

A Code of Her Own: **Attitudes Toward Women in** **Willa Cather's Short Fiction**

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Efforts by feminist scholars to recover Willa Cather's literary reputation and to ensure her place in a male-dominated canon have caused some feminist critics to dismiss aspects of her personality too complex to fit into established categories of feminist literary criticism. In particular, feminist critics have not admitted the extent of Willa Cather's misogyny, even though it informs the male code of behavior that is the controlling consciousness of all her fiction.

In her 1987 biography of Cather, Sharon O'Brien explores Cather's difficulty in reconciling her gender with the male-dominated literary tradition she hoped to join. But O'Brien does not acknowledge the depth or significance of Cather's hostility toward women. She admits that Cather had misogynistic views: "her early college journalism . . . frequently expressed . . . contempt for women in tones ranging from amused dismissal to bitter condemnation" (122). However, O'Brien argues that Cather's misogyny disappeared as she matured and asserts that Cather experienced what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar term "the woman writer's anxiety of authorship" (83), that even though she denounced women writers, "Somewhere in her consciousness she knew that women could be strong and vibrant and creative storytellers" (125). As Cather matured, she eventually abandoned the male values she once associated with art, thereby reconciling the opposing roles of woman and artist. Thus, O'Brien insists, Cather was able to write novels that speak from a woman's experience. However, O'Brien's effort to make Cather "fit" into a female literary tradition not only distorts the central themes of her fiction but also diminishes Cather's complex and conflicted literary imagination.

For whatever reason, during her adolescence Willa Cather admired male behavior and even adopted male dress; her apparent identifica-

tion with males is evident from her self-imposed nickname “Willy” or “Billy” that she used well into her college years at the University of Nebraska. Recent biographers have attempted to treat the psychological aspects of her William Cather period. For example, O’Brien analyzes Cather’s feelings toward her mother in an attempt to explain her cross-dressing and short haircuts during her adolescent years. However, Cather’s identification with the masculine goes beyond the starched shirtwaists, short haircuts, and sarcastic newspaper columns of her college years. Any discussion of Cather’s strong identification with male values must include her alleged lesbianism, for although O’Brien warns that “we must be careful to distinguish her love for women, which endured, from her male identification, which did not” (140), a discussion of one inevitably leads to a discussion of the other. Indeed, Cather’s lesbianism, which includes an assumption that she loved women, and her misogyny, which implies that she hated women, complicates the discussion of the male values that inform her fiction.

Cather’s alleged lesbianism and the effect her sexual orientation had on her writing have been hotly debated for the past five years. Although early biographers of Cather do not directly address the question of her lesbianism, all acknowledge her deep emotional attachment to Isabelle McClung. Cather lived with Isabelle in the McClung family home in Pittsburgh for a number of years and, according to all her biographers, loved Isabelle very deeply. Cather herself said that all her books were written for Isabelle. Eventually, however, Cather left the pleasant domestic surroundings of the McClung home and accepted a job at *McClure’s* magazine in New York City. There, Cather moved into an apartment with her friend Edith Lewis, whom she had met in Red Cloud a few years before. Cather and Lewis lived together until Willa Cather’s death in April of 1947. Thus, like her contemporary Gertrude Stein, Cather had a friend and helpmate with whom she shared her life for nearly four decades. Indeed, the Stein-Toklas, Cather-Lewis relationships are also similar in that they both “duplicated the imbalance apparent in many heterosexual unions” (Benstock