CODING THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, SARAH ORNE JEWETT AND WILLA CATHER

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Janette A. Allen
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father Winfield Tyler Williams because he helped me write it and wasn’t here to see it finished.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Matthew Brown who was instrumental in shaping my scholarly journey. It was through Matt’s voluminous knowledge of American literature and culture that I found my own love for the subject. Thank you Matt for the hours you spent talking/arguing with me. It was an honor and a joy to study under your guidance. I’d also like to thank Dr. Tracy Butts who always insisted that I “say what I mean and mean what I say.” This was the best writing (and life) advice I ever received. Tracy is a role-model and a friend and this project would not have happened if not for her support.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Beginning of the Influence Line</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Toward Literary Coding: Methodology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The New Matriarchal Jerusalem in <em>The Pearl of Orr’s Island</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Golden Measuring-Rod”: The Root of Power</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “New Jerusalem”</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating the Matriarchy</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Coding the Garden in <em>The Country of Pointed Firs</em></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Todd’s Garden</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennyroyal</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Metaphor and Sexuality in <em>My Antonia</em></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is the “material our of which countries are made”</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Garden of Eden: “The Deepest Peace in the Orchard”</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Conclusion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe  
Orr’s Island

*The Country of Pointed Firs*, by Sarah Orne Jewett  
Pointed Firs
ABSTRACT

CODING THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, SARAH ORNE JEWETT AND WILLA CATHER by Janette S. Allen Master of Arts in English California State University, Chico Spring 2015

This study examines the similar subversive feministic themes that exist between Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of Pointed Firs* and Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*. First, this thesis explores the relationship between these women, then it examines the similar literary techniques they utilized and finally, this thesis presents findings of an analysis of those techniques. This study contributes to the discipline of feminist and women's studies in American literature because it is focused on the experience of women and studies women via a contemporary feminist perspective. Also, this study contributes to the concept of coding in literature. This thesis adds to the study of literary coding by furthering an analysis of coding techniques. Primarily, this study adds to scholarship on the work of Stowe, Jewett and Cather by bringing contemporary perspectives into the act of textual analysis.
This study develops a definition of literary coding and applies that dentition to textual analysis. This act could be the first step in decoding literature. This thesis examines *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, *The Country of Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia*, pinpointing both literary techniques and thematic issues that were passed-on, responded to and furthered between Stowe, Jewett and Cather.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) is best known for the abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and while her abolitionist work was vital to the course of American history she also wrote lesser-known novels that focused on issues of American womanhood. Through influence and friendship, Stowe’s focus on womanhood in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1861) provided inspiration for Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1890) and Willa Cather (1873-1947). In *Orr’s Island*, Stowe examines the state of American womanhood, drawing connections between slavery and the institution of marriage. Perhaps, a close look at the bondage of slavery resulted in Stowe’s realization of the bondage women faced as property of their husband and father. Stowe’s biographer Joan Hedrick described *Orr’s Island* as “a story of what it meant to a young girl growing up in a society that prescribed sharply curtailed possibilities for women” (297). Thus, *Orr’s Island* is Stowe’s personal account of her experiences as an American woman.

As the daughter of Reverend Lyman Beecher and wife of theology professor Calvin Stowe, religion was the center of Stowe’s experience. Raised in the Presbyterian tradition, educated in theology, the Bible and the classics, Stowe was both devoutly religious and worldly in a time when education was not readily available or commonplace for women. Religion formed the conduit upon which she navigated her
life. As such, it is no surprise that *Orr’s Island* examines gender through a religious lens, exploring the ways in which women have suffered under patriarchy grounded in religion. Stowe takes up the power dynamics of Judeo-Christian myths, challenging the privileges it affords men and rewriting these foundational myths of American culture in a female model. As we shall see in chapter one of this study, Stowe carries on with the Puritan rhetoric of John Winthrop, creating a “New Jerusalem” in America, but unlike the Puritan legacy, Stowe’s model rights the wrongs of slavery and patriarchal socio-political structures by creating a matriarchal Christian/Jewish hybrid that ultimately results in true egalitarian democracy.

_The Pearl of Orr’s Island_ was profoundly influential to Sarah Orne Jewett who was both a friend of Stowe’s and an admirer of her work. Jewett’s partner Annie Fields was well acquainted with Stowe, having hosted her many times at her home at 148 Charles St. in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Per Jewett’s request, Annie brought Jewett and her literary idol together on several occasions, once in 1878 in Boston at the Newton country home of the Clafin’s and finally in 1884 when Stowe was in her late-70’s. Jewett credits *Orr’s Island* as her primary literary influence. Both Stowe and Jewett wrote about southeastern Maine and it was from Stowe’s example that Jewett found her literary voice. In the 1893 preface to her novel *Deephaven*, Jewett discusses the role _Orr’s Island_ had in her life as follows: “The first chapter of *Orr’s Island* gave the young author of *Deephaven* to see with new eyes and to follow eagerly the old shore paths from one gray, weather-beaten house to another where Genius pointed her the way.” Central to this passage is Jewett’s claim that *Orr’s Island* made her “see with new eyes,” which signals the shift in Jewett’s perspective to one that had not existed prior. Thus, Jewett
credits Stowe with having had such a profound effect on her own work as to alter the course of it entirely.

With the “new eyes” given to her by Stowe, Jewett turned to the subject of writing the female experience. In *The Country of Pointed Firs* (1896), Jewett picks up Stowe’s thematic focus from *Orr’s Island* and repurposes it. In *Orr’s Island*, Stowe claimed that a matriarchal religion was the answer for fixing America’s many contradictions and Jewett takes this theme further in *Pointed Firs*, extending the role of women to include not only being capable of producing life through childbirth but also capable of choosing when not to create life through abortion. As Chapter one asserts, Stowe imbued the unmarried female caretakers character Roxy and Ruey with the God-like power of creation and Jewett continues this focus on the ordinary domestic roles of women. Through secretive language, Jewett puts the recipe for ending pregnancy in the hands of her readers and in doing so, continues to align women with religious figures who possess the power to control life.

Through her friendship with Jewett, Willa Cather continued to remake religious figures and myths in the same vein as Stowe. Jewett and Cather became friends toward the end of Jewett’s life and just as Jewett credits Stowe as her primary literary influence, so too, does Cather credit Jewett as having given her “new eyes.” In December 1908, Jewett gave the then struggling Cather the following literary advice; “You must find your own quiet center of life, and write from that to the world . . . in short you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up . . . and to write and work on this level we must live on it--we must at least recognize it and defer to it at every step.” Shortly after this letter, Cather resigned from her busy position at
McClure Magazine and began writing full-time. This movement also signals a shift in Cather’s writing away from the overly stylized examples seen in her early work such as Alexander's Bridge (which Cather claims were written in the style of Henry James) to what would become representative of Cather’s pioneering thematic style her. Cather’s “novels of the soil” spoke the “human heart” and “the great consciousness” referred to by Jewett.

In her novel My Antonia (1918), Cather wrote of both the “human heart” and the “great consciousness” and, in keeping with Stowe’s original theme, claimed that a woman’s identity is essentially a combination of the physical experiences (“human heart”) and the spiritual life (“human consciousness”). In My Antonia, Cather remakes the Eve figure and the myth of the Garden of Eden in much the same way as Stowe remade religious figures in Orr’s Island. As chapter three of this study asserts, rather than negating Eve’s sexuality and search for knowledge, Cather creates the Genesis story with an Eve figure whose sexuality, spirituality and life giving capabilities are representative of women’s real experiences. Like Stowe, Cather uses Biblical figures to rewrite the role of womanhood in American society and like Jewett, Cather focuses much of her claims on the power to create life.

The Beginning of the Influence-Line

In Orr’s Island, Stowe defines the role of the writer. In this definition, she names the elements of identity that will become central to Jewett’s and Cather’s work. According to Stowe, artists are “beings born into this world in whom, from childhood the spiritual and the reflective predominate over the physical. In relation to other human beings, they seem to be organized much as birds are in relations to other animals. They
are the artists, the poets, the unconscious seers, to whom the purer truths of the spiritual instruction are open” (166). Here Stowe’s definition of the artist is one who oversees and is composed of equal parts “spiritual” and “reflective,” traits that dominate over the “physical.” These three elements will become central to the work of Jewett and Cather. In keeping with Stowe’s focus on the two parts that comprise the “poet,” Jewett creates models of womanhood in *Pointed Firs* that are empowered because of their ability to balance the “spiritual,” the “reflective” with the addition of the “physical.” Unlike Stowe, Jewett does not subordinate the physical experiences of womanhood. Instead, she asserts that in the ability to choose whether or not to make life, the bodies of women are primary components of their power. Continuing with Stowe’s claim and in consideration of Jewett’s, Cather moves toward a form of womanhood that is not only a combination of “spiritual,” “reflective” and “physical” but is also sexual, not merely givers of life but possessing a desires based on their physical (i.e. bodily) experiences. Cather moves female sexuality into the picture via the Garden of Eden and in doing so, Stowe’s definition culminates in *My Antonia*.

Moving Toward Literary Coding: Methodology

Although significant scholarship has been conducted on the feminist themes of *Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia*, the intertextual relationship between these narratives, given the known relationship of their authors has not been well-studied. Through a process of in-depth textual analysis, what could be called a literary code emerges from these texts. In their article “The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature,” Joan S. Radner and Susan S. Lanser define feminist literary coding as “covert expression of ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings and attitudes that the
dominant culture . . . would find disturbing or threatening if expressed directly” (414). These “esoteric messages” are “messages that comment on women’s roles in relation to men, messages it would not be safe to express directly” (413). Feminist literary coding has not been studied enough (beyond the work of Radner and Lanser) to create a concrete typology. Instead, given the extreme variation that exists between the experiences of American women, the study of literary coding utilized by female writers is in its infancy. My analysis moves toward a kind of feminist coding typology by way of the work of Stowe, Jewett and Cather. Yet, my work here is less focused on methods of coding and more focused on the representations of the female experience that emerge from the application of a modern feminist lens. Textual analysis can be seen as the first step in the development of a code typology and my study moves firmly in that direction.

Douwe W. Fokkema, established five types of literary coding, two of which are particularly relevant to my argument. They are the “linguistic code” and the “generic code.” The former is defined as a code “that directs the reader to read the text as a [feminist] text” (“feminist” is my insertion). The latter “generic code” comments on the genre of the text, “which instructs the reader to activate certain expectations and suppress others, depending on the genre” (Fokkema 646). Stowe, Jewett and Cather activate this kind of genre expectation in *Orr’s Island*, *Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia* wherein they create new genres between the lines of conventionally accepted genre boundaries. Radner and Lanser claim that these genres--domestic fiction and regionalism in particular—could have been unchallenged and perhaps even unnoticed by the dominant male culture but would be well read by women who would “understand its signs, and in reading it, learn a new message by which they could interpret their own lives” (Radner and Lanser 413).
It’s possible that this kind of generic coding could by at play in *Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia* because, as we shall see, the authors embedded secretive messages within in their texts that would have been dangerous for them to express openly.

Of particular relevance to this study is the work of Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser who began defining and applying literary codes in women’s writing. This feminist perspective is invaluable for opening women’s writing and identifying the internal voice of the text. Much of the coding typology I apply in this study is situated on their theoretical framework. One of the key coding typologies that I utilize in the following analysis is the use of landscape metaphor. Radner and Lanser identify metaphor as an encoded means in which “women express forbidden sexual and political impulses” (419). The analysis of metaphor in relation to the landscape is at the center of much of my methodology. In doing so, the work of D.W. Meinig and Gaston Bachelard provide key interpretations. I consider the following analysis representative of the internal voice of the texts. This analysis yields new perspectives of these classical American novels.

In the work of Stowe, Jewett and Cather we find encoded the types of “covert” messages Radner and Lanser describe and Stowe, Jewett and Cather would have had ample reason to mask their claims while also seeking to express their experiences. Stowe’s reality was that of the “domestic sphere” described by Barbara Welter in her well-known essay “The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860,” in which a woman’s role clearly if not rigidly “judged by her husband, neighbors and society” based on her “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152). In chapter one I assert that Stowe blames patriarchal society for having derailed the American goal of “freedom for all.” In
light of the prominent station of her family, her work in *Orr’s Island* could have had severe consequences both personally and professionally if stated directly.

Jewett was the daughter of a rural country physician and was no less influenced by gender expectation than Stowe. Jewett had abundant reason to cloak her claims concerning women’s reproductive control. Not only was abortion illegal when *Pointed Firs* was published but it was also considered immortal. As stated in the Bible, “The Lord kills and brings to life” (Samuel 2:6) and abortion would have been deemed a sin akin to murder, which, as the sixth commandment, was in direct violation of God’s institutions. *Pointed Firs* was published eighty years before America legalized abortion with *Roe vs. Wade* (1973) and in those eighty years secularization changed the way many Americans regarded abortion. In 1896 Jewett would have had ample reason to keep her claims about the importance of reproductive control for women a secret. As Chapter two of this study demonstrates, *Pointed Firs* challenges both religion and standard American thought in ways that were unparalleled in its time.

Like Stowe and Jewett, Cather also had ample reason to veil her claims in *My Antonia*. In chapter three of this study I demonstrate the ways in which Cather discusses the female body and female sexuality using language that masked these themes. In keeping with the subject of Stowe and Jewett, Cather also challenges the role of religion in women’s lives. *My Antonia* was published two years before women won the right to vote with the passage of the nineteenth amendment, at a time when women were still consider non-citizens. An open discussion about women’s sexuality, especially in the form of a Biblical figure, could have been seen as direct challenge not only to the status quo but also as sacrilegious. An overt discussion concerning women’s bodies and sexual
desires could have ended Cather’s writing career at best and been dangerous to her at worst. Therefore, cloaking her challenges in subversive language served not only to launch her career as a writer but also spread her messages.

In order for Stowe, Jewett and Cather’s feminist messages to be considered a code the following aspects would have to be present: 1-) the information or message has an ulterior meaning, 2-) the code is used to convey information that needs to be cloaked, 3-) the code is intended for a particular group of insiders, and 3-) the code is intended to not be noticed by a group of outsiders, particularly individuals in positions of power. These qualifications apply to Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs and My Antonia because faced with ruin, each woman had reason to code their messages. Also, we know that women were the primary readers of novels in the nineteenth century and so it’s possible that they may have understood these coded messages. What we do not know, or at least what I was not able to address in this study, is whether or not the encoded feminism messages went undetected by male society. In the following chapters I explore internal themes of these three texts and my analysis examines the strategies the authors used. These strategies may be representative of a form of intertextual literary coding.

Feminist Theoretical Framework

In the textual analysis process applied to Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs and My Antonia, my study adopts a materialist feminist theoretical framework without neglecting the linguistic feminist approach.

In the anthology Material Feminisms (2008), editors Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman work to “bring the material, specifically the materiality of the human body and the natural world, into the forefront of feminist theory and practice” (1). In doing so, they
suggest that the feminist theoretical practices of the postmodernist and poststructuralist schools have engaged discursive issues of culture and linguistics primarily, while ignoring, or even “intentionally distancing” themselves from, the material elements of the female experience (1). While they both claim that the “linguistic turn” of feminist studies yielded profoundly important results, they nonetheless suggest that “the retreat from materiality has had serious consequences for feminist theory and practice” and that society “needs a way to talk about the materiality of the body” because “women have bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure” (3, 4). Alaimo and Hekman draw connections between women’s corporeal experiences and nature, claiming that the same binary-based thought process that has bound-up feminist theory (language=reality) is at play in ecological studies (man versus nature). Instead, they call for a radical “New Materialism” that examines the ways that the human and the nonhuman world interact, a complete theoretical “reconceptualization” of nature and humanity (5).

Before “New Materialism” ideologies began to change feminist studies, Linda McDowell was studying the ways in which place and gender affected women’s identities. In her book, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (1999), McDowell argues that ‘the body is certainly a central object of personal concern, as well as a key social issue” and because of this relationship, the female body is “defined both as deeply personal and as subjects of public comment” (36). Moreover, in a move that seems to foreshadow the coming “materialist” turn of feminist studies, McDowell claims that the female body has “histories and geographies” of their own that connect to society but are purely physical in nature. Consequently, McDowell looks at the ways in which spatial elements affect women’s physical experiences in the relationship between
geographical sites such as homes, communities, cities, workspaces, public spaces and nations.

At the same time as McDowell was examining the connections between women’s physicality and their geographies, Kerstin W. Shands was applying body-centric feminist approaches to literature, examining “misogynistic” spatial “metaphors” in the “patriarchal literary canon” as a means of “breaking through barriers that hold women writers back” (21). In her article “Em(bracing) Space” (1998), Shands claims that “male images of conquest and subjugation have dominated American culture since Frontier times—unfortunately with harmful effects on both landscapes and women” (25). In a striking coalescence of McDowell’s theory and her own, Shands argues that “landscapes in women’s literature” is representative of “female eroticism and literary creativity” (23), thus combining the material, geographical and literary theories. Of course, none of these theories were necessarily at odds with one another, instead they each contribute to and build upon the other, fleshing out the complex realities of women in Western society.

My study of Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs and My Antonia is positioned between the linguistic and the material approach of current feminist studies, drawing both approaches without negating the other. This occurs in two ways. First, the study of literature is a linguistic study and this work is especially so in that it looks at specific utterances, sentence structure, punctuation and intentional omissions as important meaning-making signals. Therefore, the very act of decoding women’s literature applies meaning to the feminist linguistic approach. Secondly, the meaning that my work addresses is physical in nature in that the analytical process reveals the female body and its multitudinous experiences. In the Cather and Jewett chapters, I claim that the physical experiences of
the female body in *Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia* are of particular salience. Thus my work in this study combines old and new forms of feminist research to unearth the voice of women as they express their experiences, their challenges, their passions, and their beliefs.

**Scope of the Study**

In the first chapter of this study I analyze Stowe’s “New Jerusalem” in *Orr’s Island*, exploring the ways in which she imbues women with power through the construction of a matriarchal religious model. In a move that criticizes the God-given superiority assigned to men in *Genius*, Stowe draws upon religious imagery to claim that the only differences between the sexes are their anatomy. In drawing attention to the “golden rod” that separates the sexes, Stowe masks a phallic discussion in religious tropes. She continues by reconstructing the figures of God and Christ as women who, when given the “golden rod” of power, correct the many errors of male Biblical figures. Stowe focuses particular attention on Moses, claiming that the “New [female] Jerusalem” will “breed better Jews than Moses” (122). Here Stowe offers biting criticism of the institution of slavery in America, claiming that Moses, like the American government, failed at the task of creating a democracy. In Stowe’s religious model, female God and Christ figures bring about the “New Jerusalem” of Puritan rhetoric based on Christian charity and love. Thus, righting the wrongs of slavery and women’s bondage via marriage by extinguishing patriarchy.

In the second chapter I follow Stowe’s influences in Jewett’s *Pointed Firs*, examining the ways in which Jewett expands the role of women through reproductive control. In *Orr’s Island*, Stowe’s female God characters create all human life in much the
same way as human life is literally birthed by women. In *Pointed Firs*, women not only create life, they also decide when not to create life. Like Stowe, Jewett draws upon the ordinary lives of women both to expand significance of the domestic sphere and to offer implicit messages to her readers. Because these messages (recipes for aborting a pregnancy) are highly unconventional and illegal, Jewett had reason to mask them, and yet, they are not so heavily cloaked so as to render them invisible. In Chapter two, I examine Jewett’s methods of hiding these themes in a form that begins to look very much like a code.

The final chapter of my study examines the ways in which Cather furthered Stowe’s claims on the “spiritual,” “reflective” and “physical” nature of womanhood via Biblical themes and metaphor. I claim that in *My Antonia* themes began by Stowe and continued by Jewett converge and are refashioned according to Cather’s particular views on womanhood. In chapter three, I explore the ways in which Cather remade the Genesis myth, addressing Stowe’s “golden rod” phallic imagery by describing a version of the Garden where the “rod” does not signal superiority and power and the sexes are joined in a unified sexual form that is representative of sexual and social egalitarianism. In Antonia and Anton, Cather unravels the power structure created by Adam and Eve, resulting in fertility and personal happiness. Cather takes us back into the garden with Adam and Eve, via Jim Burden and Antonia, but she changes the symbol of eating the apple to one of society’s acceptance (and celebration) of female sexuality rather than the “Fall into patriarchy” (Ruthers 143). As an Adamic figure, Jim Burden is expelled from the Garden because of his adherence to patriarchal principles and rejection of Antonia’s sexuality,
but is ultimately invited back but only as an outsider. Chapter three examines these themes and makes connections to the literary techniques used by Stowe and Jewett.

The relationship between Stowe, Jewett and Cather make it possible for me to put these three texts alongside one another. In knowing that each woman actively responded to the text of the previous author, the work that *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, *The Country of Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia* do as a whole offer expressions of the female American experience in the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth-century. These expressions contribute to the ongoing feminist literary scholarship that seeks to uncover the voices of the muted female experience and study the complex means by which women writers expressed their experiences. These three texts and their authors are by no means the only women who cloaked their feminist messages to express the realities of American womanhood, they are not even the only women writers from the nineteenth century whose work represents this type of coded alternative to patriarchy. Noteworthy omission for this study are Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and, in the early twentieth-century, Zora Neale Hurston. This study is focused on these three texts only because of the known intertextual relationship between Stowe, Jewett and Cather via the friendship and influence-line. Because these three texts span over a century of American history and because of the relationship between the authors, I am able to see the ways in which each author learned from the former, applying the same techniques to keep their messages hidden. These techniques could be representative of a literary code shared between these authors. Although further study is needed to determine whether these techniques are in fact a code that was known by readers, my work here demonstrates the literary conduit that existed between Stowe, Jewett and Cather.
CHAPTER II

A NEW MATRIARCHAL JERUSALEM IN THE PEARL OF ORR’S ISLAND

Beginning in January of 1861 and written as a serial publication in the Independent, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The Pearl of Orr’s Island begins with human life set adrift as an orphaned child. Mara Lincoln, whose father died in a shipwreck and mother of a broken heart, is taken in by both the Pennel family, her maternal grandparents, and the small rural community of Orr’s Island. The first seventeen chapters of Orr’s Island were published without interruption and follow Mara and Moses Pennel, another orphan from the sea, as they progress through childhood on the rural coast of Maine. A card was inserted in the April 4, 1861 edition of the Independent explaining that Orr’s Island would be put on hold until the fall. A week later the Civil War began and Stowe’s son joined the fight. Unable to complete the story of American womanhood that she’d begun because her attention shifted to the war, her son and the state of the nation, Stowe retreated her narrative into a sentimental story that she described as “pale and colorless as real life and sad as truth.” Consequently the first and the second parts of Orr’s Island are very different from one another, but in both sections Stowe asserts bold claims on American womanhood through differing methods. The first section sets out to define a new mode of being for women and the second admits that American womanhood suffers under a patriarchal society. However, within the sentimental
conclusion of *Orr’s Island* is a revision of Christianity in a female model, paving the way for the next generation of women—and women writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett—to finish the narrative Stowe began.

*Orr’s Island* has been referred to as creating a “world apart” in its depiction of the rural New England coast, and while this is true, it is the “world apart” *from men* that the text more accurately depicts. viii Set between the genre conventions of the woman’s domestic novel while also participating in the seafaring literary tradition, *Orr’s Island* is a literary hybrid that tells a story of the inhabitants of a rural New England village in the mid-nineteenth century. *Orr’s Island* participates in the seafaring literary tradition in its focus on the fishing industry in southern Maine, but it departs from the genre in its concentration on those who remain on land when the men are out at sea. *Orr’s Island* examines the life of women, primarily widows, mothers and female caretakers, delving deeply into the interior lives of these *other* participants in the seafaring tradition. In doing so, *Orr’s Island* explores the lives of women who function within a the complex patriarchal model of American society; women such as Mrs. Blackett, Roxy and Ruey Toothacre and Mrs. Eaton who are undoubtedly dominated under a social model which privileges men and yet, for the most part their lives do not include men who are kept at sea for long periods of time. With the absence of men, women manage all the affairs of the family and the community.

These dual modes of being oscillate throughout the narrative in what Melody Graulich describes as a “tidal” manner, ebbing between the male sea faring tradition in which the “universal questions” are “metaphysical” in that they “challenge the universe” in search of profound answers and the female tradition that searches social structures
“exploring the construction and meaning of human relationship” (Graulich 206). Thus, the narrative structure reflects the content of the text, moving as the female characters do, in and out of the world of the social convention and their own inner sphere and searching always for a place where the binaries between men and women operate with as much fluidity as the tide. Stowe’s biographer Joan Hedrick views the dualities in Stowe’s work as representative of “the plurality and contradiction of American life,” seeing in Stowe’s work the constant push and pull of a society built upon the binary axis of patriarchy, slavery and freedom. Graulich’s and Hedrick’s theories converge in the claim that Stowe’s narrative is working to identify and subvert binary thought in terms of race and gender.

Deeply autobiographical in nature, Orr’s Island is often regarded as Stowe’s failed attempt to address gender issues. Sarah Orne Jewett lamented that “[Stowe] couldn’t finish [Orr’s Island] in the same noble key of simplicity and harmony” that characterized the first half of the text and Joan Hedrick addresses the disparities between the first and the latter halves of the text by saying that “Stowe was either unwilling or unable to give it the attention necessary to work through the implications of her womanhood,” but grants that “the failures” of Orr’s Island reflect the failures of society to grant full humanity to women” (297 and 302). While I agree with much of Graulich’s and Hedrick’s claims, I disagree with the claim that Orr’s Island failed at the course Stowe set upon, which I see as that of representing (and elevating) the inner world of women and challenging the validity of male superiority made implicit by American patriarchy. In the places where an overt opposition to gender status quo appears to be lacking, I see a powerful subversion, a challenge if you will. In the first section of this
chapter I examine the phallic symbolism in *Orr’s Island* and discusses the implication of this symbol. In the second section I outline Stowe’s matriarchal religion and her model of womanhood under this new religions framework.

“The Golden Measuring-Rod”: The Source of Power

Stowe’s assigns her protagonist (and Christ figure as discussed below) Mara Lincoln the “the golden rod which measured the New Jerusalem” and in doing she contests the concept of male superiority (166). Revelation 21:15 states, “now he who was speaking to me had a measuring-rod of gold, with which to measure the city and its gates and its wall” (*Weymouth New Testament*, Rev. 21:15). Here we see a male angel measuring the “New Jerusalem” via a golden rod. Using Biblical text, Stowe assigns the “rod” dual meanings. In Stowe’s “New Jerusalem” the role of designer is in the hands of a living woman, not a male angel, signifying that power is not always heavenly but is also in the hands of the living and that this power is assigned to women rather than men. Here Stowe uses the exact Biblical wording to reference the meaning of that passage and then alters it to reflect her goal. Putting the authority to measure in the hands of the living is another way of claiming that the living are responsible for making active rather than passive decisions about the state of human civilization. Power in the hands of an angel does little to empower humans to act, but power in the hands of the living suggests that the living must act. Here Stowe may be referencing the many immoral deeds of mankind that she actively fought against such as slavery. That the “golden measuring-rod” is in the hands of a living woman, rather than a heavenly male assigned it by the Bible, could perhaps signify Stowe’s suggested remedy. If women, like Stowe who vocally opposed slavery and a socio-political system that privileged men, were included in the political
and public sphere then the nation could achieve the idealized form of democracy stated in the Declaration of Independence in which “all men [and women] are created equal.”

The other meaning of the “golden rod” speaks to Stowe’s definition of the true differences between men and women. The source of power here is a “golden rod” that males possess but females do not. A clear phallic symbol, the “rod” that gives the male angel the power to measure is none other than the phallus. That the phallus is “golden” signifies that the power held by men via ownership of the phallus is of terrific value and indeed, the power with which men have historically claimed in order to dominate women has been tremendous. Thus, by putting the “golden rod” in the hands of a woman, Stowe demonstrates that the difference in genitalia between men and women, and the value assigned to those differences are the only source of male supposed superiority.

Stowe goes on to attack both the idea that the phallic “golden rod” is a source of power and to claim that in assigning themselves power based on genitalia, men will have to face a reckoning. Stowe claims, “there may, perhaps, come a time when the saucy boy, who now steps so superbly, and predominates so proudly in virtue of his physical strength and daring, will learn to tremble at the golden measuring–rod held in the hands of a woman” (166). Here, males are described as “saucy,” stepping “superbly,” dominating “proudly” only because of “virtue of his physical strength and daring.” To be “saucy” is to be impudent or rude and the word “step” implies physical forcefulness, which we see again in the phrase “physical strength and daring.” The word “superbly” is linked with the words “proudly” and “virtue,” all of which reflect a righteous self-importance. Stowe chose the word “predominate” to link all these terms in the definition of American manhood and in that word we see her definition unfold. Here Stowe claims
that men hold power because of the self-righteousness they’ve assigned themselves based on notion of the importance of physical strength and that they hold this power over society with a smug arrogance. Despite the power held by men though, they “will learn to tremble” when power shifts to the “hands of a woman.” The word “learn” here is connected to an idea of realization or discovery. This signifies that men will discover that women have always possessed power, and that this power will cause them to “tremble” shows that the power of men rests on shaky ground.

The “New Jerusalem”

Location is central to Stowe’s new form of Christianity. Stowe refers to New England as the “New Jerusalem,” signaling the sacred nature of the region (166). Here Stowe again activates the generic coding, triggering knowledge of Puritan leader John Winthrop’s 1630 speech aboard the ship the Arabella in which he referred to America as the “New Jerusalem.” After Winthrop’s speech, this idea of the new American Holy Land would become a staple of Puritan rhetoric, used in sermons by Cotton Mathers, Edward Johnson and William Hubbard. In appropriating this Puritan rhetoric, Stowe claims that her text is setting out on a similar task as that of the Puritans, a task centered on creating a new world defined by Christian codes. However, Stowe makes it clear that her “New Jerusalem” in the United States would be founded on the Hebrew scripture but would breed “better Jews than Moses could because she read Moses with the amendments of Christ” (122). Three very significant elements of Stowe’s new religion are expressed in this passage. Firstly, the new religion is a mixture of old world (Hebrew, Christ) and new world (America), showing that this new hybrid religion could only happen in America. Secondly, this regionally specific religious union is female in nature,
signaling that only the directive of the female can create a peaceful union of ancient strife. Indeed centuries of fierce disagreement over the “amendment of Christ” are solved elegantly and peacefully in the new world by a female religious force. Lastly, the mention of Moses is a direct link to slavery because Moses was the original abolitionist, freeing the Israelites from the Egyptians by infiltrating the royal Egyptian family, killing a slaveholder and leading the Israelites to freedom across the Red Sea, where the Israelites then enslaved the Canaanites. In evoking the name of Moses, Stowe claims that this female, hybrid religion will do what Moses could not, namely create a Holy state free of the hypocrisy of enslavement.

This female-centric religion in the new world is so successful that it will “make better Jews than Moses” and it is not accidental that Stowe would choose Moses as the prophet that a matriarchal American religion could better. Moses, like the United States, failed at the task of creating the “New Jerusalem” set forth by Winthrop’s definition. Just as Moses set out after the Exodus from Egypt to create a free state, so too, did the early Americans preach the rhetoric of charity and equality. However, in the forced enslavement of Africans in America and of Canaanites in Israel both male-led states failed at the task they began and in this failure, Stowe asserts, both states compromised the integrity of their “New Jerusalem’s.” Here we see Stowe utilizing the “generic coding” in her use of a specific Biblical genre that signals the reader to activate conventionally accepted ideas of Moses, but Stowe then appropriates the Moses story, claiming that her new matriarchal religion will do “better” than Moses: “better” at democratic principles, “better” at the treatment of women, “better” at true egalitarianism. Thus completing what Moses and America set out to do only because it is gendered
female. Stowe suggests that in the new-world Holy Land the opportunity exists for Americans to create a true democracy by acknowledging the “she” which symbolizes the centrality of the woman.

Having established the initial framework of the “New Jerusalem,” Stowe then turns to a description of the new-world Holy Land. First the “New Jerusalem” is described in terms of opposition to the old Jerusalem, that society which “Moses labored to produce in ruder ages” (122). Here Stowe references Moses’s ultimate failure to produce a sacred, peaceful, spiritual society by referring to his attempts as “rude.” The word “rude” here is used in the adjectival form and in modifying the noun “ages” is juxtaposed to the present, a time that Stowe asserts is less rude. In this example, rude is defined as “having no power of reason, or of low intelligence” (OED). As a fierce abolitionist, devoted Christian and religious scholar, Stowe would have been drawn to the story of Moses, but by referring to his work as lacking reason and of low intelligence she is referring to the real fact of slavery and the continued subordination of women in American culture. Here she asks how Moses could be seen as having been successful when these disparities still exist. Stowe suggests that the egalitarian world of Orr’s Island is less rude but only because it corrects the social wrongs that Moses left unaddressed. Thus the society of Orr’s Island is an example for how America should be under the principles of democracy.

Stowe is very specific in her claim that Orr’s Island and not the whole of America is the New Jerusalem. Specifically it is “in the districts of Maine” that a more successful society exists than the society that Moses “labored to produce” (122). This “New Jerusalem” is “entirely democratic,” the word “entirely” signaling both the whole and the
absolute nature of the democracy. In the wholeness of this society we see that it is complete, lacking nothing and specifically, lacking neither the hypocrisy of slavery nor the contradiction of patriarchy. The word “entire” also signifies the absolute qualities of the democracy, meaning that this new society is “free from dependency, autonomous” (OED). Thus, the society that Stowe has created as a model for true democracy is independent, sovereign and self-sufficient, specifically because it is not functioning on a foundation of hypocrisy. Stowe’s “New Jerusalem” is so successful in fact that “a more healthful, desirable state of society never existed.” Let us not forget that in Stowe’s vision, this fertile democracy is female. In other words, it is fertile only because it is female.

Creating the Matriarchy

In his book *The Word According to Eve* (1999), Cullen Murphy claims that the female experience and expression of religion is “the next intellectual revolution” and that a woman-centered reading of religion “engages doctrine, liturgy, ministry, and leadership, and it engages them all at once.” Along similar lines, Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schealing and Valerie H. Ziegler, in their book titled *Eve and Adam*, state “no other text has affected women in the Western world as much as that found in the opening chapters of Genesis” (15). It should not surprise to us then that as a devout Christian and classically educated woman, Stowe’s creation of alternative social models would begin with a woman-centric religious framework.

In *Orr’s Island*, the sisters Roxy and Ruey Toothacre are the caretakers of the Orr’s Island community and as they go from house to house, tending to the needs of the people, their role would appear to be motherly in nature. However, as I’ll display in the
coming sections, they are motherly in the same exact way that God is referred to as being “fatherly.”

Melody Graulich sees *Orr’s Island* as a narrative that addresses the role of “motherhood” in the identity of nineteenth-century women. Indeed, the Toothacre sisters represent this maternal theme and yet, as the following passage demonstrates, they are more than mothers in the conventional sense: “many a human being had been ushered into life under their auspices—trotted, chirped in babyhood on their knees, clothed by their handiwork in garments gradually enlarging from year to year, watched by them in last sickness, and finally arrayed for the long repose by their hands (20). There are three significant elements of this passage that signal the analogous relationship between Roxy, Ruey and God.

First, the word “many” is both vague and exact in that the exact number of “human beings” which Roxy and Ruey have “ushered” into life is not given but is known as being of a large quantity, leaving room for this number to be countless, just like the human race itself is countless. It’s important to note Stowe’s exactness in the word choice “human beings” because she is clear here on the precise form of life that Roxy and Ruey bring forth: countless humans. Secondly, the word “auspices” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “any divine or prophetic token” and the word “divine” signals the connection with God. It is from this God-like position of divinity “under” which all humans are ushered into life. Because human life begins “under” the sisters we see that they operate above humans, just as God is always seen as existing in a realm above that occupied by human life. Finally, Roxy and Ruey bring life to all humans without aging. The sisters are present at each juncture of the human life span without aging. Here Stowe
stretches the boundaries of mortality in Roxy and Ruey and imbues the sisters with divine powers, further suggesting their God-like position. Consequently, Roxy and Ruey’s role is such that they bring all human life into existence from a heavenly realm, a realm in which the length of their life span signifies a mystical immortality. Within this sentence is Roxy and Ruey positioned as God.

Later in the text, Mara discusses her ideas of God and gender, saying, “God has always been to me not so much like a father but like a dear and tender mother” (326). In this passage Mara fuses God and womanhood, claiming that not only is God a woman but that she is a “dear” and “tender” woman. Remember that Melody Graulich claimed motherhood was the central theme of Orr’s Island and here that theme is exemplified again. The difference between a mother and father outside of social construction is purely physical and I do not think that Mara defines God as female because of an affinity to the female body. However, it is possible that Mara’s definition of God as female has to do with seeing God in her own image, lacking the “golden rod” of the fatherly version and the misuse of power that accompanies it. Instead of the “golden rod” God, Mara’s defines God as a nurturing caretaker, a characteristic she assigns to the female gender. Roxy and Ruey are also described as being “tender” in their love for Mara and are certainly the most caring, capable mother figures in the text. It is fitting then that all human life comes into existence through their tenderness. In the place of a male God who operates in a fatherly manner, which can be defined by looking at the antithesis of the female definition of “tender” and “dear” which is hard and unfriendly, we have a female God, who operates through loving affection, caring for the community with a matter-of-fact gentleness. Here Stowe appropriates the conventional male figure and reworks it in the
female model while simultaneously juxtaposing a female God-model to the traditional male-God.

In order to understand the full range of Roxy and Ruey’s God-like status we must examine their role in human death. The words that Stowe chose to describe this are exact and significant. After being born into life through the powers of Roxy and Ruey, surviving childhood because of the sisters’ care, a human is finally “watched in last sickness” by Roxy and Ruey and “arrayed for the long repose by [Roxy and Ruey’s] hands”(20). Here the act of being seen and touched by the Toothacre sisters creates the final stages of human life. In fact, humans only exist at all because of Roxy and Ruey’s will. Humans are without identity other than the word “many,” which signifies the multitudes. Humans first come into beginning when Roxy and Ruey “usher” them in “under” their divine presence. Humans live only because Roxy and Ruey acted as overseers throughout their lives and they died only because Roxy and Ruey “watched” them and cared for them with “their hands.” In no place in this passage, do humans exist outside of the will of Roxy and Ruey. As many human lives begin and end in the will of the Toothacre sisters, they remain ageless; like God, they facilitate human life, oversee those lives, nurture by means of skills possessed within their own bodies and arrive again at the beginning of a new life to continue the God-like cycle of life and death.

At this point, we see Stowe’s models of the new Holy Land and the new God. These are crucial elements in her creation of a matriarchal American religion. However, Stowe was a devout Christian, and as such, the Christ figure was central to her ideology. Thus the Christ figure in Stowe’s religion would be of particular significance. It is not surprising then, that in Stowe’s Orr’s Island model the Christ figure is Mara Lincoln, the
female protagonist. In keeping with the centrality of Jesus Christ to the Christian religion, so, too, is Mara the locus around which the whole matriarchal society of Orr’s Island functions.

Mara comes from a place of sorrow, orphaned at birth and given the name Mara by her mother, Naomi, who, like her Biblical namesake, gave her daughter this name to reflect her own sadness. The word *Mara* translates to “bitterness” and is often thought to reflect a state of anger and sadness that is particularly female. However, the Hebrew root word of Mara is “marara” which translates to a form of bitterness “that has as much to do with grief as with strength” and the “Ugaritic, Arabic and Aramaic cognates of this root mean to bless, strengthen or command.” Often times in translation, a word that is difficult to translate because of its multiple meanings or multi-dimensional qualities loses some of its original meaning, especially when time is applied to the process. In Stowe’s Mara, we see the results of such a process and I think it right to assume that Stowe named her Christ figure Mara in full knowledge of the complete meaning of the word. Mara’s “strength” to “command” is not physical though, instead her strength comes in her divine example who, like Christ, died after having touched the lives of her disciples. In her life, Mara “blessed” all who knew her and in her death, she paved the way for a new way of being, one that was inclusive rather than exclusive and practiced a true from of democracy.

Mara’s death is a triumph for her as well as for all who look to her example of life. After realizing that she was chosen for greatness in the same way as Jesus, she says to all who love her, “I shall comfort you all,” demonstrating the “strength” born of her name (358). Indeed Mara does bless “all” in the final stages of her earthly life, nurturing
with kindness, piety and beauty so that in the end, the society of Orr’s Island is made better by her example. Mara comforts “all” in the same way that Roxy and Ruey gave life to “many.” These literary expressions are representative of the “system of signals” that Radner and Lansar point out, a covert means of expression that communicates to insiders and appears important to those on the outside. They’re little words that are easily unnoticed, but in their meaning is Stowe’s hidden claim. Just as Roxy and Ruey were the creators of life, Mara is the figure that will bring comfort, peace and an example of pious life on earth.

Mara, like Jesus, “came to show us a nobler style of living and bearing” and in whose example of life is the “cornerstone on which to erect a new immortal style of architecture” (371). Here Stowe has encoded in a language of construction the blueprint for her religious framework. Moreover, Mara is the “cornerstone” of the new religion, signaling that she is both the figure that holds the structure together and is central to its composition. Consequently, the “new immortal architecture” is the matriarchal religion that Orr’s Island represents, a religion in which Mara’s example of life and death taught all how to live “nobler” lives. In contrast to the state of America, this new way of being is both dignified and honorable. Mara’s death marks the end of the narrative, which can also be seen as the beginning of the “New Jerusalem.” The question then, after having completed the narrative and experienced the fruition of true American democratic principle, would be in the hands of the reader, those young women who are the mothers of the future. Who will the new model of the American women be in Stowe’s matriarchal Christian/Jewish hybrid?
It is in Sally Kittredge that the “New Jerusalem” woman is exemplified. Stowe shows Sally’s traits through a process of introduction that begins with another character, Mrs. Eaton. Mrs. Eaton is the only woman in the narrative who has gone to sea and as such, she has crossed over from the woman’s domestic sphere to the all-male world of sailing. She is admired by the women of Orr’s Island as a pillar of strength. Many of the women regard Mrs. Eaton’s sailing alongside her husband as proof that “she can do more than most people,” but Mrs. Eaton, drawing from the wisdom of experience, explains that “she didn’t know as it was anything remarkable—it showed what anybody might do, if they’d only try and have resolution” (331). This is an example of Stowe’s literary coding in that she intentionally uses vague words in order to keep her message hidden but not so hidden as to pass unnoticed by her female readership. Radner and Lanser describe this as a common form of coding known as “distraction and redirection” wherein Stowe utilizes passive words to “obscure” or “draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message” (417). In Stowe’s passage, the words “people” and “anybody” are masking the true message of this passage because neither of these words addresses the issue of gender that is really being discussed in this passage. If we insert the word “women” and “woman” here as it is implied syntactically, then the meaning is a direct claim on the real capabilities of women. Thus Mrs. Eaton is thought to do “more than most women,” to which she replies that her work wasn’t “remarkable,” in fact it “showed what any woman might do if she’d only try and have resolution” (my italics). This is a direct allusion to the physical capabilities of women working alongside men and even working better than men. For a young woman who isn’t allowed to work because of a
generally societal agreement of her physical weakness, this statement could have been striking with its overt message of empowerment.

Mrs. Eaton is most certainly a model for Stowe’s new form of womanhood but perhaps more significantly, she acts as a trailblazer for the more significant character Sally Kittredge. Rather than make overt statements about Sally’s strong nature, Stowe chooses the less direct route of embedding Sally’s traits in Mrs. Eaton, thus cloaking them in a language that would be heard by women who may have “listen[ed] very carefully or suspect[ed] the message [was] there” (Radner and Lanser 418). Mrs. Eaton concludes her story of saving the crew of her husband’s ship by saying that Sally is a great deal like her and it is here that the link between Mrs. Eaton’s story and Sally’s story are fused. In Mrs. Eaton’s story we see the abilities of Sally and, more importantly to Stowe’s claim, a demonstration of her version of American womanhood under the matriarchal religion.

Sally is flirtatious and enjoys the sexual thrill of exercising power over young men in a kind of bantering foreplay. Sally enjoys playing “upon the excitability of [men],--in awaking [their] curiosity, and baffling it, and tormenting [them]” (276). This form of coquetry is no less an access to power than sailing a ship. Where it differs, however, is in its sexual nature. Although Sally covets the attention of men and enjoys the privileges of sexual attraction, she “knew too much to get married . . . . She was going to have her liberty” (277). Again, this is a good fifty years before women began to explore issues of sexuality and power under the title of the New Woman. Far ahead of her time, Stowe has crafted a model of the ideal form of womanhood in the American model that is openly sexual and conscientiously opposing marriage in order to remain liberated.
This statement claims that marriage is the opposite of liberation, in other words, through Sally Kittredge, Stowe claims that marriage is a form of bondage.

It is noteworthy, however that the narrative closes on Sally revoking her decision not to marry as a woman advanced in her years. It’s possible to view Sally’s marriage as evidence of Stowe’s retreat from the task she set out upon in crafting a new form of womanhood, surely those who see *Orr’s Island* as a failed text could argue such a point. However, I think what is more important here is the message that Sally’s characterization delivered to Stowe’s readership masked within the conventionally acceptable model of womanhood. Had Sally remained unmarried throughout her life, her sexuality could have deemed her an unfit role-model in the eyes of mid-nineteenth century American society. In having Sally marry, Stowe could assert claims about the oppressive nature of marriage and the inherent sexuality of women without raising an alarm. It would be years before women began to publicly consider marriage as anything other than the pinnacle of womanhood, yet Stowe has delivered a message concerning the oppressive elements of marriage in a patriarchal society directly into the hands of young women. Sally’s traits include: a type of sexuality that was unconventional in its time, physical strength, goodness of heart, intelligence, and an opposition to marriage. Ultimately making her the “New Jerusalem” woman.

In chapter thirty-three, the women of Orr’s Island are gathered at a quilting bee and as they sew they are discussing Mara and Sally. This is the same conversation in which Mrs. Eaton claims that Sally is like her as discussed above. All the matriarchs of the Orr’s Island community are present at this “quilting” and as Mrs. Eaton claims that Sally is the same kind of woman as herself, each of the older women agree that Sally is
“smart”(331). As they exchange “sly winks and didactic nods” at one another they display the non-verbal language showing their support of Sally, thus signaling their acceptance of her character (331). In reading Orr’s Island, young women would have in Sally a new, socially accepted model of womanhood. This model works beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere, is capable of saving a crew of men with her own skill, doesn’t need to marry and in fact, sees marriage as directly opposed to freedom yet is empowered to explore her sexuality. What’s more, this new role model for young women is also a “capable and efficient person . . . bustling and energetic” and possesses an “abundance of good womanly feeling, generous and strong” (277, 280). This role model is “the best and the brightest” and because she has “the real New Jerusalem look about her” we can conclude that Sally is an exemplary woman in Stowe’s model (281, 299).

Stowe’s claim in Orr’s Island is then as follows. If, instead of a racist, slaveholding, patriarchal religion and the society that mirrored those sentiments, Americans functioned under the belief that “justice for all” and “freedom for all” did indeed include “all,” by which I mean all ethnicities and women, then the Sally Kittredge model of womanhood would be attainable for all women. Similarly, if Christians and Jews worshipped deities that represented both sexes then, as exemplified in Orr’s Island, true egalitarianism could be possible.
CHAPTER III

CODING THE GARDEN

IN THE COUNTRY OF POINTED FIRS

Sarah Orne Jewett, a great admirer of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work, found inspiration in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*. Jewett first read *Orr’s Island* when she was thirteen years old and said that “she never shall forget the exquisite flavor and reality of delight” it gave her. Upon returning to it as an already successful author, Jewett found the first half of *Orr’s Island* “clear and perfectly original and strong” and applied to it the highest honor she could bestow, that of being “classical” (creating the standard) and “historical (from the past).” In these two terms we see that for Jewett, *Orr’s Island* represented the standard by which the past should be applied to the present and the future. Jewett credits *Orr’s Island* with teaching her how to look “with new eyes” at her own inner life and the inner lives of women as the source for her creativity. In *The Country of Pointed Firs*, as we shall see, Jewett further redefines the central elements of womanhood put forth by Stowe in *Orr’s Island*. Jewett focuses, like Stowe, on the “spiritual” and “reflective” as evident in her challenge to the role of religion and God in women’s reproduction, while addressing the “physical” in a manner that Stowe never did (Stowe 166). Thus, Jewett set out to write the inner lives of women while following in the footsteps begun by her literary mother.

*The Country of Pointed Firs* is told from the perspective of an unnamed female
narrator who visits the small rural village of Dunnet Landing, Maine. The story follows Mrs. Todd, a sixty-something-year-old widow whose particular way of life becomes the focus of the narrative. Through the narrator we become acquainted with other citizens of Dunnet Landing such as the widower Elijah Tilly and the dreaming, melancholy Captain Littlepage as well as those whom the narration touches on from outside of Dunnet Landing such as Mrs. Todd’s mother, Mrs. Blackett, lifelong friend Mrs. Fosdick and the regionally respected Bowden family. These characters are linked by their association to Mrs. Todd, who is instrumental in each of their lives in one way or another, and by their seaside community. In the first section of this chapter I will examine Mrs. Todd and the exact components of her “peculiar” garden. The second section looks at the recipe for aborting a pregnancy that is embedded within the text and examines it implications.

At first glance Mrs. Todd's garden activates the socially acceptable concepts of women's work. The garden, traditionally considered to be the sphere of women, seems unthreatening, innocuous. However, upon closer inspection, we see that Jewett employs generic coding by playing upon the conventions of the domestic novel, thereby rendering invisible or obscuring from male view.

Mrs. Todd’s Garden

Though she is not our narrator, Mrs. Almira Todd is the heart of the novel. The reader comes to know Mrs. Todd through the eyes of the unnamed female narrator but despite the potential narrowness of this lens, Mrs. Todd emerges as a striking and singular woman in that she forms the connecting thread of the narrative. All but three of the twenty-one chapters begin with Mrs. Todd’s current activities, and those that do not include her are stories from the sad, lonely men that comprise the majority of the male
presence in the text, Captain Littlepage and Elijah Tilly. Accordingly, the whole of the narrative is an examination of Mrs. Todd and the way of life she comes to represent. Caretaking is at the center of Mrs. Todd’s experiences as she administers remedies for the ailments of life grown from her garden.

Mrs. Todd bears much in common with the characters Roxy and Ruey Toothacre from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s text, *Orr’s Island* in that they each inhabit caretaking roles and they do so with skills possessed from their wit, ancestral knowledge, sensitivity to the natural world and equal sensitivity to the human condition. Because Roxy and Ruey are fulfilling God-like roles, their roles are linked with the divine and are therefore otherworldly in nature. Mrs. Todd, however, demonstrates the very real, flesh-and-blood capabilities of women and as such her powers are more earthly, grounded in plants, the environment and human needs such as sickness, wellness, love, health and heartbreak. As a healer, Mrs. Todd cares for the people of her community so that the reader witnesses her work and develops a regard for that work through the lens of the narrator. It’s possible that, through her text, Jewett is prescribing medicines to the reader via Mrs. Todd. By the end of the slim volume, Jewett’s readers could possess the knowledge to end a pregnancy. In the same way that Stowe embedded messages the warned of the potential bondage of marriage and the relevance of female sexuality in *Orr’s Island*, so too does Jewett write an instructional narrative within a text that has enough ambiguity to allow its controversial message to go unnoticed and as a result, unchallenged.

The passive nature of a garden can be seen in the same light as the unassuming nature of a kitchen or, as seen in *Orr’s Island*, a quilting bee. These places are regarded as locations of woman’s work and as such are seen as unthreatening to the dominant male
culture. These locales of the oppressed have been well explored in the work of Alice Walker and others, who argue that a woman will leave “her mark in the only material she can afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (Walker 1301). Although the oppression that Walker addresses here is rooted both in ethnicity and gender, her insights into the potentially transgressive nature of these spaces applies to Mrs. Todd’s garden. In the garden, Mrs. Todd “ordered the universe in her personal conception of beauty” and as such, the garden is representative of her will (Walker 1302). The garden, in this sense, is a living extension of the home. It is a living extension of the domestic sphere because it is grown and cultivated by women.

The garden is also a space, as Walker demonstrates, that women have fused the nature of their bodies with the natural environment. In her book Gender, Identity and Place, Linda McDowell examines the history of the relationship between women and nature, claiming, “women’s particular biological attributes, especially menstruation, childbirth and lactation, were sources both of [women’s] differences from and inferiority to men” (44). Despite the significant symbolic role that gardens have played in women’s lives, they have nonetheless been viewed as docile and powerless spaces. It is the unthreatening nature of gardens that makes them a perfect distraction from the powerful dynamics between women, nature and art that they have often been. Radner and Lanser define “distraction” as “a feminist strategy to drown out or [in the case of Mrs. Todd’s garden] draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message” (417). We see this form of feminist literary coding at play when Mrs. Todd’s garden is first described by its “busy,” “green,” “blooming,” “gay” qualities. It would be so easy to picture the garden of the Luminist painters that were in style at the time, in which a
woman lounged through a flower garden along the Maine coast. This is the distraction. Instead, Mrs. Todd’s is a “queer little garden,” “puzzling” because if its “growths of rustic pharmacopeia” (378). The word “pharmacopeia” means “an authoritative or official treatise containing listings of approved drugs with their formulations, standards of purity and strength, and uses” (OED) and from this definition we see the true nature that Mrs. Todd’s garden plays in Pointed Firs. Although not “official” in the sense that it’s publication is connected to medicines, Pointed Firs is nonetheless an “authoritative” document containing recipes and prescriptions on making medicines from the plants that grow in Mrs. Todd’s garden. Indeed, Mrs. Todd’s garden is not the fragrant, ornamental work of ladies, though the distracting imagery activates this ideal.

My focus here is on the unthreatening nature of these conventionally accepted locations, a nature that renders them safe spaces for women to speak in a language or act in a way that could be recognized only by other women. Jewett’s readers may have found nothing out of the ordinary about Mrs. Todd’s garden and as such, Jewett is freed to use this space within an accepted context with major alterations. Mrs. Todd’s garden is such a place, unassuming in its perceived docility and yet, her garden is described as being unlike a conventional garden that consisted of mainly flowers and plants, meant to please and attract the attention of its viewers. From Mrs. Todd’s garden the reader is initiated into the world of herbal medicines and when the narrators refer to Mrs. Todd as a “learned herbalist,” the reader may also be convinced to trust in Mrs. Todd’s use of these herbs in the same way that the narrator does (379).

Acting as more of a pharmacy than a domestic ornament, Mrs. Todd’s garden consists of many herbs “both wild and tame” (378). Of these herbs some are of a “rustic
pharmacopoeia” that “might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries” (378). Indeed these ancient concoctions are brewed in a “small caldron on Mrs. Todd’s stove” and are sold to people who come to her door only at night, signaling to the reader that a surreptitious moment is at hand. The exact aliments which Mrs. Todd’s medicines treat ranged from “common ails of humanity” to “love and hate and jealousy” and also hold sway over “adverse winds at sea” (379). Most medicines seek to treat the “common” physical “ails” of the human experience such as sickness, infection and corporal discomfort, but few medicines extend into the emotional realm of “love,” “hate” and “jealousy” while also treating the environment. From this description we see that “the curious, wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd’s garden” are anything but docile and in fact, when dispensed by her inherited “mystic,” “sacred” and “occult” knowledge, exercise healing power over the human body, emotions, and the environment.

The word “occult” is especially significant in a description of Mrs. Todd’s abilities because it means “a kept secret; communicated only to the initiated,” which is one of the key constituents of a literary code and signals the clandestine communication between author and reader (OED). As the narrator observes Mrs. Todd brewing her “humble compounds” and “Indian remedies” and dispensing them with “whispered directions” and an “air of secrecy and importance” it is the reader who is receiving this lesson in much the same way as Stowe cloaked messages that she needed to keep out of public recognition. These literary techniques of cloaking messages could be, and quite possibly are, proof of a literary code. The secretive material not only alerts the reader to the fact that genuine information pertaining to women’s medical needs is being
administered but also concerns how to behave with this occult knowledge (378 and 379). Here Jewett reaches through the pages and tells her reader that a powerful secret is being communicated indirectly via the garden of Mrs. Almira Todd. Because this secret has been passed along to only the initiated for centuries, the reader is now in the position of the initiated and the focus on secrecy in the text points the reader to take a closer look at the Mrs. Todd’s actions.

Moving through the text provides more coded occult lessons to the reader as they are initiated in many of the ways of Mrs. Todd’s medical work. They learn that late-June through July is the best season to gather wild herbs (379) and that a healing garden should contain the following: sweet-brier, sweet-mary, balm, sage, borage, mint, wormwood, southernwood, thoroughwort, thyme and herbs that bloom only at night during the summer months (possibly Cestrum Nocturnum, or night blooming Jasmine, a plant whose night scent could be described as “rousing a dim sense of remembrance” in its strong, floral odor [378]) (378). The reader is also initiated in the knowledge of how to prepare these herbs, by “mixing them with molasses or vinegar or spirits” (378). Of particular significance is the pennyroyal plant, about which a careful caretaking and foraging description is interwoven throughout the text.

Pennyroyal

Sarah Orne Jewett, through her character Mrs. Todd, shares with her readers the properties of aborting a pregnancy using the pennyroyal plant. Carmen Ciganda and Amalia Laborde present their findings on the abortive properties of the pennyroyal plant in their study "Herbal Infusions Used For Induced Abortion" in which they find that not only does pennyroyal cause pregnancy to abort but can also cause severe damage to
internal organs. Now the pennyroyal plant, or *Mentha pulegium*, is a well-known abortifacient, but in late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, due to the general viewpoint that aborting a pregnancy was not only illegal but was profoundly immoral, its abortive qualities would have been “occult” in nature. They would have been a protected secret passed down from woman to woman and only to those women who could be trusted to guard and dispense it wisely.\textsuperscript{xx} However, the abortive properties were not unknown.

In the 1853 in *The Philadelphia Journal of Homeopathy*, Dr. C.E Toothaker published his findings on the pennyroyal plant, claiming that it caused his female patient “excessive bearing-down pains with pressure outward from the whole lower abdomen to the utero-vaginal region” (662). These pains, which pressed “outward toward the vulva from the whole lower abdomen,” were “like true labor pains” (656, 662). In 1853 Dr. Toothaker concluded, despite ample evidence that the oil of pennyroyal had profound effects on the uterus, that “if it ever produced abortion it must have been in some weak cachectic individual who could not endure the uterine contractions it has a tendency to create” (664). These findings were published in a well-known medical journal eight years before *Orr’s Island* was published and over thirty years prior to the publication of *Pointed Firs*. The findings were republished in a London based homeopathy journal in 1858 and were most likely circulated among physicians (such as Jewett’s father).\textsuperscript{xxi} Dr. Toothaker based his declaration of the non-abortive properties of pennyroyal on the apparent weakness of the female body and the “cachectic” (wasting) symptoms of his female patients. However, modern medicine has revealed that the effects of pennyroyal on the uterus do not differ between the strong and the weak and that pennyroyal oil is in fact, a strong abortifacient.\textsuperscript{xxii}
Whether or not Dr. Toothaker knew, or wanted to be held responsible for knowing, that pennyroyal caused abortions is impossible to say. Certainly there is much evidence that he was aware of these properties in his descriptions of the side effects. Similarly, it’s impossible, at least within the scope of this study, to know if Harriet Beecher Stowe aligned her caretakers and female God-figures with the name Toothaker as a veiled statement on the true nature of Roxy and Ruey’s role. There is little evidence in Orr’s Island to point in the direction of abortion themes. However striking these similarities may be, what can be deduced from these findings is that in 1896 when Pointed Firs was published, the abortive properties of the pennyroyal plant may not have been the stuff of mainstream knowledge but was certainly not unknown. Jewett’s readership may have been aware of these effects and, even if they were not, as we shall see, Jewett makes them almost impossible to ignore in her text.

In the first mention of pennyroyal the reader is taught that the plant grows best if it has been “scuffed down all spring” after which it will grow heartily throughout the summer. Knowing how to grow or gather pennyroyal would have been crucial to being able to administer it, after all, without a healthy supply of the plant its uses would be moot, thus Jewett introduces the care of the plant in such a way as to diffuse the instructional tone. We are given this information in a benign, off-handed way that shrouds the message so that it could slip unnoticed by any reader who isn’t looking for such information.

The next time pennyroyal appears in the narrative Mrs. Todd is sharing her secrets while also sharing the relevance of the pennyroyal plant. This duel divulgence mirrors itself, expressing “occult” information about the plant by expressing guarded clandestine
information about Mrs. Todd’s personal life. Mrs. Todd takes the narrator to a secret
grove of pennyroyal, tucked away on her mother’s island and guarded by both cliffs and
the ocean. At this site “grew such pennyroyal as the rest of the world could not provide”
(416) and Mrs. Todd adds, “there’s no such pennyr’yal as this in the State of Maine. It’s
the right pattern of the plant, and all the rest I ever see but an imitation.” Referring to this
particular pennyroyal as “the right pattern” shows that the uses of this plant are specific
not random or accidental and the configuration of these pennyroyal plants are ideal for
creating the abortive concoction that Dr. Toothaker studied over thirty years earlier. That
Mrs. Todd never showed nobody else” her secret grove adds to the guarded nature of her
secret.

Having been introduced to the pennyroyal plant, Jewett then uses the plant as a
catalyst to divulge Mrs. Todd’s secret and further information about the effects of the
plant. Mrs. Todd says, “Nathan died before he ever knew what he’d have to know if we’d
lived long together.” Nathan was Mrs. Todd’s deceased husband whose ship wrecked
early in their marriage, before he could learn that she was sterile as a result of having
used pennyroyal to abort the pregnancy that resulted from her and her previous lovers
intercourse. Mrs. Todd would know that her husband “never knew” because they had not
yet consummated their marriage. We know from earlier in the text that Mrs. Todd loved
another man, she explains to the narrator that “she had loved one far above her” and that
they couldn’t be together because “his mother didn’t favor the match” (381). Therefore,
applying the knowledge that Mrs. Todd had an earlier lover whom she still pines for to
the pennyroyal passage, we see that what “Nathan never found out” was that she had this
previous lover.
As Mrs. Todd continues, Jewett makes the secret of pennyroyal almost impossible to ignore by focusing and refocusing the reader’s attention. She maintains this focus through dialogue and setting. Mrs. Todd says “her heart was troubled” and because this statement is bookended with the phrase “he never knew,” we know that she was worried that her husband would discover her secret. The secret in question is then addressed blatantly in the direct turn of attention back to the plant which Mrs. Todd is sitting among; the pennyroyal, which rather than reminding her of her husband (as one might expect), reminds her instead of “the other one.” Again, the pennyroyal plant has a long history of being used to end pregnancy, so her emersion in and swift turns in dialogue towards it serves to establish it firmly in the minds of the reader indirectly. Whether or not the “other one” who Mrs. Todd is reminded of is her lost child or her lost lover is secondary knowledge here, because the primary focus is on the transfer of information from one woman to another. Jewett is careful here not to stray into a romantic plot. Therefore, she intentionally omits the details of the love affair and the abortion. To focus on the child or the lover would be a diversion and the lack of an explanation serves to refocus the reader’s attention on the “occult” knowledge that has just been shared. Jewett delivers all this information to the reader through a “coded system of signals—words, forms and signifiers” that speak directly to women. These “forms” include hyphens, pauses and unfinished sentences. The words that Jewett uses are intentionally indirect and in the words she chooses not to use—the silences—a coded language displays a clear message.

These passages are an example of what could be called a code. A pregnancy or termination of a pregnancy is never mentioned here with the explicit detail Jewett uses to
explain Mrs. Todd’s past lover and yet this passage is clearly telling of a terminated pregnancy. This is achieved through setting, dialogue, silences, and repetition, but it is not achieved through overt explanation. One of the key elements of coding is covert recognition; the code must be passed from one person to another without being noticed by the dominant group. We see that the narrator understands the knowledge that has been passed on to her when she explains that she and Mrs. Todd “were friends now since she had brought me to this place” (416). The secret of “the place” and the friendship that is born from it are akin to a verbal head nod or wink. The knowledge has passed between them and the secret is safe.

What is unknown, at least in the scope of this study, is whether or not the secret message passed from Mrs. Todd to the narrator and from Jewett to the reader went unnoticed by mainstream culture, yet there is ample evidence to suggest that it did. It is only in the last thirty years that *Pointed Firs* has been regarded by scholars as containing abortive information and even today, the uses of pennyroyal go unnoticed by those who study this text. In 1983, Laurie Crumpacker studied the medicinal themes of *Pointed Firs* in her article “The Art of the Healer: Women in the Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett” wherein she discusses pennyroyal only once: “pennyroyal, which was abundant in the Maine Coast, was hung in sleeping rooms as an air freshener and disinfectant; it was also considered beneficial for menstrual cramps” (158). Conversely, in his article “Jewett’s Unspeakable Unspoken: Tracing the Female Body Through *Pointed Firs*” (1994) George Smith claims, “we needn’t overstrain ourselves” in an understanding that “in Mrs. Todd’s time and place, pennyroyal was a common home-ready abortifacient” (17). If, as Smith suggests, the secret of pennyroyal was common knowledge, then it wasn’t a secret and
certainly wasn’t part of a code. If that were the case, then why would Jewett conceal it so in her text? Even Jewett’s biographer Paula Blanchard does not mention pennyroyal or themes of reproductive control in her 1994 book. This leads me to the conclusion that the abortive properties of pennyroyal was not commonly known at the turn of the twentieth-century but, as Dr. Toothaker’s article demonstrates, was available to those in the healing industry such as Jewett’s father. As Pointed Firs demonstrates, this information would also have been available to those women who passed it along to other women.

There is yet another element of the pennyroyal information that is relevant to this study and that is the thematic bridge it creates between Stowe and Jewett. Can it be mere coincidence that Jewett, who openly credited Orr’s Island as the text that had the greatest influence over her, chose to create a female healer in Mrs. Todd that was almost an exact replica of the Toothacre sisters and that through Mrs. Todd she would pass on the secret that Dr. Toothaker published in 1853? Perhaps this connection is purely coincidental, or, what I think is more likely, is that Jewett was motivated to create characters in the model set forth in Roxy and Ruey as a means to divulge secret information. Let me be clear, I’m not claiming that Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote about or endorsed terminating pregnancy; reproductive control was simply not the focus of her revolt. Instead, Stowe challenged marriage and the role of religion in the lives of women and in the creation of slavery. In the mid-nineteenth century these were the problems that comprised her thematic focus. Over thirty years later, Jewett’s rebellion was focused on the issues of her time and place and she looked to her literary mother for the literary techniques required to challenge the status quo.
Just as Roxy and Ruey created all human life as God-figures, so too do Mrs. Todd’s powers continue the involvement and control women have over human life. This is a direct challenge to Judeo-Christian thought in which only God controls life. In Deuteronomy 32:39, God states, “There is no God besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand” and yet, in Orr’s Island, it is Roxy and Ruey who “usher” in all life and it is through their hands that death comes. Jewett takes women’s role in creation a step further in Pointed Firs, claiming that not only do women create human life (rather than God), they can also choose when not to create human life (via abortion). Mrs. Todd is a multifaceted example of the limits of God’s power in a traditional Biblical sense. Not only does she terminate her own pregnancy but also she lives to tell the tale and pass on the knowledge. She does not die from either the physical implication of her abortion or God’s wrath. As a result, she passes the information of her abortion and the pennyroyal recipe on to other women. As Mrs. Todd shares this information with the narrator who returns to Boston to share it with other women, so too does Jewett share this information with her readers. Having learned from Stowe in the example of Roxy and Ruey, Jewett continues the literary tradition of challenging Judeo-Christian principles and the privileges it affords men in American society.

Could this be a literary code? Certainly there is much to suggest that it is. In the encoded information that Jewett shares we see her give her female readers the knowledge to exercise power over their bodies. The literary coding is at play in Pointed Firs is both linguistic and generic in nature; the text works along common and accepted genre lines while encoding an unconventional feminist message within these lines. We see this in the
example of Mrs. Todd’s garden that activates the socially acceptable concepts of women’s work first but then, upon a closer reading, is actually bursting with substances that allow women to exercise power over their bodies. The generic coding at work in *Pointed Firs* allows the text to exist within literary genres considered to be the sphere of women, such as that of the domestic novel. This generic coding could activate a kind of invisibility, or lack of notice from the male literary community and it is this coding technique that allowed the uses of pennyroyal to go largely unnoticed.
CHAPTER IV

SEXUALITY AND METAPHOR IN *MY ANTONIA*

Willa Cather achieves two main goals in *My Antonia* that relate to the techniques and themes I examined in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* and Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of Pointed Firs*. First, Cather uses veiled language to convey messages about female sexuality. She does this primarily through landscape metaphor. Secondly, Cather, like Stowe, challenges the role of religion by remaking Biblical figures and stories. The first section of the chapter examines the use of landscape metaphor to express the female body both in terms of sensation and sexuality. The second section of the chapter examines Cather’s re-creation of the Genesis story and the implications of her claims.

Cather builds upon the foundational definition put forth by Stowe in *Orr’s Island* and continued by Jewett in *Pointed Firs* that womanhood is essentially a combination of the “spiritual,” “reflective” and “physical.” Like Jewett, Cather focuses much of her attention on the “physical,” but unlike Jewett this focus is not on reproductive control but on sexuality. In keeping with Stowe’s original definition of womanhood, Cather sets her literary gaze on Biblical figures and, in doing so, remakes what Biblical scholar Rosemary Radford Ruther calls “the fall into patriarchy” (143). In rewriting the Genesis story to be one that accepts and celebrates women’s sexuality, Cather has fused the “spiritual,” “reflective” and “physical” into one mode of being. Like Stowe and Jewett
before her, Cather accomplished this through a process of cloaked language that could, pending further study, represent a literary code passed from Stowe to Jewett to Cather.

Published in 1918, Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* is the story of Antonia Shimerda from the perspective of her childhood friend Jim Burden. As children, both Antonia and Jim immigrate to the Nebraska plains, Antonia from Bohemia and Jim from Virginia. As Jim and Antonia develop a close friendship, the reader sees Antonia’s experiences through Jim’s perspective. The narrative follows Jim and Antonia as they come of age while exploring the wild countryside and its eclectic inhabitants. As they grow, they experience the differing realities that reflect their gender, social-class, and ethnicity. Jim pursues his education while Antonia goes to work in the fields and then later as a domestic worker in the home of the Burdens’ neighbors. Antonia and the other “foreign” girls of the town are simultaneously lusted after and held in disgrace by the upper-class Anglo families. As young adults, Jim pursues an education, ultimately leaving Nebraska and becoming a successful lawyer. Antonia is abandoned in pregnancy and returns to the country where she works the land. In middle age, Jim returns to his childhood home and seeks out Antonia, who occupies a central role in his inner life. He finds her living near the region of their childhood, the wife of a Bohemian man, mother of twelve children and successful, self-sufficient farmer. The Nebraska landscape plays a central role throughout the narrative, functioning not as a backdrop for the events of the human characters but as a central character in the narrative.

It is well known among those who study Willa Cather that the role of the land, especially in her “novels of the soil,” is so primary as to be central. However, scholars have disagreed on the particulars of meaning Cather assigned to the land. In her article
"Landscapes Of Excess: Sexuality And Spirituality In Willa Cather's O Pioneers! and The Song Of The Lark," Susan E. Hill claims that the landscape represents an excess of space within the narrative that is representative of the female experience within a patriarchal society. Hill also claims that the interior lives of women are comprised of a union of sexuality and spirituality. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard examined the role of immense space, like the spaces we see in Cather’s landscapes, claiming that the role of immensity acts as mirror, reflecting the “unfathomable depths” of the human psyche while also fusing “the ventures of the mind and the powers of the spirit” (192). Thus, the vast landscapes we see in Cather’s descriptions of “the divide” point us toward the internal spiritual, or metaphysical workings of the character.

Continuing Bachelard’s claims, Judith Fryer claims that the encoded roles of the landscape in Cather’s novels are “felicitous” in nature, signaling the inner spiritual world of womanhood. Laura Winters also suggests that Cather’s use of landscape is sacred in nature and is at the heart of Cather’s work. Sharon O’Brien claims that Cather has coded a female landscape through images and symbols, thus the landscape symbolizes the female body. Judith Fetterley furthers this claim, suggesting that Cather created a space where female characters make love to a female landscape, thus coding lesbian experiences within a heterosexual framework. Finally, Blanche H. argues that Cather created a new creation myth that restores life-giving power to women and to the landscape rather than to the men who “subdue” both. My study builds upon prior scholarship in examining the central role of the landscape in My Antonia, claiming that Cather uses landscape as a metaphor to cloak Antonia’s sexuality.
Let me offer an example of Cather’s use of landscape metaphor to discuss sexual tropes in *My Antonia*. The Nebraska landscape is defined by its movement: “there was so much motion in it, the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running” (13). This point is reiterated: “more than anything I felt motion in the landscape . . . and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping” (13-14). Here the movement of the land is described as containing a great energy under the surface, under the apparent. Consider the following passage from later in the text in which the woman’s body is described in familiar terms. The ideal female body, represented here by Antonia and her friends, “had a vigor which, when they got over their first shyness about coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and a freedom of movement” (131). This ideal female form is juxtaposed to its antithesis, women’s bodies “that never moved inside their clothes; their muscles seemed to ask just one thing—to be left alone” (131). The land is described as having a great, exuberant “motion” “underneath” the surface in the same way that the women’s body is described as possessing “vigor” under its “shyness.” Similarly, the less ideal female body is described as possessing a lack of motion “underneath” clothing; their bodies are described as being static. Both the land and the female body are characterized in the exact same terms, the surface (grass/clothing) is “a loose” hide beneath which lies the energetic action of the body or, the sexual energy of the female body.

She is “The Material Out of Which Countries Are Made”

*My Antonia* begins with a young girl who has been cast-out of her native homeland, setting forth in a new land as a foreigner and in this way the narrative begins with the thematic focus of immigration. The root of immigration is the Latin word
immigräre, meaning “to go into,” thus we must ask ourselves for the sake of this study, to where or in what are Cather’s heroines going (OED). My Antonia begins at the crossroad of what has been lost and the promise of the future, so that when “the immigrants rumble off into the empty darkness” we know that this darkness signifies the unknown (8). It is in this liminal space between the old world and the new world that Antonia Shimerda must discover the pathways to self-knowledge. In this threshold she must discover what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society that will deem them inferior and subservient and she must find the means to assert her will over her life. This is the task assigned to all American women and this is one of Cather’s great themes. Thus, the “darkness” of the future represents the disorientation of liminality.

Therefore, to return to the root immigräre, the what of what Antonia “goes into” is necessarily the task of creating herself. Antonia is charged with the task of creating herself out of the material of a foreign country. In this way, she is a personification of the country itself because her womanliness is just as foreign as her new homeland. As Antonia sets-out to build herself she is at first unformed; she is still the “the material out of which countries are made”(8) rather than the “explosions of life” (220) and “physical harmony” (226) that she comes to know. Like the female characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Orr’s Island and Sarah Orne Jewett’s Pointed Firs, Antonia must create her identity through a combination of the “spiritual,” “reflective” and “physical.”

One of the functions of the landscape in My Antonia is to portray the physical experiences of Antonia. Through this portrayal, Antonia is given a voice and an identity in a story that is not told by her. In the first chapter of My Antonia, Cather signals the landscape/body connection by telling us that Antonia is “the country” (2). Here we see,
quite literally, that we should think of Antonia as one and the same with the landscape. As we follow the actions of the land we are in fact, becoming intimately acquainted with Antonia.

Cather continues to remind the reader that any description about the land is a coded description of Antonia throughout the text by positioning Antonia as close to the land as possible. Indeed, Antonia is often in the land, signaling the lack of barrier between woman and landscape. As a child, Antonia lives in a “hole in the bank,” described as a “badger-hole” (16, 17). As she grows, Antonia is “comfortable only when she was tucked down in the baked earth” (27) and she prefers the “out of doors” (92) to any interior space. From these early descriptions of Antonia’s physicality fused with the landscape we learn that the land is a metaphor used to discuss Antonia’s somatic experiences. As Radner and Lanser point out, metaphor is a type of feminist coding that often “expresses forbidden sexual and political impulses” (419). Cather hides Antonia’s bodily experiences because to write openly of a woman’s sexuality in 1913 was “forbidden” or “would be dangerous if expressed directly,” thus Cather cloaked the physical realities of womanhood in landscape metaphor (413). In the same vein as it would have been dangerous for Stowe and Jewett to overtly challenge the Christian ideal that supported the hierarchies that deemed them inferior as women, so too would it have been blasphemous for Cather to rewrite Biblical stories that express female sexuality.

As Antonia grows into womanhood her sexuality is described (by Jim) as “an adventure” (1). Referring to Antonia as an “adventure” demonstrates two important aspects of the male versus the female perspectives as they are applied to women. First, the term “adventure” evokes the classic heroic narratives (such as Homer’s *Odyssey*) that
have been so instrumental to literary history. In the heroic myth, man must embark on a perilous journey in which he meets significant adversity and in conquering that adversity becomes a mythic hero; thus, the man is born only through the success of his “adventure.” Because Antonia is here described as the “adventure” we see that, in Jim’s perspective, she is the journey, she is the “object of dominion and exploration” (Kolodny 5). Secondly, in designating Antonia as an “adventure” Jim is dehumanizing her, she is rendered a living symbol for his exploits into manhood. Taken together the living, breathing woman who is Antonia, is reduced to a symbol of both male gratification and mastery, a complete sexual conquest.

A crucial element in the analysis of My Antonia is separating Jim’s perspective from Antonia’s. As was discussed earlier, Antonia represents “the country” to Jim from the opening words of the texts she is linked with the landscape. Annette Kolondy’s work shows us that the American male literary history has linked woman with the landscape so that in images of nature told by men we see symbols of “eroticism, penetration, raping, embrace, enclosure and nurture,” so much so that the land and female body are interchangeable (Kolodny refers to this as land-as-woman). (150) Therefore, when Jim, as an adult, becomes a lawyer for one the “great western railways” that cuts through “the never-ending miles of ripe wheat fields,” we see his linear marks have penetrated the great fertile countryside (1). Here Jim’s railroad functions in much the same way as Stowe’s “golden rod,” hiding sexual themes in cloaked language. Jim’s “great railway” on and inside of Antonia’s “ripe field” represented the act of sex. But the literal sex act never happened because, in making Antonia a symbol of manhood and sexual potency, Jim failed to see her and know her as a woman, despite her love for him. Unfulfilled in
his “adventure” to manhood, Jim recreates what would have been a sexual journey with a purely mental act. By mating with the land Jim gets as close as he can to a sexual relationship with Antonia and having quenched the sexual desire he can return to the older Antonia and make her a mother.

Through Jim’s lust we see Antonia grow into the woman that mainstream Anglo-society would see her as, but we do not hear Antonia’s voice in these passages. Instead, we see her growth in descriptions of the land so that in the distant horizon, in the “rolling country, swelling gently until it meets the sky” we see Antonia growing in graceful form toward the sky, upward toward the unfathomable. While Jim sees Antonia’s body as the ultimate fulfillment of his desire, as a “blossom” that is “unusually luxuriant and beautiful” (153), the landscape continues to juxtapose the constant undercurrent of his lust, shifting back to Antonia’s perspective, which is told through descriptions of the land. When Jim sees only a degraded woman in Antonia after she’s been abandoned during pregnancy, Antonia is experiencing the “fine open fall,” sitting “on the grassy banks of the draw and sunning herself for hours” (204). Cather uses the word “open” to describe the world that surrounds Antonia here and openness in a spatial sense has to do with immensity, with vastness. Gaston Bachelard characterizes immense open space as symbolic of “an intimate depth of feeling,” thus signaling the shift to Antonia’s internal self (189). Turned inward through the “open” nature of the environment we must ask what this openness signifies. Looking again to Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*, we see that the use of vast space in literature is a coded expression of synthesis; openness “reconciles difference” by synthesizing those differences (192). Therefore, Antonia’s “open fall” is a reflection of her mental state. Although she has just been abandoned by
her lover and is unmarried and pregnant, as she sits and enjoys the natural world around her, her closeness with the land reminds her (and the reader) that female sexuality and pregnancy are themselves, natural experiences.

Upon hearing that Antonia has been abandoned in her pregnancy, Jim feels “bitterly disappointed” in her “for becoming an object of pity” (194). Jim’s reaction to Antonia’s suffering reflects his arrogance because he still does not see her as a human but only as an “object,” a thing to whose sole purpose is translated though his feelings. It would be so easy to assume at this point in the narrative that Jim’s view of Antonia reflects both her community’s view and her own perspective, but Cather has been careful to juxtapose Jim’s perception with that of her heroines. In the narrative moment directly following Jim’s “bitter disappointment” we see the narrative pulse forward with a description of the land as “the summer wind blows in the windows, bringing the smell of the ripe fields” (207). Here we see the moment framed through Antonia’s perspective. The window acts as the border, framing the moment, signaling its significance and we see that this important moment is one that brings the reproductive powers of the sun and the productive foreshadowing of fertility from the potent land that mirrors Antonia’s own fertile body. The sunny open window here symbolizes Antonia’s perspective. She loves her baby daughter and for Antonia, the future beyond the window is welcoming, tracking forward along productive and expansive lines. Consequently, through encoded landscape metaphor, the reader is offered the female perspective despite the male narrative framing.

Knowing that Antonia’s experiences are coded in the descriptions of the land, it’s not surprising that after she moved beyond Jim’s gaze she began to thrive, ultimately recreating the Garden of Eden, a space in which she inhabits an Eve-like role as the
primordial mother. Away from Jim’s influences, Antonia’s sexuality flourishes, embodied here in the fecundity of the land: “the windy springs, and the blazing summers, one after another had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland . . . in long, sweeping lines of fertility” (199). The “springs” of this passage symbolize Antonia’s regeneration, her potency and the “blazing summers” represent the vital heat of her own health and sexuality. The phrase “one after another” in reference to seasons signals the cyclical nature of Antonia’s experiences, the physical changes of motherhood and the erotic energy of reproduction embodied in the landscape. The culmination of Antonia’s productivity is stated in the phrase “long sweeping lines of fertility” which describes Antonia’s body and much as it describes the land itself. Here we see that there has never been a difference between Antonia’s body and the land in the narrative; the land is an encoded symbol for discussing Antonia’s body and feelings outside of Jim’s perspective.

The Garden of Eden: “The Deepest Peace in the Orchard”

The connection between Antonia and the natural world is of primary importance in accessing the inner themes of the text. In her book The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel, Judith Fryer claims that “the myth of America is the myth of the New World Garden” and she goes on to say that all American heroic stories are essentially grounded in recovering the Garden of Eden (3). Much scholarship has been devoted to evaluating this claim in the work of early American male writers of prominence such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fennimore Cooper and Henry James, but the relationship between Eve and Eden in the American Garden has garnered little attention. The question at hand here then is at the heart of Cather’s work. What is the
relationship between woman (Eve), the land (Eden) and the Biblical myths that form the foundation of American gender construction and the resulting relationship of the sexes.

In his book *The Word According to Eve*, Cullen Murphy claims, “the Bible is famous for being the world’s most over studied book—over studied by male scholars and commentators, that is to say. It has not been, however, been over studied by women.”

Murphy’s work asks questions that Cather’s work answers. Who is God to a woman and how does the “great spirit” affect the lives of women? Murphy claims that the female experience and expression of religion is “the next intellectual revolution,” and it is precisely this revolution that Cather expresses through the relationship created between landscape and woman.

Cather’s remaking of the Genesis story in *My Antonia* has much in common with Stowe’s matriarchal religious hybrid. It’s possible that Cather, a great admirer of Stowe and close friend of Jewett’s, learned from Stowe’s example of a reimaged God and Christ figures in the model of living women. Certainly, in remaking Eve, Cather has made the same literary moves as Stowe did in remaking God and Christ. Once Antonia moved beyond the reaches of Jim, whose male-gaze is symbolic of patriarchal society, she moves into a mode of being that exemplifies the spiritual and physical union that is at the center of Cather’s claim on the nature and in keeping with the definition begun by Stowe and furthered by Jewett. Antonia married Anton, a man who is a first-generation immigrant. Anton and Antonia are reflections of one another in both the sameness of their names and in that they are both first-generation Bohemian immigrants. In this mirroring, Cather may be commenting on the asexual nature of a successful sexual union. As a mated couple, Anton and Antonia are genderless beings made whole in their ability
to join their bodies and create life. Here Cather inverts the Adam and Eve myth; instead of woman created from the body of man we have fertility only as a result of union. This representation of a perfect union is a direct challenge to gender norms that insist on the superiority of man and the dependence of woman.

Another challenge to gender conventions is Cather's focus on the figure of Eve rather than Adam. Having birthed twelve children and single-handedly nurtured a productive farm into the self-sufficiency, Antonia is a powerful recreation of Eve. This is evident in the description of Antonia’s Eden which parallels the Eden of Genesis. Antonia takes Jim (and the reader) into the inner layers of her garden, first showing us the outer Gardens that consist of a cherry orchard and shrubs of gooseberry and currant. At the center of the garden is an apple orchard in which apples “hung on the branches as thick as beads on a string, purple-red, with a thin silvery glaze over them” (222). Here the image of naked Adam and naked Eve under the apple tree is remade, the apples representing the very element that the Biblical story denied, the obvious sexual pull between man and woman. In the Biblical story, Eve reaches up and pulls the apple down, takes a bite of it and is thus, the figure who initiates all human life in bringing sexual awareness into the Garden. In this scenario, Adam like Jim punishes Eve in the same way Jim punished Antonia, by making her feel ashamed of her sexuality and her body.

In Cather’s rewriting of this scenario, Antonia’s garden is full of “the deepest peace,” lush with fertility. Antonia’s Garden is described as being “full of sun, like a cup, and [Jim and Antonia] could smell the ripe apples in the trees” (222). The sexuality in this description is coded in landscape metaphor and is therefore a palpable presence in the scene; the “smell” of “ripe apples” acting as the question of sex that existed between
Adam and Eve and has had such significant ramifications. Just as Eve took the apple so, too, does Antonia “stand in the orchard” and “put her hand on the little crab tree,” “looking up at the apples,” picking them by the bushel, cooking them into food for her family. Rather than being punished for eating the apple as Eve was, Antonia is rewarded with nourishment, becoming a symbol for the “goodness of planting and tending and harvesting.” The apple is a symbol of female sexuality and in the Adam and Eve story, Adam denies the apple, believing it to be forbidden. In remaking this myth, which has had such significance in creating patriarchy, Cather makes Antonia eat the apple, the result of which is twelve children, signifying that women’s sexuality is not denied. Because of Eve’s decision, women, here exemplified in Antonia, become “rich mine[s] of life. . . the founders of early races” (229). In recreating the Genesis myth in Jim and Antonia, Cather explores the union of sexuality and spirituality in the lives of women, ultimately claiming that the two are inseparable and as seen in Antonia’s garden, the cycles of “planting, tending and harvesting” are responsible for all human life.

Cyclical movements are the energy at the center of all creation myths, the force that fuels all life, to move always “onward and outward,” which is the mechanism of all life. xxix Therefore, the land contains metaphors of both life and death; the cycles of creation are expressed in the coded language of seasons in order to express the life giving elements of Antonia. Thus Cather refers to spring as a “throb” and to summer in terms of its “blazing” intensity. These are physical terms applied to the land rather than to Antonia’s body. Had Cather written of Antonia’s sexuality blatantly her work would have been scandalized and most likely unread. Instead, Cather creates a palpable description of Antonia’s physicality by coding this experience in landscape metaphor. Having arrived at
the pinnacle of her fertility, Antonia is the primal giver of life. Just as all living things fold into the earth and are literally reborn (recycled) into the energy of new living things so too, does life begin in the body of a woman. In human terms, the reproductive energy is encompassed in desire. This elemental yearning to produce life is, of course, not limited to humans but extends to all living forms: the flower yearns for the bee to spread its pollen, the tree reaches for the sun so that it may grow and spread its seeds, the mammal’s existence is a frenzy of searching for the energy to sustain its fevered need to reproduce. This cycle of life represented in Antonia symbolizes the continuation of humanity: Antonia “is the future . . . the future lies in her hands” (Gelfant xii). It makes sense then that Cather would utilize images from nature to symbolize the physical experience of Antonia; there is a natural connection. Here the woman and the land have much in common, as Antonia’s fertility is expressed in her ability to give life to her twelve children and to her Garden of Eden. Cather replaces images of Eve as a “fallen” woman who is singlehandedly responsible for “the fall into patriarchy” with images of Antonia, resplendent in the midst of her verdure.

The text closes in the moments after Antonia emerges from the same darkness that threaten to envelope her in the beginning of the narrative as she “rumbled out into the empty darkness” as a young woman in a foreign country (8). The final image of Antonia described her and her children emerging from an underground cellar as “a veritable explosion of life out of the darkness” (220). Thus, Cather’s narrative, like her heroine, moves in a full cycle, returning to the question of immigration posed at the start of the text, the great task of creating herself out of the “darkness” of womanhood. As a figure that represents the task facing all women in the start of the 20th century, Antonia’s
experiences suggest Cather’s voice as she imagines women emerging from the “darkness” of patriarchy. In *My Antonia*, Cather claims that women will have to carve-out a space for themselves to exist outside of patriarchy, a separate place that, like the cloaked expressions of Antonia’s experiences, exist within the conventional primary narrative. This primary narrative, or Jim’s voice, represent conventional male-dominated society and Antonia’s experiences told mostly through metaphor, symbolizes the female voice. The narrative structure of *My Antonia* describes the structure of American society. In much the same way as Stowe cloaked her criticism of Judeo-Christian principles and the privileges they afford American men within the conventional themes of *Orr’s Island*, so, too, did Cather comment on the centrality of sexuality in the lives of women while also criticizing the Genesis myth. In keeping with Jewett’s example, Cather conceals the expression of Antonia’s sexuality in veiled language so that, like the pennyroyal secret, the expression of Antonia’s sexuality could go unnoticed by some and noticed by others. Cather converges the “spiritual,” the “reflective” and the “physical” into one manifestation, one text, so that Stowe’s original definition of womanhood is answered.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Taken as a whole The Pearl of Orr’s Island, The Country of Pointed Firs and My Antonia contain the following subjects concealed within the narrative by way of various literary techniques: hidden pregnancies, secret recipes and oddly coincidental similarities in names (Toothachre); gardens that are really pharmacies, a landscape that is really a woman’s body; spinsters as God, “golden rods” as phallic symbols, Christ in the form of young girl, an apple that symbolizes female sexuality; Eve as the fertile “mine of life;” concealed lovers and expressions of sexuality that were either illegal, considered immoral and most certainly blasphemous. All of these were passed along literary lines. These, and many more examples of the messages contained within Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs and My Antonia, are the parallels that simply cannot be coincidental. These are the results of a code, a language that Stowe may have learned from slave narratives such as Fredrick Douglas’s A Narrative of the Life of a Slave in which coded language was used to convey messages of escape to those still enslaved. The literary techniques Stowe utilized were passed to Jewett who passed them to Cather. If a code is defined by the necessity of its creation, its secretive contents, its ability to be known to insiders and unnoticed by outsiders, then the similarities between these texts cannot be random. Perhaps, because a code has not yet been defined, these similarities cannot be accurately called a code but they are certainly moving in that direction and require further scholarship.
My study has examined some of the themes embedded within Harriet Beecher Stowe’s, *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of Pointed Firs* and Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*, demonstrating the ways in which each author continued the themes began by her predecessor and exploring the evolution of themes relating to women in their work. The places where these texts differ is in the predominate nature of sexuality in a woman’s life. Stowe claims that the sphere of the mind and the spirit were of a superior nature to that of the body, but even as she claims this ideology she contradicts it by crafting a new model of womanhood in Sally Kittredge that is a union of spirit and body. Jewett takes-up Stowe’s interest on the internal spiritual and physical nature of womanhood, continuing the method of communication through similar literary techniques while altering the claim to emphasize secret information concerning women’s reproductive control and challenging the role of religion. Cather furthers the claim via the influence-line, fusing the visions of Stowe and Jewett into an encoded alternative way of being for women that also challenges religious principles while expanding the role of sexuality in women’s experiences. What emerges from the work of these three women is one example of the female voice in American literature, a voice that is so often difficult to distinguish because, as Nina Baym’s work shows us, the male literary tradition has long asserted, “stories about women could not contain the essence of American culture” (8). *In A Room of Ones Own*, Virginia Wolfe famously wrote about the lack of women’s voices in literary history, saying that:

Genius like Shakespeare's is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people . . . It is not born today among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began . . . almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of
law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. (Wolfe, n.p)

We know that women did in fact write and their voices are present in American history through subversive and surprising methods. Women have always found means to express themselves, no matter how “uneducated,” “servile,” “docile” or “submissive” they have been forced to be by “all the power of law and custom” (Welter and Wolfe). My study adds to the chorus of their voices, showing that the female voice is anything but silent.

Individually, these three texts appear to be commenting on very different issues; from the mid-nineteenth-century seafaring experience to the twentieth-century women’s immigration experience. Consequently, it has been easy for the unifying themes in Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs and My Antonia to go unnoticed. Taken together, these three texts represent an example of the inner world of American women as being one in which profound internal issues of the spirit, the heart, the mind and the body converge with the external, or public lives of women, including the conventional roles of domestic work, motherhood and caretaking. Stowe, Jewett and Cather comment on the roles of women in a society that deems them lesser, while also showing examples of the varied experience of “true womanhood.”

An important distinction needs to be made concerning this study. In this study I investigate Orr’s Island, Pointed Firs and My Antonia through historical, textual and rhetorical analysis and I have, in no way, exhausted the possible results of this analysis. Instead, such a study yields an open-ended swath of possibilities. For example, in his book Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America, Peter Coveillo explores The Country of Pointed Firs and arrives at the conclusion that the alternative social structure represented by Dunnet Landing is an example of “love once it
is removed from its overcoding by marriage” (84). He claims that the result of this “unbinding” is a “queer sociality moving toward normalization” (103). Similarly, Judith Fetterley and Shannon O’Brian claim that in the physical connection between a feminized landscape and a female protagonist Cather has coded lesbian experiences. We see in the work of Annette Kolodny the ways in which men have gendered the landscape female through literature and the ways in which this act reinforces male dominance in American society. What is lacking from this discourse however, is the female experiences told in primary terms, from the minds and pens of women writers. How and why do women write about landscape? What is coded within sentences that discuss God, or female relationships, or plants? What sort of spaces do women of early America create for themselves? My study focuses on addressing these questions in the work of Stowe, Jewett and Cather. I do so knowing that the results of this study are open to a variety of interpretations and are, by no means, static. Indeed, the spaces these women and all women carve out for themselves are varied and vast. I do not claim that Stowe’s, Jewett’s and Cather’s subversive themes have been exhausted in this study. On the contrary, it would be reductionist to claim that a full analysis of said texts has occurred herein. Having suggested the presence of a literary code, I hope to see further study of feminist coding in the texts I have examined as well as other literary work by women. The work of unearthing the female voice and the female experiences in literature requires a multitude of voices and perspectives. This is merely a beginning.
ENDNOTES


v. Willa Cather’s “novels of the soil” are considered to be *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia*. These novels are linked thematically. In her text *Student Companion to Willa Cather*, Linda De Roche defines “novels of the soil” as “a special kind of regionalism in the novel in which the writer portrays the lives of people struggling for existence in remote rural place” (p. 29).


x. Ibid. p., 297.


xiii. Ibid, 143.


xxii. See chapter 35, of The Pearl of Orr’s Island, “The Toothache Cottage” in which the word “tender” is used four times to describe the care that Roxy and Ruey show to Mara.

xvi. See the Hebrew translation of “Mara” at Arie Uittenbogaard’s website, Abarim Publications for a full exploration of the word Mara.


xix. See Alice Walkers essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden” for a thorough discussion on the importance of a woman’s space in challenging oppression and encouraging creative expression.


