GENDER TRANSITIVITY AND SOCIETAL POWER IN THREE WORKS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Thesis
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
Katherine Kumpan
Spring 2013
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WORKS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Gender Transitivity and Societal Power</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Application of Queer Theory and Gender Identity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Miss Roxy, Mrs. Todd and Miss Amelia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Female Author</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Novel Selection</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel Synopsis: The Pearl of Orr’s Island</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel Synopsis: The Country of the Pointed Firs</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel Synopsis: The Ballad of the Sad Cafe</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Selection of Novels</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender in America</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Gender Roles</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwives and Healers</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Gender Transitivity, Societal Power and Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Gender Transitivity, Societal Power and Mrs. Todd</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Gender Transitivity, Societal Power and Miss Amelia</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Conclusion</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abstract: iv
My thesis addresses the correlation between gender and power in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by Sarah Orne Jewett, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* by Carson McCullers. In discussing gender the main focus of this thesis is to establish how the representation of the term gender transitivity presents itself as a method of literary analysis and further allows for the understanding of societal power for the three main female characters within each novel. Due to the fact that gender and power are such broad terms it is important that I apply how exactly gender transitivity distinguishes the subsequent level of societal power each character is able to maintain within their rural community. In doing so I can then establish that each novel presents a unique commentary on the importance of how gender and power interact within the lives of three small town women who are all examples of gender transitive characters.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Gender Transitivity and Societal Power

The aim of my paper is to explore the significant assumptions between gender and power that all of the female authors manifest in their works as reoccurring themes. I will argue that the narratives of Harriet Beecher-Stowe, Sarah Orne-Jewett and Carson McCullers have female characters whose gender identity can be said to reside along a continuum of gender. For each female character the degree to which they navigate between traditional gender identities varies as does their ability to attain their own degree of societal power. Gender transitivity is a term which is referenced by theorist Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick in her book Epistemology of the Closet. Kosofsky-Sedgwick explains the purpose of her book by stating:

the project of the present book will be to show how issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationlized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist (47)

The “coexistence” that Kosofsky-Sedgwick is referring to is how I will apply the term gender transitivity to this paper. The feminine and the masculine are able to coexist in each of the female characters in the novels I am writing on. Kosofsky-Sedgwick further expands upon the notion of transitivity when she writes “what is
presumed to define modern heterosexuality “as we understand it”, in the form of the straight-acting and –appearing gay male, is gender intransitivity; for Foucault, it is, in the form of the feminized man or virilized woman, gender transitivity” (46). Miss Roxy in The Pearl of Orrr’s Island, Mrs. Todd in The Country of the Pointed Firs and lastly Miss Amelia in The Ballad of the Sad Café are all a version of the “verilized woman” that Kosofsky-Sedgwick notes in her book and are thus representative of gender transitivity. By utilizing the term gender transitivity I will then be able to push off from established gender roles and typical versions of gender identity in order to understand how societal power operates in these particular novels.

The Application of Queer Theory and Gender Identity

The study of American literature has long been concerned with the correlation between gender and power. However, in the 1970s the gender discourse expanded to include the field of gay and lesbian studies within the U.S. With the advent of gay and lesbian studies even more questions arose regarding sexual identity and literary scholars began to then apply this new school of thought to texts not previously considered in such a manner. This questioning eventually led to the inclusion of Queer theory which has significantly changed the methodology and interpretation of various works of American literature. The article “Outlaw Readings: Beyond Queer Theory” by Sally O’Driscoll provides valuable insight into the correlation between gay and lesbian studies and the formation of queer theory. She writes:

The relation of queer theory and lesbian and gay studies has been a site of contention from the moment queer began to be used to define a field of critical study. In the special issue of differences titled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay
Sexualities,” edited by Teresa de Laurentis (one of the first places where the term queer theory was used), the two fields are separated with a colon to mark what de Laurentis called a “certain critical distance from the latter” (1991, iv). That colon marks an ambiguity in the multiple meanings of queer as it is currently used: a tension between the substantive queer (as a label for a person, thereby implying the constitution of identity) and what Robyn Wiegman has neatly summed up as the “anti-identity critique of queer theory” (1995). The existence of queer theory would be unimaginable without the preceding decades of work in lesbian and gay studies and politics; yet the goal of queer theory as defined by many critics in their work is precisely to interrogate the identity positions from which that work is produced. (30)

The article by O’Driscoll notes “anti-identity” and “identity positions” in relation to how a person is labeled. I contend that the relevance of these notions of identity can all be applied to how this paper is attempting to reconsider traditional gender in relation to Miss Roxy, Mrs. Todd andlastly Miss Amelia. I will then be able to argue for how these female characters are indicative of women capable of exemplifying either feminine or masculine personality traits in their small towns.

One of the pioneers and authors credited with the development of Queer theory is Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick. Her novel Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire was published in 1985 and is grounded in feminist theory. Epistemology of the Closet, published later in 1990, is the second book by Kosofsky-Sedgwick which I will be referencing because that is where the term gender transitivity first presented itself to me. The interrogation of identity positions which O’Driscoll refers to is exactly what the work of Kosofsky-Sedgwick accomplishes in both of her books and it’s this type of intensive analysis that my paper is concerned with utilizing in order to understand gender and power as they relate to the three female characters I will be referencing. In addition, Kosofsky-Sedgwick dedicates an entire chapter of Between Men to the concept of the erotic love triangle. Kosofsky-Sedgwick is very clear in her
introduction as to the importance of this particular chapter which she expands upon by stating:

The graphic schema on which I am going to be drawing most heavily in the readings that follow is the triangle. The triangle is useful as a figure by which the “commonsense” of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations, and because it allows us to condense into a juxtaposition with that folk-perception several somewhat different streams of recent thought. (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 21)

It is important to acknowledge the breadth of work that Sedgwick has done regarding the bonds between “rivalry” and “love” (21) in her novel because my critique of Miss Amelia is dependent upon this section of critical literary analysis. Ultimately, Between Men is a piece of work in queer theory focused on pointing out where and how issues of “historical blindness present themselves” (24). As a result of the work done by Kosofsky-Sedgwick I will then be able to discuss how these characters can be understood in relation to the term gender transitivity.

In her book Epistemology of the Closet Kosofsky-Sedgwick writes that “sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren’t well described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all” (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 35). In essence, our cultural assumptions of sex, class, and race do not lend themselves to any real definition of gender identity which does not fall along the expected binary of female-male or male-female. There is a distinct association between gender and societal power in all of these novels and among the rural lives of the female characters. For the sake of argument, we must note that my use of the term societal power does not infer power which places these women on par with the male patriarchy. Instead, the female characters in these novels are indicative of many rural women who have dealt with the need to occupy a space which is neither female nor male. These women are not breaking new ground but rather the
authors are using them to inspire the understanding that women have always been able to straddle the lines of gender identity.

Gender: Miss Roxy, Mrs. Todd and Miss Amelia

A closer examination of preconceived gender roles within literature is outlined in the book *Feminist Futures* by Natalie M. Rosinsky. Rosinsky notes that “the traditional divisions of labor into circumscribed “feminine” and broader “masculine” spheres are artificial constructs which reflect social prejudice rather than actual human capabilities” (Rosinsky x). I am not proposing that these female characters are androgynous but rather that they are able to exist on a continuum of gender. My paper will also make it clear that the “human capabilities” referred to by Rosinsky are presented in various ways in each of the novels. For example, these human capabilities are slightly different for Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey than for the other two female characters. In addition, my interpretation of the “human capabilities” is the assumption that women in rural America often express their gender identity in a more transitive way.

Thus, the three female characters I am examining fulfill whatever gender role is necessary in their societies and as a result become representative of women capable of possessing gender identities often only equated with the male gender. Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey are noted as being “cunning women-that is, gifted with an infinite diversity of practical “faculty” which made them an essential requisite in every family for miles and miles around. It was impossible to say what they could not do” (Beecher-Stowe 18). Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey have jurisdiction over life and death in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*. One could argue that while they are inherently gendered female Miss Roxy is also
repeatedly referred to as having a more rational, less emotional disposition which is usually understood to be more masculine. She facilitates easily between the male-female gender binary at will.

In much the same way Mrs. Todd is also gifted with her own ability to consistently attend to the needs of those around her and is capable of taking on tasks typical of either gender. Orne-Jewett writes that Mrs. Todd was “a wise saver of steps; but with certain vials she gave cautions, standing in the doorway, and there were other doses which had to be accompanied on their healing way as far as the gate, while she muttered long chapters of directions” (Orne-Jewett 9). Even as an herbalist Mrs. Todd can be said to exist along the continuum on gender. While an herbalist would normally be considered to be feminine Mrs. Todd explains the usage very methodically much like a doctor, typically gendered male, might do for a patient. Mrs. Todd is in charge of brewing beer, navigating her own boat and has medical skills on par with the local town doctor. The narrator in the novel noticed that “Mrs. Todd made distant excursions, and came home late, with both hands full and a heavily laden apron” (Orne-Jewett 13). Mrs. Todd is not expected to adhere to strict codes of female conduct and she reveals herself as a female character more than capable of gender transitivity throughout the novel.

Miss Amelia is notably the female character most clearly an example of gender transitivity. Miss Amelia is responsible for having “the best liquor in the county” (McCullers 4) while the beer Mrs. Todd brews “had won immense local fame, and the supplies for its manufacture were always giving out and having to be replenished” (Orne-Jewett 9). However, Miss Amelia is written as a “tall woman with bones and muscles like a man” (4). Like the other two female characters Miss Amelia is able to attain a certain
amount of societal power, although briefly, and oscillates between the female-male gender binary. She is written physically as a man but she has innate female qualities which situate her at times in the novel to be quite feminine.

Rosinsky makes a valid point in her argument concerning the ramifications of social prejudice and how society creates constructs which do not allow for any true understanding of a gender that does not adhere to the traditional gender roles established by the male patriarchy. Rosinsky takes her argument of androgyny one step further by applying a feminist perspective to her work on gender stereotypes. She continues:

Other feminists maintain that there are indeed innate psychological or spiritual differences between the sexes. Their emphasis on “essential” mental differences between women and men is potentially the mirror image of the androcentric essentialism that has fueled patriarchal stereotypes of women as naturally limited, inferior beings. Instead of perceiving women as inferior, though, proponents of “gynocentric essentialism” view our supposedly distinct traits as superior ones—abilities which furthermore do not preclude women’s fulfilling traditionally male roles (Rosinsky x)

Again, the goal of this paper is not to discuss societal power in relation to androgyny but to incorporate a sense of essentialism as Rosinsky notes in her book. Gender transitivty allows us to do just that by coming to the conclusion that gender can be both feminine and masculine. The authors of these novels all invert gender in some capacity through their female characters ability to exemplify gender transitivity.

The Female Author

The overall formation and societal constraints of gender have influenced and marginalized numerous texts by female authors. Throughout history the limitation of critical analysis as it pertains to the study of gender transitivity has left very little room for the depth of analysis needed regarding the feminine voice. However, the work done
by Kosofsky-Sedgwick and the majority of this paper is concerned with a more decisive
discussion on gender as it pertains to identity. In the wake of the masculine Paula Smith-
Allen discusses gender identity in her book *Metamorphosis and the Emergence of the
Feminine* and offers further understanding of the dynamic between women and feminism
in American Literature. Her novels addresses themes such as authorship in women’s
writing, the concept of how the female author herself is representative of metamorphosis
and issues of femininity in American literature. In explanation of the feminine author
Smith-Allen writes:

not only must the female writer discover her true nature she must create language
that appropriately packages her discovery for conveyance to the rest of the world
which has not an inkling of her existence. Since the presumed associations for her
identity are already wrought in iron in her external world, her search must begin
inwardly. (37)

Smith-Allen’s summary of the female voice addresses the most common issue
in literary criticism which is a type of re-representation. In addition, she acknowledges
that the female writer must not only “discover her true nature” but create a language
which articulates what the meaning of her true nature is to the external world. Amidst this
web of creation comes the need for redefinition. Finding the feminine voice is one thing
but what of the other voices, those which exist along the continuum of gender, and where
do those voices fit in? If Smith-Allen is stating that the process of the feminine involves
the creation of her true nature then does this creative process allow for a complete
redefinition and understanding of the character’s which reside along the continuum of
gender?

In the introduction to *The Country of the Pointed Firs* Ted Olson refers to
Orne-Jewett and her stance against traditional culture. He explains that:
Both Jewett and her alter ego sought escape from the strictures of Victorian society by consciously seeking acceptance within a traditional rural culture. These two women—the creator and her fictional personae—form bonds of friendship with other females in order to better express their natural selves within a natural rather than a manmade environment; this was an act of rebellion that permitted the women to escape from the social straitjacket constructed for them by the Victorian male hierarchy. (Orne-Jewett xxviii)

I would like to go one step further and apply this passage from Olson to the other two authors. While Olson is referring only to Orne-Jewett and the narrator in The Country of the Pointed Firs his admission of Orne-Jewett’s writing as “an act of rebellion” can be applied to Beecher-Stowe and McCullers as well. All of the female authors have penned characters that are able to navigate between the gender binary and thus escape the “social straitjacket constructed for them.”
CHAPTER II

THE NOVEL SELECTION

I have decided to group together The Country of the Pointed Firs by Sarah Orne-Jewett, The Pearl of Orr’s Island by Harriett Beecher-Stowe and The Ballad of the Sad Cafè by Carson McCullers because each of these works provides us with a female character capable of what Kosofsky-Sedgwick refers to as gender transitivity. Often times The Country of the Pointed Firs and The Pearl of Orr’s Island are discussed in relation to each other or they are presented together in a course on New England regionalist literature. By applying the terminology and insight of Kosofsky-Sedgwick we can then further explain how the text by McCullers fits into this equation. The incorporation of The Ballad of the Sad Cafè serves to magnify the social constructs of gender by way of what Kosofsky-Sedgwick refers to as the erotic love triangle. These three novels have never been considered together and this paper is asking that such a discussion take place in order to gain valuable insight into how gender and power intercept with sexual identity in the novels.

In her article “Sex, Class, and “Category Crisis”: Reading Orne-Jewett's Transitivity” Orne-Jewett scholar Marjorie Pryse remarks:

Jewett’s resistance to traditional categories produces a salutary crisis for critics. To object to simplistic categorical or reductionist readings of Jewett is to argue for blurring the old and creating the new categories of analysis, or at least for understanding the way new categories transform old ones. Thus when we are trying
to understand a body of work as resistance to classification as Jewett’s, we learn fluidity in our own critical frameworks. (522)

Pryse and her reference to Orne-Jewett’s work as being resistant to classification can also be applied to the other two novels. Beecher-Stowe and McCullers both offer female characters who exists along a continuum of gender. In addition, all three of the female characters in my thesis can read as women “blurring the old” and attempting to create new “categories of analysis”

Novel Synopsis: The Pearl of Orr’s Island

Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s regional fiction story, The Pearl of Orr’s Island, which was written about the Maine coastline in 1862 will be the second novel in this thesis. This particular story takes place on Orr’s Island and revolves around an intimate group of townsfolk. The novel is focused on the relationship which develops between Mara and a young shipwrecked boy named Moses. The two children are raised together, although they are not blood related, and end up in love eventually. The women on the island, notably Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey, are incredibly powerful and much like Mrs. Todd they too are healers.

Due to the significance of Uncle Tom’s Cabin Beecher-Stowe’s novel about a rural New England village is not usually considered by queer theorists or in terms of gender identity. In fact, had this book not made it into a graduate seminar class one evening I might never have thought about the representation of gender on Orr’s Island. In his book Harriet Beecher Stowe John R. Adams makes the literary comparison between Beecher-Stowe and Orne-Jewett by writing “the opening pages, in fact, are unusually charming, and Sarah Orne-Jewett has spoken admiringly of them in an autobiographical
preface, expressing deep gratitude for the book’s revelation to her, a young girl, of “those who dwelt among the wooded seacoast and by the decaying, shipless harbors” of her native state (Adams 99).

Novel Synopsis: The Country of the Pointed Firs

The first book I will be discussing is The Country of the Pointed Firs by Sarah Orne-Jewett. The novel of a quaint Maine fishing town, called Dunnet Landing, is comprised of gender contradictions and very deep bonds of female friendship. Mrs. Todd is the center of her rural town and the narrator provides commentary from the point of view of an outsider. The book continually reminds the reader that there is a real sense of pull between the outside world and the inside world. There is an emotional connection between Mrs. Todd and the narrator and there are numerous moments in the text during which the lives and stories of various women intercept. Women such as Mrs. Blackett, Mrs. Fosdick and even poor Joanna are all examples of gender transitivity in varying degrees. Mrs. Todd is an established herbalist and healer, a midwife of sorts, and cares for anyone who is in need of her both medically and emotionally speaking.

Orne-Jewett’s novel was published in 1896 and is deeply tied to Beecher-Stowe’s novel The Pearl of Orr’s Island. The Pearl of Orr's Island is indicated by Orne-Jewett as a book which conspired to channel her aesthetic energies. Orne-Jewett’s novel expands upon numerous themes of mother-daughter love and sisterhood bonds touched on by Beecher-Stowe and goes one step further in "suggesting her vision of an alternative world - woman-centered, existing outside of masculine America" (Pryse 521). Both novels offer female characters representative of gender transitivity or characters
which are able to adopt either the feminine or the masculine gender at will. In her article “Changing Conversations, Shifting Paradigms: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Women's Literary Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century” Orne-Jewett scholar Nancy Grasso writes “In order to create a gender-balanced history to replace the gender-biased one they have inherited, these scholars first have to engage in gender-exclusive studies, for without the later the former is impossible” (Grasso 150).

**Novel Synopsis: The Ballad of the Sad Cafe**

Lastly, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* by Carson McCullers is also a regionalist work of literature which explores gender transitivity and challenges basic issues related to societal interpretations of gender ideology. McCullers novel is set in a small, rural town in Georgia and is centered around Miss Amelia. Miss Amelia is a strong female presence and has very little to do with anyone or anything in town unless is benefits her. When the hunchback comes to town Miss Amelia falls in love with him almost immediately and then the town comes to life by way of their relationship and subsequent successful café. Miss Amelia is a noted herbalist and demonstrates great compassion with children. The arrival of her ex-husband quickly changes the plot and creates a love triangle which results in the downfall of Miss Amelia.

These novels are interwoven around the lives of three similar women. Although, it would appear that McCullers does not fit into this particular grouping due to the Southern-gothic literary tradition and the later publication of her novel my paper will argue the opposite with the assistance of Kosofsky-Sedgwick. The comparability between the female characters and their gender roles within society is an intrinsic part of the
overall discussion that my thesis will entail. More importantly, these seemingly insignificant nuances of gender are to be examined outside of the concept of regionalism and through the proposed feminist-gender theories of Kosofsky-Sedgwick. Kosofsky-Sedgwick notes that “ideology can be used as part of an analysis of sexuality” (13) and further elaborates:

The two categories seem comparable in several important ways: each mediates between the material and the representational, for instance; ideology, like sexuality as we have discussed it, both epitomizes and itself influences broader social relations of power; and each, I shall be arguing, mediates similarly between the diachronic, narrative structures of social experience and synchronic, graphic ones. (13)

However, I want to focus the breadth of this paper on the concept of redefinition and on the term gender transitivity. In addition, my goal is to further discover just how the often overlooked, quiet little American stories and their opposition to societal gender norms fit into this paradigm of current literary discourse.

The Selection of Novels

I have selected Mrs. Todd from The Country of the Pointed Firs, Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey from The Pearl of Orr’s Island and Miss Amelia from The Ballad of the Sad Café because each of these women exemplify gender transitivity. Furthermore, I am able to apply the research of Kosofsky-Sedgwick to these particular novels so that we can examine their gender identity more closely.

While my analysis will include Miss Ruey the majority of my commentary will be left to her sister Miss Roxy. My rationale in selecting these women is that each of these female characters is able to navigate between the male-female gender binary. In addition, each character is the center of their particular community and is able to maintain
a position of great power within their small town. These women are all a type of midwife, herbalist or accepted healer within their community and are called upon continuously to take care of the ailments of those in need. All three of these female characters can be interpreted with the gender theory lens of Kosofsky-Sedgwick and all three of the novels reverse or redefine typical gender roles. Mrs. Todd is considered more knowledgeable than the local doctor. She is midwife, herbalist and the absolute hub of her quaint Maine fishing village. Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey are also considered the lifeblood of their coastal Maine town and Beecher-Stowe refers to them as oracles throughout the novel. Miss Amelia is a strong Southern presence and, by far, the most decidedly masculine character with well-known healing powers. In fact, all three women are referred to as a type of oracle or as having a sixth sense beyond that of the average person. Due to the significance of her love interest and unwanted inclusion in a love triangle, Miss Amelia is the female character which exemplifies the multitude of contradictions which present themselves throughout the three different novels.

Critics of these novels consider the ensuing works to be indicative of small-town society. Mrs. Todd, Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey, and Miss Amelia have all been described women who do not adhere to expected gender norms in literary discourse. In my thesis I will push off from this notion of gender fluidity in order to further understand why it is these women are allowed to navigate away from the typical male-female gender binary and to occupy a space along the continuum of gender. My paper will examine these three female characters from the standpoint of gender theorist Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, from the societal implications placed upon them by the community they live in and from where exactly they reside along the spectrum of gender. By examining these
characters, providing references to the background of midwives and female healers in general, exploring a brief history of gender roles in the America and referencing literary criticism on the selected works I will be able to explain how we might then begin to view them in another way. The fundamental question that is the basis for the initial thought behind this body of graduate work and is to answer what makes these female characters so atypical. Why are they allowed to navigate between the male-female gender binary when other women are made to adhere to strict societal gender codes? The entirety of this paper is not focused on mere gender negotiations but on what the negotiations of power signify for the female characters in each of the novels and whether or not the correlation between power and gender impacts their individual sense of identity.

Gender in America

In order to begin any discussion on literature and the gendering of characters we must first begin by examining gender in America. With the exception of The Ballad of the Sad Café, which was set in the rural South, the other two novels were both set in small, coastal Maine communities with strong ties to the shipping industry. It is critical to point out that these Maine stories revolved around the sea because such proximity defined typical gender roles at that time in the U.S. In the book Iron Men, Wooden Women authors Creighton and Norling write

feminist historians have pointed out that nineteenth-century gender categories, in particular the conceptual separation between a male, public world of work and a female, private world of home and family, have persisted in and compromised twentieth-century historical analyses. (70)

Whether or not the separation was conceptual or not the male domain was public and the female domain private. However, the average seaman was between the ages of fifteen
and thirty. Such a large discrepancy in age indicates that there were many men not living at home during what would normally be a significant time in their lives. Fathers, brothers and husbands were often absent from family life as a result. In addition, these seafaring voyages often went on for three years or more which left the women in these communities at home alone. It’s important to acknowledge this fact because it affected gender roles during that time. Along the New England coast men went out to sea in order to make a living and they left behind mothers, wives, sisters and children in order to do so. History tells us that these communities did not collapse in the absence of men and so the question must be asked then how did these women and their communities thrive? As Creighton and Norling explain:

The men’s repeated absences assumed the willingness and ability of those left on shore to do whatever was necessary: to care for the young, the sick, and the old; to oversee property, manage budgets, maintain households, and integrate the networks of kinship and neighborhood ties through which the larger community survived. (79)

In essence, the women such as Mrs. Todd, Miss Ruey and Miss Roxy held these communities together. Each of these female characters is indicative of a specific type of woman that was able to exist in the absence of a fully male gendered society. They assumed the role of whatever the community needed them to be and in doing so were able to navigate successfully between the male-female gender binary.

Southern Gender Roles

Meanwhile, in the Southern U.S. gender roles for women were far more complicated. In the wake of the men leaving for war there were a plethora of white women who suddenly found themselves in charge of disciplining the slaves, attending to
household finances as well as overseeing the daily operations of plantation life. Of course, in stark contrast to this assumption of power for white plantation mistresses “black women had long been forced to assume the dual roles of mothers and field laborers under slavery, and they often exercised considerable influence within the black community” (“Gender in Reconstruction”). The role for women, of both races, was just as confusing after the war. The idea of the “southern belle” had been completely ingrained into the psyche of the South for generations. Modern Images like those of Scarlett O’Hara and the like kept the illusion of gender roles firmly in place even amidst the feminist strides for women’s suffrage and after the formation of the American Equal Rights Association. The result of these strides in political power did not transform the prescribed gender roles of the genteel southerner. In fact, what occurred was a more stringent adoption of the anticipated gender norms as if many southern women felt misplaced and unsure of how to re-define themselves in the absence of the masculine. The congenial Southern female stereotype clashed with the newer formation of feminist Southern women desperately seeking to ensure their own futures of equality. A character such as Miss Amelia can only have been written in this vortex of gender inversion.

Although much has now been written about these seemingly quiet bodies of texts, I will now apply queer theory terminology and critique to these works in an attempt to readdress and reconfigure gender roles in relation to concepts of identity and power. My work will attempt to situate these texts and the female characters into a larger discussion on gender theory and the power dynamics which affect their subsequent societal roles in their rural small town settings. By singling out these three novels and demanding that they be interpreted together we can then begin to situate them into a
greater conversation on gender identity and further articulate how the term gender transitivity leads us to a literary discussion on the significant negotiations of power for the women in these novels.

The concept of the gender, which is said to incorporate both the feminine and the masculine in modern Western culture, is a concept only recently receiving due recognition thanks to the amount of research being done on queer studies. In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* queer theorist Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick coined the term gender transitivity. For the duration of this paper I will be utilizing this term in order to discuss literary characters who reside along the continuum of gender, moving back and forth from male to female and female to male. Kosofsky-Sedgwick offers critical insight into behavioral deviation away from the anticipated gender binary. In explanation of her work Kosofsky-Sedgwick writes

> Psychoanalysis, the recent work of Foucault and feminist historical scholarship all suggest that the place of drawing the boundary between the sexual and the not-sexual, like the place of drawing the boundary between the realms of the two genders, is variable, but is not arbitrary. (22)

She writes on to suggest that “the placement of the boundaries in a particular society affects not merely the definition of those terms themselves-sexual/nonsexual, masculine-feminine, but also the apportionment of forms of power that are not obviously sexual” (22). The goal of this thesis is not to make any literary claims on gender identity but to apply the theories from Kosofsky-Sedgwick in such a way that the correlation between gender transitivity and societal power within the novels can be made. This idea that gender isn’t arbitrary and that it can reside in a state of variability is what the work of Kosofsky-Sedgwick means to this paper. As gender and power are inextricably attached
in American literature this paper will also point out how the dynamic of power defines the course for each female character I will be comparing.

Midwives and Healers

In the absence of any real terminology which explains the female characters I will be referencing, the term transitivity shall be the gender theory methodology with which I will refer to their identity. In addition to the concept of transitivity my paper will provide a brief history on the role of midwives in Western civilization. By understanding how the historical role of midwives influenced and shaped the role of women, medically and sociologically speaking, we can then apply these descriptions to the three female characters that I will be discussing in my thesis.

A typical midwife, throughout the course of history, was responsible for multiple functions and fulfilled a role within society that went far beyond the realm of mere medicine. To put the definition of a midwife more succinctly historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English note in their book *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* that “women have always been healers. They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of Western history. They were abortionists, nurses, and counselors. They were pharmacists, cultivating herbs and exchanging secrets of their uses” (25).

In discussing a paper that deals with gender negotiation the definition of a midwife is not enough to fully comprehend what exactly a midwife was responsible for. We must push off from this term in order to incorporate the implications of what a midwife not only was but what a midwife represented to the community. Their tie to the community is best expressed by the term “people’s medicine” (63) and Ehrenreich and
English further explain “when women had a place in medicine, it was in a people’s medicine. When that people’s medicine was destroyed, there was no place for women—except in the subservient role of nurses” (63).

While researching the historical role of midwifery, from as early as 1000 B.C. until post 20th century, I came across many disturbing images and information that made it seem as if midwives were something taboo. A few of the sources I found included articles that linked midwives to witches and two of the books actually included witches and midwives in the title. This correlation between the normal healing practice of a midwife and of something more sinister is best explained in the book *Woman as Healer* by Jeanne Achterberg. This particular novel applies the historical context of midwives to the implications of gender ideology. In explaining the duality, the God versus the Devil foundation that came about in the wake of the Middle Ages Achterberg writes of female healers that:

> It was never insinuated that women lacked the knowledge or the wisdom to ply the healing arts—indeed, quite the opposite: women were credited with knowing their business, with having powerful secret remedies, and with the ability to intervene on the planes of the physical and the supernatural. However, because they were women—not men, nor philosophers, nor priests, nor physicians—any manifestation of their healing practices was deemed the work of demons. (75)

This type of demonization in relation to the term midwife is historically linked to all women that provided midwifery services to those in need. As a result ancient midwives and female healers were pushed to the margins and forced to exist in secret. They were deemed witches and sinners. However, the ability of the midwives to straddle the physical and the supernatural, i.e. the physical being the masculine and the supernatural being the feminine, indicates they are able to move between genders at will.
History writes that the role of midwives and healers has always incorporated the juxtaposition of the male-female gender binary.
CHAPTER III

GENDER TRANSITIVITY, SOCIETAL POWER AND MISS ROXY AND MISS RUEY

Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s was born in Litchfield, Connecticut on June 14, 1811. She was born into a deeply religious family and her mother passed away when she was only five. Her father was very much an abolitionist and influenced his children in this belief. The publication of her novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin was a major success and is often referred to as the great American novel. There has been so much literary attention to the significance of Uncle Tom’s Cabin that some of her other novels are overlooked or pale in comparison. The Pearl of Orr’s Island is an example of Beecher-Stowe’s ability to portray the complexity of social life in rural America. Like Orne-Jewett, Beecher-Stowe is capable of incorporating the colloquialisms of ordinary speech into the discourse of her characters.

The introductory note to The Pearl of Orr’s Island explains that “it was not until eight years later, after the Minister’s Wooing had been published and Agnes of Sorrento was well begun, that she took up her old story in earnest and set about making it into a short serial. It would seem that her first intention was to confine herself to a sketch of the childhood of her chief characters, with a view to delineating the influences at work upon them” (Beecher-Stowe 6). I would argue that Beecher-Stowe’s novel did more than
attempt to offer a “sketch” but to rather invert societal norms in order to expand upon her dedication to social and political causes of humankind.

Beecher-Stowe situates her two main female characters, Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey, at the center of the community in the novel and in a position of great societal power. They are written as the authority “for miles and miles around” and it’s universally acknowledged in their town that “it was impossible to say what they could not do” (Beecher-Stowe18). We can apply the Kosofsky-Sedgwick term gender transitivity to these female characters because they are situated between the gender binary of what it means to be female or male. They are capable of shifting their identity to become what they are needed to be. This was no oversight by Beecher-Stowe but writing these women only reiterated the fact that women in rural American were more than capable of taking on tasks previously thought to belong only to the male sphere.

During her writing of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Orne-Jewett was greatly influenced by the novel *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*. Reading the novel by Beecher-Stowe one can gather that two of the main female characters, Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey, most definitely influenced Orne-Jewett in her writing of Mrs. Todd. All three women are often written in relation to nature, reside on a plane between the physical and spiritual realm, provide various duties related to the role of a midwife and maintain a position of unparalleled power within the community. Most importantly, Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey exemplify the concept of gender transitivity. Like Orne-Jewett, Beecher-Stowe was interested in subverting the typical gender binary in such a way that Fetterley and Pryse write Beecher-Stowe was “subverting it, subjecting the conventions of romance to a critique that eventuated in a story that not only violated her readers’ expectation but
called those very expectations into question and aimed to expose and displace them” (112). Fetterley and Pryse are referring to the period of time prior to the recommencement of her novel in which Beecher-Stowe warns “we beg our readers to know that no great romance is coming” (110). While Beecher-Stowe does not deliver a romance she does offer a piece of work rich in the subversion of basic gender ideology. Beecher-Stowe consistently writes Miss Ruey in such a way that the feminine in her character is heightened. These two women occupy a literary space in which they both exist next to each other. Beecher-Stowe is careful to rarely separate the sisters during the entirety of the book. Doing so would separate the gender of the two women and set them apart in a category of isolation. Kosofsky-Sedgwick would refer to the bond which ties the women together as homosocial, a term which she defines as “a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual”, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual” (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 3). In order for this thesis to analyze the contributions of the work done by Beecher-Stowe it becomes imperative that we apply the term homosocial to Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey. In doing so I will then be able to argue that such extremes of gender identity meld together to provide a more magnified example of gender transitivity.

Within the first few pages of her work, Beecher-Stowe sets up the important communal presence of Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey. They are two old spinster sisters who are physically explained in relation to nature as being “like last year’s mullein stalks, upright, dry, seedy, warranted to last for any length of time” (19). Similar to Mrs. Todd,
Beecher-Stowe refers to these women as a type of herb and equates their age with being God-like in that they are ageless. They are all at once of the earth and beyond it.

The introduction of these two women are chronologically placed within the first few pages of the novel and are consistently situated between the cycles of life and death which dictate the outcome of this story. Like Mrs. Todd these two female characters are the backbone of their community and they also oscillate between the supernatural and physical sphere. However, these women are written as two separate characters in theory but they are made to be read as one entity. Beecher-Stowe is able to write them in such a way that when one speaks the other finishes the sentence. In essence the two women combine to create a perfect example of gender transitivity by constantly moving between the female-male gender binary. In describing Miss Roxy, Beecher-Stowe writes “her mind on all subjects was made up, and she spoke generally as one having authority; and who should, if she should not? Was she not a sort of priestess and sibyl in the most awful straits and mysteries of life? How many births, and weddings, and deaths had come and gone under her jurisdiction!” (19). Again we read the term sibyl which is applied to Mrs. Todd in the novel by Orne-Jewett. Both Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy fulfill the necessary roles, whether it’s that of a midwife or confidant, needed from them by their subsequent communities. While Miss Roxy is gendered male, Beecher-Stowe writes of Miss Ruey that she was “a pliant, cozy, easy-to-be-entreated personage, plump and cushiony” and that “Miss Roxy looked on Miss Ruey as quite a frisky young thing” (Beecher-Stowe 19). Beecher-Stowe explains the physicality of Miss Ruey through the use of descriptive verbiage which is located in emotion. Miss Ruey is not just soft but she is “cushiony” (19) and “cozy” (19). Such word choices only serve to
demonstrate the extreme level of femaleness that is representative of Miss Ruey. Beecher-Stowe also uses the notation “frisky young thing” (19) as if Miss Ruey, a midwife and oracle in her own right for the town, were almost childlike and the embodiment of someone superfluous.

Miss Roxy is often at odds with her sister Miss Ruey for her adherence to the strict code of female conduct. Beecher-Stowe relentlessly singles out her authorial desire to subvert the feminine through the argumentative relationship which typifies these two women. When Miss Ruey behaves in a very feminine manner, often referred to as sentimental or juvenile, Miss Roxy is there to ground her in reality. Miss Roxy is always quick to acknowledge these faults. These moments of bickering are witnessed throughout the story. Once such example includes Miss Roxy warning her sister “I declare, Ruey, you are silly; your head is always full of weddin’s, weddin’s, weddin’s-nothing else—from mornin’ till night, and night till mornin’” (242). Miss Roxy equates such an obsession with weddings as something of a feminine sin. There can be nothing more female than a preoccupation with a wedding and all that such frivolity entails. Unlike Orne-Jewett’s character Joanna, Miss Ruey is allowed to exist in the feminine sphere of gender identity because her sister is rooted in the masculine and is capable of balancing out the gender contradiction. While Joanna was forced into exile, even if it was seemingly self-imposed, Miss Ruey would never find herself in such a position because the lives of the sisters intertwine with everything and everyone they come into contact with. Society accepts these women as the cornerstone of Orr’s Island.

The gendering of Miss Roxy in the masculine is a critical component to this section of analysis on The Pearl of Orr’s Island. In relegating a female character to the
male domain, Miss Roxy provides the reader with greater insight into the questions of gender identity raised by Beecher-Stowe. Her novel is full of scenarios which examine closely the expected societal norms of male behavior. These sections of the novel tie into the work done by Kosofsky-Sedgwick which challenges that her “argument is structured around the distinctive relation of the male homosocial spectrum to the transmission of unequally distributed power” (18). In essence, Kosofsky-Sedgwick is not only focused on the bonds between men, which are consequently also applied to the homosocial bonds between women, but warns that “we may take as an explicit axiom that the historically differential shapes of male and female homosociality—much as they themselves may vary over time—will always be articulations and mechanisms of the enduring inequality of power between men and women” (5). Ultimately, Beecher-Stowe is providing her reader with a set of characters whose gender identity does not parallel that of the societal norm and is acknowledging the inequality of power which exists in the world. Beecher-Stowe calls into question the burden that gender roles place upon women by confessing:

> No man—especially one that is living a rough, busy, out-of-doors life—can form the slightest conception of that veiled and secluded life which exists in the heart of a sensitive woman, whose sphere is narrow, whose external diversions are few, and whose mind, therefore, acts by a continual introversion upon itself. They know nothing how their careless words and actions are pondered and turned again in weary, quiet hours of fruitless questioning (154)

Again, Beecher-Stowe is delivering the standard, expected version of male-female gender relations. She is also touching upon the sense of feminine isolation, which is a reoccurring theme in the three novels, which is significant enough to keep a woman in a state of emotional submission. If a woman does not attempt to reconfigure this power dynamic she is doomed enter into “quiet hours of fruitless questioning” (154). The mind
of Miss Roxy never “acts by a continual introversion upon itself” (154) because she is the one female character within the confines of the text that does not let the frivolities of the heart dictate her identity. By way of Miss Roxy Beecher-Stowe interjects her literary point of view by affirming typical gender roles and then subverting them through such a character capable of complete gender navigation. In her book The Novels of Harriet Beecher Beecher Stowe Alice Crozier writes that the author wrote from a deep theological belief that “American society needs to regain the fervor of heart and the integrity of a community, a nation, under God” which is credited with being “addressed to a Victorian audience” (96). In addition, Crozier further notes that Beecher-Stowe “is regularly inconsistent about the relative superiority of Past and Present in that she frequently suggests that she admires the past for things she does not want for herself, that she is glad not to have to put up with” (109). Beecher-Stowe’s sense of loyalty to the past, or to her spiritual history, and her desire to address the problems of gender roles instilled upon women of her time is a contradiction. She attempts to work out this inconsistency through her depiction of Miss Roxy. In relation to Beecher-Stowe we must acknowledge that Miss Roxy is not a black and white character. In fact, one of the most important points of any critique on Miss Roxy is the understanding that she too lives with one foot in the present and one foot in the past. Even something as simple as a name comes under the jurisdiction of Miss Roxy and as the name is biblical Miss Ruey maintains “that ought to be enough for us” (20). However, “being the master spirit of the two” leads the sister to point out that the past isn’t enough when she remarks “well, I don’t know, said Miss Roxy. Now there was Miss Jones down on Mure P’int called her twins Tiglath-Pileser and Shalmaneser,-Scriptur’ names both, but I never liked ‘em. The
boys used to call ‘em, Tiggy and Shally, so no mortal could guess they was Scriptur’” (20). As usual Miss Ruey is advocating that what is right before them is enough but Miss Roxy isn’t convinced. There is an unseen accountability which she holds herself and others responsible for. The past is not enough for Miss Roxy because her placement within the context of the novel is to retain her position of masculine authority while advocating for a redefinition of the assumed female-male gender binary. Any unwavering obedience to one stable direction, or to any blind allegiance to the past without consideration of the future, would not allow her character to be representative of the innate type of fluidity necessary for gender transitivity.

Miss Roxy is unfailingly linked to the gift of sight in this novel and continually demonstrates her prophetic capabilities by foretelling the future. In fact, within the first few pages of the novel Zephaniah Pennel says to Miss Roxy “I’ll give all there is in my old chest yonder if you’ll only make her live” (23). Beecher-Stowe has already set up Miss Roxy as a “priestess and sibyl” (19) on the previous page and warned that her two main female characters are not “people of the dreamy kind” (18). Thus, the comment from Zephaniah Pennel only serves to validate the immortal association which binds Miss Roxy to the domain of the mythical. She is capable of controlling life and of foretelling death. While Miss Roxy does not immediately announce the premature death of Mara she does admonish “babies liked that is marked always. They don’t know what ails ‘em, or nobody” (25). Miss Roxy continues on about Mara by commenting:

But them kind o’ children always seem homesick to go back where they come from. They’re mostly grave and old-fashioned like this ‘un. If they gets past seven years, why they live; but it’s always in ‘em to long; they don’t seem to be really unhappy neither, but if anything’s ever the matter with ‘em, it seems a great deal easier for
'em to die than to live. Some say it’s the mothers longin’ after ‘em makes ‘em feel so, and some say it’s them longin’ after their mothers. (25)

Her assertion that these types of children die if there is anything “ever the matter with ‘em” does foreshadow the eventual death of Mara and such a prediction solidifies Miss Roxy as an Oracle. In relation to Mara, Miss Roxy does eventually state “she’s been goin’ down for three months now; and she’s got that on her that will carry her off before the year’s out” (250). These supernatural capabilities manifest themselves throughout the story. In discussing the shipwreck which yielded very little ship and which deposits Moses to Mara as an awaited playmate Miss Roxy points out that “It won’t be known till the sea gives up it’s dead, said Miss Roxy, shaking her head solemnly, and there’ll be a great givin’ up then, I’m a –thinkin’” (49). In addition, Miss Roxy clarifies her omnipresent accord to Miss Kittridge by stating “Mis’ Kittridge, this ‘ere’s a very particular subject to be talkin’ of. I’ve had opportunities to observe that most haven’t, and I don’t care if I jist say to you, that I’m pretty sure that spirits that has left the body do come to their friends sometimes” (55). Miss Roxy is the only female character, with the possible exception of her sister that is able to make a statement such as this and still maintain her credibility amongst the inhabitants on the shores of Orr’s Island. In fact, the ever proper Miss Kittridge doesn’t seem upset by such an admission but looks at her friend with “eyes of eager curiosity” (55). Beecher-Stowe has referred to herself as “the voice of the voiceless” (Fetterley 111). If Beecher-Stowe was the outlet by which societal wrongs found their platform for discussion, then the incorporation of Miss Roxy could only serve to solidify her desire for the exemplification of gender navigation. Miss Roxy is never voiceless like so many women during Beecher-Stowe’s time and she is never
devoid of influence within her small town. In fact, throughout the course of the novel Miss Roxy only really breaks down emotionally at one point in the story. It is worth nothing that her bond with Mara is very intense and that he subsequent temporary breakdown is from the keen understanding that Mara is dying. Beecher-Stowe writes:

Mara looked imploringly at Miss Roxy. The hard visage woman sat down on the wash-bench, and, covering her worn, stony visage with the checked apron, sobbed aloud. Mara was confounded. This implacably withered, sensible, dry woman, beneficently impassive in sickness and sorrow, weeping!—it was awful, as if one of the Fates had laid down her fatal distaff to weep. (238)

Thus, Miss Roxy fulfills the role of male protector and maternal caregiver for the child that is so much a part of her. Mara is consistently ascribed with the terms spirit and witch. Various places within the text also refer to her as having a connection to the spiritual world and of possessing foresight akin to that of Miss Roxy. As this paper does argue that Miss Roxy exhibits supernatural capabilities then we must briefly examine her attachment to Mara, who is written in relation to Miss Roxy, and uncover how it is Beecher-Stowe is ascribing gender transitivity within this homosocial relationship. In attempting to explain why this interrelationship is not just a feminist question but a question meant to be posed on a much larger scale on the oppression of women Kosofsky-Sedgwick writes:

However, agonistic the politics, however conflicted the feelings, it seems at this moment to make an obvious kind of sense to say that women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities. Thus the adjective “homosocial” as applied to women’s bonds (by, for example, historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg) need not be pointedly dichotomized as against “homosexual”; it can intelligibly denominate the entire continuum. (3)
When Kosofsky-Sedgwick clarifies the term homosocial she also takes into account the “entire continuum” which can mean the incorporation of gender transitivity which is associated with Miss Roxy. Her description of homosocial as well as the application of the bond which resides along a continuum allows us to apply her work to the bond between Miss Roxy and Mara. Beecher-Stowe writes of Miss Roxy and Mara that:

The fact was, as the reader may perceive, that Miss Roxy had been thawed into an unusual attachment for the little Mara, and this affection was beginning to spread a warming element through her whole being. It was as if a rough granite rock had suddenly awakened to a passionate consciousness of the beauty of some fluttering white anemone that nestled in its cleft, and felt warm thrills running through all its veins at every tender motion and shadow. A word spoken against the little one seemed to rouse her combativeness. Nor did Dame Kittredge bear the child the slightest ill-will, but she was one of those naturally care-taking people whom Providence seems to design to perform the picket duties for the rest of society, and who, therefore, challenge everybody and everything to stand and give an account of themselves. (52)

Once again we have an excerpt which illustrates the countless qualities which allow Miss Roxy to occupy a space between the male-female gender binary. The link to nature ties her character to the natural world, her position of authority binds her to a society which cannot thrive in her absence and she is, ultimately, the God-like figure which holds everyone accountable for their actions. However, these attributes are enhanced by the connection she has to Mara. Similar to Joanna, Mara is representative of a warning and of someone whose profound grief only serves to reinforce the humanity of Miss Roxy. If Miss Roxy, much like Mrs. Todd, is never to find herself marginalized within her community then Mara is symbolic of someone destined to follow expected gender norms. Beecher-Stowe does confuse this analysis by insisting that Mara possesses both the masculine and the feminine when she writes:
She looks not exactly in ill health, but has that sort of transparent appearance which one fancies might be an attribute of fairies and sylphs. All her outward senses are finer and more acute than his, and finer more delicate all the attributes of her mind. Those who contend against giving woman the same education as man do it on the ground that it would make the woman unfeminine, as if Nature had done her work so slightly that it could be so easily raveled and knit over. In fact, there is a masculine and a feminine element in all knowledge, and a man and a woman put to the same study extract only what their nature fits them to see, so that knowledge can be fully orbed only when the two unite in the search and share the spoils. (92-93)

This particular quote, much like the previous one regarding Miss Roxy, is indicative of Beecher-Stowe and of her acknowledgment of societal contradictions of gender identity. She explains Mara as being “transparent” and diminutive much like a fairy. However, a fairy would place Mara on par with the spiritual domain in which Miss Roxy resides. We then must infer that Mara is both of the human world and of the spiritual world. In Miss Roxy these contradictions are representative of a character capable of gender transitivity but that is not the case with Mara. Mara does die of consumption near the end of the novel and, as a result, depicts a character unable to truly exemplify gender transitivity because of death and love for Moses. Instead, Mara succeeds in demonstrating what can happen to the potential of a female that cannot break free from the constraints of gender ideology and that is ultimately incapable of complete gender transitivity like Miss Roxy.

Just prior to the death of her beloved Mara, Miss Roxy is linked to a bird called the raven. Moses asks of Miss Ruey “where’s that black old raven going?” as Miss Roxy leaves to attend the dying Mara. History tells us that the raven is an omen of change which can be interpreted as negative or positive depending on the receiver. The Raven is also associated with truth and inner knowledge. Muck like Miss Roxy a raven will persist until a challenge is faced and they will just as readily protect one from the destructive
truths which harm us. The raven is so clearly a totem for Miss Roxy in that this animal is constantly aware that death is linked to life. Both animal and female character exist between the physical and the spiritual planes of life. With her creation of Miss Roxy, Beecher-Stowe has created a character rich in contradictions and with the ability to remain the center of society amidst her adherence to a gender binary centered along the continuum of gender. Unlike Miss Ruey she does not conform to the female norms imposed by society and unlike Mara she does not die at the conclusion of the novel. On the contrary, throughout the novel Miss Roxy can be found to be the constant example of gender transitivity and an important lesson regarding the innate power of the human voice.
CHAPTER IV

GENDER TRANSITIVITY, SOCIETAL
POWER AND MRS. TODD

Sarah Orne-Jewett was born in South Berwick, Maine on September 3, 1849. She was the daughter of a doctor and spent much of her time with him visiting his patients. She attributes much of her education to the medical calls she made with her father. In the introduction to the novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs* scholar Ted Olson notes that the author “possessed a powerful psychological connection to her own childhood” (Orne-Jewett xvii). Literary scholars consistently refer to Orne-Jewett as a local color writer and often mention her uncanny ability to make the reader feel as if ordinary, everyday people are talking. Orne-Jewett’s work is rich in ethnographic details and simple sentence structures which transform the feeling of her work into a novel more concerned with oral rather than written discourse. In addition, Orne-Jewett is usually referenced as an author who writes her characters outside of any association with masculine America.

Orne-Jewett’s quaint story about a small Maine fishing town *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is responsible for helping to establish Orne-Jewett as a successful local color writer. Olson wrote that “It was Miss Orne-Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* which brought the local color novel to its highest degree of artistic perfection in nineteenth century America” (Orne-Jewett xxvi). Orne-Jewett utilizes local color in her
narrative in order to draw the reader into the world of Dunnet Landing and to make us feel as if we are part of an everyday conversation. The novel immediately opens and establishes a relationship between the narrator, arguably a non-gendered outsider who is telling the story from her perspective, and the main female character Mrs. Todd. It is critical that Orne-Jewett begin her story with this bond of female friendship in order to make it clear that she is writing from a gendered position. Both the narrator and Mrs. Todd do not adhere to traditional gender roles yet they are capable of adopting either gender at will. Thus, Orne-Jewett is able to demonstrate the importance of female bonds and how the rural community these women live in can help us contextualize their gender identity. The atmosphere of Dunnet Landing which is struggling to maintain a sense of belonging in an every changing modern America only serves to reinforce how the female characters are also concerned with having to negotiate for their own positions of power in term of gender and society. If the outside world, or masculine America, is slowly encroaching upon rural towns then what does that mean for the women like Mrs. Todd so accustomed to having the freedom to establish her own gender identity?

In my introduction I point out that Mrs. Todd is allowed personal freedom that one would equate at the time with being of the male domain. Her ability to “make distant excursions” and “come home late” would gender her male to a substantial degree. However, these “excursions” are made in an apron and result in the accumulation of large quantities of pennyroyal. Pennyroyal is the herb used to induce miscarriage, which affirms Mrs. Todd as an important midwife, and there can be no reference more feminine than that of an apron. Orne-Jewett pushes against traditional depictions of gender identity through her ability to renegotiate the social construct of what it means to be either
feminine or masculine. This renegotiation allows us to apply the term gender transitivity to Mrs. Todd and how, in doing so, she is able to take on either gender situating her in a position of greater societal power. She does not have to ask permission by anyone to go off into the night collecting her herbs but rather can do as she likes which ultimately benefits the community she continuously cares for.

The image of “cultivating herbs and exchanging secrets of their uses” (25) directs the course of this paper to the first character Mrs. Todd. In addition, such an explanation of midwives allows the reader greater insight into who Mrs. Todd really is. Throughout the novel Orne-Jewett incorporates the midwifery skills of Mrs. Todd into the centrality of the story. Her ability to holistically tend to others is her most latent power. Achterberg notes that midwives “reflect a broad sense of healing that aspires to wholeness or harmony within the self, the family, and the global community. They see body, mind, and spirit as the inseparable nature of humankind; they believe that any healing ministrations have an impact on each element of this triune nature” (4). Orne-Jewett was cognizant of the implications in making her main female character a widowed midwife. Giving Mrs. Todd the capabilities of a midwife also catapulted her social status beyond the human realm. Mrs. Todd works as a female character in the town of Dunnet’s Landing because of her ability to minister in such a healing way and because she is capable of God-like powers which bond her to the community she constantly supports. As a result of being a midwife Mrs. Todd is endowed with a great deal of empathy. This sensitivity to the needs of other humans is what moves her to provide countless acts of selflessness. Orne-Jewett’s novel opens with Mrs. Todd in her herb garden:
It was a queer little garden and puzzling to a stranger, the few flowers being put at a
disadvantage by so much greenery; but the discovery was soon made that Mrs.
Todd was an ardent lover of herbs, both wild and tame, and the sea-breezes blew
into the low-end window of the house laden not only with sweet-briar and sweet-
mary, but balm and sage and borage and mint, wormwood and southernwood. If
Mrs. Todd had occasion to step into the far corner of her herb plot, she trod heavily
upon thyme, and made its fragrant presence known with all the rest. (The Country
of the Pointed Firs 8)

Orne-Jewett places Mrs. Todd at the beginning of her story and in the literal
center of Dunnet’s Landing, metaphorically by explaining her physical presence which
moves all over her garden, and offers the reader insight into the powers of her main
character. Mrs. Todd is a perfect example of gender transitivity because she is in control
of her garden, ripe with herbs both “wild and tame,” (8) and can exist as both midwife
and God-like deity. Her ability to crush thyme, a possible pun on the word time, can
attest to her power. Not only does she watch over thyme in her garden but she can control
it. In fact, Orne-Jewett goes one step further by writing that “she trod heavily upon
thyme” (8). She can let live what she desires and destroy anything that comes in her way.
She is all at once of this world and of another dimension completely.

Orne-Jewett’s depictions of Mrs. Todd are consistently ripe with terminology
which allows her to straddle the physical and natural world she is surrounded by. She
exists in a mode of constant navigation but is also just as rooted to the earth much like her
beloved herbs. In her introduction of Mrs. Todd, Orne-Jewett goes on to note “It may not
have been only the common ails of humanity with which she tried to cope; it seemed
sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy and adverse winds at sea might also find their
proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd’s garden” (9). Thus,
Mrs. Todd wasn’t just a mystic or an herbalist, but someone capable of fixing everyone
around her. The dichotomy between the masculine/feminine binary inherent in the term gender transitivity is also exemplified within this passage. The depiction of “adverse winds” (9), which are of the natural-feminine world, and of the “ails of humanity” (9), which are medically based of the masculine world, signify the concept of gender transitivity in Mrs. Todd. Just like the winds themselves, Mrs. Todd can readily move between genders. As in the physical world, too, her ability to demonstrate gender transitivity is effortless and latent with power. Mrs. Todd is of the physical and of the spiritual world. Her character is representative of the clear understanding that anywhere else in America during that time Mrs. Todd would exist on the margins but not in the world of Dunnet’s Landing. She is the center of the universe there and is the continuous thread which binds the narrative together. Her place is in the center of Dunnet’s Landing and Orne-Jewett is telling the reader that someone such as Mrs. Todd should never find herself marginalized. The outside world, dominated by the male patriarchy and by their strict adherence to gender definitions, would be responsible for forcing someone as powerful as Mrs. Todd to the outer edges of society. However, Mrs. Todd is representative of what an ideal society should constitute and of the harmony that such a person can bring to their community.

Mrs. Todd is the hub of her coastal Maine town. She occupies a place amongst the natural world akin to that of an oracle. Her knowledge is far reaching and trumps even the local town doctor because Mrs. Todd is able to draw from a wealth of midwifery skills. On one page alone Orne-Jewett writes “I had become well acquainted with Mrs. Todd as landlady, herb-gatherer, and rustic philosopher…but I was yet to become acquainted with her as a mariner” (32). Orne-Jewett purposefully sets up the inherent
talents of Mrs. Todd within the first few pages of the story. This is not a literary accident, but rather an obvious attempt to situate Mrs. Todd at the beginning of all things related to the coastal town of Dunnet’s Landing. In addition, Orne-Jewett explains all of the talents of Mrs. Todd which fall under gender transitivity.

In my research midwives were consistently linked to herbs and various uses of herbs. Philosophers and mariners were historically associated with male roles. Mrs. Todd is able to be anything she needs to in her town and she is accepted no matter what gender role she chooses to adopt. In their book Writing Out of Place Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse clarify “it also becomes clear how Orne-Jewett envisions gender as a fluid, rather than a fixed, form of identity” (3). Orne-Jewett was indeed ahead of her time and wrote Mrs. Todd in such a way as to reside outside the gender binary. Mrs. Todd continuously redefines her gender identity and comes to stand for that which is undefined. In discussing the female-centered literary tradition of Orne-Jewett literary critic Linda Grasso writes “In The Country of the Pointed Firs, she negotiates the divide between a male-centered aesthetic that insists the author function as a God-like superior authority” and notes that Orne-Jewett maintains “a female-centered aesthetic that values the author’s sociability and intimate involvement by creating an author-figure who simultaneously fulfills both functions” (Grasso 3). In fulfilling both functions Orne-Jewett succeeds in creating a literary space in which gender construction is deconstructed. In other words, Orne-Jewett did not adhere to the concept of a “female-centered tradition” (3) but decided to maintain her sense of gender fluidity in creating a gender transitive female character in the form of Mrs. Todd. Binding Orne-Jewett and Mrs. Todd to any traditional literary category is exactly the opposite of what someone
such as Mrs. Todd aims at representing. We must not force Mrs. Todd into the typical constraints of gender construction when her ability to exist amid the continuum of gender is why she is so very powerful as both a character and as a representation of transitivity.

Orne-Jewett writes “she stood in the centre of a braided rug, its rings of black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light. Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from the little garden” (11). Mrs. Todd is consistently referred to in such a way that her physicality, which we understand in literature is related to the masculine, and her natural powers, which we understand to be related to the feminine, are completely intertwined so the reader is unable to define one without the other. Orne-Jewett skillfully manipulates any strict adherence to the confines of either identity by calling Mrs. Todd a “huge sibyl”. One must also acknowledge that Orne-Jewett chose to use the word sibyl and that a sibyl is also defined as a prophet. In essence, Orne-Jewett is attempting to reconcile the traditional version of the male-female gender binary which is rooted in the strict adherence to conceived roles of masculinity with her version of the masculine-feminine and of gender transitivity. Various critics of Orne-Jewett have honed in on her work by referencing her subversion of the male-dominated form and of the historical masculine social structure within her novels. While critics might have a point regarding Orne-Jewett’s attempt at patriarchal subversion the writing of a character such as Mrs. Todd goes even further that such a simplistic view. Even more critics of Orne-Jewett discuss her consistent penning of “strong women” and apply these characters to feminist theory. Again, such adherence to typical gender roles is not what a character such as Mrs. Todd is meant to exemplify.
The correlation between life and death is embodied in Mrs. Todd. Orne-Jewett does not endow Mrs. Todd with these powers to harm or to belittle the town. On the contrary, endowing her principal female character with such capabilities is how Orne-Jewett ensures the protection of Dunnet’s Landing. Mrs. Todd is written with so much empathy and compassion that one can infer that the author is telling society to embrace a person like Mrs. Todd not to marginalize her. Accepting someone like Mrs. Todd will only lead to a perfect place such as Dunnet’s Landing and isn’t that kind of community sacred to mankind? This question is best answered by example and through the introduction of Mrs. Todd’s cousin by marriage, Joanna. Orne-Jewett purposefully dedicates three chapters of a seemingly slight story to the life lesson and legacy of the hermit Joanna. Chapter ten introduces us to the herb Pennyroyal which sets up where the herb is grown and explains that only Mrs. Todd and her mother know of the secret location. In fact, Orne-Jewett dedicates the entire title of this chapter to the medicinal herb medically referenced as an abortifacient and historically known to induce miscarriage. In researching the drug I found a depiction of a midwife mixing a concoction of Pennyroyal for a patient in order to induce miscarriage. The archaic drawing could very well have been Mrs. Todd and the patient herself or Joanna. In the chapter on Pennyroyal Mrs. Todd graces the narrator with a brief glimpse into her past by bringing up her deceased husband, Nathan. However, the memory of her husband is not what is disturbing about her story but the fact that she makes mention that he “died before he ever knew what he’d had to know if we’d lived long together” (45). Mrs. Todd expands upon this vague story by remembering “I always liked Nathan, and he never knew. But this pennyr’yal always reminded me, as I’d sit and gather it and hear him
talkin’-it always reminded me of-the other one” (45). The implications here are that Mrs. Todd induced her own miscarriage because she knew Nathan had died. Call it sixth sense or intuition but this entire paragraph is begun by the admission from Mrs. Todd that “I knew it when he was gone. I knew it” (Orne-Jewett 45). She knew that Nathan had died at sea and she terminated her pregnancy. This action enables Mrs. Todd to remain a character capable of gender transitivity because a married mother would not wield the same position of power within the world of Dunnet’s Landing. In addition, the “archaic grief” which possesses Mrs. Todd is necessary in that it instills within her a very real sense of empathy. Most importantly after her loss she remains a widow and never again has a love interest. All of the women in these novels are allowed to typify gender transitivity if and only if they remain alone. Chronologically and literally speaking her miscarriage foreshadows the miscarriage of Poor Joanna. Thus, the character of Joanna exemplifies a strict adherence to the expected female gender role dictated by society. What Mrs. Todd considers a normal yet painful life experience, having conceived and chosen to abort her own child, Joanna believes to be an “unpardonable sin” worthy of ostracizing herself for. After her abortion Joanna leaves the island and is visited by Mrs. Todd. Ever mindful of the well-being of others, most especially those she deems under her care, Mrs. Todd arrives with the minister. She remembers “I thought he might have seen the little old Bible a-layin’ on the shelf close by him, an I wished he knew enough to just lay his hand on it an’ read somethin’ kind of fatherly ‘stead of acussin’ her, an’ then given poor Joana his blessin’ with the hope she might be led to comfort” (67). The poignancy of this passage is not merely in the story of human loss but in the story of what could be. Orne-Jewett riddles her work with questions of gender identity and gender
transitivity so that the reader can ask themselves: what if everyone was able to be the
person they truly are and to do so free from the constraints of traditional gender binaries?
Carson McCullers was born in Columbus, Georgia on February 19, 1917. McCullers did not begin her life as a writer but rather as a pianist, eventually finding herself at the Julliard School of Music in New York. After an illness McCullers turned to creative writing. She went on to write Wunderkind, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Reflections in a Golden Eye. Her works centered on the continuing themes of loneliness and isolation. Of the three novelists, Carson McCullers is the one whose life was fraught with health issues, personal issues and even thoughts of potential suicide.

My final discussion on gender will end with Southern writer Carson McCullers and Miss Amelia. The recent body of work being done on McCullers touches on themes of the grotesque, queer studies and gender theory to name a few. Her work is often explained in relation to her use of the grotesque and as being of the Southern gothic tradition. The focus of my chapter on McCullers’ character Miss Amelia from The Ballad of the Sad Café does not reference either of these two obligatory themes but rather focuses on how Miss Amelia is able to negotiate along the continuum of gender and on how in doing so she then becomes part of this discourse on gender and power. Miss Amelia is included as part of my thesis because of her background as a respected healer and her medical skills, her exemplification of gender transitivity and her consequent
capacity to reside at the center of her rural society. Even though she exhibits the same qualities as the other characters Miss Amelia is eventually persecuted for her inability to completely conform to expected gender norms. My rationale for choosing to end with Miss Amelia is due to the fact that her character is the most complex in terms of gender negotiation and that the eventual outcome for Miss Amelia is drastically different from that of the other women. Unlike, Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey she succumbs to an idealized version of love for Cousin Lymon and is made to suffer dearly for her decision by society. It makes sense to conclude with such a character because the other women in this analysis do not find a love interest. My argument is that in order to be representative of complete gender transitivity within these texts the women must adhere to strict codes of societal behavior and having a relationship outside of the expected gender norm is breaking the rule. Mrs. Todd is the only female character in these novels that not only finds love, more than once as it turns out, but exhibits the most typical heterosexual romantic relationship of all for a brief time.

Within the earliest paragraphs of the novel we read about the “the largest building, in the very center of town” (3) and situated inside of that building is, unbeknown to the reader, the first real introduction to Miss Amelia that McCullers gives her audience. McCullers writes:

The building looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second floor there is one window which is not boarded; sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams – sexless and white, with two great crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief. (3)
This description of Miss Amelia is difficult to understand right away because it does not register who this human soul racked with grief is. McCullers does not readily explain who the woman in the building is but purposefully leaves the presence of Miss Amelia and her grief in a state of vagueness. Doing so is McCullers attempt to blur the lines and the boundaries between the seen and the unseen. It is her stylistic methodology for creating an atmosphere in which the expected gender binary can be inverted and societal norms temporarily repositioned. This entire section of the text introduces Miss Amelia as someone “sexless” and with the ability to “look down on the town” (3). The term sexless allows her to not ascribe to one concrete gender. Furthermore, her ability to look down on the town implies a type of transcendent power that is not of this world. Such a depiction foreshadows the situational placement of societal power Miss Amelia will eventually attain and the metaphorical death that will result in the loss of this power. Both of these descriptions set up Miss Amelia as someone existing in a state of malleability. McCullers opens with this haunting image of Miss Amelia so that we understand there is a hidden sense of human accountability watching and waiting from afar.

Miss Amelia, while initially introduced as sexless while confined to a deserted building is written as “a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man” (4). The descriptions of Miss Amelia as masculine pervade the novel and sporadically change after the arrival of her love interest Cousin Lymon. McCullers observes that:

It was only with people that Miss Amelia was not at ease. People, unless they are nilly-willy or very sick, cannot be taken into the hands and changed overnight to something more worthwhile and profitable. So that the only use that Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them. And in this she succeeded.
Mortages on crops and property, a sawmill, money in the bank – she was the richest woman for miles around. (5)

While McCullers is quick to point out the masculine qualities of her main character she is equally adept at integrating the myriad of medical skills which Miss Amelia is known for. Just like Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, Miss Amelia is an herbalist and healer. McCullers writes:

This office was also the place where Miss Amelia received sick people, for she enjoyed doctoring and did a great deal of it. Two whole shelves were crowded with bottles and various paraphernalia. Against the wall was a bench where the patients sat. She could sew up a wound with a burnt needle so that it would not turn green. For burns she had a cool, sweet syrup. For unlocated sickness there were any number of different medicines which she had brewed herself from unknown recipes. They wrenched loose the bowels very well, but they could not be given to small children, as they caused bad convulsions; for them she had an entirely separate draught, gentler and sweet-flavored. Yes, all in all, she was considered a good doctor. (16)

The only sickness that Miss Amelia wouldn’t handle was a “female complaint” (16). In fact, “at the mere mention of the words her face would slowly darken with shame, and she would stand there craning her neck against the collar of her shirt, or rubbing her swamp boots together, for all the world like a great, shamed, dumb-tongued child” (17).

Her inability to handle female matters does place her outside the context of the feminine but I would argue that her sensitivity to her younger patients expresses a more maternal side that is always a part of Miss Amelia. Thus, she becomes representative of gender transitivity. When a child is brought into her care as a patient Miss Amelia in much the same manner she assumes with Cousin Lymon exhibits the most feminine aspects of her personality. She is incredibly empathetic to young children and is said to have:
Used a special method with children; she did not like to see them hurt, struggling, and terrified. So she had kept the child around the premises all day, giving him licorice and frequent doses of the Kroup Kure, and toward evening she tied a napkin around his neck and let him eat his fill of the dinner. Now as he sat at the table his head wobbled slowly from side to side and sometimes as he breathed there came from him a little worn-out grunt. (39)

This depiction of Miss Amelia is in stark contrast to the image of her in the beginning of the novel. Her aversion to seeing any child in pain is deeply touching and establishes one of the main reasons the town turns to her when they are in need of a doctor. It also is representative of how nurturing she can be which is a quality often overlooked by critics of her as merely being a masculine character. Her medical expertise is more in line with a type of a healer because of her ability to minister to the community around her which makes her demonstrative of a type of “people’s medicine” much like Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey.

The introduction of Cousin Lymon serves to furthermore exaggerate the feminine gender hidden within Miss Amelia. Her adoption of a more submissive nature is inexplicably tied to the entrance of the hunchback and such typical gender ideology is what transforms her in the eyes of the townspeople. When Cousin Lymon approaches Miss Amelia and the other menfolk on her porch, the scene is described in relation to the masculine. McCullers constructs a setting with Miss Amelia standing dead center among a group of men by stating “Miss Amelia herself stood leaning against the side of the open door, her feet crossed in their big swamp boots, patiently untying knots in a rope she had come across. They had not talked for a long time” (6). Once again the portrayal of Miss Amelia is of someone substantial and intimidating. There is nothing soft or delicate about the image of Miss Amelia which McCullers offers the reader. There is an immediate shift
in tone when Cousin Lymon appears and proceeds to place himself at the bottom of the steps sobbing. In that instant Miss Amelia pivots from the masculine to the feminine. Such a display of emotion on the part of the hunchback evokes something deeply maternal in Miss Amelia. Overcome with a feeling of sensitivity:

Miss Amelia crossed the porch with two slow, gangling strides. She went down the steps and stood looking thoughtfully at the stranger. Gingerly, with one long brown forefinger, she touched the hump on his back. The hunchback still wept, but he was quieter now. The night was silent and the moon still shone with a soft, clear light—it was getting colder. Then Miss Amelia did a rare thing; she pulled out a bottle from her hip pocket and after polishing off the top with the palm of her hand she handed it back to the hunchback to drink. Miss Amelia could seldom be persuaded to sell her liquor on credit, and for her to give so much as a drop away free was almost unknown. (9)

Miss Amelia is written in a state of gender transitivity prior to the arrival of Cousin Lymon but upon his entry into the story she aligns herself more and more with the feminine aspects of her nature. This virtue results in Miss Amelia being more accepted by her society. Literary critic Sarah Gleeson-White remarks that “Miss Amelia Evans also appears from time to time as a woman. When the hunchback Cousin Lymon comes to town, love, the magic potion resembling her whiskey, which heightens sensitivities to the world around, feminizes Amelia” (Gleeson-White 91).

The introduction of Miss Amelia describes her as sexless, feminine and masculine all within the first three pages of the story. She is the genderless ghost in the building, the feminized woman racked with pain and the businessman obsessed with a good fight. McCullers is clear throughout her novel that gender and power are consistently linked in the “lonesome”, “dreary” town that once boasted a café which was known for its “great gatherings”. The correlation must be considered that the verbiage McCullers utilizes for the initial depiction of the town and of Miss Amelia is fraught with
a feeling of emptiness. McCullers has admitted that “my central theme is the theme of
spiritual isolation” (Broughton 34). The sense of isolation rendered so vividly in the work
by McCullers can be considered in relation to gender ideology. For example, Morris
Finestein is a name given out in order to negatively denote any feminine feelings. In her
article “Rejection of the Feminine in Carson McCullers’ The Ballad of the Sad Café”
literary critic Panthea Reid Broughton notes:

In other words to be sensitive, to weep, is to be effeminate. The human virtues of
tenderness and sensitivity are considered to be exclusively feminine and decidedly
superfluous and downright contemptible by a pragmatic and rationalistic society.
The human psyche has then been split, “cracked” if you will, into qualities which
are feminine and contemptible on the one hand and masculine and admirable on the
other. (38)

Gender within the context of the story occupies a space which serves to
enforce strict versions of anticipated gender norms and to create the understanding that
deviation away from such norms will not be tolerated. McCullers had said that “by nature
all people are both sexes” (38) but her admission is not one accepted by the angst ridden
town in which Miss Amelia resides. The characters in the novel who fall along a
continuum of the masculine and the feminine gender are themselves “cracked” in such a
way that human isolation is inevitable. This particular society does marginalize Miss
Amelia, unlike Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, but there is a segment of the text in which this
marginalization is temporarily suspended. As Broughton states, many critics of the text
“seem to disregard the fact that aloneness was, for a time at least, actually overcome”
(36). Regarding the effects of the café in relation to gender norms Broughton continues:

When the building Miss Amelia owns becomes a café rather than a dry goods store,
Miss Amelia and the townspeople as well almost succeed in breaking out of their
separateness. On the occasion when Miss Amelia first breaks her rule and allows
liquor to be drunk on the premises, an atmosphere of “company and genial warmth” suddenly emerges. (35)

The human feelings of separateness and isolation reinforce the fact that the café came to represent another form of gender transitivity. When the townspeople finally put aside their issues and begin to accept one another, without regard to the influences of the outside world, a perfect little town much like Dunnet’s Landing or Orr’s Island emerges for the benefit of all. For Miss Amelia the café came to represent an atmosphere in which she could feel accepted regardless of gender or power and that was a feeling which all of the others in the town began to adopt as well. In relation to how the café influenced the both the town and Miss Amelia McCullers clarifies:

Her manner, however, and her way of life were greatly changed. She still loved a fierce lawsuit, but she was not so quick to cheat her fellow man and to exact cruel payments. Because the hunchback was so extremely sociable, she even went about a little-to revivals, to funerals, and so forth. Her doctoring was as successful as ever, her liquor even finer than before, if that were possible. The café itself proved profitable and was the only place of pleasure for many miles around. (24)

With this particular passage McCullers is careful to explain that Miss Amelia, while obviously more feminized and more accepted by society at large, still retains masculine traits which locate her character between the female-male gender binary. Her ability to maintain her position as both doctor and maker of spirits situate part of her gender identity amongst the masculine. However, her attendance at the revivals and funerals still places her between the cycles of life and death. Ultimately, such literary placement within the confines of the text foreshadows the tragic end of the story and brings the reader back to the introduction of Miss Amelia at the start of this tale.

The dynamic between power and gender manifests itself in Miss Amelia. Miss Amelia’s love for Cousin Lymon and her unconsummated marriage to Marvin Macy is
viewed by critic Gleeson-White as signifying her “rejection of sexual relations in favor of an asexual maternal love” (Gleeson-White 102). In addition, Gleeson-White points out that Miss Amelia is “censured for her rejection of heterosexuality” and continues to say “critics implicitly equate women’s function with heterosexual reproduction. Amelia is therefore condemned, both inside and outside the ballad, for her rejection of “womanly” procreative duties, underscored by her “strange” maternal, nonsexual love for Cousin Lymon” (Gleeson-White 103). Unlike Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, Miss Amelia enters into a love triangle which forever changes her relation to the gender identity imposed by society. Miss Amelia falls in love with Cousin Lymon, representative of the feminine, and fails to consummate her marriage to Marvin Macy, which is atypical expected female behavior and thus gendered masculine. Regarding Miss Amelia and her “resistance to cultural norms” (76) Gleeson-White notes:

> On a more general level, the new form of power Miss Amelia creates through transvestism and the refusal of normative demarcations must be contained. In passing beyond puberty, the ritual of the adolescent’s inscription of femininity (or masculinity), the grownup Amelia is particularly upsetting to what might be thought of as the natural order of things. (76)

> Again, in relation to Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, Miss Amelia can be understood to reside in a state of gender transitivity but one in which her community ultimately rejects her for. The natural order, or the order superimposed by societal standards of gender conformity, is one in which Miss Amelia is placed outside of throughout the text. Her precarious placement, whether in regards to a definitive authorial word choice or in regards to her gender navigation, is exactly what magnifies her ability to become representative of a character capable of gender transitivity.
Miss Amelia can be read in relation to Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy but is also a female character whom the writer channels in order to give a voice to the voiceless. Much like the existence of Joanna and Mara, Miss Amelia does succumb to a metaphorical death. Her love of Cousin Lymon and her emotional descent into the feminized version of herself is her downfall. She is incapable of maintaining her placement between the female-male gender binary, which balances her, and allows herself to conform to the codes of female gender identity imposed by the townspeople. McCullers writes “for the first time in her life she hesitated as to just what course to pursue. And, like most people in such a position of uncertainty, she did the worst thing possible—she began following several courses at once, all of them contrary to each other (53). This notion of not being your authentic self, or of having to rely on society to establish your worth, plagues Miss Amelia in the final chapters of the novel and diminishes her power both personally and spiritually. The townspeople surmise that “all in all it was a distracting time for Miss Amelia. In the opinion of most people she was well on her way in the climb up fools’ hill, and everyone waited to see how it would all turn out” (McCullers 53). Unfortunately, Miss Amelia is the one female character out of the three that I have brought into the breadth of this paper which suffers for her inability to be defined by one gender. In essence, the society whose rules for gender ideology Miss Amelia refuses to follow subjugate her to a life of isolation. Her temporary position at the center of her town was only tied to the feminized Cousin Lymon and his ability to help redefine Miss Amelia as another feminized character. Miss Amelia became more of a woman in the presence of Cousin Lymon and the townspeople accepted her for such. The arrival of Marvin Macy, Cousin Lymon’s immediate devotion to him and rejection of Miss Amelia only serves to
reinforce the gender transitivity which typifies Miss Amelia. The demise of Miss Amelia is not only linked to the arrival of Marvin Macy but to the fact that she is unable to negotiate any level of societal power after he inserts himself into the love triangle. Macy drastically upsets the power dynamic between Miss Amelia and the town:

During these weeks Miss Amelia was closely watched by everyone. She went about absent-mindedly, her face remote as though she had lapsed into one of her gripe trances. For some reason, after the day of Marvin Macy’s arrival, she put aside her overalls and wore always the red dress she had before this time reserve for Sundays, funerals, and sessions of the court. (52)

As if being watched by the entire town was not enough pressure for Miss Amelia it is said that Miss Amelia “seemed to have lost her will” (52). Miss Amelia was accepted by society when her identity and worth were merely the result of the success of the cafe. Unfortunately, Miss Amelia attempts to find her own sense of self-worth in Cousin Lymon and when this situation does not work out Miss Amelia loses herself. McCullers warns the reader, much like Beecher-Stowe in her novel, about the importance of identity and how easily the constraints of power can upset the human condition:

And the confusing point is this: All useful things have a price, and are bought only with money, as that is the way the world is run. You know without having to reason about it the price of a bale of cotton, or a quart of molasses. But no value has been put on human life; it is given to us free and taken without being paid for. What is it worth? If you look around, at times the value may seem to be little or nothing at all. Often after you have sweated and tried and things are not better for you, there comes a feeling deep down in the soul that you are not worth much. (54).

Miss Amelia ultimately pays her own price for falling in love with Cousin Lymon and for letting what Marvin Macy stands for destroy her true self. She becomes as indispensable as a bale of cotton or a quart of molasses.

The fight at the end of the novel concludes the love story between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon and finds that Miss Amelia “was beaten before the crowd
could come to their senses. Because of the hunchback the fight was won by Marvin Macy, and at the end Miss Amelia lay sprawled on the floor, her arms flung outward and motionless” (67). Broughton sums up the ending of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and of Miss Amelia with the understanding that:

Miss Amelia is then no more capable of manifesting a healthy femininity than Marin Macy is. She is alternately hard and soft, but cannot manage to balance the qualities or to be both at once. She is, as McCullers explains, “divided between two emotions”. Thus, when Marvin Macy returns, she puts aside her overalls and wears always the dark red dress as a symbol of her accessibility. She tries giving Marvin free drinks and smiling at him “in a wild crooked way”. But she also sets a terrible trap for him and tries to poison him. And she is no more successful at destroying him than she is at attracting him. She remains then the figure in the boarded-up house, white and sexless, the eyes turning increasing inward upon themselves. (41)

This passage by Broughton places Miss Amelia back at the beginning of the text, as someone “sexless” and thus devoid of any real gender. Her gender transitivity, in relation to Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, does not ultimately situate her character within a position of power. The only time that Miss Amelia attains any real sense of power is when the café is at the height of success and she is in a relationship with Cousin Lymon. Miss Amelia is never completely able to find a positive mode of balance between genders and thus must suffer at the hands of a community steeped in a strict code of gender identity. Her ability to break out of the expected norm and to be representative of gender transitivity is only allowed during a brief part of the story. In contrast to the other two female characters Miss Amelia is indicative of a character which cannot find balance in her life and who marginalizes herself when expected gender norms fail her. Broughton leaves us with one thought regarding Miss Amelia which is the warning that “the feminine virtues must not be rejected; they must be reclaimed by all human kind” (42). The goal of this thesis is to argue that gender transitivity is linked to even greater issues
of power within society. From such a perspective human kind must not only accept the strength of feminine virtues but the balance between the masculine and the feminine. The concept of gender transitivity might be fairly new in academia but it’s a gender theory in need of critical attention.

It is critical to point out that Miss Amelia “ate her Sunday dinners by herself; her place was never crowded with a flock of relatives, and she claimed no kin with no one” (McCullers 5). Immediately upon meeting Cousin Lymon, Miss Amelia exhibits a turn toward a more feminine, empathetic person. The dynamic between Cousin Lymon and Miss Amelia is distinguished from the other two stories due to the romantic nature of the relationship. The third person in this love triangle is Miss Amelia’s ex-husband, Marvin Macy. Described as “a fortunate fellow; he needed to bow and scrape to no one and always got just what he wanted. But from a more serious and thoughtful viewpoint Marvin Macy was not a person to be envied, for he was an evil character” (McCullers 27). In order to apply the concept of the love triangle it becomes necessary to incorporate the literary depiction of Marvin Macy. Theorist Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick devotes an entire chapter of her novel Between Men to the concept of “gender asymmetry and erotic triangles” (Segdwick 21). In her novel she writes:

thus, Lacan, Chodorow and Dinnerstein, Rubin, Irigaray, and others, making critiques from within their multiple traditions, offer analytical tools for treating the erotic triangle not as an ahistorical, Platonic form, a deadly symmetry from which the historical accidents of gender, language, class, and power detract, but as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment (27)

Kosofsky-Sedgwick is arguing that gender, language, class, and power are not accidental but rather pivotal points of development which demonstrate the dynamics of
power within societal relationships. Her work on gender asymmetry and erotic triangles applies to Miss Amelia because it expands upon the concept of homosexuality and homosocial bonds which have nothing to do with sex. Thus, the masculine and the feminine are compared in relation to the “dominant culture” or the “societies where gender is a profound determinant of power” (26). The acknowledgement of the societal influence directs this gender theory back to the feminization of Miss Amelia and her ability to navigate between the female-male gender binary.

Miss Amelia is written in a state of gender transitivity prior to the arrival of Cousin Lymon but upon his entry into the story she aligns herself more and more with the feminine aspects of her nature. Literary critic Sarah Gleeson-White remarks that “Miss Amelia Evans also appears from time to time as a woman. When the hunchback Cousin Lymon comes to town, love, the magic potion resembling her whiskey, which heightens sensivities to the world around, feminizes Amelia” (91). The introduction of Miss Amelia describes her as sexless, feminine and masculine all within the first three pages of the story. She is the genderless ghost in the building, the feminized woman racked with pain and the businessman obsessed with a good fight. McCullers is clear throughout her novel that gender and power are consistently linked in the “lonesome”, “dreary” town that once boasted a café which was the known for its “great gatherings”. The dynamic between power and gender manifests itself in Miss Amelia. Miss Amelia’s love for Cousin Lymon and her unconsummated marriage to Marvin Macy is viewed by critic Gleeson-White as signifying her “rejection of sexual relations in favor of an asexual maternal love” (Gleeson-White 102). In addition, Gleeson-White points out that Miss Amelia is “censured for her rejection of heterosexuality” and continues to say “critics
implicitly equate women’s function with heterosexual reproduction. Amelia is therefore condemned, both inside and outside the ballad, for her rejection of “womanly” procreative duties, underscored by her “strange” maternal, nonsexual love for Cousin Lymon” (Gleeson-White 103). Unlike Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, Miss Amelia enters into a love triangle which forever changes her relation to the gender identity imposed by society. Miss Amelia falls in love with Cousin Lymon, representative of the feminine, and fails to consummate her marriage to Marvin Macy, which is atypical expected female behavior and thus gendered masculine. Regarding Miss Amelia and her “resistance to cultural norms” (76) Gleeson-White observes:

On a more general level, the new form of power Miss Amelia creates through transvestism and the refusal of normative demarcations must be contained. In passing beyond puberty, the ritual of the adolescent’s inscription of femininity (or masculinity), the grownup Amelia is particularly upsetting to what might be thought of as the natural order of things. (76)

Again, in relation to Mrs. Todd and Miss Roxy, Miss Amelia can be understood to reside in a state of gender transitivity but one in which her community ultimately rejects her for.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The ability of each of these novels to represent characters capable of what Sedgwick refers to as gender transitivity and expand upon how gender fuses with societal power unifies these readings from a literary perspective. The novels which my paper has explored in this thesis by Beecher-Stowe, Orne-Jewett, and McCullers embody a representation of gender identity and power not previously considered. A close examination of these narratives reveals that typical gender roles can exist outside of the expected male-female binary. Of equal significance is the way in which each female character is able to maintain a position of societal power. The argument is that these women were expected in rural American and function as a sign of the dichotomy which is representative in discussion of gender identity.

There is an air of intimacy within these novels. The constant that we might locate in these readings is the reoccurring theme of gender. What gender represents, how we can navigate societal power around it, and what it means to the relationships the characters in these novels have with their community or even each other. There is a “womanist ideal” at the center of these narratives and it’s an ideal which brings forth the concept of gender being fluid as opposed to fixed. These novels allow for a powerful redefinition of the ideals which surround gender identity and ask the reader to consider the implications of gender transitivity in these representations of rural America.
WORKS CITED
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<http://www.shmoop.com/reconstruction/gender.html>


