy admires her for her strength. Yet, the fact that Jimmy is among the few who do not look down on *Ántonia* differentiates Cather from Steinbeck: where Steinbeck challenges early-twentieth-century

gender-based performances of affect by creating strong women and empathetic men, Cather highlights the societal opposition to nonnormative performances of affect, even though Jimmy accepts *Ántonia* the way she is. However, where Cather is able to imagine a lasting peace for her heroine, given that *Ántonia* finds happiness by novel's end, Steinbeck offers a much grimmer fate for his characters, even if the Joads are not ostracized specifically for their nonnormative performances of affect.

In this case, as in the case of the Steinbeck novel examined in this chapter, the nonhuman construct of farming and the land brings about affect in Cather's characters that estranges them from a typical performance of their gender. For *Ántonia*, her desire to do the work of a man casts her in a masculinized light and elicits the ire of the majority of her community, who in turn view her as a type of misfit and threaten her humanity and dignity as Jimmy recalls the "nasty way" the local farm-hands "joke" about *Ántonia* over her willingness to do "chores a girl ought not to do" (117). However, although *Ántonia* is looked down on by her peers, she insists that she enjoys doing the work of a man, even stating "better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house! . . . I do not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man" (127). The affect produced by farming sticks to the masculine clothes she wears in the fields— emblematic of the construct of farming and the land—just as those clothes cling to her body as she toils in sweat. Yet, because this novel ends happily, Cather is able to offer up a more optimistic view of America than Steinbeck: where the latter is able to create strong characters who find acceptance, he is unable to imagine happiness for them, while Cather is able to create a world wherein a character who in most ways runs counter to typical gender expectations is able to find peace and happiness as well as acceptance despite her difference. The truth that Cather is more optimistic may indeed stem from her own status as an outsider: she was a queer woman

writer in a patriarchal, straight culture, whereas Steinbeck was himself a straight male. Perhaps Cather's own experiences of life contributed to her ability to imagine a safe place for nonnormative individuals, where Steinbeck was not able to fully imagine lasting happiness for them, although it is certainly impossible to know with certainty so many decades later at our present point.

Daniel Worden writes extensively on Cather's depiction of female masculinity in *My Ántonia* and supports the view that Cather creates a character who is able to flourish as a masculinized woman despite the objections of the society around her. In *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism*, he observes,

O Pioneers! and *My Ántonia* depict Nebraska as a space where female masculinity prospers. In this frontier territory, the novels make a case for female masculinity as not merely a doomed imitation of the naturally masculine but as an authentic subject position. This dislocation of masculinity from the male body disrupts patriarchal entitlements to property and women and reworks marriage conventions and family relations. Masculinity, then, is a strategic performance in Cather's novels, one that requires a peculiar relation to time and space. The Nebraska novels offer an alternate history of masculinity on the frontier at once nostalgic for an idyllic past and pregnant with future promise. (82)

Yet, although Ántonia does find happiness by the novel's conclusion, it is not without hardship and struggle. Importantly, she remains on the fringes of society because of her masculinized femininity throughout, only finding acceptance towards the novel's end. Thus, while Cather is able to create a society where 'female masculinity prospers,' as Worden suggests, Ántonia's

masculinity nevertheless invites the scorn of the novel's white, affluent as well as lower-class citizens alike, even if *Ántonia* is able to carve out a life for herself apart from that majority.

While keeping the novel's eventual uplifting conclusion in mind, one must still acknowledge the tremendous hardship *Ántonia* faces on her way to finding happiness. It is on that token that *Ántonia* fails to fit in with the white, middle-class society around her at other points in the novel. After spending her early years aiding her family on the farm, *Ántonia* moves to the town of Blackhawk to work as a domestic labourer in a middle-class home. However, her lack of a middle-class upbringing and previous work as a farm labourer immediately cast her as slightly apart from her adopted urban society. Jimmy's grandmother observes *Ántonia*'s lack of belonging in this urban culture, commenting that the girl will "be awkward and rough at first, like enough, . . . but unless she's been spoiled by the hard life she's led, she has it in her to be a real helpful girl" (139). Although it initially seems unlikely that *Ántonia* will be able to fill this domestic role seamlessly, she does indeed take to the work quite quickly and manages to earn a good living for her family on the farm. Yet, despite this early success, *Ántonia* soon finds herself, once again, an outsider, as her desire to attend dances and seek entertainment causes the townsfolk to view her in an unseemly light.

After *Ántonia* and her friends begin regularly attending the town dances, the group of girls begins to arouse the ire of the townspeople, who view the European country girls as overly sexual and morally loose. Here, Jimmy comments on *Ántonia*'s status as a relative outsider as Cather writes that the girls "were considered a menace to the social order" because their "beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background" (181). It is shortly after that the town's boys begin "to joke with each other about 'the Harlings' Tony'" (184), and still not long after that Harry Paine assaults *Ántonia* and forcibly kisses her. After this forceful assault, Mr. Harling

berates the young girl, criticizing her for her supposedly loose sexuality: “This is what I’ve been expecting, *Ántonia*. You’ve been going with girls who have a reputation for being free and easy, and now you’ve got the same reputation. I won’t have this and that fellow tramping about my back yard all the time” (185-186). The same physical vivacity and that allows *Ántonia* to succeed as a farmer, here, in town, arouses the desires of the town’s young men, who in turn contribute to *Ántonia*’s poor reputation. Where the girl’s physical strength and willingness to perform the work of men engender the criticism of her peers in the country, in town, her vivacity sets her apart from the affluent girls and attracts the town’s young men, causing the townspeople to view her as an outsider. *Ántonia*’s physical vivacity and reputation as an outsider prove equally damning in an urban environment, where her physicality is mistaken for loose sexuality. Yet, where *Ántonia* appears happy in the country despite the ire of her peers, here, in the town, she seems far more unhappy and restless—a fact that suggests that she draws emotional strength from her relationship with the land. The land at once causes her nonnormative performances of affect, but removed from that land itself and placed in an urban environment, she is unable to find peace and happiness; it is as if her happiness is tied in with the nonnormative affect produced by the land, and removed from the land itself, her vivacity and physicality are mistaken for something they are not. Accordingly, in town, *Ántonia*’s reputation as an outsider is magnified to the point of causing her to live as an outsider, as she shortly after takes up work at the disreputable Cutter household.

After Jimmy’s and *Ántonia*’s lives take separate paths following the latter’s unfortunate employment at the Cutter’s, Jimmy later learns of his old friend’s misfortune. As Cather briefly describes her heroine’s trials after parting from Jimmy’s life, it seems that *Ántonia* is destined to an unhappy fate:

Poor *Ántonia*! Everyone would be saying that now, I thought bitterly. I replied that grandmother had written to me how *Ántonia* went away to marry Larry Donovan at some place where he was working; that he had deserted her, and that there was now a baby. This was all I knew. (263)

However, many more years pass before the pair again meet, and when Jimmy finally reunites with his old friend some twenty years after they had last met, he finds that *Ántonia* has found a semblance of happiness and good fortune in a happy marriage. While *Ántonia* remains relatively poor financially at the novel's conclusion, Jimmy observes that she still has that spark of vivacity that made her unique in youth and that his old friend seems truly happy in her role as a farmer's wife: "I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life" (296). The 'inner glow' and 'fire of life' to which Jimmy refers speak to *Ántonia*'s happiness and contentment at the novel's end, and, thus, Cather is able to imagine a happier fate for her heroine than Steinbeck forecasts for the unfortunate Joads. It is an important omission that Cather does not provide much of a glimpse of the public opinion of *Ántonia* in these closing scenes: it is as if the only opinions that truly matter are those of Jimmy, *Ántonia*'s family, and *Ántonia* herself. *Ántonia* in turn appears content with her life, and, thus, Jimmy feels a tremendous sense of happiness that his friend has finally found peace.

Both of these novels create telling portraits of powerful women, and in both cases, their authors succeed at doing so by forging women characters who embody important aspects of masculinized femininity. For Steinbeck, Ma Joad emblemizes the strong American woman: she is single-mindedly focused on the support of her struggling family, and she never fails to take that family's needs into account. Although Ma largely occupies the traditional female role

of a domestic labourer, she is able to find her voice and contradict the opinions of the male members of her family and, in doing so, make decisions for the entire family that would otherwise have been left to Pa and the other Joad men. Ma passes her strength on to Rose of Sharon, who, by the novel's conclusion, finds the strength to commit a harrowing deed of charity—one that both plays into female stereotypes of women as nurturers but also exceeds these stereotypes by showcasing the leadership Rose of Sharon has learned from Ma.

Importantly, some of Steinbeck's other characters, such as Preacher Casy and Tom, also push the boundaries of accepted definitions of gender identity—the preacher himself self-consciously acknowledging his nonnormative performance of his gender role. In many of these cases, the affect arises, whether directly or indirectly, from these characters' relationship with the land, particularly since the Joads' misfortunes stem directly from their loss of their family farm and their inability to support themselves financially as agricultural labourers in California.

Where Steinbeck succeeds at creating strong women and empathetic men who do not frequently arouse the criticism of their peers, Cather differs by acknowledging the hardships faced by those who do not fit normative moulds of gender identity. But while Steinbeck ends *The Grapes of Wrath* on a somber note with the Joads' fate seeming bleak at best, Cather crafts a world wherein a woman who embodies a clearly defined sense of masculinity is eventually able to find a lasting sense of happiness and belonging despite her difference, even if she fails to find financial prosperity. As with Steinbeck's Joads, Cather's *Ántonia* time and again displays her nonnormative gender performance as a result of the affect produced by the land—in this case, the construct of farming binds together the idea of *Ántonia* as a masculine woman with the gender values of the majority around her who view her as an outsider. The affect holds together these elements—'sticking,' as Ahmed would say, to the very farm she works on and the farmer's

clothes she wears—to cast *Ántonia* as an other, even though she is able to find happiness apart from this majority by the novel's ending. Accordingly, when *Ántonia* moves to the town of Blackhawk, the affect produced by the land remains 'stuck' to the land itself, as the physical vivacity that allows her to be a successful farmer is mistaken for overt sexuality in this urban environment, and she in turn finds far less happiness and acceptance in town. Finally, Cather's heroine is able to find her lasting sense of peace only after returning to the land that spawned her nonnormative affect, as *Ántonia* finds acceptance with her family in the country. Hence, where Steinbeck succeeds at pushing the boundaries of gender identity with his characters, Cather perhaps exceeds feminism in that her heroine finds a lasting sense of peace and happiness that likely eludes Steinbeck's Joads.

Both of these works, however, have commonality in that the affect produced by this seemingly quite human construct of the land and farming elicits a tremendous amount of alienation for the novels' characters: the Joads' relationship with farming proves to be one of misfortune and raw survival as they are forced off their land and subsequently fail to find prosperity, while *Ántonia* struggles to find acceptance among her peers despite finding happiness by the novel's conclusion. The truth that farming—a seemingly more human construct than animals, given that farming is entirely human engineered—produces more alienation than do these authors' characters' relationships with animals allows for the view that Steinbeck and Cather found the more human aspects of their American society to be more alienating—a trend that continues in my next chapter with my examination of these authors' depictions of relationships with an even more human construct still: the home and domesticity.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### Affecting Domesticity:

#### Empowered Sexuality in *East of Eden* and *A Lost Lady*

The previous chapters of this thesis have examined nonhuman constructs that were increasingly human, arguing that the turn towards more human examples of the nonhuman brings about the most alienation for Steinbeck's and Cather's characters—particularly in the authors' characters' performance of gender identity in relation to affect. This final chapter, in turn, examines the most human construct of the examples I have looked at—the home and domesticity—and once again looks at the ways that this very human nonhuman construct brings about affect that causes characters to perform their gender in nonnormative manners.

Steinbeck's *East of Eden* presents one of the author's most controversial characters: the brothel keeper Cathy Ames. From Cathy's earliest appearance in the novel, Steinbeck details the ways in which she lies to, deceives, and ruins the men in her life for her own personal gain, from her schoolteacher to her own father. Her marriage to Adam Trask—one of the novel's 'Adam' characters in its biblical parable—presents her with the opportunity to conform to societal norms when she gives birth to two children, but Cathy instead chooses to abandon her family and pursue a financially successful career as a prostitute and eventual brothel keeper. While many critics, such as the aforementioned Gladstein, have argued that Steinbeck's characterization of Cathy—later 'Kate' in her career in the brothel—is highly misogynistic given her lack of a conscience and her very clear-cut evil nature, a handful of scholars, such as Kelly-Rae Meyer, have seen Cathy as a symbol of empowered femininity. Time and again, Cathy uses her sexuality to destroy powerful men to her own personal benefit, and her status as a successful

financially independent woman alone points towards the latter of those two appraisals. But whether misogynistic or empowered, Steinbeck's depiction of Cathy unquestionably upholds her as a character who fully embodies a nonnormative performance of gender identity. From her projection of a masculinized sense of potent sexuality, to her decision to abandon her own family, Cathy, in her relationship with the home and domesticity, displays the least normative behaviour of any of the characters I have previously examined. And though Cathy finds temporary happiness as a brothel keeper, her suicide in the novel's latter chapters indicates her immense suffering—a suffering that arises from her lack of affect in relation to domesticity, given her clear misgivings over her abandonment of her children.

In the novella *A Lost Lady*, Cather likewise creates a portrait of powerful, even masculinized, women's sexuality. As it progresses, the novel's 'lost lady,' Mrs. Marian Forrester, gradually becomes trapped by her domestic life and role as Captain Daniel Forrester's wife. Given that Mrs. Forrester drinks to the point of severely damaging her health and also carries out several extra-marital affairs throughout the novel, it is quite evident that she does not fit into the domestic sphere happily. While the narrator—Niel Herbert—bases his infatuation with Mrs. Forrester on the assumption that she is well-equipped for this domestic role, he later learns that his love of her was based on the mould that Captain Forrester attempted to place her into—a mould into which she does not happily fit. Yet, even given Mrs. Forrester's immense amount of emotional suffering over the course of the early stages of her life, Cather is still able to imagine a happy ending for her character—a character who, with her immense sexual confidence and strong-willed desire to remedy her situation through the seduction of younger men, runs counter to early-twentieth-century notions of what a proper woman should be. The affect produced by Mrs. Forrester's relation to the home brings about behavior in her that drives

her away from a traditional performance of gender identity, as her outward sexuality later in life thoroughly challenges Niel's idealization of her.

Yet, unlike Cathy Ames, Mrs. Forrester is able to parlay her nonnormative performance of affect and gender into a happy life by the novel's conclusion, as Niel learns that she was happy at the time of her death. Cather is able to imagine a lasting sense of happiness for a character who contradicts normative notions of gender-performance—a feat that Steinbeck is only able to accomplish temporarily with Cathy, although Mrs. Forrester evidently suffers extensively before finding happiness late in life. This construct of the nonhuman—the home and domesticity—is the most abundantly human of the constructs that I examine in this thesis—arguably being a fully human construct at that, though perhaps excluding the home as a physical space. It hence follows that since the characters examined in this chapter are seemingly the least happy in the face of the affect produced by this construct, these characters—and perhaps their authors—find the most human aspects of their contemporary American society the most alienating and most suffocating.

Cathy's powerful ability to manipulate others to her benefit is apparent throughout the novel, but some of Steinbeck's most insightful examinations of her supposedly evil nature come through Cathy's own assessment of herself. After Cathy's forlorn husband, Adam Trask, learns of rumours of a new brothel run by a seductress named Kate, he seeks out this Kate, rightfully surmising that she is his estranged wife. After Adam confronts Kate over her decision to abandon their family, Kate's own words speak to her view of herself as an empowered woman who refuses to bend to the will of anyone in her life, in particular to the will of any man:

She smiled. "Maybe you've struck it," she said. "Do you think I want to be a human? Look at those pictures! I'd rather be a dog than a human. But I'm not a

dog. I'm smarter than humans. Nobody can hurt me. Don't worry about danger." She waved to the filing cabinets. "I have a hundred beautiful pictures in there, and those men know that if anything should happen to me—anything—one hundred letters, each one with a picture, would be dropped in the mail, and each letter will go where it will do the most harm." (321)

Kate's own words point to a hidden truth behind her blackmailing of the powerful men of her community: though she may be inherently evil and manipulative—not human, as Adam calls her—Kate commits these deeds partially because she sees so clearly the moral flaws in humanity. The men she manipulates, though important members of society, have all been guilty of taking advantage of underprivileged women in the brothel—women with no other viable means of sustaining themselves than selling their sexuality. However, despite their moral transgressions, these men would not be judged by society for their cruelty to the brothel workers, but for their 'perverse' sexual acts instead. Kate sees clearly the hypocrisy in a society that would overlook the harm done to women and instead judge men for their sexual abnormalities just as she sees the hypocrisy in a society that allows men of this nature to ascend to positions of power. It is this evil inherent in humanity that drives Kate towards being the deceptive, cunning, manipulative seductress that she is, even if it drives her to the point of being so evil herself that she nearly destroys the good-natured Adam Trask. Kate preys on the people in her life much the way the brothel users prey on the prostitutes at the brothel, and, since her sexuality is one of the primary means of her predation, she projects a masculinized sense of sexuality. Cathy Ames may in fact be an outright evil character, but so are many of the men she victimizes, and her self-assessment as 'smarter than humans' therefore seems quite apt, especially given the financial security and independence she attains as a result of her cunning nature.

During the same conversation with Adam, Kate's recollection of her childhood likewise furthers the idea that she is a reflection of the flawed society around her rather than an innately evil being. Steinbeck details Cathy's memories of childhood:

“When I was a little girl I knew what stupid lying fools they were—my own mother and father pretending goodness. And they weren't good. I knew them. I could make them do whatever I wanted. I could always make people do what I wanted. When I was half-grown I made a man kill himself. He pretended to be good too, and all he wanted was to go to be with me—a little girl.” (319)

Cathy's memories point to the brutal truth that the schoolteacher whom she manipulated into suicide was in fact a pedophile; hence, while Cathy's actions may not be forthright and positive, the fact remains that the man she manipulated was guilty of a desire at least as evil as the crime she inflicted upon him. Cathy's assertion that she 'knows' people's true nature indicates that she is a reflection of society's moral shortcomings and that she sees through people's hypocrisy. From an early age, Kate is aware of the corruption of people, and the woman she grows up to be stands as a symbol of the moral bankruptcy of America as much as a symbol of pure evil.

If Cathy, then, is more a projection of the corruption of early-twentieth-century America, then her status as an independent, financially successful woman adds to the view that she is more than a purely negative characterization. After Kate assumes the management of the brothel from Faye—the original owner whom Kate slowly poisons to death and from whom she usurps the ownership of the business—Steinbeck describes the change that comes over the establishment as a result of Cathy's tight management: “During the following months a gradual change came over Faye's house. The girls were sloppy and touchy. If they had been told to clean themselves and their rooms a deep resentment would have set in and the house would have reeked of ill temper.

But it didn't work that way" (242). Kate is able to effectively lead the girls and inspire them to take better care of themselves and the brothel, and as a result business increases dramatically after Cathy takes over from Faye. This effective leadership—another subtle form of manipulation—allows Cathy to prosper financially and amass a small fortune by the time the novel concludes. Given her financial success, Kate proves to be a shrewd business woman on top of being a cunning manipulator of people, and, at least in respect to her strong though admittedly self-serving leadership and monetary wealth, also proves to be an example of powerful femininity.

However, though Steinbeck casts Cathy as a powerful woman, he at the same time underlines her moral 'shortcomings,' even going to far as to refer to her as a 'monster' in the eighth chapter. At the beginning of this chapter, Steinbeck comments on Cathy's lack of normal human empathy:

I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents. Some you can see, misshapen and horrible, with huge heads or tiny bodies; some are born with no arms, no legs, some with three arms, some with tails or mouths in odd places. They are accidents and no one's fault, as used to be thought. Once they were considered the visible punishments for concealed sins.

And just as there are physical monsters, can there not be mental or psychic monsters born? The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or a malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?

Monsters are variations from the accepted normal to a greater or a less degree. . . . A man who loses his arms in an accident has a great struggle to adjust

himself to the lack, but one born without arms suffers only from people who find him strange. . . . No, to a monster the norm must seem monstrous, since everyone is normal to himself. (71)

We see from this passage that Steinbeck's narrator at this point considers Cathy to be a 'malformed soul,' and moments later, he indicates that she is just this type of 'monster,' as he begins to relate the story of her childhood (72). Yet, despite describing Cathy as monstrous, the narrator also takes great pains to highlight her difference from other people, pointing out that 'the norm' would 'seem monstrous' to a 'monster.' Cathy thus appears a stark example of someone who is outside the boundaries of normativity, and her lack of normativity even arouses some empathy from Steinbeck's narrator himself, as he imagines the difficulties faced by someone who is inherently different from everyone else. Therefore, though Cathy is clearly an evil character who lacks most human empathy, the narrator refuses to blame her for her behaviour as he describes her monstrous nature as an 'accident.'

My above assessment of Steinbeck's empathy towards Cathy and her lack of normativity finds further footing in the later passage where the narrator questions whether Cathy is indeed a monster at all. At the beginning of chapter seventeen, the narrator re-examines his description of Cathy as a monster:

When I said Cathy was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and reread the footnotes, and I wonder if it was true. The trouble is that since we cannot know what she wanted, we will never know whether or not she got it. If rather than running toward something, she ran away from something, we can't know whether she escaped. . .

. It is easy to say she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why.

(182)

This passage, which explicitly ties in with the previous passage from chapter eight, adds an even greater amount of sympathy to Steinbeck's characterization of Cathy—a sense of sympathy that supports a reading of her as more than merely negative. Although Steinbeck does not name the 'something' that Cathy seeks to escape, we see her unease with human corruption in others parts of the novel, such as in her blackmailing of the powerful, corrupt men who frequent her brothel. Implicitly, the corruption of American society thus seems to be this unnamed force from which Cathy flees, and Cathy herself therefore stands as perhaps more of a symptom of the sickness in society than as a figure of pure evil. Thus, while Steinbeck clearly depicts Cathy as a woman lacking in empathy and compassion—a woman lacking in humanity, even—he at the same time implies an explanation for the lack of those positive traits. Meanwhile, Cathy's abundant strength in other areas of life—her success as a business owner, her destruction of corrupt men, for example—in turn casts her as a powerful feminist creation: as a self-supporting, cunningly intelligent woman who is able to successfully manipulate and destroy all of her opponents—be they men or women alike—all for her personal gain.

Although Steinbeck does seem to imply an explanation for Cathy's lack of empathy, the truth still remains that she lacks some of the most fundamentally human characteristics of all—chiefly empathy and compassion. As the above reading suggests, Steinbeck casts Cathy as an almost nonhuman figure—an assertion that is supported by Cathy's own comment that she would "rather be a dog than a human" and that she is "smarter than a human" (321). Since this thesis is concerned largely with the interplay between human characters and nonhuman constructs, it seems relevant that Steinbeck casts Cathy herself as a type of nonhuman figure.

The relationship between the nonhuman Kate and the nonhuman construct of the home thus appears even more lacking in humanity than all of the previous examples of character-construct relationships that this thesis has examined. This lack of humanity in the relationship supports the argument that Steinbeck found the most human aspects of American society to be the most alienating, particularly since the home is the most human construct that I have examined. Cathy's relationship with the nonhuman in this novel thus appears the most lacking in humanity of all the character-construct relationships I have examined, especially since Kate herself is described in nonhuman terms.

While it is given that she is in some ways an empowered woman as well as an outright 'monster,' Cathy additionally displays a highly nonnormative relationship with the home and domesticity. As a mere teenager, she deceives her parents and steals her father's fortune, only to burn down their house and them with it. She marries Adam only out of the need for recovery after being beaten nearly to death by the brothel keeper Mr. Edwards. In time, she deceives Adam into caring for her and even gives birth to his two children before abandoning her family after regaining enough of her strength to strike out on her own. Cathy, while still being an empowered woman, at the same time displays nonnormative behaviour in relation to this most human of constructs. The affect produced by Cathy's relationship with the home binds together her nonnormative familial values and lack of desire for a traditional domestic life with the idea of her as an emblem of fierce independence and the construct of the home.

Cathy's lack of normative affect in relation to the home is apparent in her early interactions with Adam and his friend, Samuel Hamilton. The following passage foreshadows Cathy's rejection of her family as Steinbeck carefully points to her lack of empathy and human emotion as she eats dinner with the two men:

Samuel suddenly realized that he was making his speech last to prevent silence from falling on the table. He paused, and the silence dropped. Cathy looked down at her plate while she ate a sliver of roast lamb. She looked up as she put it between her small sharp teeth. Her wide-set eyes communicated nothing. Samuel shivered. (170)

While Adam remains unaware of Cathy's coldness, the more intuitive Samuel notices the lack of humanity in her demeanour. Steinbeck's description of Cathy's 'small sharp teeth' meanwhile underlines her predatory nature, even if that predation is born out of disgust for society's shortcomings. This passage serves as a portent of Cathy's eventual abandonment of her family and her manipulation of the other figures in her life, just as it echoes her earlier nefarious exploits with her parents.

Cathy's reaction to the birth of her twin children, Caleb and Aron, likewise indicates her nonnormative relationship with the domesticity. After Samuel aids her in delivering her children, Cathy immediately rejects the infants as she displays tremendous coldness in response to motherhood:

"You have two sons," Samuel said. "Two fine sons. They aren't alike.

Each one born separate in his own sack."

She inspected him coldly and without interest.

Samuel said, "I'll show your boys to you."

"No," she said without emphasis.

"Now, dearie, don't you want to see your sons?"

"No, I don't want them. . . . I don't want them. I want you to cover the windows and take the light away." (192)

Even as Samuel suggests that Cathy is merely tired and will eventually warm to the children, she remains cold and uninterested with the lack of ‘emphasis’ in her voice casting her in an almost nonhuman light. Her insistence on being in the darkness, though possibly born out of her sheer fatigue after giving birth, likewise points to her unemotional, sinister nature as she reiterates that she does not want her children. Cathy is indeed shrouded in darkness, both physically and emotionally. Her choice to flee her family soon after (while shooting Adam in the process) merely cements her nonnormative performance of affect in relation to the home and domesticity, as Cathy is characterized as completely lacking in normative domestic values. However, despite failing to find a normative family life in her relationships with her parents, Adam, and her children, Cathy does later create a type of distinctly nonnormative family in her brothel.

While Cathy clearly fails to live a normative family life with her parents and Adam, she nevertheless approximates a family dynamic in her relationship with Faye and the girls in the brothel. After Kate masks her true deceptive intentions and thoroughly placates Faye, the latter takes her on as an adopted daughter and Kate thereafter refers to Faye as “Mother” (244). But although Kate merely caters to Faye in order to assume ownership of her adopted mother’s business and fortune, Kate still manages to create a semblance of family in their relationship. Steinbeck’s narrator describes the relationship between the two women as follows:

Ordinarily both Faye and Kate had their supper at the long table in the dining room, but on Sunday nights when Alex was off and the girls dined on thick sandwiches, Kate served supper for two in Faye’s room. It was a pleasant and ladylike time. There was always some little delicacy, very special and good—foie gras or a tossed salad, pastry bought at Lang’s Bakery just across Main Street. (245)

It is important to note that in this passage the narrator insists that these intimate meals are a ‘pleasant and ladylike time,’ particularly since Kate fails in many ways to cultivate a normative sense of femininity. Although Adam and other people see Cathy as an ideal woman, her true nature is far from ideal, and thus the only semblance of normativity that Kate is able to embody comes as a sort of insincere act. Cathy seeks to perform normative womanhood only when it suits her best, and, as we have seen, she at other times performs a distinctly predatory version of masculinized womanhood that mirrors the predatory nature of many of the novel’s men.

Throughout this discussion, I have alternately referred to Catherine Ames/Trask as either Cathy or Kate: to her parents and her adopted family, she is Cathy; to the workers in the brothel in her second life, she is Kate. Cathy’s adoption of the abbreviated, more playful ‘Kate’ for her role in the brothel perhaps speaks to the cunning, deceptive nature of her role in this position. To Faye, and later to the men who she blackmails, she is at first the carefree ‘Kate,’ yet, they soon discover that she is far more serious and sinister beneath the surface. In essence, Cathy performs the playful acts in her role of Kate as an insincere act—she is a daughter to Faye, a mother to the brothel workers, and a mistress to her customers. However, this playfulness is mere performance: she takes advantage of Faye and her customers and uses the girls for her financial gain. However, though the carefree attitude that Kate initially passes off in deceiving people is an act, the truth that she does indeed perform this character to gain an advantage over other people is sincere and true to her nature. While Cathy Ames/Trask is in no way a loving child to her parents nor a faithful wife to Adam, her Kate persona may indeed be closer to her true self, even if the playfulness in her performance is insincere. In turn, Cathy seems incapable of a normative relationship with the idea of domesticity, and it is perhaps only in her performance of the Kate character that she is able to find any semblance of a satisfactory domestic life.

Yet, though Cathy finds temporary stability and perhaps even happiness in her nonnormative brothel household, her decision to take her own life at the novel's end speaks to her final unhappiness. Additionally, Cathy's unhappiness at her life's end reveals her underlying sense of humanity that surfaces after she meets her sons Cal and Aron. After Kate drinks poison to take her own life, she lies about thinking of the family she could have had, as Steinbeck's description of her thoughts reveals an underlying sense of regret and possibly even humanity in Kate's nature:

Other faces peered in from the sides of her eyes—her father and mother, and Charles, and Adam, and Samuel Hamilton, and then Aron, and she could see Cal smiling at her.

He didn't have to speak. The glint of his eyes said, "You missed something. They had something and you missed it." . . .

Her eyes closed and dizzy nausea shook her. She opened her eyes and stared about in terror. The gray room darkened and the cone of light flowed and rippled like water. . . . And her heart beat solemnly and her breathing slowed as she grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared—and she had never been.

(551)

The thing that Cathy 'misses,' revealed by her memory of Cal's eyes, is the empathy and humanity that she chose to forgo in abandoning her family and, earlier, in murdering her parents. The characters she thinks of in this moment all to some extent display the humanity that Cathy lacks, and Steinbeck's description of the 'terror' she feels and her 'solemn' heartbeat while she dies indicates that Cathy regrets her decisions. This regret is the reason she wills her estate to Aron, whom she sees as lacking the nefarious nature that she embodies, while she cuts Cal out of

her will specifically because he reminds her of herself. Yet, in this final moment, she sees that Cal also has that ‘something’ that she missed, and that he, too, has an empathetic nature—a realization that only adds to her regret. While Steinbeck does allow Cathy to find temporary peace in the brothel, her tremendous regret and unhappy fate suggest the author’s inability to imagine lasting happiness for characters who do not fit normative moulds of gender identity, while the alienation and unhappiness that Cathy experiences in relation to domesticity further suggest that Steinbeck sees clearly the inhumanity and alienation present in the most human aspects of his contemporary America.

To this point, much Steinbeck scholarship has seen Cathy as a thoroughly negative character. Gladstein refers to Kate as “the most vicious female villain in American fiction” (243) and in the same article argues that the majority of the women in *East of Eden* are negatively portrayed and one-dimensional (245). However, among these scholars, Kelley-Rae Meyer seems unique in her assessment of Kate as a powerful feminist creation. Meyer argues that Cathy’s “masculine characteristics,” rather than outright casting her as a pure villain, “instead raise her up to be a successful member of patriarchal society,” while Meyer, at the same time, acknowledges that “Steinbeck portrays Cathy as a woman lacking in traditional feminine emotions and motherly instinct” (30). Meyer’s article appears to be unique in its assessment of Cathy as a pro-feminist creation, and while this chapter also argues for Cathy as a powerful woman, it is important to keep in mind that Kate is also a thoroughly evil character. Though Cathy may be a reflection of the evil in American society, Steinbeck also plays on stereotypes of women as prostitutes, even if he succeeds at pushing the boundaries of those negative depictions given that Cathy is clearly empowered in addition to being negatively portrayed. In this novel, Steinbeck works within acceptable stereotypes by casting the evil Kate as a brothel

worker/keeper. At the same time, he broadens the limits of the virgin/whore dichotomy by giving Cathy so much power, much as he does by subtly empowering the domestically confined Ma Joad.

Cathy's nonnormative behaviour, however, is not exclusive to her alone among the characters of the book. Lee Chong, for example, displays subtly feminine behaviour in his mothering of the Trask children. Steinbeck's narrator also tells a story about his sister Mary—a girl who wants to be a boy. This bending of gender norms substantiates the notion that Cathy is more than a purely evil character and that there are also feminist undertones to her characterization. The narrator recalls his sister's attitudes in childhood: "My sister Mary did not want to be a girl. It was a misfortune she could not get used to. She was an athlete, a marble player, a pitcher of one-o'-cat, and the trappings of a girl inhibited her" (276). While Mary's desire for freedom from the social expectations placed on her as a young girl is a powerful example of Steinbeck pushing the boundaries of gender identity, the narrator insists moments later that his sister eventually learned to accept her womanhood. Yet, though Mary's eventual acceptance of traditional femininity somewhat softens the feminist impact of her character, she nevertheless stands as a clearly defined marker of the text's underlying feminist theme—a feminism that pushes the acceptable limits of gender identity, especially given that Cathy stands as a subtly empowered woman in a still-patriarchal world.

Lee Chong, the Trask family's household servant, likewise stands as a stark counterpoint to Cathy, though Cathy and Lee display similarly nonnormative gendered behaviour: where Cathy is a woman who eschews the values of the home and the family, Lee is a man who wholeheartedly embraces domestic work and even takes care to ensure that his work is done with meticulous care. But where Cathy lacks empathy, Lee is abundantly empathetic. Steinbeck

describes Lee's role in the Trask household: "Lee had been [Aaron and Cal Trask's] contact with the adult world, and Lee had managed to not only raise, feed, clothe, and discipline the boys, but he had also given them a respect for their father" (28). As the boys mature, Lee is their primary caregiver: he cooks their meals, cleans their clothes, teaches them moral values, and reads them bedtime stories. As gender theorists, such as the previously noted Michael Kimmel, explain, the role of childcare in the early-twentieth-century largely fell on the shoulders of women. The Trask family is quite unique in that it does not have a female mother figure, and Adam is thus a single father. Yet, Lee fills the role of mother in this nonnormative family and even manages to instill respect for Adam in the twins, despite the family's lack of a true mother. For Lee, the affect produced by the home differs widely from that of Cathy given that Lee fits comfortably into his domestic role where Cathy does not. However, Lee and Cathy's nonnormative gender identities also mirror each other considering that Lee is a domestic man and Cathy is an entirely nondomestic woman.

However, although Lee seems at heart to be a positive example of a feminized man, one must still account for Steinbeck's adoption of the stereotype of the emasculated Asian American man. In the first-half of the twentieth century, American literature often depicted Asian men as feminized and lacking in abundant virility and sexual prowess, while Asian women were shown to be overly sexualized and delicate. Sau Ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana concisely explain the roots of these stereotypes, commenting on the origins of this emasculation:

During the first period, Asian American gender and sexuality were understood, first (by the dominant society), as so at odds with white norms as to be at best exotic, at worst freakish, and, later (by Asian Americanists), as oppression-induced departures from "normal" gender and sexual roles in a

"natural" family formation. From the beginning, discriminatory racial practices have presented Asian American men's gender and sexuality as deviant.

"America's capitalist economy," Espiritu explains, "wanted Asian male workers but not their families. To ensure greater profitability from immigrants' labor and to decrease the costs of reproduction—the expenses of housing, feeding, clothing, and educating the workers' dependents—employers often excluded 'nonproductive' family members such as women and children" (1997, 17). A whole series of Exclusion laws, including legislation that revoked a U.S. woman's citizenship upon marriage to an "alien ineligible to citizenship," ensured a long-term lack of women in early Asian immigrant communities. Such laws led to a conspicuous absence of wives and traditional families in Chinese immigrant communities and resulted in "bachelor societies" of single Asian men who performed "'feminized' forms of work—such as laundry, restaurant, and other service-sector jobs." (178)

We see echoes of this brief history in Lee's story: he is a migrant Chinese American who was separated from his family because of the labour laws of his day; he partakes in the 'feminized form of work' to which these authors refer; he longs to one day open a small shop and live on as a bachelor. While Steinbeck clearly embraces these stereotypes about Asian American men, he nevertheless handles the story of Lee's past with care and poignancy, and though he depicts Lee as a feminized man, this portrait is not construed as negative in any way. Lee, indeed, is one of the most respected members of the small circle of people surrounding the Trask family, and Adam and the children frequently rely on Lee for advice in their most difficult times. Thus, much as he does with Ma Joad, Steinbeck appears to embrace stereotypes even while expanding

the terms of those stereotypes themselves, as he casts Lee in a highly admirable light despite the emasculation. Lee is, in turn, by far the most intellectual character in the novel and seems at times a stand in for the author figure himself in addition to being strikingly similar to the outsider-intellectual-type figure often found in Cather's fiction—Jimmy Burden, Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*, and Niel Herbert standing as key examples.

Much like Cathy Ames, Cather's Mrs. Marian Forrester displays an empowered sense of femininity—a femininity that at times seems even masculinized and that pushes the boundaries of normative womanhood. Mrs. Forrester's differences from other women are apparent from her earliest introduction into the novel, where Cather describes Marian's attempts at domestic work and loose manner of dressing:

She was always there, just outside the front door, to welcome their visitors, having been warned of their approach by the sound of hoofs and the rumble of wheels on the wooden bridge. If she happened to be in the kitchen, helping her Bohemian cook, she came out in her apron, waving a buttery iron spoon, or shook cherry-stained fingers at the new arrival. She had never stopped to pin up a lock; she was attractive in dishabille, and she knew it. . . . in the eyes of the admiring middle-aged men who visited there, whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was “lady-like” because she chose to do it. (12-13)

At least in these early passages, Marian appears to be the ideal domestic wife: she greets the Captain's guests warmly and helps the couple's cook in the kitchen. However, she differs from other women in her loose attitude towards her appearance: she does not hesitate to greet guests even when she is dirtied from her work in the kitchen, and she fails to keep at tidy hairstyle partially because she knows she is attractive even in 'dishabille.' The narrator's insistence that

the men nevertheless view Marian's behaviour as 'lady-like' merely points to the truth that such behaviour might not be tolerated as feminine were it to come at the hands of a less attractive woman. Cather's characterization of Mrs. Forrester hence pushes the envelope on normative gender identity from the outset, as Cather describes Marian as lacking certain normative feminine traits.

Mrs. Forrester's relationship with Niel Herbert over the duration of the novel reveals much of her lack of normativity as Niel slowly discovers that Marian is not happy in her role as Captain Forrester's wife, but early in the novel, Niel admires Marian's seemingly harmonious adherence to domestic life. Cather delicately describes the pair's earliest encounter, which occurs after Niel falls from a tree and breaks his arm. As Mrs. Forrester tends to Niel's injury, Cather writes, "[w]hat soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white throat rising and falling so quickly. The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again" (28). Niel's earliest interactions with Marian point to his sexual infatuation with her, but, more importantly, they also present the formation of his earliest memories of her, which cast her as an emblem of domestic harmony as Niel feels that he will 'never be in so nice a place again.' This childhood impression of Marian, coupled with his sexual longing, compels him to keep in touch with her for the remainder of her life, even after he learns that she is not the happy domestic caretaker that he initially supposes her to be.

Later in the novel, Niel begins to learn of Marian's displeasure with her marriage as she takes to heavy drinking and as her health begins to suffer. Cather describes Niel's impression of Mrs. Forrester as the latter's discomfort begins to surface: "When she stopped beside him to feel his clothes, he smelled a sharp odour of spirits. Was she ill, he wondered, or merely so bored

that she had been trying to dull herself?" (74). The answer to Niel's question of course lies in the confining nature of Marian's role as Captain Forrester's wife, particularly once the captain grows ill and starts to require more of her attention and care. For Marian, the affect produced by the home and domesticity at once presents her with a tremendous amount of alienation as she is made very unhappy and driven to heavy drinking because she is forced to care for a much older man whose health is far from good, yet, at the same time, the affect also drives her further from normativity as she eventually seeks male companionship outside of her marriage.

Marian's adulterous relationships with younger men not only stand as paramount examples of her nonnormative behaviour but also prove extremely liberating in that she is able to live in sexual and emotional freedom and at least temporarily escape the burdens of her marriage. As the Captain's health wanes, Marian's desires stray, and Niel soon observes that she finds company with men much younger than her husband. Later in the same chapter, Cather notes Niel's observations:

Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the road-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else. . . . His admiration of Mrs. Forrester went back to that, just as, he felt, she herself went back to it. He rather liked the stories, even the spiteful ones, about the gay life she led in Colorado, and the young men she kept dangling about her every winter. . . . From that disparity, he believed, came the subtlest thrill of her fascination. (78)

While Niel admires Mrs. Forrester most for her domestic role as her husband's wife, he also refuses to judge her for her extra-marital affairs and for keeping the company of much younger

men. As the narrator notes, it is in this ‘disparity’—the disparity between being a caring wife and at the same time being an adulterer—that Niel finds the most ‘fascination,’ and it is hence Marian’s role as both a faithful wife and outrageous adulterer that attracts Niel.

As much as Mrs. Forrester is able to successfully adopt a domestic role as Daniel Forrester’s wife, it is finally her husband’s poor health and his need for her care that cause her unhappiness and spur her towards her extra-marital affairs with men like Frank Ellinger. Suffering from poor health throughout much of the novel, Captain Forrester eventually has a stroke after losing his fortune in the stock-market collapse. The Captain’s fall from health epitomizes Mrs. Forrester’s struggle between maintaining her image as a happy wife and satisfying her own desires as a still-attractive woman much in need of companionship. Cather notes Marian’s struggles, writing,

A stroke could not finish a man like Daniel Forrester. He was kept in his bed for three weeks, and Niel helped Mrs. Forrester and Ben Keezer take care of him. . . . When Mrs. Forrester was not in the Captain’s room, or in the kitchen preparing special meals for him, she was at her desk. (94)

We see Mrs. Forrester’s struggle to keep up with the demands of her sick husband’s care, and importantly, Cather observes that Marian spends her free time when not engaged with caring for her husband at her desk, where she presumably writes and reads letters to and from men such as her lover Ellinger. The affect produced by the home in this instance leaves Marian longing for an alternative form of domesticity—one where she does not need to be tied up with the Captain, even if it nevertheless does seem clear that she still loves her husband, despite his ill health and the burden he places on her with his domestic needs. Thus, in the face of this most human of constructs, Cather’s character suffers serious unhappiness and hardship—a hardship made more

difficult by Captain Forrester's loss of his fortune and subsequent inability to provide the financial comforts to which Mrs. Forrester grows accustomed.

Although an argument could be made that Marian's nonnormative relationship with domesticity does not stem directly from domesticity itself, but instead from the truth that Captain Forrester is a much older man who suffers from poor health, her nonnormative performance of affect does indeed seem closely tied with her idea of domesticity when one examines all of her romantic relationships as a whole. Captain Forrester is much older than Marian, and as such, is perhaps not the most suitable of partners; Frank Ellinger is closer to her age, but their relationship is still highly nonnormative given that Marian is married to Daniel at the time of her affair with Frank; Ivy Peters is an equally nonnormative partner given his much younger age, and thus it seems that Marian is fully incapable of approaching romance—and with it, domesticity—in a normative way.

Marian's final phone conversation with Ellinger reveals the lack of normativity in their relationship, as they come into conflict after Frank reveals that he will no longer be visiting the Forrester household now that he is married. As the former lovers exchange pleasantries, Niel's reaction as he listens in on the conversation points to the extent to which Frank has taken advantage of Marian while not taking their relationship seriously:

A long, listening pause. Niel stared stupidly at the dark window. He steeled his nerves for violent reproaches. The voice he heard behind him was her most charming: playful, affectionate, intimate, with a thrill of pleasant excitement that warmed its slight formality and burned through the common-place words like the colour in an opal. He simply held his breath while she fluttered on. (132-133)

Niel holds his breath specifically because he has seen all along that Frank has been taking advantage of Marian while never intending to make more of their relationship, even with Captain Forrester's imminent death. Niel's intuition proves correct, when moments later, the conversation goes sour and Marian is left sobbing and heartbroken (133-134). Although Marian could have potentially had a normative relationship had she married someone closer to her own age, she ultimately seems drawn to partners who fall outside the bounds of normative values, just as her personal vibrant vivacity sets her apart from other women and allows her to pick and choose the suitors she most desires. Niel describes Marian time and again as being different from all the other women: more vibrant, more charming, more lovely. It seems as though Marian is in fact different in more ways than she outwardly shows, and her choice of partners throughout her life speaks to this nonnormativity. Though she clearly has deep feelings for Frank, she has her affair with him only after marrying Daniel and watching the Captain's health fail, and thus her lack of normativity in relation to domesticity seems to stem from her own nonnormative ideas of romance and her desire to live outside the bounds of commonplace existence. This lack of normativity, though it causes her heartbreak and trouble, nevertheless allows her to live a sexually empowered life—a feat that casts Marian as a powerful feminist character, despite the hardships she encounters.

Marian's unhappiness only continues to grow as Captain Forrester's health further diminishes, and, later, after the Captain dies, Mrs. Forrester becomes less discreet in her keeping of younger male companions. This emboldened use of her sex appeal to attract younger men stands in stark contrast to the conservative attitudes of the other townsfolk and in turn speaks to Marian's empowered sexuality. Where, traditionally, it would be customary for an older man to take a younger woman as a companion, as in the case of Captain Forrester's marriage to Mrs.

Forrester, Marian upsets this traditional balance by having affairs with much younger men. The contrast between Captain Forrester's marriage to Marian and Marian's affairs with men like Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters reveals the extent to which Mrs. Forrester projects a masculinized sense of sexuality—an empowered status that serves as an indication of her lack of normativity. Here, Cather describes Niel's confronting of Marian over the town's incessant gossip and Marian's damaged reputation, writing, "[a]t last Niel had a plain talk with Mrs. Forrester. He told her that people were gossiping about Ivy Peters being there so much. He had heard comments even on the street" (153). The townspeople's reactions to Mrs. Forrester's affairs stand as evidence of the truth that she does not fit into the expectations of her gender, and thus her projection of empowered sexuality does not sit well with her peers.

After the Captain's death, Marian's relationship with the much younger Ivy Peters—an enemy of Niel's from childhood onward—reveals her seeming inability to engage with domesticity in a normative fashion. Niel dislikes Ivy Peters from the novel's early pages where Ivy cruelly mutilates an innocent woodpecker thereby revealing his insensitive nature. Later, after Ivy becomes Marian's lawyer and suspected lover, Niel's description of the young man points to Ivy's untrustworthy nature:

He wasn't one of the people who went to the Forrester's house in the old days. He's one of the younger generation, a few years older than I. He rented part of the Forrester's land for several years before the Captain's death—was their tenant. That was how Mrs. Forrester came to know him. She thinks him a good business man. (149-150)

While Niel cites Marian's feeling that Ivy is a 'good business man' as cause for the pair's interactions, it remains that Peters is a much younger man, and Marian—especially at this stage

of the novel—seems drawn to lovers who are much younger than her since they allow her to feel young again and perhaps recapture some of youth that she perhaps feels she lost in caring for the ailing Captain. Much like Frank Ellinger, Ivy is a bold, confident man—much like the Captain, as well—and Marian seems perpetually drawn to this type of suitor. Niel, meanwhile, fails to arouse Marian’s passions, perhaps because he is too modest and reserved, and also perhaps because he idealizes her too much where these other men do not. Moments after the above passage, Niel’s insistence that Peters “takes the cases nobody else will take” (150) reveals the extent to which Ivy is dishonest—a dishonesty which points to the conclusion that Ivy is taking advantage of Marian much as Ellinger did in her past. Indeed, all of Marian’s lovers to some extent take advantage of her, as it could certainly be argued that the Captain takes advantage of her youth to secure himself a caretaker in his old age, even if he does provide her with financial comfort throughout most of their marriage. Thus, while Marian is certainly an example of a sexually empowered woman given that she has adulterous affairs and takes lovers much younger than her, Cather tempers that empowerment by having the men whom Marian brings into her life deceive her in their own right. While Cather perhaps exceeds Steinbeck’s feminist vision given that Marian supposedly meets a happy ending while Cathy does not, in some respects Cathy remains an equally powerful creation given that she crushes the men who oppose her while Marian allows herself to be used by the men whom she seduces.

Scholars have likewise noted Marian’s loose sexuality and lack of normativity. Stephanie Bower argues that Marian’s sexuality thus goes against the grain of traditional women’s sexuality in the “pioneer period” and instead “works to inscribe the degeneration of the novel's contemporary moment” (60). Bower’s argument that Marian’s loose sexuality anticipates the changing notions of female sexuality in Cather’s contemporary period seems quite

valid, and I would posit that in addition to projecting a ‘deviant’ sexual identity, as Bower describes it, Marian also embodies a masculinized sexual identity. This masculinization of Marian’s gender identity mirrors that of Steinbeck’s Cathy, and, thus, further validates my argument that Steinbeck challenges traditional notions of gender identity in a manner that seems strikingly similar to that of Cather.

However, unlike Cathy Ames, who succumbs to unhappiness and takes her own life, Mrs. Forrester seems able to find a lasting sense of happiness by the novel’s end, despite having an unhappy first marriage and despite the town’s gossip. Niel learns of Mrs. Forrester’s supposedly happy second marriage many years after Mrs. Forrester moves away and drifts out of his life. Marian herself tells Ed Elliot to let Niel know that she found happiness, and Niel’s own insistence that “she was well cared for, to the very end” (174) suggests that Marian meets a happier fate than Cathy does in the Steinbeck novel. Yet, this happy ending is at the same time tempered by the fact that we do not get to see Marian first hand. Ed Elliot’s description of Henry Collins, Marian’s second husband, as “a rich, cranky old Englishman” (174) who “had been married twice before” and is “quarrelsome and rather stingy” (174) could be meant to point to the alternate possibility that Marian’s happiness is less overwhelming than she indicates in her second-hand message to Niel. Thus, while Cather suggests a happy ending, she leaves the door open for a less optimistic interpretation.

However, though Marian’s happy ending is somewhat questionable, it cannot be disputed that she finds far more peace than does Cathy, who harbours tremendous regret while committing suicide. Despite Cathy and Marian’s similarities in terms of their empowered sexuality and in terms of the affect produced by the alienation they feel in relation to domesticity and the home, Cathy is essentially a villainous character, even if she is a reflection of the evil in

society, while Mrs. Forrester is kind-hearted and in no way the inhuman ‘monster’ that Steinbeck at times crafts Cathy to be. It is also suggested that Marian meets a much happier fate than does her Steinbeckian counterpart, once again supporting the view that Cather is able to imagine happier fates for characters who do not fit in with normative models of gender identity. Although Steinbeck may indeed fall short of Cather’s vision of happiness for sexually empowered women, he clearly succeeds at approximating Cather’s feminist creation of a powerful woman who openly pushes the boundaries of acceptable sexual identity, as both Cathy Ames and Marian Forrester embody a powerfully enacted, even masculinized, sense of sexuality—an emboldened sexuality that furthers the bounds of normative notions of gender identity.

## CONCLUSION:

### A Reflection of Difference

In the first chapter of this thesis, we saw how Cather and Steinbeck both work to create nonnormative characterizations of male gender identity that push the boundaries of early-twentieth-century American stereotypes about gender roles. Steinbeck's Lennie Small indeed performs his gender identity in much the manner of a flawed mother, while other characters in *Of Mice and Men*, such as George Milton, also promote nonnormative gender identity. Throughout much of the novella, these nonnormative performances of gender roles are revealed by the affect produced by character-animal interactions—animals being the least human example of the nonhuman constructs examined herein. Cather, similarly, reveals her characters' nonnormative performances of gender identity through the affect that arises from their interactions with animals—Latour and Vaillant's horses and mules bringing about affect that subtly feminizes the pair of men. Yet, in the case of this comparison, Cather perhaps exceeds Steinbeck in her ability to imagine lasting happiness for characters who display nonnormative affective relationships, since Latour and Vaillant thrive in their society where Lennie clearly does not succeed in his.

My second chapter explored human-nonhuman relationships with respect to the construct of farming and the land. We saw that Steinbeck and Cather use farming and their characters' relationships with the land to explore nonnormative performances of affect in relation to gender identity. Steinbeck's characters—Ma Joad, Rose of Sharon, Tom Joad, and Preacher Casy, namely—display nonnormative affect in relation to the land, performing their gender identities in manners that push the boundaries on early-twentieth-century stereotypes. Here, Steinbeck deserves tremendous credit given that these characters are never judged specifically for their

nonnormative performances of gender identity; instead, Steinbeck's creation of feminized men and masculinized women allows these characters to reach powerful limits of human endurance and emotional strength. Yet, the fact still remains that these characters all to some degree meet a very bleak fate—a fate which is brought about chiefly by their relationship with the land.

Cather, in turn, uses farming and the land to highlight *Ántonia*'s nonnormative performance of womanhood—a lack of normativity that casts *Ántonia* as an outsider in her midwestern society. Unlike Steinbeck's Joads, who are never judged for their gender identities, *Ántonia* is viewed by her peers as less than a woman and even as a threat to the social fabric, namely when she migrates to the town of Blackhawk. Thus, while Steinbeck imagines characters who are never looked down on for their nonnormative gendered behaviours, Cather highlights the difficulties faced by people of difference. Importantly, however, Cather creates a lasting sense of peace and happiness for her heroine, who finds acceptance as a farmer's wife by novel's end. Steinbeck, conversely, spurs the Joads towards an unhappy fate, even if Tom perhaps offers a glimpse of hope for the future in his narrative.

Chapter three examined examples of powerful womanhood—Steinbeck's Cathy Ames and Cather's Marian Forrester serving as the prime examples. We saw how Steinbeck works within the virgin/whore dichotomy to expand normative stereotypes about women's behaviour as he creates in Cathy a woman who uses her sexuality in a predatory, even masculine, fashion, although he does create positive woman characters such as Abra who counter Cathy's negativity. Cathy likewise eschews a domestic life in favour of becoming a financially independent businesswoman. Yet, while Cathy is in some ways a powerful feminist character, she also lacks empathy and human emotion, as Steinbeck casts her as a 'monster' of sorts. Cather's Marian is, conversely, in no way an evil character, yet Marian compares to Cathy favourably in respect to

her powerful sexuality—a sexuality which Marian uses to seduce much younger men, even if those men to some degree take advantage of her. In the case of both women, their nonnormativity is often exposed by their relationships with the home and domesticity, as their performances of affect in relation to the home stray far from normative American values. Once again, where Steinbeck offers a grim fate for the nonnormative Cathy, Cather is able to imagine a happier life for her heroine, even if the true degree of Marian's final happiness is called into question by the ambiguity of the text and even though Marian clearly suffers many hardships throughout her life. And just as the increasingly human constructs of animals, farming, and the home in turn bring about rising levels of alienation for Steinbeck's and Cather's characters, so too does it seem that both authors found the most human aspects of their contemporary America to be the most alienating. Accordingly, the home and domesticity produces the most hardship of all three of these constructs, as Marian and Cathy are judged by far the most harshly by their peers of all of the sets of characters examined in this thesis, while it could also be argued that these two characters suffer the most, respectively.

However, although Steinbeck perhaps falls short of Cather in her optimism for the ability of people of difference to find acceptance and belonging in society at large—at least in the cases of the texts examined in these three chapters—Cather is not nearly as optimistic in her early short story “Paul’s Case.” Paul’s difficulties in fitting in with his teachers and peers in the story’s early pages highlight his nonnormativity—he is subtly described as a young gay man, and his peers cast him as an outsider even if they remain unaware of his sexual preference. Cather very subtly suggests Paul’s sexual difference through his insistence on wearing a “red carnation in his buttonhole,” the unusual “brilliance” (34) of his eyes, and his violent aversion to physical contact with members of the opposite sex—the last of which Cather demonstrates when Paul shudders

and thrusts “his hands violently behind him” (34) when a woman teacher attempts to guide his hand while he writes on the blackboard. After Paul steals money from his father’s company and flees to New York City, Cather examines the incredible ease of mind and comfort that the young man experiences once he is free of the judgement of his hometown peers, while she further suggests his sexual preference when Paul romps around New York City overnight with another young man (50). Paul escapes Pittsburgh because he does not wish to become a “rivet” in a “machine” (47) like his father and other peers. Paul’s disgust over the “sickening men” whose clothes are defiled by “children’s hair” and “the smell of cooking” (47) likewise highlights his nonnormativity, as the affect produced in this scene once again arises from the character’s interactions with the nonhuman—in this case the home and domesticity. Paul in turn fails to connect with the normative values of society that dictate that a man should produce a family in a heterosexual marriage in part because he desires to live a nonnormative life—the like of which he finds temporarily in his New York City hotel that he feels was “built and peopled for him alone” (47). Here, away from the judgement of his peers, Paul is able to attain temporary peace and happiness.

Yet, despite finding happiness in New York City, Paul is eventually forced to confront his reality and face the truth that he will eventually have to return home to his family. Faced with the impossible burden of having to conform to life on Cordelia street, Paul flings himself in front of a moving train as he takes his own life, and his existence “drop[s] back into the immense design of things” (51). Cather’s closing description of Paul’s suicide underlines the hardships faced by members of American society who choose not to conform as her reference to the ‘immense design of things’ points to the normative notions of gender identity present at the time that did not tolerate difference. The design to which she refers is, perhaps, normativity itself.

Paul is unable to picture a happy future for himself because of his sexuality and resorts to suicide in a moment of abjection, failing to live out his nonnormative identity, and instead choosing to end his life. Here, much like Steinbeck in the three works I have examined, Cather refuses to write a happy ending for a nonnormative character—a feat which aligns her with Steinbeck in the two authors' ability to demonstrate the hardships faced by people who do not conform to normative gender identity. Perhaps, sometimes, there are cases where the scorn of society is too much for certain individuals to bear, and Cather, here, poignantly elucidates one example.

My discussion throughout this thesis of these two authors' treatment of the nonnormative gendered performance of affect in relation to nonhuman constructs has underlined Steinbeck's and Cather's support of nonnormative castes of gender identity. These authors' championing of such characters clearly demonstrates Cather's ardent feminism and broadens the appreciation of Steinbeck's often overlooked, subtle feminist concerns. Additionally, my treatment of affect theory expands on the work of Sara Ahmed and Anu Koivunen, as I demonstrate at length the implications of the performance of affect in relation to gender identity. This argument proves that narratives favouring and supporting the inclusion of people of nonnormative gender identity and difference have been present in American culture for well over a century, just as this scholarship highlights the lack of inclusivity for people of difference present in American popular culture at large in roughly the first-half of the twentieth century. The themes examined by Steinbeck and Cather in these texts—at times subtle and at times overt—speak to the ongoing struggle of the LGBTQ community in the landscape of North American culture today—a struggle that has been brewing at least as far back as the turn of the twentieth century and that has come to the forefront of popular culture in our present time. Although John Steinbeck has long been considered a powerful writer on the topic of economic hardship, I hope that this

discussion has perhaps at least broadened his appreciation as a writer concerned with issues of gender, as I have sought to demonstrate his often-subtle promotion of the need for the inclusion of people of nonnormative gender identity. Though it may be understandably difficult for some to conceive of Steinbeck as a feminist writer (his works do abound with brothels, after all, as *Cannery Row* clearly demonstrates, which understandably complicates my assertion), I believe that this thesis has demonstrated that some of his most enduring works do in fact contain important feminist themes—themes that compare favourably to those examined by Cather, who was herself no stranger to supporting the cause of the appreciation of nonnormative casts of gender identity. For while Cather may indeed exceed the feminism found in Steinbeck's works—at least in so far as her works tend towards greater optimism—the example of “Paul's Case” aligns her with Steinbeck's pessimism, as both Steinbeck and Cather time and again create powerful portraits of the difficulties encountered by outsiders and people of difference.

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