

## ABSTRACT

### Stranged Marriages: Unconventional Matrimony in Western American Fiction

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Marriage does more than unite individuals. It affirms existing social structures and promises to perpetuate them. Embedded within marital conventions are traces of a society's assumptions regarding race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and politics. Fictional marriages, therefore, traditionally signal a return to social order, an affirmation of the dominant values of a given culture. Some writers, however, especially those writing on or about the American frontier, recognized in the institution potential to challenge reified social norms and eastern literary conventions. Through their treatment of nontraditional marriages, Mark Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Willa Cather denounce or reveal racism, greed, religious prejudice, class inequalities, and oppressive or restrictive gender roles. Additionally, they draw readers' attention to the arbitrariness of marital or social conventions for purposes of humor or satire.

This study examines attempts to defamiliarize, or “strange,” marriage in American fiction set west of the Mississippi River and written between 1865 and 1918. During the years following the Civil War, white, middle-class Americans perceived a crisis of marriage and family brought on by the threat of interracial marriage due to the emancipation of African American slaves and rising Chinese immigration, the brazen flouting of federal legislation by Mormon polygamists, a rising divorce rate and declining birth rate among the social elite, and the challenging of traditional gender roles as a result of women’s rights movements. Mainstream America responded to these challenges with an increased emphasis on conformity, aggressively legislating against deviant forms of marriage and strictly limiting immigration, particularly from China. The writers in this study resisted these efforts through portrayals of interracial marriages, same-sex pairings, polygamy, marriages late in life, arranged marriages, and unorthodox representations of marriage. In a postwar era of conformity, when the newly re-United States reevaluated its national identity, Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather “stranged” the basic building block of society to remind readers that, in America, union must never come at the cost of individualism and independence.

Stranged Marriages: Unconventional Matrimony in Western American Fiction

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of English

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## PREFACE

When marriage arrives in a small town in western Texas in Stephen Crane's 1898 short story "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," the unfamiliar institution does more than disrupt stereotypical frontier roles. It also burlesques the familiar form of comedy in which conflicts are resolved and happiness is peacefully secured through matrimony.<sup>1</sup> The foundational unit of most organized human societies, marriage is inextricably linked to comedy because it represents a return to order and stability in response to some menacing threat. So when town marshal Jack Potter and his unnamed bride arrive at the train station in Yellow Sky in Crane's tale, nineteenth-century readers anticipate that the new arrangement signals a strengthening of the town. Indeed, it instantly neutralizes the immediate threat to Yellow Sky, Scratchy Wilson's drunken tear. However, Crane's use of matrimony to bring communal peace is highly ironic. Rather than clarifying misunderstandings, the marriage compounds them, and instead of resolving conflict, it merely disarms it.

Having travelled to San Anton' and married without informing the Yellow Sky residents of his actions, Potter returns sheepishly to the town, feeling that he has somehow betrayed its trust. Hoping that he and his wife can reach his

house without being noticed and work out a plan for delicately announcing their union to the community, Potter unexpectedly comes upon Scratchy, the town gunslinger who terrorizes Yellow Sky when he drinks. Looking for a fight and seeking to avenge what he feels are past wrongs by the town marshal, Scratchy holds a gun to Potter and demands to know why he is unarmed. This familiar showdown between foes that has long characterized Yellow Sky suddenly takes a turn when Potter reveals he is returning from his own wedding. Stunned by the revelation that his old antagonist has adopted a new role as a husband, Scratchy becomes “a simple child,” holstering his weapons and retreating from his confrontation with Potter in incomprehension (798). But while the simple fact of marriage, what the narrator refers to as “the presence of this foreign condition,” removes the imminent threat of physical violence, it simultaneously destroys the established governing structure of Yellow Sky (798). Despite the alarm that Yellow Sky’s residents experience whenever Scratchy begins another assault upon the town, they take comfort in the presence of the town marshal, who has never failed to challenge and put an end to Scratchy’s delinquencies. Communal harmony in Yellow Sky depends on individuals reliably performing prescribed roles. But with Scratchy’s retreat, his boots making “funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand,” an old order passes away (798). In this case, marriage disrupts rather than reinforces the established social order.

Along with Crane, other American writers saw the disruptive potential of marriage. While early novelists frequently employed matrimony in an effort to sustain and extend the influence of the dominant culture, some authors used the institution to affront rather than affirm many of the most deeply held assumptions and values of the middle class. While Crane employs an unanticipated but otherwise traditional marriage to dismantle the stereotypical order of the Old West, the writers in this study, also writing on or about the American frontier between 1865 and 1918, find in nontraditional marriages or peculiar portrayals of marriage a particularly effective mode for undermining the conventions, both social and literary, of the mainstream establishment. By defamiliarizing the common institution, making something familiar seem strange, Mark Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Willa Cather demand close reexamination of one of America's most important cultural carriers.

While humans have long viewed matrimony as foundational in their societies, the institution acquired particular significance in a new democratic republic marked by the voluntary union of disparate parties into a single, cohesive body. Insofar as traditional marriage represents social order, these "stranged" marriages draw attention to the inconsistencies and questionable assumptions that underlie a unified national identity. If the goal of conventional literary marriages in a denouement is to smooth over sources of conflict and



tension, unconventional marriages emphasize persistent wrinkles, the aberrations and discrepancies that cannot be or refuse to be ironed out by a dominant group's fierce longing for affinity. In the decades following the Civil War, America urgently sought reunion and passed strict laws to regulate proper forms of marriage and restrict immigration. Unwilling to accept the proposal that the nation had to be homogeneous to be one, Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather engaged "stranged" marriages to call for individualism and independence during an era of unity and conformity.

Fittingly, the marriages explored by these authors occur on the edges of mainstream America. All of the authors in this study lived and wrote, at least for a time, in the western United States, and the majority of stories treated here take place west of the Mississippi River at a time when open spaces, fewer prospective mates, and racial diversity made the strict social conventions of the east difficult to enforce.<sup>2</sup> Deviant marriages in nineteenth-century America, including interracial marriage and polygamy, had a strong presence on its frontiers, and divorce rates were much higher in the West.<sup>3</sup> In *Building and Breaking Families in the American West* (1996), Glenda Riley contends that the great diversity of culture in the American West "created a chaotic environment in which to court and marry" (145). While many Americans viewed the frontier as the space on the western edge of the civilized nation that was being prepared for

the extension of eastern values and conventions, others saw in the space a loose set of social customs that allowed for cultural exploration, adaptation, and subversion. Most famously, Frederick Jackson Turner insisted in 1893 that the primary cultural influence during the development of the United States actually moved from west to east as frontiersmen forged an ethos of individualism and exploration that then reshaped American identity.<sup>4</sup> Though historians overwhelmingly agree that Turner overstated the case, his frontier thesis nevertheless draws attention to the dynamic tension between an established, civilized order and a rapidly changing space characterized by few societal restrictions.

But clarification is necessary before adopting the term “frontier.” Over a century’s worth of criticism has loaded the term with negative associations and still has not arrived at a clear or widely accepted definition. Chris Packard offers a useful starting point:

In the nineteenth century, Anglo-Americans use the term ‘frontier’ to mean an amorphous line extending from the banks of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers westward. In symbolic terms, ‘frontier’ meant a location where epic encounters between opposing forces occur—civilization and wilderness, cowboy and Indian, familiar and foreign. (119–20n)

Essential work by revisionists such as Henry Nash Smith, Richard Slotkin, Annette Kolodny, and Patricia Nelson Limerick highlights the obvious patterns of violence, oppression, sexism, and exploitation that often marked the

development of the American West, patterns that Turner seemed to ignore and that are sometimes implicitly condoned today by the use of the term “frontier.” William Handley notes in *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* (2002) that many western historians consider it the “ethnocentric ‘f-word’” (25). With full recognition of and appreciation for these issues, this study employs the term to evoke the tension between a dominant culture seeking to expand and the forms of resistance it encountered. While diverse populations, cultures, and experiences mark the American West, the writers in this study view their work as communicating directly with white, middle-class culture.

In this study, then, “frontier” refers specifically to the space on the western periphery of the United States’ cultural establishment during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Obviously no such space could be plotted accurately on a map, for the boundaries of cultural influence are even more nebulous than the elusive frontier, but the term is meant to capture a scarcity of organized enforcement of cultural norms. To use Louis Althusser’s language, the frontier lacks strong ideological state apparatuses, those institutions that perpetuate cultural hegemony by actively reinforcing the assumptions, values, and ideologies of the dominant culture. To use Cather’s language, the American West “was, somehow, an honest country, and there was a new song in that blue air which had never been sung in the world before” (*The*

*Song of the Lark* 243). This space between a strong cultural establishment and a location entirely beyond the influence of that culture helps define the works of Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather.

As this study will show, each author considered himself or herself an American writing from a position outside the mainstream establishment. All were committed to the concept of a unified nation, but in writing from a frontier perspective they recognized the need for much greater inclusivity. Certainly other writers of the time pushed back against cultural norms and even used matrimony to do it, but calling into question the very makeup of marriage, particularly in terms of race, age, sex, religion, free choice, or number of participants, occurred more frequently in literature of the frontier.<sup>5</sup> William Handley notes that “long before the revisionism and sexual revolution of the 1960s, marital contract and legitimacy are challenged in the literary West” (21), and Glenda Riley finds that the stereotype of the Victorian wife and marriage were “especially inapplicable in the culturally diverse American West” (33). Marriage is expected to function as civilization’s cornerstone, the frontline of an advancing society, but in the case of western literature, this “‘cornerstone’ does not so much secure civilization as question its very meaning and future” (Handley 21).

Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather are connected not only by geography and a skepticism of convention but also by a sympathy for marginalized groups or individuals. Long before he exposed the racial prejudices of postbellum America through the nonconforming Huck Finn, Twain unpopularity decried the mistreatment of Chinese Americans by San Francisco police in the mid-1860s. Ethnic diversity and looser social regulations in the West did not protect Asian immigrants from persecution, a fact Sui Sin Far thoroughly understood. Her favorable portrayals of Chinese Americans and her condemnations of the injustices they endured during the height of the “Yellow Peril” mark her as a strong countercultural voice. Willa Cather, too, became a voice for immigrants on the margins of mainstream America. Her celebration of the contributions of Scandinavian and Bohemian immigrants to the national identity departed from more popular efforts to “Americanize” the West. While accounts of the American western frontier have long been accused of ethnocentric bias, these writers preserve in their fiction a range of diverse voices. The impulse on their part to defend or champion those on the periphery of mainstream society helps reveal why strict marital conventions came under such scrutiny in their works.

For these three writers, marriage, or at least marriage of the conventional sort, could not be trusted to civilize the West and propagate the essential elements of American identity. In fact, strong emphasis on conformity in marital

practices threatened a basic principle of the American experience: freedom of individual choice rather than adherence to established authorities. By enforcing strict expectations regarding religious practice, gender roles, racial boundaries, sexual proscriptions, romantic love, childbearing, and age, all through “proper” forms of marriage, mainstream America risked trading a unique and vibrant character for a unified identity. Defamiliarizing marriages asked Americans at least to recognize the implicit assumptions carried by conventional unions rather than passively accept and perpetuate them.

Changes to demographics and gender roles precipitated by the Civil War, including the large death toll among men, the participation of women in the workforce, and the increased contact through travel with individuals outside one’s small community, altered established expectations surrounding matrimony in America. A conservative reaction to these changes in the form of stricter marriage laws and social pressures made the topic of unconventional marriages a particularly fruitful subject for writers in the decades following the conflict.

World War I compounded such changes, but by that time, the reactionary backlash had greatly dissipated, making the fictional treatment of nontraditional marriages less compelling. Marked by widespread countercultural sentiment, the Roaring Twenties tended not to award the same level of deference to established order. This study ends, therefore, in 1918, with the publication of *My Ántonia* and

the close of World War I. These historical considerations frame the writings examined here and help reveal their relationships to the culture from which they emerge. The works of literature themselves, however, are given priority of space and authority within the study. Close readings focused on the particular ways that writers defamiliarize marriage, therefore, constitute the bulk of analysis. Authors' correspondence and historical documents such as magazines, newspapers, and marriage manuals are consulted insofar as they help reveal those relationships.

Despite the connections between Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather, they have not been combined into a single, exclusive study, and certainly not one on their use of fictional marriages. And while volumes have been written about love and marriage in literature, a focus on unconventional forms or portrayals of matrimony in Western American fiction is unique, though this study does owe a large debt to the work of William Handley. Notwithstanding the distinctness of this project, it contributes to the study of American letters in at least three important ways.

First, American literature, particularly of the nineteenth century, has been frequently characterized as either a flight from domesticity into the wilderness or a sentimental embrace of home. The following pages complicate that division by revealing a minor but significant pattern of forging through unconventional

marriages a middle ground between those extremes. The flight from and embrace of domesticity represent two seemingly contradictory impulses in the American identity, an insuppressible independent spirit and a fierce commitment to union. This study argues that certain American writers found in “stranged” marriages a useful trope for reconciling, to some degree, these competing urges and a particularly apt symbol for the United States. Seen in this light, unconventional marriages become distinctly American marriages, and the literature of nontraditional marriage calls for reexamination for its role in shaping national identity.

Second, if one of literature’s favorite themes has been tracing the development of love between characters, this study argues that the official forms that that love takes constitute by themselves a powerful scheme of social criticism. Critics are rightly accustomed to marking carefully whom one marries, for literary conventions have dictated that the course of finding the right spouse constitutes a central dynamic of narratives and carries enormous symbolic weight. This study argues, however, that marking carefully *how* one marries can be just as illuminating, for the acceptable forms of marriage in any given society quietly transmit many of that group’s most important values and assumptions.

Third, *Stranged Marriages* contributes to ongoing efforts to classify, describe, and understand literary Realism. Usually contrasted with the



Romanticism that preceded it, Realism is commonly identified, among other traits, by its emphasis on community, institutions, and social concerns. While a review of fiction between the Civil War and World War I largely justifies this conclusion, this study reminds readers that such concerns and an abiding interest in individuals were not mutually exclusive. Realists were often just as concerned with the distinct peculiarities of their characters as their predecessors. Certainly a shift from emotionalism to ostensible indifference can be detected in fiction following the Civil War, but by “stranging” marriage, Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather found a convenient avenue for pushing back against the conventions of literary Romanticism and the sentimental tradition while preserving its emphasis on individualism.

But as for pushing back against conventions to emphasize individualism, it is fitting at this point to embrace one convention that has happily persisted in projects such as this, acknowledging at the outset that no work of this kind is ever an individual effort. Without the generous mentorship of Joe Fulton, this dissertation could not have even started; to recognize his influence in bringing it to a finish, then, seems gross understatement. When I stumbled into his office with no more than a vague idea and a few texts, he immediately offered reassurance and direction. It was his perceptive suggestion to consider defamiliarization as a useful lens for examining my texts that eventually led to

my critical framework and provided the language to discuss meaningfully the work of the three writers considered here. Along the way, he pointed out obscure texts that only a genuine Twain enthusiast would be likely to have read and offered linguistic observations that only someone with his background in Russian would recognize. An avid collector of dictionaries, he has emphasized from my first graduate seminar with him to the final draft of this dissertation the importance of precise diction, of using, as our shared literary favorite would say, the right word, not its second cousin. His own lucid, witty prose is a model for any aspiring writer in academia—thorough, rigorous scholarship that is a pleasure to read. For these and numerous other influences and contributions, Joe has my deep respect and heartfelt appreciation.

Sarah Ford and Andrea Turpin have also been with this project from its early stages, and the final product, whatever its flaws, is far stronger because of their insight and encouragement. They provided that perfect balance in perspective that makes for an ideal committee. Dr. Turpin prudently emphasized accuracy in details and solid evidence for claims, and she invariably directed me to just the right sources. Her impressive catalogue of historical scholarship made it possible to navigate unfamiliar waters. For her part, Dr. Ford offered the wide-angle lens that helped me constantly pull back to see the big picture. In helping me see connections among these writers and identify their common goals, she

gave greater purpose to the project. Without that valuable outlook, I would have undoubtedly lost my way and become mired. It was also my great fortune to have Ron Thomas and Julia Daniel join my committee and give openly of their time and knowledge. The enthusiasm they have expressed for my work has been a sustaining force. In addition to their valued academic expertise, each member of my committee has been personally gracious, supportive, and kind. They have my sincere gratitude.

My sympathy, though, is for anyone who attempts a project like this without the friendship and experience of someone like Rachel Griffis. Not only has she offered helpful feedback on the content throughout, but she scouted the way on just about every part of the process, from outlining a prospectus and maintaining a daily word count to formatting the dissertation and scheduling a defense. She also helped organize a writing group that was professionally productive and personally rewarding. Josh Boyd, the other member of our small group and my teaching mentor, rescued me from potentially embarrassing disasters on multiple occasions, always with his characteristic dry humor. I will forever be grateful for their assistance in maneuvering through the obstacles of completing a dissertation.

I also owe special thanks to the Mark Twain Papers at the Bancroft Library and Melissa Martin for providing the transcript of an unpublished chapter from

*A Tramp Abroad*, to the Baylor University Graduate School and English department for granting travel funding to present sections of this project at academic conferences, and to Chris Rios and the Graduate Writing Center for organizing productive writing workshops. Without the invitation and encouragement of Jim Barcus, I would never have found my way to Baylor, and my life would be so much poorer for it. His legacy endures in the many lives he touched as a mentor and teacher.

In their ceaseless support and never-ending patience, my family deserves the fullest expression of my appreciation. My children have acquired the tradition of making a wish whenever they notice the same number repeated on a digital clock (1:11, 2:22, etc.). Rarely an hour goes by without a plea for the successful completion of my dissertation. Despite the sacrifices they have made, Talmage, Tennyson, London, Emerson, and Rosalyn have been my biggest champions. They have given me the strength and motivation to persist, and they have granted me the greatest portion of my joy in the effort. Above all, I am unspeakably grateful to my wife April for her unwavering faith and optimism. During this project I learned what should have been obvious from the start, that no marriage, whatever its makeup, is strictly conventional. Each is unique, with its own idiosyncrasies. Somehow, with all the infinite variables and complexities

of marriage, some still manage to be successful. And sometimes, with a spouse like April, they can be perfect.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As used here, burlesque refers to the literary form that exaggerates or distorts a particular genre or style, often for purposes of humor or satire. It is closely related to parody, which is primarily distinguished by targeting a specific text, though some writers use the terms interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> A few qualifications are necessary: Twain offers no clear location for “How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Winslow,” though the rural American setting matches the concept of frontier, as discussed here. The same is true for “Extracts from Adam’s Diary” and *Eve’s Diary*. The Garden of Eden is, of course, impossible to place in any kind of meaningful relationship to modern political borders or other markers of organized civilizations. Twain altered the first version of Adam’s diary to locate the Garden near Niagara Falls so that he could include the work in a tourist book for the area, but he later revised the work and removed all references to Niagara. In any case, no established social conventions are available to Adam and Eve, so they necessarily live in a type of frontier state. The narrative action of “Wapping Alice” takes place in the rural South, but the frame story is told from the deck of a ship at sea— a clear example of a space on the periphery of ordered civilization. In Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*, Thea spends time in Chicago, New York, and Germany, but the novel is anchored in Moonstone, Colorado.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars reject the term “interracial marriage,” opting instead for “marriage across the color line” (see Cott 242n). With full recognition of the term’s limitations and the complexities of racial identity, this study employs the term “interracial marriage” due to its wide acceptance and convenience.

<sup>4</sup> Turner made his claims regarding the frontier during a conference of the American Historical Association. He responded specifically to the 1890 United States Census and an accompanying statement that enough individual settlements dotted the western United States to make the notion of a contiguous frontier line no longer meaningful. Turner took that statement as a declaration that the American frontier was essentially closed.

<sup>5</sup> Novelists such as William Dean Howells, Henry James, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton challenged social conventions through extensive treatments of marriage. With only a few exceptions, though, those critiques involve traditional marriages, even when the spouses end up defying cultural expectations of loyalty, fidelity, modesty, or deference. One notable irregularity

might be James's *The Bostonians* (1886), in which two women live together in an ambiguous relationship. Though James concludes the novel with a traditional marriage, the work nevertheless gave rise to the term "Boston marriage." See Allen Stein's *After the Vows Were Spoken* (1984) for a full treatment of matrimony in these writers' fiction.

*For April Dawn*



## CHAPTER ONE

### A House Divided: Union and Divorce in American Identity and Fiction

Reflecting in 1728 on the expansion of European influence into America, William Byrd offers what he considers a foolproof program to extend civilization and Christianity to the Native Americans of the western wilderness: "There is but one way of converting these poor infidels and reclaiming them from barbarity, and that is charitably to intermarry with them" (221). In appealing to the socially unifying potential of matrimony, Byrd presciently forecasts the central role of the institution in America. As others had done for centuries, Americans saw marriage as a stabilizing force and a cornerstone of society. Across organized human civilizations, wedlock had long held great power to perpetuate the values and traditions of a particular group, to hold communities in place as well as spouses. In a nation intentionally formed out of separate and distinct parties and calling itself the United States, marriage held particular symbolic significance.

Byrd's proposed scheme does more than foreshadow an apt metaphor, however. In suggesting controversial intermarriage between white Europeans and Native Americans, he presages a debate over proper forms of marriage that

would continually resurface in the new republic, especially as the frontier moved west, and he launches a minor but significant and complicated trope of unconventional marriages in American literature. From interracial marriage in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's 1827 *Hope Leslie* to polygamy in Zane Grey's 1912 *Riders of the Purple Sage* to extreme age hypergamy in Marilynne Robinson's 2004 *Gilead*, forms of marriage in American fiction deviate from social expectations with some regularity, though certainly not with great frequency. Mark Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Willa Cather are not, therefore, the first or the last American writers to unsettle commonly accepted forms of marriages in their fiction. At a time when the United States aggressively legislated against irregular marital structures, however, these three writers recognized a tremendous potential for social and literary criticism in the act of defamiliarizing the institution of marriage, making something commonplace seem strange. In these efforts, they demanded close examination of America's deeply held values and assumptions; denounced or revealed racism, greed, religious prejudice, class inequalities, and oppressive or restrictive gender roles; drew readers' attention to the arbitrariness of social norms for purposes of humor or satire; and intentionally disrupted the unassailable conventions of an eastern literary establishment that loved a good marriage plot.

### *National and Marital Unions*

Matrimony held particular importance in America's conception of itself. Long understood as a contract undertaken for the social, economic, and sexual benefit of the participants and often arranged or at least approved by third parties, marriage came to be regarded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western societies as an agreement freely entered into by two willing parties because of strong romantic attachment (Coontz 5–6). Such a conception had especial significance in America, where the new republic rested squarely on the foundation of individual freedom. Just as individuals with distinct tastes, personalities, and goals freely agree to form a union in marriage for mutual benefit and greater fulfillment, individual states, with their separate geographies, economies, and demographics, agreed in the eighteenth century to give up some degree of autonomy and distinct identity to form a single nation. The United States was/were at once distinct and indivisible.

In addition to the figurative parallels between marriage and a democratic government, Americans saw in actual marriages a very real and important ingredient to success in their new political experiment. As Nancy F. Cott in *Public Vows* (2000) and Leslie J. Harris in *State of the Marital Union* (2014) argue, conceptions regarding acceptable models of marriage had tremendous implications for national identity. "Radiating outward," Cott writes, "the

structure of marriage organizes community life and facilitates the government's grasp on the populace" (1). By seeking official recognition of a mutual commitment, marriage participants recognize the authority of the state and communicate their willingness to endorse the basic principles of community cohesion. Upon entering into wedlock, they tacitly approve the existing social structure, including its power dynamics, and accept that their vows are not just personal, as Cott's title suggests, but rather an important piece in the larger social fabric.

Revolutionary Americans recognized the correspondence between personal relationships and community adhesion and emphasized the importance of matrimony in the new republic. The Reverend John Witherspoon, who signed the Declaration of Independence as a representative from New Jersey, insisted on "the absolute necessity of marriage for the service of the state" (162). These founders also believed that, in addition to reinforcing existing social structures, the institution of marriage could prepare brides and grooms for full, productive, and responsible participation in a local and national community. In fact, married couples were long seen in England and the United States as a single civic unit. Under the principle of coverture, a woman's legal rights, along with her name, were subsumed by her husband. He was legally and financially responsible for her and would therefore cast the representative vote for his family. Having

entered into the public institution of marriage, he was expected to use that vote more responsibly for the good of the community at large.

Furthermore, marriage was seen to cultivate in individuals characteristics understood to be valuable or necessary to the United States. Individual citizens of exceptional character being indispensable for a successful representative democracy, marriage was viewed, according to Cott, as “a training ground of citizenly virtue.” After the founding of the nation, she explains, “actual marriages of the proper sort were presumed to create the kind of citizen needed to make the new republic succeed” (18). Within marriage, it was assumed, individuals otherwise selfish, independent, and shortsighted learned how to put others’ needs before their own and make sacrifices for the good of all, lessons essential for a harmonious and prosperous society based on democratic and capitalist principles.

Because Revolutionary Americans believed traditional marriage to be essential in strengthening the nation and reaffirming its political identity, citizens endorsed the institution in print as well as practice. Such widespread acceptance and promotion helped reinforce the status quo, cementing marriage as a critical functioning piece of the cultural hegemony, as Antonio Gramsci terms it. Viewing traditional marriage as natural, inherently moral, and essential to national prosperity, Americans found little reason to question its form or the

cultural expectations surrounding it and ample reason to encourage it. At the close of his captivity account, Updike Underhill, the fictitious first-person narrator of Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797), announces in the same breath his intention to marry and to profitably contribute to his country:

I now mean to unite myself to some amiable woman, to pursue my practice, as a physician; which, I hope, will be attended with more success than when essayed with the inexperience and giddiness of youth. To contribute cheerfully to the support of our excellent government, which I have learnt to adore, in schools of despotism; and thus secure to myself the enviable character of an useful physician, a good father and worthy FEDERAL citizen. (225)

Implying that leaving behind the “giddiness of youth” and joining a community as a responsible and contributing member require marital attachment, Tyler typifies the attitude that marriage is a public act meant to strengthen the social system.

The Revolutionaries' insistence on the absolute necessity of proper marriages for the success of the republic continued in the nineteenth century. Lawyer and writer David Hoffman recognized the parallels between home and country, noting in 1837 their “mutual dependence, binding the various relations of life.” In his view, “there is a reciprocal action and re-action constantly, though almost invisibly, existent, between government and our firesides,” and “if we violate any of its links, we weaken thereby the whole; and cast into peril in all its parts, the well-being of society” (89). Like Hoffman, other Americans put

enormous stake in the constitution of the family. In fact, historian Ronald Walters finds that during this time the family and its relationships “were almost uniformly presented as vehicles of social and individual salvation” (225). Regardless of individual ideologies, antebellum Americans very commonly looked to marriage and family as the most important means of properly educating citizens and regulating society. “It is surprising, but important,” Walters writes, “that feminists and anti-feminists, abolitionists and anti-abolitionists, reformers and anti-reformers all directed their attention to the same institution. Rather than being mere sentimental convention, concern for the family was bound up with the most serious social and cultural debates in antebellum America” (225). The perception of marriage’s essential role in national identity and stability led nineteenth-century Americans to create numerous laws aimed at governing the home (Grossberg 10) and produce abundant marriage manuals (Gordon and Bernstein 666).

Faith in marriage’s power to secure America as it should be led to an emphasis on home and settlement during the nation’s westward expansion. By demanding traditional marriages along the nation’s borders, Americans sought to extend the nation’s influence and cultural standards. For many, proper marriages were the ideal conquerors of the frontier. Not only could marriage guard the borders of civilization, but it could also expand them. According to

William Handley, “the whole impulse to civilize and conquer in the early nineteenth century was predicated upon monogamous Christian marriage and the family (29). For this reason, married men were often rewarded or incentivized on the frontier. Notwithstanding the myths of independence and individualism on the frontier, much of the American West was settled by families, not single men. In the case of Native Americans, those men who were willing to renounce tribal affiliations and establish monogamous domestic households often received property and United States citizenship by the federal government. In the case of white Americans, land grants that were often dependent on or tied to marital status helped encourage married men to settle the West.

As America emphasized the role of marriage in its national identity, it insisted on certain marital prescriptions. Because all legal marriages are necessarily public arrangements, a simple desire to be wedded to another party does not necessarily satisfy the expectations or demands of the local community or the state. Every society has a vested interest in prescribing standards and norms for marital practices, for it is through marriage that many of the core values and beliefs of the group are maintained. From its inception as a political body, then, the United States took a strong interest defining appropriate marriages. As Cott explains,



Political and legal authorities endorsed and aimed to perpetuate nationally a *particular* marriage model: lifelong monogamy, formed by the mutual consent of a man and a woman, bearing the impress of the Christian religion and the English common law in its expectations for the husband to be the family head and economic provider, his wife the dependent partner. Because mutual consent was intrinsic to it, this form of marriage was especially congruent with American political ideas: consent of the parties was also the hallmark of representative government. (3)

For the sake of national identity and unity, therefore, Americans had great liberty in selecting a potential spouse—so long as the resulting marriage conformed to the important standards of monogamy and patriarchy. In addition to these expectations, Michael Gordon and M. Charles Bernstein show in their study of nineteenth-century marriage manuals that there was great pressure on white, middle-class Americans to choose a companion of the same race, class, religious commitment, and denomination (the assumption being that audiences were Christian and that marriage to a non-Christian was unthinkable) (667–69). For nineteenth-century Americans, proper marriage meant lifelong, monogamous, intraracial, heterosexual, patriarchal marriage. Departures from these norms were seen not only as deviations from culturally accepted practices but, more importantly, as direct attacks against the national polity.

### *Marriage, National Identity, and Fiction*

Correspondence between marriage and a strong, stable society has often marked works of literature. While dramatic comedies culminating in wedlock

have been commonplace at least since Shakespeare, narrative prose fiction in particular gravitated toward the marriage plot in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During its rise in Europe, the novel tended to reinforce the social conventions and values of the emerging middle class. As Joseph Allen Boone argues in *Tradition Counter Tradition* (1987), the genre was “radically conceived yet more often than not the voice of tradition” (1). Despite obvious exceptions to this rule, readers often found in fiction of the time either models of social ascendancy or cautions against behaviors that offended the cultural hegemony. Unsurprisingly, these lessons often centered on or culminated with matrimony, for in addition to symbolizing the resolution of conflict and a return to order, marriage also patrols a society’s borders and dictates relative status within that community. Tony Tanner helps explain the prevalence of marriages in prose fiction when he observes in *Adultery in the Novel* (1979) that “for bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organizing, all-containing contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure, or System” (15). Barbara Weiss agrees, adding that “there has perhaps never been an age (or a literature) as relentlessly *pro* marriage as the Victorian period, in which a loving marriage is generally seen as the resolution to every social ill in the novel” (67). Because marriage conventions work to govern social frameworks, the right marriage betokens the ultimate social triumph. In the nineteenth century, a successful

marriage granted an individual acceptance in a respectable community and evidenced that the participating parties had embraced its governing principles. Marriage, therefore, fortified the community as much as it did a personal relationship.

Given that the early novel and marriage both reinforce the social status quo, the link between the two is unsurprising. Ian Watt finds in his influential 1957 study *The Rise of the Novel* that “the great majority of novels written since [Samuel Richardson’s 1740] *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage” (148–49). Such a pattern repeated itself in at least one broad strand of American fiction in the nineteenth century. In what has been termed domestic fiction or woman’s fiction, a sympathetic heroine overcomes trials and, in almost every case, marries happily (Baym xxvi, 22).<sup>1</sup> The genre was enormously popular during the mid-nineteenth century, with novels such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) achieving early “best-seller” status. As Boone finds with the rise of novels generally, these books targeted the middle-class and sought to reinforce its values, acting as a socially stabilizing force. Their service to community went even beyond that in America, though, argues Nina Baym. In *Woman’s Fiction* (1978, 1993) she illustrates that in their protagonists’ quests to find suitable traditional marriages, these novels center on the premise that there should be no

rulers except by the consent of the governed. In their pages, proper marriages are egalitarian rather than hierarchical, and “the organization of family and state coincide” (Baym xxv). In the United States, a democratic republic formed from separate and distinct political states, the future of the nation depended on continued willing participation of its individual members. Happy, traditional marriages in fiction reflected and perpetuated that ideal.

Oddly, however, another dominant strand of American literature in the nineteenth century diverged noticeably from this model. In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) Leslie Fiedler argues that, prior to Henry James, protagonists in the nineteenth-century American literary canon were more likely to flee the domesticity of married life than pursue it. In contrast to *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Vanity Fair*, he points out, Americans produced *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Fiedler does acknowledge the marriage of *The Scarlet Letter* but contends that the most relevant aspects of that marriage take place before the novel even begins. Referring specifically to American writers, he states, “Our great novelists, though experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of a novel” (xix). While Fiedler’s oversights of writers such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Louisa May Alcott

are now readily apparent, his primary contention holds true: the most traditionally esteemed works of nineteenth-century American fiction contrast sharply with those of Europe in regard to the marriage plot.

These two distinct strands of American literature make sense given the nation's unique identity. On the one hand, Americans have always defined themselves as an integrated body out of a collection of diverse and distinct parties, a union of disparate colonies and peoples, *e pluribus unum*. From this perspective, matrimony works as a fitting national metaphor, and its appearance in fiction reinforces the social structure. On the other hand, Americans have always insisted that a democratic republic rests squarely on pillars of individualism and independence. Thus, insofar as it consists of a partial surrender of one's personal will and identity, marriage seemingly runs contrary to an important trait of Americanism. When they flee domesticity, American protagonists can claim just as much allegiance to their nation's true spirit as those who marry. The paradox of America, then, its dual impulses toward unity and individualism, challenges a simple embrace of traditional matrimony as the proper and satisfactory culmination of fiction, but it also rejects bachelorism as a sustaining alternative. In working out the implications of these apparently contradictory national urges, certain writers found something of a reconciliation in marriages that broke standard conventions and expectations. Unconventional

marriages challenge the assimilating forces of conformity that threaten to stifle individualism while maintaining faithfulness to the precept of social stability through unions.

That these marriages often occurred on the western periphery of the United States is not surprising. Tasked by the federal government in 1820 to tour the western borders of the United States and assess the best approaches for improving the condition of the Native Americans (and for improving opportunities for trade), the Reverend Jedidiah Morse determined that assimilation through conventional marriage practices would lead to the desired result. In his view, “the marriage institution, in its purity,” and not the polygamous marriages frequently taking place at the time among Indians, had the ability to transform and normalize their culture. Noting that with the proper Christian education, Indian women could even qualify to marry white men, Morse concludes, “They would then be literally of one blood with us, be merged in the nation, and saved from extinction” (75). That Morse connects marriage to survival suggests the power and importance of the institution in regulating society, but in his endorsement of interracial marriage, however qualified, he hearkens back to William Byrd’s proposal and suggests a new direction for marriage in American fiction.

Within four years of Morse's report, Lydia Maria Child published the novel *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times* (1824), in which a white woman marries a Native American chief when she receives news that her primary love interest has died at sea. Though the novel is not an endorsement of interracial marriage (the protagonist Mary leaves her Indian husband, despite sharing a child with him, when she learns that her first love has survived), merely raising the possibility constituted a significant development in American fiction. Uniting a white woman with a Native American man was a direct assault on propriety. Marriages between Indian women and white men were by no means unheard of in the Americas, often carried out as a basis for trade partnerships, but notions of sexual purity stigmatized any white woman who married outside her race (White 68).

Three years after the publication of *Hobomok*, Catharine Maria Sedgwick included an interracial marriage in the popular *Hope Leslie, or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827). In Sedgwick's novel, Hope's sister Faith marries a Native American man after she is kidnapped and experiences a shift in cultural allegiance. As with *Hobomok*, the novel does not endorse such marriages, but it does treat the arrangement sympathetically. Initially horrified to learn of her sister's fate, Hope comes to understand and accept the situation through the help of her Native American friend Magawisca. Other instances of white-Indian

marriages surfaced in American literature in subsequent decades, including Ann S. Stephens's *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, serialized in 1839, and Walt Whitman's 1855 "Song of Myself." Whatever the attitudes of these particular works to Native Americans or interracial marriage, they illustrate a nonconformist impulse in American literature in presenting marriages that were considered troubling, if not taboo. Given America's commitment to individualism, however, these unions constitute, in a sense, distinctly American marriages, unity in diversity.

Notwithstanding the appearance of unconventional marriages in American fiction in the first half of the nineteenth century, major shifts in the nation's conception of itself during the second half of the century resulted in a fierce backlash against marital arrangements perceived as deviant. Until the mid-nineteenth century, marriage helped both to reify mainstream social norms and to expand the boundaries of that society's influence. Limited interracial marriages were tolerated insofar as they were seen to align with that project. With the Civil War, however, the experiment of America, the uniting together into one body of very distinct parties, was put to the ultimate test. America emerged from its domestic dispute newly wary of nonconformity, manifested clearly in marital laws passed in the decades following the war. This was no time



for unconventional marriages, the nation declared. For at least three writers, however, such a declaration sounded more like an invitation.

*Divorce and a Re-United States: A Postwar Era of Conformity*

Despite the emphasis on civil and marital union in early United States history, the nation found itself a house divided by the mid-nineteenth century. In 1848, women launched a movement at Seneca Falls, New York, that challenged many of the assumptions and expectations regarding gender roles, particularly wives' inability to hold property or vote. The women's rights movement, which would continue to grow in the subsequent decades, put questions regarding marriage squarely on the national stage. During the 1850s, a distinct movement emerged that directly challenged traditional conventions surrounding marriage. "Free lovers," as adherents were called, criticized marriage as a restrictive institution that individuals were pressured or coerced into through societal demands. An equally controversial group, the Mormons publically declared in 1852 that certain members of their community would practice polygamy in direct opposition to mainstream standards. The following decade, the Civil War would transform not only the political landscape of the nation but also its domestic spaces.

As the Civil War tested the strength of political bonds, threatening to destroy the promise of domestic harmony, it precipitated concern over the state

of traditional marriage. Most obviously, the unprecedented number of men killed in battle created a sex imbalance with wide-reaching consequences. With fewer marital prospects, “the assumption that every woman would be a wife became questionable, perhaps untenable” (Cott 79). Marriage no longer a given, women were forced to consider other identity markers besides wife and mother. For this and other reasons, historians such as Anne Firor Scott, LeeAnn Whites, Mary E. Massey, Catherine Clinton, and Nina Silber argue that the Civil War produced a crisis in gender. In addition to causing a sudden shift in demographics, the war required women to care for themselves and their children while their husbands were away. Dependent housewives became capable providers, facilitating a post-Civil War shift from private to public roles.

Unsurprisingly, women’s rights movements accelerated after the Civil War. Although the Seneca Falls Convention had formally launched a national movement in 1848 and women had made important strides toward social equality, much of the reform energies prior to the Civil War aimed at abolition. With the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, all of which secured greater civil rights for former slaves, many reformers set their sights on women’s equality. By 1869, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, and the American Woman Suffrage Association followed just

months later. While women's suffrage would not come for another half century, the decades following the Civil War saw largescale participation in social reform efforts by women. According to Allen Stein, it was during this time that the so-called new woman emerged—"vocal, independent, and deeply inclined to question the traditional roles assigned her" (7). Divorce rates climbed dramatically during this period, increasing over fifteenfold between 1870 and 1920, and birthrates among the social elite fell (Lasch 8). By the end of the nineteenth century, many middle-class Americans felt that the post-Civil War gender crisis had become a crisis of traditional marriage and the family.

In the face of these changes, powerful forces mobilized to reaffirm and protect traditional forms and conventions of marriage. The Freedmen's Bureau, charged with helping former slaves transition into productive citizenship after the war, emphasized the importance of formal marriages between one man and one woman, a departure from the loose marital customs necessarily present in the slave system. Once "the south's divergence on slave marriages had been eliminated," Cott contends, "a national standard of formal and legal monogamy could conceivably move from rhetoric to practice" (103). Influential publications such as *The Nation* and *The New York Times* published articles in favor of lifelong monogamy, and the clergy made it a point of emphasis from the pulpit and in the press. Legislation throughout the states aimed to regulate increasingly

complex marital arrangements. Pointing to the number of prohibitions and restrictions regarding marriage in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Michael Grossberg notes “a determination to apply more rigorous tests of nuptial fitness” among postwar Americans (140). All in all, “the reframing of American political society after the Civil War incorporated a preferred model for American marriage,” writes Cott, and that model “renewed emphasis on spouses’ being of the same race, highlighted the state’s role in the marriage, and continued, as of old, to see the whole inspired by Christian principles, including the consent and unity of the couple, with the husband representing his wife” (104). Insofar as the United States relied on marital metaphors for its conception of itself, the outcome of the Civil War strengthened the sense that unions must be freely entered into but also unbreakable. With a renewed feeling of national unity, middle-class Americans just past a war were ready to go to battle over their conception of proper marriage.

Fights over the two biggest marriage controversies of nineteenth-century America, interracial marriage and polygamy, illustrate clearly just how much was at stake in legal articulations of the institution for white, middle-class Protestant Christians. Both aberrant marital practices spurred legal battles that traveled all the way to the Supreme Court and tested the Constitution itself. Bans against interracial marriage and sexual relations, or miscegenation laws, as they

came to be known after the term was coined in 1863, went back as far as the seventeenth century in America but came to a head during the Civil War. Of the original thirteen colonies, six banned marriage between whites and blacks, and two prohibited Indian-white marriages. Others punished extramarital sex between races (Cott 40, 236n). These prohibitions expanded through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Karen Woods Weierman notes in *One Nation, One Blood* (2005) that anti-miscegenation laws developed alongside slavery, a system that dramatically altered Americans' conceptions of race (125).

Still, by mid-nineteenth century, approximately half of the states or territories did *not* have legal bans against interracial marriage, and some Americans, like Jedidiah Morse, had even encouraged the practice. Interracial marriages were certainly not widespread nor widely accepted during this time, but mainstream anxieties regarding the subject increased enormously after the start of the Civil War. Even in the South, many states did not have bans against interracial marriages in 1861, not because they were tolerated, but simply because they were not considered feasible. Strict social codes policed marital relations. With emancipation and the prospect of social ascendancy by former slaves, however, many states reacted quickly with a wave of legal prohibitions. Cott notes that "more laws of this sort were passed during the Civil War and Reconstruction than in any other comparably short period" (99). Peggy Pascoe

explains this historical development by arguing in *What Comes Naturally* (2009) that prejudice against interracial marriage merged with notions of white supremacy in the 1860s, leading to a social, political, and legal system predicated on and committed to perpetuating racism. The term miscegenation itself emerged during this time to inscribe the nation's fears of racial minorities gaining power through marriage.

Laws against interracial marriage passed during this time were particularly harsh. Some made the practice a felony and, in the case of Mississippi, carried the penalty of life in prison. So strong were the notions of white superiority and anxieties over preserving and protecting the race that the taboo of interracial marriage persisted well into the twentieth century. Although emancipation brought fears over interracial marriage to the foreground and focused attention on African Americans, restrictions against interracial marriage were not limited to white-black relationships. Many states also passed laws that prohibited Anglo Americans from marrying Native Americans and, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Asian Americans.

Despite these widespread restrictions across states, Representative Andrew King of Missouri proposed in 1871 a constitutional amendment to ban interracial marriage. The effort failed, but the Supreme Court upheld states' bans in *Pace v. Alabama* (1883) by ruling that such laws did not violate the equal

protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because they punished both parties equally. That ruling was not overturned until 1967 with *Loving v. Virginia*, which finally made all restrictions on interracial marriage unconstitutional. That these laws were not only passed and defended but also actively enforced indicates how threatened America's dominant cultural group felt by nontraditional marriages. While sex was often tolerated between races, as illustrated by white slaveholders' frequent sexual abuses of their slaves, interracial marriage caused outrage and fear, particularly after the Civil War. As Pascoe observes, legislators throughout the country "conflated the families of White citizens with the American national family" (82). Marrying outside one's race was nothing less than disloyalty to America itself. Commenting on this intense intolerance for interracial marriage specifically, Frenchman Auguste Carlier wrote in his 1867 *Marriage in the United States* that "the force of prejudice is such that no one would dare to brave it. It is not the legal penalty which is feared, but a condemnation a thousand times more terrible" (88).

That insecurity regarding nontraditional marriages was also revealed during the battle against polygamy during the last half of the nineteenth century. Despite their relative isolation from the rest of the country in the Utah Territory, Mormon polygamists became the target of a series of legal attacks due to their practice of "plural marriage," as they termed it. For mainstream America,

though, and for the Republican Party in particular, the practice of taking multiple wives was more properly one of the “twin relics of barbarism.” In the 1856 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, the new political party promised to eradicate from the United States both “relics,” slavery and polygamy. Polygamy, however, would have to wait some years. After a failed attempt by President James Buchanan to quell Mormon leaders into submission through the threat of military force in 1857-1858, the federal government made few serious efforts to bring the religious group into conformity with the rest of the nation until after the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln signed an anti-polygamy bill into law in 1862 but did nothing to enforce it, and the law had virtually no effect on Mormon practice. When asked in 1863 about his attitude toward the Mormon problem and church president Brigham Young, Abraham Lincoln reportedly told a Mormon emissary, “You go back and tell Brigham Young that if he will let me alone, I will let him alone” (Hubbard 103). Such a policy continued to mark the government’s general approach to Utah for several years after the war, but with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, contact between Mormons and other Americans dramatically increased. Fueled by sensationalist accounts of Mormon intrigue, anti-polygamy sentiment rose sharply through the 1870s and ’80s.<sup>3</sup>



According to Sarah Barringer Gordon the strong opposition to polygamy went far beyond moral outrage. In *The Mormon Question* (2002) she contends that fights surrounding the issue, which included debates over religious tolerance, property rights, and the status of territories, stemmed from values and assumptions at the very core of the nation. As Cott observes, “if marriage molded the form of government, as the founders’ political philosophy assumed, Utah presented more than a religious and social aberration. It was a political threat to the integrity of the United States” (73). As with interracial marriage, polygamy elicited not just public scorn but also formal legislation, with the constitutionality of the matter determined by the Supreme Court in *Reynolds v. United States* (1879) amid debates over the First Amendment and the free exercise of religion. Even after that decision, which found that religious duty does not protect an individual from indictment, conflict continued, with the federal government passing aggressive anti-polygamy laws such as the Edmunds Act (1882) and Mormon polygamists refusing to recognize or conform to the legislation. Finally, after the passage of the Edmunds-Tucker Act (1887), which disincorporated the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and seized much of its property, Mormon leaders officially capitulated and formally ended their endorsement of polygamy in 1890. That a marital practice among a relatively small religious group in an isolated territory could become one of the planks of a

national political party and generate not only bipartisan opposition but also an endless stream of alarm in journalism and popular print reveals the strength of the ongoing relationship between marital conventions and a sense of national identity and stability.

These strong ties between notions of proper marriage and national identity help explain why, as Terryl Givens notes in *The Viper on the Hearth* (2013), Mormons were depicted in popular nineteenth-century fiction as decidedly un-American and even ethnically distinct. Mormons' threat against the state, Givens argues, was more often understood in political terms than religious, and attacks against Mormonism, as with similar attacks against Catholics and immigrants, came to be viewed as acts of patriotism. Efforts to restrict the main body of Mormons from entering the union revealed Americans' firm insistence that practitioners of aberrant forms of marriage could not be considered full citizens. Only after the official end of polygamy was Utah granted statehood. An outpouring of anti-Mormon fiction, most of it capitalizing on exotic rumors regarding the practice of polygamy, helped to reinforce, extend, and ultimately shape perceptions of Mormons as enemies of mainstream American values. "In the case of anti-Mormonism," Givens writes, "literary treatments serve as the means by which the heretically suspect becomes recast as the ethnically distinct, demarcated as Other, transgressive, and dangerous" (134).

These perceptions helped justify the denial of citizenship rights to Mormons, argues Martha M. Ertman, when the predominantly Anglo American Mormons were recast not only as “Other,” but also as non-white. Because polygamy was understood to be a barbaric form of marriage, practiced only by the supposedly inferior races of Africa and Asia, Mormon marital practices constituted what Ertman refers to as “race treason” against white America (288). Such treason justified stripping polygamists of some of their basic civil rights, including the right to vote and to sit on juries. Categorizing the Mormon body not only as a distinct religion but also as a distinct race allowed popular and governing powers to fiercely oppose a threatening marital practice without jeopardizing their commitment to traditional democratic principles or the free exercise of religion.

Reconciliation in the decades following the Civil War called for a recommitment to social norms and ideals perceived to be inherent in the nation’s identity. The Gilded Age and Progressivism promised growth and prosperity for a united populace. Reforms were welcome, but they were expected to emerge from a common set of established values. Still reeling from the devastating losses of rebellion, the United States found some measure of assurance in conformity. As Jackson Lears writes, this was an era marked by a “widespread yearning for regeneration” (1), and, just as it had been during the founding of the country,

marriage symbolized for postbellum Americans the proper union of separate entities, a hopeful new beginning.<sup>4</sup> As the nation shored up its identity and then projected it in an era of empire-building, it significantly restricted immigration and vigilantly regulated matrimony to ensure a unified homefront. Acceptable forms of matrimony during this time emphasized social stability and legal order, not individual expression, one of the reasons why Amy Dru Stanley finds that postwar Americans thought of marriage in contractual terms (x). For these late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Americans, control over the boundaries of marriage was nothing less than social control, and the dominant social group stood only to lose from alternate forms of marriage.

*Literary Realism and Unconventional Marriage: Defamiliarizing the Family*

Against this backdrop, American writers began examining marriages in their fiction. Taking as his cue Mark Twain's comment at the conclusion of *Tom Sawyer* (1876) that a writer cannot continue a novel about adults past marriage, Allen F. Stein finds in *After the Vows Were Spoken* (1984) that American authors indeed took up and examined seriously the subject of marriage during the last three decades of the nineteenth century (3). Twain's claim certainly seems to characterize much of American fiction prior to *Tom Sawyer's* publication.

Bachelors abound in nineteenth-century American fiction (Edgar Huntly, Natty Bumppo, Arthur Dimesdale, Ishmael). Novels that do involve protagonists'

marriages, such as *Hope Leslie*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Little Women*, tend to culminate with that union rather than explore it. This tendency was especially true of sentimental novels, and Twain's humorous observation likely targets this particular convention. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, Stein notes a marked shift in American novelists' approach to marriage, with writers such as William Dean Howells, Henry James, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Robert Herrick all offering multiple and extended examinations of marriage itself.

For Stein, this shift is unsurprising. American writers during much of the nineteenth century expressed far more interest in individuals and their relationship to the universe than in mundane social interactions. Religious self-scrutiny, rugged individualism born of frontier life, the celebration of the American self-made man, and the emphasis on individual freedoms all contributed to a cultural and literary climate that tended to ignore the details of social institutions generally and marriage specifically. Such a climate, generally referred to as Romanticism, could not endure forever, though. Stein notes that the

Civil War, urbanization, industrialization, Darwinian theory, and advances in knowledge in the sciences generally, the development of pragmatism, the rise of sociology and of a new awareness of social and economic inequities, drew a number of American writers, as all know, to increased concern with relations among people and away from a narrow if intense concern with the

individual in relation to absolutes, abstractions, and the cosmological context. (7)<sup>5</sup>

This new concern with social relations inevitably led to increased interest in the most basic and ubiquitous social institution, marriage. Mainstream America's anxiety over that institution during the latter half of the nineteenth century made the subject particularly compelling for the realists, for they tended to share the belief that everyday events, circumstances, and institutions had significant human consequences. For many realists, literature needed to effect social change, a goal best achieved not through talk of the cosmos or of the soul but through an examination of the mundane, familiar subjects that directly touched individuals' lives. Because marriage traditionally involves at least a partial surrender of one's individualism and will, the examination of the marriage institution itself during the shift away from Romanticism to the social and communal concerns of literary Realism makes sense.

While everyday subjects, like marriage, marked literary Realism, a new aesthetic approach to that material also characterized the movement. Realists sought to present the mundane in such a way that readers would see the familiar with fresh eyes, an effort that involved great attention to commonly overlooked detail. Reacquainting readers with everyday realities also required creativity, for even the most detailed description of an object can fail to inspire revised perspectives or enhanced perceptions, a charge not infrequently leveled at works

of Realism. To encourage novel perspectives and perceptions, then, some realists presented everyday objects or relationships in unexpected ways, intentionally making the familiar seem strange. Viktor Shklovsky eventually gave this aesthetic approach a name and described its purpose and function in 1917, but the writers in this study employed the principle of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, even before Russian formalism defined it.

According to the formalists, defamiliarization had aesthetic value because it drew attention to the craft of art, its devices, but for realists its primary value resided in its ability to draw attention to the object of the art, the everyday thing itself. Writers did this by “disrupting or radically modifying the familiar, automatic perception habits as regards literature . . . and (re)creating instead novelty, surprise, strangeness, and unfamiliarity’ (Margolin 815). Applied to marriage, the most obvious example of a familiar institution, defamiliarization caused readers to reconsider their perceptions not only of matrimony itself but also of the social system it upheld. By “stranging” marriage Mark Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Willa Cather revealed that mainstream attitudes regarding the ideal American social structure often rested on a foundation of racism, religious intolerance, greed, and sexism. In doing so, they also found a convenient avenue for pushing back against the conventions of literary Romanticism and the sentimental tradition while preserving its emphasis on individualism. By calling

readers' attention to marriages that cast off the conventions of the east, of Europe, they express an independent spirit particularly tied to Americanism. Their efforts to defamiliarize marriage comprise a reminder and a caution to Americans that in their push for postwar unity, they must not allow pressures of conformity to erase the nation's unique identity as a place of individualism and diversity. In this sense, the unconventional marriages in their fiction constitute truly American marriages.

By examining the unexpected portrayals of marriages in western American fiction in the decades following the close of the Civil War, this study uncovers the relationships among marital norms, mainstream social or cultural conventions of the United States, and the standards for respectable literature in both the eastern U. S. and Europe. As the North and the South experienced a rather troubled reunion in the decades following their separation, these western writers looked at other unlikely pairings to explore the values and assumptions that helped shape the newly re-United States. Because traces of a society's ideas regarding race, class, gender, religion, and politics are embedded in acceptable forms of marriage, this study helps uncover the important though often subtle ways that writers of the American West sought to reshape mainstream assumptions, values, and beliefs. At a time of high skepticism toward nonconformity, these writers played with marital conventions to remind the



nation that unity without the bedrocks of individualism and independence is no union at all.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For additional studies on domestic fiction in America, see Herbert Ross Brown's *The Sentimental Novel in America* (1940), Helen Waite Papashvily's *All the Happy Endings* (1956), Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage* (1984), Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), and Susan K. Harris's *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Women's Novels* (1990).

<sup>2</sup> With tensions between Mormons and the U. S. federal government high, President Buchanan sent an army of 2,500 men to the Utah Territory to suppress a supposed rebellion and enforce Washington-imposed order. After a standoff, Alfred Cumming officially replaced Brigham Young as the territorial governor of Utah, but because the large majority Mormon population refused to recognize Cumming's authority, Young continued to act as both religious and political leader. For Mark Twain's account of Brigham Young as virtual "king" of the Utah monarchy, see *Roughing It* Chapter 14.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the nineteenth-century print attacks on Mormon polygamy, see Terry Givens's *Viper on the Hearth* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Other important relevant studies of the era include Laura F. Edwards's *Gendered Strife and Confusion* (1997) and Michael E. McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent* (2003).

<sup>5</sup> For additional studies on the rise and shape of American literary Realism, see also Harold H. Kolb, Jr.'s *The Illusion of Life* (1969), Edwin H. Cady's *The Light of Common Day* (1971), Warner Berthoff's *The Ferment of Realism* (1981), Peter Conn's *The Divided Mind* (1983), Daniel H. Borus's *Writing Realism* (1989), Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1992), Donald Pizer's *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* (1995), and Phillip J. Barrish's *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* (2011).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Something to See Here: Polygamists, Transvestites, and Nudists in Mark Twain's Farcical Marriages

"Bless my soul, you don't know anything about married life."  
—Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

By all accounts, Samuel Clemens had great joy in marriage. But Mark Twain had great fun with it. According to his letters, Clemens had doubts that he would ever wed. In 1866, believing he may have missed his chance, he wrote dismissively to childhood friend William Bowen, "Marry be d—d" (*Mark Twain's Letters* 1: 359). By the time Olivia Langdon finally accepted his proposal over two years later, he had come around. Midway through their engagement, he wrote to his future bride, known as Livy, that the day of their wedding would be "the mightiest day in the history of our lives, the holiest, & the most generous toward us both" (*Mark Twain's Letters* 3:348). An affectionate and committed husband from that anticipated day on 2 February 1870, Clemens placed great value on the institution of marriage. In addition to the enormous happiness he experienced with Livy, marriage launched the socially ambitious writer of humble background into the ranks of American upper middle class. To understate the obvious, marriage was good for Sam.<sup>1</sup>

Mark Twain the writer experienced no such conversion. Throughout his career, Twain saw marriage as a perfectly appropriate target for humor, satire, and critique. As early as 1852, prior to the adoption of his final penname but not before the birth of his writing persona, he wrote for the *Hannibal Journal*, "What a world of trouble those who never marry escape! There are many happy matches, it is true, and sometimes 'my dear,' and 'my love' come from the heart; but what sensible bachelor, rejoicing in his freedom and years of discretion, will run the tremendous risk?" ("Connubial Bliss" 86). A similar, seemingly flippant, attitude toward matrimony punctuated the writer's career. From "unreliable" accounts of Brigham Young's polygamous family dynamics in *Roughing It* (1872) to the preposterous circumstances surrounding the provocative shotgun wedding between two women in "How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Wilson" (ca. 1902), Twain challenged mainstream social and literary conventions through farcical marriages. Understood as a narrative that relies on improbable situations or gross incongruities for humorous effect (Harmon 205), farce proved effective in this enterprise because Twain realized that readers often need unexpected, even outrageous, presentations of the mundane to shock them into full awareness or reconsideration. So when Twain has Brigham Young tell the visitor Mr. Johnson "you don't know anything about married life," he may as well be addressing his readers directly.

That marriage was held to be sacred by white, middle-class Americans only made the topic more attractive for Twain. During a time of great national anxiety over the state of marriage, he exposed the flaws of the all-important institution, or, more commonly, the flaws of participants in it, in his typical irreverent fashion. Twain affirmed the importance of wedlock as a stable basis for human societies, but by toying with the conventions surrounding marriage, he decried the arbitrary customs or expectations America often imposed upon spouses or would-be spouses. Because marriage carried such symbolic significance in the United States, that critique extended beyond the home. Though a harsh critic of imperialism, Twain was devoted to the idea of a strong, unified nation. Communal harmony could never become more important than personal liberties and American diversity, however. Farcical marriage, therefore, became an avenue for critiquing social, political, and even literary conventions that stifled individual expression.

The Clemens/Twain distinction here is overdrawn, of course, but it helps illustrate one of the defining traits of Twain's writing—the value of an alternative perspective in defamiliarizing everyday subjects.<sup>2</sup> In order for readers to experience the subjects of realist fiction with fresh eyes, writers find that they must often provide an original vantage point from which to examine the subject. For Twain, writing filled with detail was not always sufficient to produce in his

readers the level of reflection he wanted. Those details often required presentation through a unique character, one of the reasons why Huck Finn is such a successful narrator. Describing an opening scene in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in which Huck complains about being called urgently to dinner with a bell only to have it postponed by an apparently unnecessary prayer, Joe Fulton emphasizes the importance of the unexpected perspective in Twain's work: "Like the widow during the prayer, our eyes are closed and the details escape us until Twain rejuvenates everyday reality by recording it through the perspective of a young boy whose eyes are irreverently open" (5). In seeking to open the eyes of his readers to the unexamined realities of marriage, Twain relies on other characters who can, like Huck, offer new perspectives on old topics. By having individuals such as Brigham Young deliver comments about marriage, Twain ensures that readers do not too readily dismiss his insights about the institution, or, by extension, mainstream America generally.

In addition to using interesting characters to introduce fresh perspectives, Twain also defamiliarizes the ordinary by employing atypical instances of everyday subjects in order to draw greater attention to the more typical examples. Even in stories conveyed by a traditional, third-person omniscient narrator, Twain manages to surprise readers with rather extreme examples of his material. Whether a coerced wedding between two men or a transvestite woman

forced to marry a female accuser, Twain's farcical marriages demand close examination because they emphasize realities of commonplace unions often overlooked due to familiarity. From history, politics, and religion to childhood and family relationships, Twain's work consistently aimed to reveal the true nature of things, to dispel the myths, assumptions, or fantasies people forever attach to all aspects of life. An anonymous *New York Times* reviewer of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) summed up this authorial goal: "Matters are not told as they are fancied to be, but as they actually are" ("New Publications" 3). Twain saw in marriage a valuable opportunity to present matters "as they actually are." In an unpublished chapter initially written for *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), Twain calls courtship and marriage "that most interesting of all topics that engage the interest of human beings" ("Chap."). Because of marriage's central place in the human experience, he approaches the conventions and practices surrounding it as a window into the values and beliefs of various civilizations, suggesting that observing a group's marital norms is one way to see a people clearly. During Clemens's engagement to Livy, he wrote that on the day of their wedding, "the scales will fall from our eyes & we shall look upon a new world" (*Mark Twain's Letters* 3:348). From then on, he enlisted marriage in his writing to achieve a similar effect in his readers.

### *Plural Marriage and Pluralism*

When Samuel Clemens passed through Salt Lake City en route to Nevada in 1861, marriage was the last thing on his mind. Western America held the promise of adventure and wealth. Mormon polygamy was nothing more than a passing curiosity. By the time he wrote his recollections of that trip in *Roughing It* a decade later, circumstances were much different. For one thing, Clemens himself had just married Livy, and, despite enormous mutual affection, the transition required some adjustments. Furthermore, the “Mormon question” felt much more pressing after the close of the Civil War. With the Union preserved and slavery abolished, the status of the Utah Territory and its seemingly nonconformist or rebellious inhabitants had national implications. Finally, the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 brought Mormons and non-Mormons into greater contact, dramatically increasing general awareness and scrutiny of Mormon practices. Twain’s treatment of polygamy in *Roughing It* reflects all of these factors.

In order both to capitalize on the nation’s interest in Mormonism and polygamy and to offer readers something different from what they were likely to read in typical anti-polygamist literature of the time, Twain altered his approach to the subject, “stranging” a practice that was becoming increasingly familiar to American readers. Such a strategy allowed him to comment on more traditional



marriages and the state of American society generally. Twain had some limited interest in denouncing polygamy along with others writing on the subject, but he was far more concerned with revealing the peculiarities common to all forms of marriage. In reality, polygamy in *Roughing It* has less to do with plural marriage than it does with the behaviors of husbands and wives generally. Also, by changing the tone of the discourse surrounding polygamy, Twain hints at one of his larger aims within *Roughing It*: presenting a post-Civil War America that is big enough and diverse enough to accommodate variety without insisting upon, or legislating, strict social conformity. In the 1870s, Americans were shocked and outraged by polygamy. With his unexpected, farcical treatment of the practice, Twain redirects much of that intense criticism in order to reveal common shortcomings closer to home and to remind readers that a greater threat to the United States than distant unconventional marital practices was impulsive conformity that refused to tolerate differences.

Writing *Roughing It* within months of his own wedding, Clemens had good reason to reflect on the widespread diversity in marital dynamics. That his own marriage caused the writer a great deal of reflection and adjustment comes as no surprise to those familiar with his courtship of Livy. Having pursued her steadily for months, the somewhat disreputable and irreverent bachelor finally convinced her to accept his proposal with numerous promises of moral reform.

All evidence indicates that Clemens was sincere in his intentions to leave behind him the indiscretions of youth and make himself respectable in the eyes of Livy, her family, and the upper middle class generally. In addition to Livy's persuasions, his recently developed, close relationships with committed Christians Mary Mason Fairbanks and Reverend Joseph Twichell significantly influenced his behavior and religious outlook. Having met with the newly married Clemens in Washington, D.C., a correspondent from the *Sacramento Daily Union* wrote of the change that had come over the writer since he had known him out west: "Mark appears to be a very devoted husband. His old friends in Nevada and California will remember how he used to smoke pipes, and quaff lager and dress rather slouchily. Well, all this is changed. He now dresses with good taste, never drinks or smokes. Such, alas! are some of the results of marriage" (D. 1).

Twain himself recollected similar reforms, but as spouses and politicians know, even the best intentions sometimes fall short. In fact, it was during the composition of *Roughing It* that he discovered how fleeting some marital commitments can be. The month before their marriage, Clemens wrote to Livy a lengthy letter promising to quit smoking if she but asked him: "There is one thing that will make me quit smoking, & only one. I will lay down this habit which is so filled with harmless pleasure, just as soon as you write me or say to

me that *you desire it*" (Mark Twain's *Letters* 4:22). Whether Livy asked him to stop or not, he did, in fact, quit the habit shortly after their marriage. Probably within a year, when he found it difficult to write without a cigar, he took it up again. As he recalled a decade later:

But by and by I sat down with a contract behind me to write a book of five or six hundred pages—the book called "*Roughing it*"—and then I found myself most seriously obstructed. I was three weeks writing six chapters. Then I gave up the fight, resumed my three hundred cigars, burned the six chapters, and wrote the book in three months, without any bother or difficulty. (Reade 122)

Despite some inaccuracy in his recollection of the composition details, Clemens did begin smoking again while writing *Roughing It* after initially quitting for Livy. In fact, according to best estimates, he took it up again just before composing the Mormon chapters.<sup>3</sup> Altering his smoking habits (or trying) wasn't the only rough adjustment that Clemens had. Like most husbands, he had to learn to balance work, social engagements, and other commitments with time spent with his wife, and he immediately felt the pressure of providing for Livy. When children came, especially sickly Langdon, he found it nearly impossible to focus on writing with a baby constantly crying. In short, the realities of married life, many wonderful and rewarding, but some challenging, were on Twain's mind while composing chapters 12 to 15 of *Roughing It*.

In addition to his own marriage, the outcome of the Civil War affected Twain's treatment of polygamy in *Roughing It*. In 1861, the very existence of the

United States was in question, and the relationship of the Utah Territory to the nation mattered far less to most Americans than it would ten years later. With the preservation of the Union and a strong emphasis on conformity, aberrant marital practices seemed to pose a direct threat to social order. This was particularly true of polygamy because the Republican Party had coupled it with slavery as the “twin relics of barbarism.” With slavery defeated, many Americans viewed polygamy as the next abhorrent social abuse to be eradicated from the nation. In fact, Utah was denied statehood until its citizens demonstrated that they could accept and abide by the marital standards of the rest of the country. Polygamy, therefore, presented not only a challenge to core American values but also a troubling metaphor for a nation just recovering from disunion. For some Americans, Utah seemed just as defiant and dangerous as a Confederate state. As the United States sought to reunite its house divided, Mormon polygamists appeared to dance defiantly on the front lawn. As Fitz Hugh Ludlow wrote, worriedly, in 1870,

Nothing can bring the Mormon and the national ideas together. There is no more compromise between them than between ice and fire, darkness and light. They are diametrically opposed forces. [. . .] Theirs is an irrepressible conflict,—as irrepressible as that between the national idea and slavery,—and this conflict must terminate as that one did, with the triumph of the national idea. (524)

To be sure, Ludlow attributed the conflict between Mormonism and nationalism to more than just disagreement over marital customs. In his view, the Mormon system of religious government itself defied American principles. Still, polygamy served as the most obvious example of the clash of values between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and mainstream America. In fact, it was the practice of polygamy that convinced Ludlow that Mormons were sincere and devout, and therefore all the more dangerous, rather than simply hypocritical or self-interested. Twain had no love for polygamy, but he was enormously skeptical of government attempts to enforce conformity by imposing mainstream values and beliefs on all Americans, a skepticism that helped shape his portrayal of Mormonism.

The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad only increased the national attention focused on polygamy after the Civil War. As western traveler George W. Pine wrote, critically, of Mormons and polygamy, “They could, while isolated, maintain their unholy system; but now, when the iron track has climbed over the mountains, and is fastened at their very doors, it will no doubt let darkness out and light in” (332–33). In many ways, that 1870 prediction proved accurate. Convenient transportation through the remote Utah Territory led to greater opposition to polygamy. Claudia Stokes points out in *The Altar at Home* (2014) that dozens of sentimental novels about the dangers of Mormon polygamy

for unsuspecting women began surfacing as early as the 1850s (145–46), but these sensational novels were joined by more serious condemnations after the war — national journalism, travel literature, and controversial legislation. By 1890 the Mormon church declared the official end to the practice of plural marriage, and in 1896 Utah was admitted into the union as its 45<sup>th</sup> state. Writing or revising his Utah chapters early in 1871, Twain hoped to capitalize on the nation’s curiosity, but he also began to fear that the topic might be overdone. Enough western travel literature had been published between 1865 and 1871, much of which dealt extensively with Mormonism and polygamy, that Twain considered his subject “hackneyed” (*Mark Twain’s Letters* 4:499). Due to the amount and tone of material already published about Mormonism, Twain felt it necessary to distinguish himself from other writers through his treatment of the subject.

As political and popular opposition to Mormon polygamy increased in the decades following the Civil War, visitors to Utah openly condemned the practice and expressed their moral outrage in print. In his 1866 travel account, New York native and future U. S. representative Demas Barnes wrote of his conviction that a “system of polygamy would retard civilization and work the downfall of any advanced nation.” For wives of polygamists, “life loses its aim — the mind becomes morbid — material ends are neglected — children are not cared for — maternal love is not developed — death is a relief, and society is cursed in a rising

generation without hearts" (58–59). Writing a year later, Albert D. Richardson concurred, referring to Mormon polygamy as "the one repulsive and monstrous feature of their domestic life," a "stain" on their community (365). The market for western travel literature was so great that a new edition of Richardson's *Beyond the Mississippi* was issued in 1869. Then, just as Twain was beginning to conceive of *Roughing It*, George W. Pine decried what he felt were the "unnatural, unholy practices of these people—forbidden of God and common humanity" (326). According to Pine, polygamy, in particular, constituted "insufferable licentiousness" (329). Alan Gribben has demonstrated that Twain knew and drew on Richardson's *Beyond the Mississippi* while writing *Roughing It*, and given his concern that his subject was hackneyed, he must have been familiar with others (2:577). Certainly he knew of Artemus Ward's humorous sketches regarding Mormonism, accounts, like Twain's, that deviated in tone and purpose from the majority of writings on the subject. Those popular sentiments expressed first in sensational fiction and then in travel narratives would soon lead to strict anti-polygamy legislation.

With such rhetoric in mind as he began work on *Roughing It*, Twain intentionally sought to deviate from these and other common treatments of "the Mormon question." Although presented ostensibly as non-fiction travel narrative, *Roughing It* has the flexibility of a fictional work. Critics have long

recognized that Twain consistently exaggerates, modifies, or outright invents history in the work when his memory fails or, just as often, when he finds he can improve upon it, and this is especially true in the polygamy chapters. Twain saw these chapters as an opportunity to play with readers' expectations, whatever he happened to have recalled while in Utah. According to Herman Nibbelink, the tourists who flooded into Utah after the completion of the railroad "viewed it with horror, [. . .] perplexed that their own ideals of temperance and industry could flourish in this land of despotism, heterodoxy, and polygamy." Twain, however, adopted "an ironic temper remote from these conventional attitudes" (1). In fact, as early as the Prefatory to *Roughing It*, Twain displays his willingness, even eagerness, to disrupt literary conventions and readers' expectations. Having determined to write a travel narrative, a genre usually marked by description and information for the curious reader, Twain declares, "Yes, take it all around, there is quite a good deal of information in the book. I regret this very much" (xxiv). Given Twain's implied objective, to surprise, entertain, and educate readers not with "information" but with new perspectives and new approaches, his playful tone toward the controversial practice of polygamy fits squarely within his larger project.

Because Twain understood popular attitudes toward polygamy and its conventional treatment in travel narratives, he knew the "proper" way to



criticize it. As his narrator explains, one must “make the customary inquisition into the workings” of the practice and then “get up the usual statistics and deductions” in order to call “the attention of the nation at large once more to the matter.” All of the “usual statistics and deductions,” of course, aimed to condemn the controversial practice, and the narrator claims that he “had the will to do it, [. . .] to plunge in headlong and achieve a great reform” (97). Rather than conform to other narratives and reinforce public opinion of polygamy, though, Twain turned conventions on their head, having his narrator change his mind and causing readers to reconsider their assumptions about polygamy and, more importantly, about traditional marriage.

Clemens did not approve of plural marriage, yet the narrator’s purported shift in attitude toward the practice shocks readers and disarms the typical criticism leveled at it. Ready to join the common outcry against polygamy and enlighten the backward Mormons, he experiences a change of heart when he sees the Mormon women. “Then I was touched,” he writes.

My heart was wiser than my head. It warmed toward these poor, ungainly and pathetically “homely” creatures, and as I turned to hide the generous moisture in my eyes, I said, “No—the man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their harsh censure—and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence.” (97–98)

Irony notwithstanding, this passage aims to alter in significant ways late-nineteenth-century discourse surrounding polygamy. As Nibbelink puts it, “Mark Twain deflates the moral tone” of the anti-polygamy rhetoric in typical western travel narratives, even as he pokes fun at Mormons (1). His statement that polygamous men deserve not scorn but the highest admiration, while humorous, highlights the gap between the ideal and reality. Nearly everyone dreams of marrying a very attractive mate, but somebody has to settle. Whether polygamists deserve to be prosecuted or praised matters less than the reminder that individuals’ hopes or expectations regarding their spouses or future spouses, in terms of appearance or otherwise, often go unrealized or unfulfilled.

This passage also draws attention to the common expectation of the time that men had the responsibility to care for women, a responsibility that some nineteenth-century men viewed as a burden. With the unprecedented death-toll among young men during the Civil War, that burden was dramatically compounded. For some men, Twain implies, that burden appears simply unbearable if those women are unattractive. By voluntarily assuming responsibility for so many ill-favored ladies, then, Mormon polygamists demonstrate the epitome of Christianity, not its antithesis. “By commending the polygamist according to a system of values commonly used to condemn him,” Nibbelink writes, Twain “also exposes a flaw in that system and makes the

genteel tourist as ridiculous as the Mormon who has sixty homely wives" (2). Simply put, the flaw derives from the assumption that honorable men make a sacrifice and marry out of the goodness of their hearts rather than self-interest. The limits or hypocrisy of Christian charity exposed through these "stranged" marriages reveal that flaw to readers. Of course Twain's praise of polygamous men is insincere, yet it nevertheless hints at a sense of common relief men might feel if the number of plain-looking women on the eligible bachelorette rolls was significantly reduced. By "stranging" marriage through his tongue-in-cheek praise of polygamists, Twain calls out those men who felt that they were really doing women a big favor by marrying them.

As of 1870, Samuel Clemens, of all men, knew just how ludicrous such a sentiment could be. Neither Sam nor Livy had any illusions that a marriage between the two would be an act of charity on his part. The daughter of a wealthy, respectable family, Olivia Langdon was, quite simply, out of Sam's social league. Social class was not the only barrier, though. Mark Twain had a reputation for unprincipled behavior. Before conceding to his daughter's engagement, Jervis Langdon asked for references attesting to Clemens's moral character. In the end, Livy's willingness to marry Sam came about largely because he was able to convince her that he was a lost soul whose only chance of redemption was her Christian influence. After they agreed to marry, Clemens

wrote exultingly to his family, “She said she never could or would love me—but she set herself the task of making a Christian of me. I said she would succeed, but that in the meantime she would unwittingly dig a matrimonial pit & end by tumbling into it—& lo! The prophecy is fulfilled” (*Mark Twain’s Letters* 3:85). Livy brought not only a firm religious commitment to the marriage, but also a very strong inheritance. The money left to her by her father would carry the Clemenses through more than one financial crisis. Although Livy adored her husband, from a social or economic standpoint, Clemens was certainly doing her no favors in proposing marriage.

In addition to pointing out the contrast between the ideal and the actual in marriages and criticizing husbands who pretend to marry without any self-interest, Twain uses polygamy to draw readers’ attention to the shortcomings of spouses in their treatment of each other. As the narrator approaches Salt Lake City on his journey west, he stops for supper at the home of a Mormon “Destroying Angel,” a man purported to “conduct permanent disappearances of obnoxious citizens” (85). What he encounters there reminds him of what he has encountered elsewhere, a husband being inconsiderate to his wife, but multiplied. As the narrator and his travelling companions eat, they are served by women said to be the wives of the Destroying Angel. The narrator concludes that this must, of course, be the case, “for if they had been hired ‘help’ they would not

have let an angel from above storm and swear at them as he did, let alone one from the place this one hailed from" (86). The image of "a lot of slatternly women flit[ing] hither and thither in a hurry" defamiliarizes a customary domestic setting when the narrator reveals that these are wives, not servants (86). Yet, as readers consider the strangeness of the scene, Twain intends that they recognize something familiar. As Nibbelink points out, the narrator's reasoning that wives humbly submit to abuse where other women would surely protest is based on his knowledge of monogamous families: "Whether they have one wife or many, husbands are likely to mistreat them" (2). For Twain, polygamy offered the opportunity to make social critiques that might have otherwise been ignored or caused offense. What might be overlooked in a conventional marriage due to its familiarity is impossible to ignore with so many wives on hand to be mistreated. Highlighting verbal or emotional abuse through polygamy also provides some insulation between readers and the true object of criticism, creating a safe distance from which they can begin to see more clearly the true effects of inconsiderate behaviors in marriage without feeling attacked directly.

Humorous in chapters 12 through 14, Twain's depictions of polygamy reach the level of farce in chapter 15 when he introduces the invented character Mr. Johnson. Since the narrator has limited time to observe the domestic details of polygamy, he quotes extensively from a non-Mormon in the area who

furnishes him a firsthand account of Brigham Young's own home life. This Johnson, in turn, quotes extensively from Young himself. Since no evidence exists that Twain modeled Johnson on a real person, both Johnson and the version of Brigham Young he presents must be understood as Twain's own fictional characters.<sup>4</sup> By describing Johnson's stories as "preposterous" (100) and revealing that "some instinct or other made me set this Johnson down as being unreliable" (106), Twain's narrator finds a way to include humorous anecdotes without having to answer for their credibility, a narrative move Twain perfected.

Johnson's role in *Roughing It* goes beyond humor, though. Using a supposed firsthand account of polygamy allowed Twain to employ effectively the strategies of defamiliarization. For one thing, Twain could essentially, without being accused of intentional deceit or libel, invent any episode he wanted regarding Brigham Young's home life, however outrageous or strange it might seem (although, in reality, he drew many of his ideas from Artemus Ward's "A Visit to Brigham Young").<sup>5</sup> The resulting accounts cause reflection regarding ordinary, everyday marital patterns because they are so exaggerated. Furthermore, the fictitious Johnson allows Twain to "report" on polygamy by using Brigham Young's own words. Young's perspective is so unexpected that readers pay greater attention to aspects of marriage that they would ordinarily overlook. A description of Mormon polygamy from the voice of its most

notorious practitioner certainly surprises readers, but even more surprising is the attitude that Young takes toward the practice. Rather than offering a defense of polygamy, Twain's version of Mormons' top leader merely complains about his domestic arrangements. In short, Twain provides neither the typical (non-Mormon) criticisms of polygamy nor its customary (Mormon) justifications. Instead, he focuses on those challenging or humorous aspects of marriage that would be compounded by having multiple spouses. Nibbelink concurs, adding that "when he maintains his ironic balance, Mark Twain is a humorous critic of men in general rather than a satirist with a particular target. By observing similarities in polygamy and monogamy he exposes the incongruities of marriage in either form" (2). Through these farcical, fictionalized firsthand accounts, then, Twain makes some of his most pointed observations about traditional marriage, critiquing and laughing as he goes, but always affirming the value and importance of the individual and his or her liberties within any social arrangement.

As Twain's Brigham Young explains to Johnson, keeping a single wife happy is hard enough, but keeping multiple wives happy is virtually impossible. To illustrate, Young refers to "a heedless moment" when he carelessly gave a gift of a breast-pin to one of his wives. After a few slighted wives come to demand their own pin, Young realizes his error. "A man *can't* be wise all the time," he

tells Johnson. "I have wives all over this Territory of Utah [. . .] and mark you, every solitary one of them will hear of this wretched breast-pin, and every last one of them will have one or die" (102). He calculates that he will eventually have to dole out twenty-five hundred dollars in breast-pins, and, even then, he anticipates trouble if his wives detect any difference in the pins' quality.

Clemens had no dozens of wives "scattered far and wide," like the Brigham Young of *Roughing It* does, but he understood very well the pressures of supporting a wife and family. Livy was sensible and understanding, but she was also used to comforts. Despite the generosity of his in-laws, who purchased for Sam and Livy a furnished home in Buffalo as a wedding present, Clemens immediately felt the need to offer his bride a higher standard of living than the one to which he himself was accustomed. Having ascended the social ladder through marriage, Clemens determined to make himself at home in the upper-middle class, both for his own sake and for Livy's.<sup>6</sup> Distracted from writing by his marriage, but ever anxious about making money, Clemens wrote to his motherly friend Mary Fairbanks, "But I must work, & I *will* work. I will go straight at it & *force* it" (*Mark Twain's Letters* 4: 71). The pressure to work and the difficulties of doing so only increased when children came. Sam and Livy's first child Langdon was born in November 1870, during the time that Twain had stalled in his progress on *Roughing It*. By March the demands of family life and



the pressures of providing for them weighed heavily on Clemens. He wrote to his publisher,

In three whole months I have hardly written a page of MS. You do not know what it is to be in a state of absolute frenzy—desperation. I had rather die twice over than repeat the last six months of my life. Now do you see?—I want *rest*. I want to get clear away from all hamperings, all harassments. I am going to shut myself up in a farm-house alone, on top an Elmira hill, & *write*—on my book. . . . If I *dared* fly in the face of Providence & make one more promise, I would say that if I ever get out of this infernal damnable chaos I am whirling in at home, I will go to work & amply & fully & freely fulfill some of the promises I have been making to you—but I don't dare! Bliss—I don't dare! I believe if that baby goes on crying 3 more hours this way I will butt my frantic brains out & try to get some peace. (*Mark Twain's Letters* 4: 365-66)

Ever concerned with making money, Clemens found, like Young, that the burden of doing so dramatically increased with every addition to his family. Clemens's domestic affairs certainly influenced *Roughing It*, his first major writing project after his marriage, but his treatment of marital challenges is not simply autobiographical. At a time when a husband's role was commonly understood to include providing for the material needs and comfort of his spouse, virtually all readers could readily identify with the economic challenges of family life, even while they laughed at the problems Young brought upon himself. "No, sir, there is not such a thing as economy in a family like mine," he tells Johnson. "Let me scrimp and squeeze all I can, I still can't get ahead as fast as I feel I ought to, with

my opportunities" (104). Other American husbands may not have had families as large as Young's, but they could certainly relate to such a statement.

Challenging as providing for the material needs of a spouse can be, providing for his or her emotional needs can be far more challenging, something Samuel Clemens was learning for himself while composing *Roughing It*. Twain makes this point most forcefully through Young's references to his wives, to whom he refers by number rather than name. Dreading the eventual fallout of his careless gift to one wife, Young tells Johnson, "I have dozens of wives whose *numbers*, even, I do not know without looking in the family Bible" (102). The surprise readers experience at the suggestion of a husband who cannot keep track of all the women he has married grows with the account Young supposedly gives Johnson of a woman who fooled him into believing she was one of his wives. When she presents herself before him with a child that bears some resemblance to him, he carelessly acknowledges, "Of course I could not remember her name" (103). The Brigham Young of *Roughing It* cannot be accused of selfish hoarding of wealth or resources. He assumes responsibility for the young child presented to him without question. What his reported comments do reveal, though, is a peculiar level of disinterest in his own wives and children. His casual, even flippant, "of course" signals an attitude of emotional neglect and

apathy. He sincerely cares about providing for the material needs of his family, but he expresses no remorse at all for knowing virtually nothing about them.

Young's lack of interest in his wives and children certainly strikes readers as callous, but Twain implies that Young's attitude is simply a reflection of common husbands, amplified. In a time when some wives were still treated much like property, worth taking good care of but receiving little emotional support, Twain criticizes those who don't give adequate attention to family matters. Given Livy's personal difficulties in the year following her marriage, Clemens understood how challenging it could be to care for someone emotionally as well as financially. The summer after the Clemenses' marriage, Livy's father Jervis Langdon died of stomach cancer, an enormous blow to Livy. Four months pregnant and exhausted from nursing her father day and night for weeks, Livy suffered a nervous collapse after his death. She required Clemens's constant attention, and he finally resorted to giving her narcotics to help her sleep. Soon after, Livy's friend Emma Nye arrived at the Clemenses' Buffalo home for a visit on her way to Detroit. While there, she contracted typhoid fever and was placed in the Clemenses' own bed, where Livy and Sam watched over her for several weeks until her death. The experience added to Livy's depression and deeply affected Clemens. Reflecting on that time in 1906, he recalled, "During the last two or three days of it, Mrs. Clemens seldom took her clothes

off, but stood a continuous watch. Those two or three days are among the blackest, the gloomiest, the most wretched of my long life" (*Autobiography of Mark Twain* 362). A month later, Livy suffered a near miscarriage and was confined to bed for the remainder of her pregnancy. The baby, Langdon, was born prematurely, a sickly child that further taxed his mother's energy and emotional reservoir. Through it all, Clemens gave nearly all of his time and attention to Livy, writing very little in the summer and fall of 1870. Despite his anxiety over his low literary output, available evidence indicates that he did not feel resentment toward Livy; however, the demands of that first year of marriage likely required more empathy than anything he had experienced before. A man who cannot even remember a wife's name, or, as is more common, does not give her adequate attention, time, and concern fails as a husband, whatever talents or accomplishments he may otherwise have, implies Twain in *Roughing It*.

One of the most effective instances of challenging readers' expectations through a novel perspective comes with Brigham Young's description of his marital bed. Many Americans assumed that lust motivated polygamy, and stories of kidnappings and coerced marriages for sexual purposes became common in anti-polygamy fiction of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Twain presents the issue differently. According to Young's account to Johnson, the polygamist's bed is not a site of gratification but one of tumultuous insomnia.

Frustrated at having to keep his money tied up in seventy two separate beds, Young sells the beds and builds a single, ninety-six-foot-wide bedstead for himself and his many wives. He experiences neither peace nor pleasure, though. The din of seventy two women all snoring together drives Young to distraction, and he fears the room will collapse with their collective breathing. “My friend,” he advises Johnson, “take an old man’s advice, and *don’t* encumber yourself with a large family—mind, I tell you, don’t do it” (*Roughing It* 105). Young’s pessimistic attitude regarding large-scale polygamy surprises readers, especially given the persistent efforts of the Mormon community to defend the practice in the post-Civil War years, and it tends to humanize the religious leader. Twain cuts through sensationalism to the underlying reality of his subject. No matter the circumstances, marriage requires adjustments from its participants—everything from accommodating others’ habits and individual preferences to learning how to share a bed peacefully. Seeing interpersonal relationships through a new, “stranged” perspective creates a safe distance from which to criticize imperfect spouses, but it also reminds readers that all marriages, even more familiar ones, are comprised of individuals with real needs that should not be ignored.

While polygamy offered Twain an easy way to defamiliarize marriage and comment on its customary patterns, the practice also had important national

implications, something Twain and other Americans knew very well. Like Fitz Hugh Ludlow, who saw inevitable conflict between Mormonism and nationalism, Twain recognized that “the Mormon question” had as much to do with proper forms of government as it did proper forms of marriage. Unsurprisingly, then, Twain emphasizes political authority throughout the Mormon chapters. As the narrator and his companions near Salt Lake City, he refers to the Mormon headquarters as “the capital of the only absolute monarchy in America” (87), and he refers to Utah generally as “the kingdom” (89). When he and Orion, along with other officials, make a formal visit to Mormon leader Brigham Young, he writes that they “put on white shirts and went and paid a state visit to the king” (92). The narrator claims that during that visit he tried to “‘draw [Young] out’ on Federal politics and his high-handed toward Congress,” hoping to better understand how Young conceived of his relationship to the rest of the United States (93).

These references to political authority are not explicitly tied to polygamy, but the two topics are so interwoven in the narrative that it is difficult to separate them. For example, the reference to the “only absolute monarchy in America” immediately follows the narrator’s first mention of the “western ‘peculiar institution,’” a term for polygamy taken from the more common “peculiar institution,” slavery (87). In the following chapter (13), the narrator describes his

arrival in Salt Lake City, again mixing domestic governments with political. Walking the streets he and his companions “felt a curiosity to ask every child how many mothers it had, and if it could tell them apart,” and they “longed to have a good satisfying look at a Mormon family in all its comprehensive ampleness, disposed in the customary concentric rings of its home circle.” Because this is a “fairy-land” to them, “a land of enchantment, and goblins, and awful mystery,” they seek out a non-Mormon government official to help orient them (88). This acting governor introduces them to other non-Mormons, but he can offer little insight into Mormon society.<sup>7</sup> An outsider, he and all other federally appointed officials have very little power or authority, since the Mormons have their own system of government, defiant of federally appointed rulers. In truth, all governors appointed during this time were “acting governors,” as the predominantly Mormon population obeyed Brigham Young and resented the federal government’s attempts to oversee their community. This gap between Mormon practice and federal government simply reflected the larger chasm between Utah and the rest of the nation. The narrator describes the community organization of Salt Lake City as he perceives it, orderly, industrious, and healthy, but he concludes the chapter when he finally meets the unofficial but true head of government, Brigham Young. The meeting with Brigham Young prompts, in chapter 14, an illustration of his governing power and authority,

followed by more information about polygamy. The polygamy material then spills over into chapter 15, most of it specific to Young himself. For Twain, apparently, as for many Americans at the time, separating polygamy from the Mormon system of government was impossible, so his descriptions of their marital arrangements reach beyond the walls of the home.

Anxiety over the connection between subversive marital practices and subversive governments became the justification for strict anti-polygamy legislation following the Civil War. Congress passed a series of laws aimed at eradicating polygamy and limiting the civil privileges of those practicing it. With wide public support, the federal government imprisoned offending husbands, seized Mormon property, and disincorporated the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Significantly, the voting rights of polygamists were often restricted, highlighting the connection between proper marital forms and national identity. Twain, however, did not share the same concern as many of his contemporaries. On the contrary, Clemens later suggested that the alarm of the United States government and its people and their efforts to quash Mormon practices were the true objects of ridicule. In a letter to Kate Field, an outspoken critic of polygamy, he wrote, "Considering our complacent cant about this country of ours being the home of liberty of conscience, it seems to me that the attitude of our Congress and people toward the Mormon Church is matter for



limitless laughter and derision" (Whiting 449). No matter how repulsive a religious practice may appear, he implies, America has no choice but to permit it if that practice does not infringe on the rights of others. Any efforts to the contrary constitute obvious hypocrisy, for which Twain never had much tolerance. "The Mormon religion is a religion," he explains. "The negative vote of all the rest of the globe could not break down that fact; and so I shall probably always go on thinking that the attitude of our Congress and nation toward it is merely good trivial stuff to make fun of" (Whiting 449). Though Clemens wrote this clearly articulated position fifteen years after the composition of *Roughing It*, that impulse to poke fun at those panicking over polygamy surfaces in the voice of the narrator as he describes his change of heart and his skepticism of Johnson's tales. Twain desired an end to Mormonism and its marital practices, but they mattered far less to him than the "Congressional rascalities" aimed at eliminating them (Whiting 449).

All in all, Twain's unique approach to the Mormon question, which had post-Civil War Americans frustrated, perplexed, and indignant, turns satire not just on polygamists but on the nation itself. Rather than wringing his hands, Twain collapses the distance between aberrant and traditional marital practices, suggesting that polygamists are not the threat to the country that many assume they are. His Brigham Young has too many domestic problems to worry about

national issues, a state that might characterize more than a few mainstream Americans. While poking fun at Mormons, Twain simultaneously takes aim at those who obsess over distant martial practices they find unconventional while neglecting or contributing to problems at home. Whether indicting Congress or lousy spouses, Twain's farcical treatment of Brigham Young's polygamous marriages pushes back against mainstream conventions as much as it does radical ones. For Twain, then, insistence on absolute conformity, whether in marriage conventions or in other areas, runs contrary to the nation's core principles. "Stranging" marriage offered him an effective way of insisting on the all-important "liberty of conscience" that mattered more than perfect harmony of ideas or ideals. Through its treatment of nontraditional marriage practices, *Roughing It* calls for a post-Civil War America large enough to accommodate a wide range of diversity. In a nation recovering from an uneasy split, Twain calls for united states but sundry expressions of individualism.

### *Scandal and Spectacle*

Though Twain's playful treatment of polygamy is mischievous, the highly unconventional marriages in "Wapping Alice" (1898, 1907) and "How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Winslow" (ca. 1902) are just plain scandalous. Both involve a forced marriage between two individuals of the same sex, one of whom is secretly a transvestite. Twain never chose or managed to publish the short stories

during his lifetime, possibly due to the highly controversial nature of the subject material for a late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century audience. That he wrote them at all, though, reveals the important implications for national identity and social conventions that Twain found in fictional marriages. John Cooley suggests that Twain wrote “Nancy Jackson” as a cathartic exercise in response to a presumed lesbian relationship between the Clemenses’ daughter Susy and her college friend Louise Brownell (105).<sup>8</sup> But despite its provocative title (which Twain did not choose), the story says less about same-sex relationships, positive or negative, than it does about the arbitrary and sometimes debilitating conventions surrounding traditional marriages.<sup>9</sup> The same is true of “Wapping Alice,” though the precise nature of Alice’s relationship with Bjurnsen is far more ambiguous than Nancy and Kate’s. Together, these narratives draw attention to many of the idiosyncrasies, artificial constructs, overlooked realities, and social consequences of marriage, causing readers to reexamine standard conventions in their society as well as in literature that relies on the standard marriage plot.

With their plot twists and confusions, “Wapping Alice” and “Nancy Jackson” insist that the many of the expectations regarding proper marriages in middle-class America, and, by extension, many other established norms, are so contorted that they sacrifice individual agency, or even common sense, for compliance. Like the clothes that disguise Nancy’s and Alice’s true identities and

individualities, these superficial customs help facilitate the appearance of a well-ordered society while concealing underlying incongruities. With his characteristic penetrating eye, Twain saw through the mask, ridiculing the notion that insistence on absolute conformity to marital practices or other social conventions was essential to national unity and progress. He also recognized, however, that removing an outer covering to expose the bare truth beneath could be offensive. Certain beliefs and mores, however artificial or arbitrary, were so ingrained in the psyche of the United States that even questioning them, let alone violating them, constituted scandal. Only by creating a spectacle through farcical marriages could Twain convince his readers to take a closer look.

In "Wapping Alice," Twain emphasizes that many of the incongruous social judgments related to sexuality are sometimes made even more absurd through the expectations and customs surrounding marriage. Alice joins the Jackson household as a servant and takes up residence in an isolated section of the house with a separate entrance. When Mr. Jackson recounts her story some time later to Twain's narrator, he clarifies at the outset that Alice was actually a man disguised as a woman for unknown reasons and, for most of the story, undetected by the Jackson household. Despite revealing Alice's sex, Jackson continues to refer to the transvestite with feminine pronouns throughout his narrative. The Jackson household refers to the new servant, who was born and

raised in the section of London called Wapping, as Wapping Alice. She attracts some attention from head servant George when a burglar alarm is tripped on three subsequent mornings, but the incidents stop when Alice learns about the alarm and how it functions.

Months pass, and the household begins to suspect that an intruder has been in the house. Confident that Alice knows something, Jackson confronts her, anticipating tales of burglary. When Alice confesses that she has been letting a jobless young man into the house at nights to sleep and eat, and that it was he who disabled the burglar alarm, Jackson expresses dissatisfaction that the mystery's explanation is not more intriguing. Sensing his disappointment, Alice adds that the young man, a Swedish immigrant named Bjurnsen Bjuggersen Bjorgensen, has started a sexual relationship with her and now refuses to marry her.<sup>10</sup> Enraged at Bjorgensen's apparent dishonor, Jackson devises a plan to force a wedding. "Won't marry you!" he exclaims. "Oh, he won't, won't he? We'll see about that!" (58) Acting quickly, Jackson tells Alice to invite Bjorgensen over that evening. In preparation for his arrival, Jackson asks the local minister to obtain a marriage license and then hide out at the Jackson home until he is needed. Meanwhile, all the servants are to dress in gala and prepare a wedding feast (mostly alcohol). Arrangements are made for a police officer disguised in plain clothes to be present at the house to ensure that everything goes smoothly, so

that the “unintending intended” accepts his responsibility (59). Significantly, Twain writes that Jackson’s actions follow from his “native appetite for doing things in a theatrical way” (60). Jackson prepares his household for a spectacle, even as Twain does the same for his readers. This will be an event worth watching, and all eyes are drawn to the anticipated wedding ceremony. Jackson’s preparations make plain the assumptions of middle-class America at the turn of the century regarding sexuality: a man who takes advantage of a woman has a moral and social obligation to marry her. Furthermore, they highlight the ritualistic conventions of wedding ceremonies that have long since lost their meaning but which remain necessary aspects of marriages, even forced marriages that conflict strongly with the meaning symbolized by such conventions.

Much of the communal anxiety over premarital sex and the pressure on sexually involved couples to marry came from Victorian commitments to chastity and virtue. According to Susan Gillman, American ideas regarding the purity of women culminated in the early 1900s with the “Trial of the Century,” which, she argues, Twain associated with “Wapping Alice” (299). Twain had written a version of the story in 1898 but laid it aside for nearly a decade. He returned to it again in 1907 during the murder trial of Harry Thaw, who had very publically killed Stanford White, a minor New York celebrity. Thaw admitted to

shooting White, but his defense lawyers claimed that he should not be convicted because of his mental state at the time of the killing. Thaw, they argued, suffered from what they termed *dementia Americana*, an affliction of temporary insanity brought about by the violation of the sanctity of one's wife or daughter. White, it turns out, had years previously seduced the young woman who would eventually become Thaw's wife. According to the defense lawyers, *dementia Americana*, which puzzled "the learned alienists" but was "perfectly familiar to every man who has a family," consisted of a "species of insanity which makes [a man] believe that whosoever invades the sanctity of that home, whoever brings pollution upon that daughter, whoever stains the virtue of that wife, has forfeited the protection of human laws and must look to the eternal justice and mercy of God" (Mackenzie 191-92). After a highly publicized trial, Thaw was acquitted.

Twain references the Shaw case in the same autobiographical dictation in which he completes his final revisions of "Wapping Alice," thus connecting the two narratives in Gillman's view. But however closely Twain associated the trial with his tale, Thaw's defense and particularly its success highlight just how inviolable most early twentieth-century Americans considered women's purity and how critical they were of men who initiated sexual relationships with women with no intention of marrying. Twain himself held similar views. On 10

April 1907, the same day he concluded his revised account of "Wapping Alice," Twain dictated for his autobiography disapproval of White's licentious behavior, laying much of the blame for his death on White's own actions. Even more telling, Clemens himself once acted a role very similar to Jackson's, when he arranged for the marriage of a young man involved with one of his household servants. In fact, early versions of "Wapping Alice" are told from Twain's first-person perspective before he revised the story to distance his family from the story. In July 1877 a rudimentary alarm system at the Clemenses' Hartford home indicated that the door to the servants' quarters was being opened late at night. When Clemens investigated, his English maid Lizzy Wells admitted that she had been admitting a young man into her room and that she was now a ruined woman, pregnant and unwed. According to his letters to Livy, Clemens took the matter into his own hands when he arranged a shotgun wedding immediately for the two lovers. Only years later did Clemens learn that Lizzy had never been pregnant at all. Though Clemens felt a bit duped, available evidence suggests that the husband and wife were both satisfied with how things turned out and Clemens was satisfied with his role in the affair.<sup>11</sup> But despite Clemens's ongoing commitment to Victorian standards of morality, Twain's willingness to poke fun at the fictionalized version of himself indicates his recognition that, however things may have turned out in Lizzy's case, the formalities of marriage alone do



not change individuals' intentions or outlook. By insisting on formal marriages for lovers without regard for their level of dedication or commitment, middle-class America reveals its hypocrisy, its obsession with appearances, and its dangerous willingness to favor submission to social expectations over autonomous choice.

"Wapping Alice" echoes the typical outrage aimed at unprincipled men during the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. A raging Jackson recounts to Bjorgensen the kindness Alice has shown him in feeding him and providing a place to sleep before accusing him of betrayal: "And for reward—you take away her purity!" (61). Bjorgensen denies the fact, but Jackson is undeterred, for he feels the weight of his social responsibility. In his own words, "I had a duty to perform, and I put my weakness aside and kept my grip" (63). Clearly "Wapping Alice" relies on the common views of the time regarding the appropriate course of action when two young people become intimately involved. But despite the obvious similarities, "Wapping Alice" diverges significantly from Clemens's own experience or the Thaw trial in that Twain casts the helpless woman as a transvestite male.<sup>12</sup> That important difference helps Twain defamiliarize the resulting marriage, which increases the story's satirical elements.

Because readers know Alice's true sex, Jackson's extravagant preparations to give Alice justice and protect her reputation through a coerced wedding

appear not only misguided but completely foolish. As the de facto guardian and enforcer of social codes, Jackson represents a patriarchal order that clearly knows what is best for everyone—a notion that immediately becomes utterly laughable when readers get all the facts. Jackson himself retrospectively recognizes the absurdity of his role when he retells the story to Twain's narrator: "Some of the ridiculous features of the incident which I am going to speak of presently will be better understood if I expose Wapping Alice's secret here and now, in the beginning—for she had a secret. It was this: she was not a woman at all, but a *man*" (42). By introducing a case of mistaken sexual identity, Twain effectively defamiliarizes a typical wedding, or even a coerced wedding, thereby highlighting all of the normal conventions that are usually unquestioned and taken for granted. Even in situations in which a bride or groom has reservations about the wedding, the formalities of smiling witnesses dressed in fine attire, an elaborate wedding feast, a minister able to pretend that nothing is out of the ordinary, and even a representative of the law seem appropriate. In Twain's tale, those preparations do not disguise the fact that Bjorgensen does not want to marry Alice, but unlike many other individuals coerced into wedlock through social or legal pressures, Bjorgensen must be excused for his reluctance by even the most rigid observers of social norms. On the one hand, if he is ignorant of Alice's true sexual identity, he has clearly never had sexual contact with "her," as

he is accused of having. He has no social obligation to marry, though Jackson is still able to coerce him into marriage through a combination of excellent planning and threats of prison. On the other hand, if the two have begun a (homo)sexual relationship, Bjorgensen's knowledge of Alice's true sex would preclude marriage at a time when same-sex marriage was taboo.

Jackson's extensive efforts to have everything and everyone in the proper place to carry off the marriage with great effect only serve to highlight the absurdity of the situation. His arrangements constitute a "kind of circus," a "spectacular program" (59, 60). The servant George relishes the drama of the affair almost as much as Jackson, delighting that "it was one of the showiest things he had ever helped to put together" (60). Such language highlights the fact that affairs like these are typically watched carefully, with great interest, by the members of a given community. Unmarried individuals presumably involved in a sexual relationship can expect the rapt gaze of outsiders, all of whom have a deep interest in the outcome. Under more ordinary circumstances, that is, in the case of a man and a woman involved sexually, Twain's audience might not question at all the appropriateness of Jackson's actions. They might agree with Jackson that he acted out of duty. Indeed, they, like the Reverend Tom, might applaud his efforts. "Jackson, dear boy," the minister gushes after the ceremony is concluded but before Alice's true sex is revealed, "you will be forgiven many a

sin for the good deed you have done this night" (66). However, the knowledge that Alice is a deceptive man defamiliarizes the marriage and saves readers the embarrassment of being taken in. They are displaced from a position of passively nodding along in agreement that two young people suspected of sexual contact should be pressured into marrying. Although they can recognize that they have joined the audience carefully watching this "kind of circus" and "spectacular program," they are in a position to criticize the whole affair and peer beneath the veil of established norms (59, 60). As with other farcical marriages employed by Twain, the marriage between Alice and Bjorgensen says more about prevalent assumptions and practices than it does about less common affairs, such as transvestism or mistaken sexual identity. Introducing those elements into the narrative, however, allows Twain to more easily demonstrate how arbitrary and theatrical conventions can cloak or distort true attitudes and intentions. It should not be ministers or witnesses or even the approval of the community, and certainly not the formalities of a ceremony, that truly legitimize a relationship, but the commitment of the participants. Once again, Twain emphasizes individuals rather than institutions.

The strangeness of the situation makes it clear to readers, who have all the facts, that the marriage ceremony arranged by Jackson has no real meaning, something that becomes obvious to Jackson himself when George reveals Alice's

sex after the wedding. The “stranged” marriage between Bjorgensen and “Alice” suggests that more conventional weddings arranged in response to social expectations are often no less coerced and no more legitimate. As Jackson’s statement during his preparations indicates, pressure put upon a couple to wed does not always spring from a genuine interest for the parties involved. “I said I would teach that young scamp a lesson that he wouldn’t forget till he was a widower,” Jackson admits (59). All that changes when two individuals involved in a sexual relationship marry out of fear of exposure is the outward appearance, which, as Alice’s disguise illustrates, holds great power to deceive and obscure the true nature of things, despite society’s watchful eyes. Twain certainly did not condone premarital sex, but in criticizing Jackson’s arrangements for a showy wedding ceremony for two men, Twain also criticizes any common practice or convention that relies on appearances rather than reality.

Almost equally absurd, “How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Wilson” features another “stranged” marriage that invites readers to reexamine the social conventions and expectations surrounding marital unions. But whereas the farcical marriage of “Wapping Alice” comes about through skewed social expectations and a dangerous craving for spectacle, the marriage of Nancy and Kate results, indirectly at least, from the ceremonial formalities of the wedding ritual itself. Forced to dress like a man for protection and swear that she will

never reveal her true identity or sex, Nancy Jackson abandons her old life, moves to a rural community, and finds safety in anonymity. Going by the name Robert Finlay, she is taken in by a compassionate farming family with a flirtatious eighteen-year-old daughter who has just been jilted. The daughter, Kate Wilson, determines to exact revenge by ensnaring as many men as possible with her charms and breaking their hearts, and she sets her sights on Robert Finlay. When “he” resists her advances, Kate accuses him of impregnating her. Dependent upon the Wilsons and unable to reveal her true sex, Nancy cannot defend herself against the claim, and a shotgun wedding results. After going through the formality of marriage, Robert/Nancy refuses to live with Kate, and her identity and innocence are never revealed. Within a year, however, Kate gives birth to a son, clearly the result of Kate’s previous relationship.

As with “Wapping Alice,” Twain highlights the hypocrisy and pressures that too often accompany marriages, in this case by carrying out a coerced wedding in which a woman plays the role of the presumed father. Though the story was never finished or published in Twain’s lifetime, it nevertheless demonstrates his sustained interest in marriages that defy expectations and their ability to disrupt social norms too often taken for granted. Significantly, Nancy’s marriage indirectly results from a disruption of formal wedding proceedings decades earlier. On the run from the law for murdering her brother’s killer,

Nancy seeks protection from her family's sworn enemy, Thomas Furlong. Engaged to Nancy's mother years before, Furlong was jilted on the day of his wedding when his fiancé abandoned him to marry Mr. Jackson. Having harbored ill will toward the Jacksons since that day, Furlong recognizes a unique opportunity for revenge when Nancy comes seeking his help. The requirements he places upon Nancy in exchange for protection, that she dress like a man and never reveal her true sex, ultimately result in her marriage to Kate. Furlong's revenge stems not just from the fact that Nancy's mother left him, though, but, more importantly, from the circumstances under which she left him—with the entire community figuratively looking on and preparing for the festivities of the very public affair that is a wedding celebration.

Furlong makes it clear that it was the embarrassment of being cast aside after passing through all the formalities leading up to wedlock that destroyed his life, not a broken heart. He does not live in desperate, unhappy solitude because he could never learn to love another woman; rather, he claims that no one else would have him after the cruel manner in which his fiancé broke off the engagement. "On the very morning of the day set for our wedding," he rages to Nancy, "she flung me over and married that low-grade fool your father; humiliated me, made me the joke of the countryside; spoiled my life and made it bitter and lonely and a burden" (101–102). Couples break off engagements

frequently without great social consequences, but those consequences tend to increase the closer the termination is to the wedding ceremony. Once the formalities of the affair are in place, the pageantry and the parties, the garments and the guests, breaking things off causes substantially more damage. Being jilted at the altar evokes a pitiable image and can carry a certain social stigma. In the case of Furlong, "the joke of the countryside," it seals his fate in his community. Twain emphasizes how broken Furlong actually is from the first sentence of the story: "Thomas Furlong was a grizzled and sour bachelor of fifty who lived solitary and alone in a log house which stood remote and lonely in the middle of a great cornfield at the base of the rising spurs of the mountains" (99). Miserable and alone, Furlong exacts his ultimate revenge by robbing the daughter of his ex-lover of any prospect of love, sex, or marriage, just as he was denied.

Readers can expect that Nancy, who is likewise destroyed through the formalities of marriage, will be just as lonely and unhappy as Furlong. In her case, a formal and official wedding ceremony is required by her community in order for Kate to avoid the shame and ruin of childbirth out of wedlock. Kate's parents make it clear that saving face requires the formalities of a wedding between their daughter and Nancy/Robert, not commitment and devotion. They need the public wedding at the farmhouse, the barbecue and the dance, not



affection between their daughter and “son”-in-law. Mrs. Wilson needs to make her rounds to the village women with her dignity intact and her daughter’s reputation preserved. The marriage, therefore, is nothing more than a show performed to satisfy the demands of the community. As Nancy exclaims of Kate after the formalities are over, “No—no—no! She is no wife of mine, and never shall be, except in name” (110). The marriage means nothing more for their actual relationship than Nancy’s disguise does for her true sexual identity. They are exterior displays only, and Twain leaves no doubt regarding the potentially destructive consequences that can result from gaps between outward appearances and inner realities.

Indirectly, then, Thomas Furlong and Nancy Jackson, to say nothing of Kate Wilson and her newborn son, are ruined, at least partly, because of the prejudices, mores, and conventions of their communities. Individuals are sacrificed in the scramble to preserve the appearance of a well-ordered community, to perpetuate a conformity that is too often mistaken as necessary for real social unity. It is doubtful that many of Twain’s readers, or that Clemens himself, would have objected strongly to the notion that a sexually active young heterosexual couple should be encouraged to marry. In addition to strong Victorian notions of sexual propriety, there was a very real concern for the well-being of children born out of wedlock. Beyond the stigmatization of bastards—

another example of an unnecessary social practice that tended to compound individuals' difficulties rather than alleviate them—mothers at the turn of the century had enormous challenges providing for children without financial support from a husband or other family. Such considerations would make it hard for Twain's audience to sympathize greatly with a young man accused of impregnating a young woman and then refusing to marry her. As with "Wapping Alice," though, the transvestism of "Nancy Jackson" demands that readers reconsider their assumptions.

For Twain, unwavering insistence on the proper adherence to outward conventions characterized mainstream America, distorting its perception of reality. Just as white, middle-class America insisted that sexually involved couples pass through certain formalities to legalize and legitimize their relationship, they placed arbitrary demands on others based on supposed notions of propriety or misguided commitment to established conventions. In insisting on the segregation of races or the immutability of traditional gender roles or the pious profession of faith, for example, Americans play the role of Mr. Jackson or the Wilsons in demanding actions and behaviors based on appearances and ingrained assumptions rather than truly examining matters "as they actually are." In both "Wapping Alice" and "Nancy Jackson," societal pressures and expectations regarding marriages and marriage ceremonies are not

just arbitrary and purposeless but outright destructive. Such is the case, Twain implies, in many of America's practices. While Twain believed in a United States that could fulfill a democratic, egalitarian vision through a commitment to inclusiveness, he feared that blind adherence to convention too easily overruled common sense and compassion. It certainly could destroy individualism. To examine human relations stripped of the arbitrary impositions of a community, Twain found it necessary to return to a time before conventions or traditions of any kind, to the original attempt at social organization.

### *Trouble and Triumph in Paradise*

If Twain tackled the epitome of marital heterodoxy in *Roughing It*, "Wapping Alice," and "Nancy Jackson," he returned to the quintessentially orthodox marriage in "Extracts from Adam's Diary" (1893) and *Eve's Diary* (1906). That is not to say, however, that his treatment of the myth of human origins was orthodox in any way. In fact, Twain takes a most unconventional approach to Christianity's supreme model of a conventional marriage. According to the King James Version of the Bible, with which Twain was very familiar (Ensor 7), Adam is to "cleave unto" his wife Eve and the two "shall be one flesh" (KJV Genesis 2:24-25). One of Adam's earliest entries in his diary, therefore, raises Christian eyebrows. Alluding to his problems with Eve after she joins him in the Garden of Eden, he writes, "I escaped last Tuesday night, and travelled

two days, and built me another shelter, in a secluded place, and obliterated my tracks as well as I could, but she hunted me out [. . .] and came making that pitiful noise again, and shedding that water out of the places she looks with” (“Extracts from Adam’s Diary” 100). Clearly, this is not the Sunday School version of the Garden of Eden tale. Adam defies characterization as the committed, loving husband that nineteenth-century Christians expected, while Twain prompts readers to set aside preconceived notions and assumptions and look with fresh eyes, just as humanity’s first parents must do.

Of course, Adam and Even are not married in the conventional sense—and that is just the point. Without a priest or a justice of the peace, without wedding bells or vows, without pageantry or prenuptials, they are simply two people who eventually determine to be together (in Twain’s version, only after they leave the Garden), to cooperate in the task of living, bringing some order to their world and raising children in it. That their arrangement is supposed to be understood as the primordial marriage seems clear from the Bible, for it explicitly refers to Adam and Eve as husband and wife (KJV Genesis 3:6, 20), but while it establishes convention, it is necessarily free from convention to begin with. It is the first of its kind. If the true identities of Nancy and Alice are effaced by clothing and customs, Adam’s and Eve’s individualities are laid bare when Twain strips such coverings away. Pulling back centuries of traditions and

assumptions leaves readers looking at a very “stranged” marriage, and what they see is two people who are far less similar than might be expected, and who manage to unite together anyway.

As with polygamy in his travel narrative or same-sex marriages in his transvestite tales, Twain employs strategies of defamiliarization when writing about Adam and Eve’s relationship to disrupt readers’ expectations, invite reflection, and examine the implications of the marriage relationship beyond the walls of the home. More than in any of his other writings on the topic, though, Twain affirms in Adam’s and Eve’s diaries the centrality of marriage to stable societies. Furthermore, by setting the Garden of Eden near Niagara Falls, the honeymoon capital of the world and a national landmark, Twain invites comparison between humanity’s first union and America. Both pass through periods of discord and intolerance, even temporary separation, but as Adam and Eve gradually discover, and as the United States must learn, differences between or among individuals that appear problematic and threatening to domestic harmony can actually secure it and lead to richer relations. Diversity born of individualism provides essential adhesion in both domestic and social settings, a truth Adam and Eve only learn outside the Garden and one Americans can only learn after relinquishing notions of a paradisiacal nation without flaws, disputes, or aberrations.

Critics have long noted that Twain's depiction of Adam and Eve humanizes the mythological parents of the human race. Stanley Brodwin argues for John Milton's influence on Twain, noting that Milton first presented "the idea of seeing Adam and Eve as a very human, married couple rather than the bare, archetypal figures met with in Genesis 2:4" (58n). Regardless of its origin, Twain's approach to Adam and Eve fits, in many ways, within his larger aims for his religious writings. As early as *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) he invites readers to see the stories, places, and figures of the Bible and Christian tradition with new eyes, to discard what they *think* is there and focus on what is actually there. In the Preface to that work he reveals that the purpose of the book is to "suggest to the reader how *he* would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who travelled in those countries before him" (v). That same purpose underlies his efforts to recast the myth of humanity's first parents. An idealized picture of Eden, therefore, comes into question when Twain draws attention to some of the challenges that Adam and Eve might have faced, everything from labeling new elements of the Creation without any experience or stable reference points to navigating the challenges of companionship and parenthood without any models or instruction. In "Adam's Diary" and *Eve's Diary*, such an effort has the inevitable result of defamiliarizing

what many Christians saw as the ideal marriage, the first and perfect union between man and woman, united by God.

Twain accomplishes that defamiliarization through the new perspectives he introduces into the myth and the tone he adopts. Whereas Genesis records the narrative of Adam and Eve in the third-person past, Twain employs the first-person, present perspective of the first parents' diaries. As with the narrator Huck Finn, the fresh perspectives of Adam and Eve call to readers' attention elements of the world they otherwise overlook, in this case aspects of the Eden myth that likely escape their notice or consideration due to familiarity.

Additionally, because Adam's and Eve's diary entries not only focus on unfamiliar aspects of the creation myth but also disrupt in humorous ways readers' assumptions about Christianity's first marriage, those fresh perspectives introduce an irreverent tone that further drew attention. At a time when many Christians still accepted the Bible as absolutely literal and thoroughly sacrosanct, Twain's treatment of Adam and Eve risked offending some. It certainly seemed to do so for several English reviewers. One writer for the London *St. James's Gazette* charged that "'Adam's Diary' is a singularly painful example of a weakness to which Mark Twain has always been liable—the inability to know what is and what is not a proper subject for humour" ("Tom Sawyer, Detective" 417). Another typical British review printed in the *Manchester Guardian* suggested

that “in America this sort of thing may pass for humour” but emphasized that “in this country one is happy to believe that people who have any reverence for the Bible will call it blasphemous” (“Novels” 416).

As this latter review hints, Americans tended to respond differently. Despite the potentially offensive tone, American reviewers tended to read the diaries as playful rather than blasphemous. After the publication of *Eve’s Diary*, the *Boston Congregationalist and Christian World*, which might have been expected to take greater offense, wrote, “It was inevitable that Mark Twain should have followed his jolly invention, *Adam’s Diary*, with that of his life partner. If the fun is not quite so spontaneous and sympathetic as in the former book, it is nevertheless what no other living humorist could have given us” (“The Literature of the Day/Humor” 557).<sup>13</sup> Still, the unexpected tone was striking enough to achieve the intended effect of prompting readers to view with fresh eyes a narrative that was all too familiar and therefore uninspiring.

To illustrate, Adam’s firsthand account of naming the different aspects of the Creation highlights the arbitrariness of language, even the mythic Adamic language, and its obvious imperfections. It also suggests the inevitability of minor disagreements between spouses, even within the prototypical Christian marriage. Adam laments that he is not the unquestioned authority on language. On a Tuesday he praises the great waterfall in the garden, but he resents Eve’s



interference in naming it: "The new creature calls it Niagara Falls—why, I am sure I do not know. Says it *looks* like Niagara Falls. That is not a reason, it is mere waywardness and imbecility. I get no chance to name anything myself" ("Extracts from Adam's Diary" 98). Eve also names the dodo, to Adam's chagrin. "Dodo!" Adam writes. "It looks no more like a dodo than I do" ("Extracts from Adam's Diary" 98). A few days later he extends his criticism of sounds seemingly arbitrarily assigned when Eve suggests the Garden, now renamed "Niagara Falls Park," would make for a nice vacation spot: "Summer resort—another invention of hers—just words, without any meaning" ("Extracts from Adam's Diary" 100). Adam, ever rational and pragmatic, wants explainable reasons for anything undertaken, and his perspective destabilizes the common nineteenth-century Christian assumption that everything in the Garden of Eden was ordered and purposeful. In Twain's account, half of the living human race initially objects to names that, years later, their descendants never think to question. Once an object is named, a convention established, it is difficult to change, something Adam learns quickly as Eve swiftly names everything in sight over his silent protests. At the very dawn of human society, Adam suggests that patterns are established not because they are inevitable, inherent, and inviolable, but simply by random chance or meaningless circumstance, and only Adam's naïve, childlike perspective reveals it.

Twain balances the unexpected perspective of Adam with Eve's voice. After publishing "Extracts from Adam's Diary" in *The Niagara Book* in 1893, Twain made minor revisions to the work over the next decade. After composing *Eve's Diary* in 1905, though, he made his most significant revisions, planning to publish the two pieces together. Although that publishing venture never materialized during Twain's lifetime, his correspondence and the texts themselves make it clear that they were supposed to be read together (Baetzhold and McCullough 4–7). With Eve's unique perspective, Twain further complicates the Christian origin myth and distances readers from their previously held assumptions regarding the narrative. Eve's comments on language, for example, help contrast her views with her husband's. For Eve, the names she assigns to elements of the Creation are perfectly rational, though she also implies that she has a "gift" for naming that Adam lacks. As she explains, "The minute I set eyes on an animal I know what it is. I don't have to reflect a moment; the right name comes out instantly, just as if it were an inspiration, as no doubt it is, for I am sure it wasn't in me half a minute before. I seem to know just by the shape of the creature and the way it acts what animal it is" ("Eve's Diary" 23). Contrary to Adam's view that Eve's naming is mere imbecility, Eve insists that she identifies the correct name for everything she sees and that each name is perfectly rational. Furthermore, Eve implies her superiority to Adam by indicating that she receives

the names by inspiration. Despite the apparent contradictions in Eve's statement, her perspective provides an essential element of Twain's defamiliarization project, for it highlights, paradoxically, unity in discord. Like Twain's readers, Eve initially sees nothing amiss in the labels and classifications she accepts for her world, and only through the surprising contrast between these primeval spouses do doubts arise. Opposed to pragmatic Adam, who demands a practical use for every element of the Creation, Eve, who tries to knock stars out of the sky so she can keep them and who fantasizes about stealing the moon, represents creativity, imagination, aesthetics, and compassion.<sup>14</sup>

When Twain turns these two unexpected perspectives regarding language to the first union of humanity, he defamiliarizes not only the relationship between Adam and Eve but also the very foundation of all human societies. Rather than revering the two as a sacred couple divinely appointed to be the model husband and wife for all of humanity, he suggests that the first man and woman were probably a lot like men and women generally. They disagree often, experience frequent misunderstandings, and express general annoyance or frustration with each other. With both narrators side-by-side readers get a full picture of the "stranged" marriage that constitutes humans' first attempt at social organization. While Adam and Eve have been charged with bringing sin into the world, Christians have commonly viewed them as devoted to one another, as the

ideal couple living without any sorrow or trial. So when Adam first encounters Eve, readers expect a blissful union.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Eve appears on scene, her origin apparently a mystery, and Adam writes, “This new creature with the long hair is a good deal in the way” (“Extracts from Adam’s Diary” 98). That Adam refers disparagingly to “the mother of all living” (KJV Genesis 3:20) as “this new creature” immediately disrupts readers’ expectations regarding the nature of this symbolic relationship. Apparently, Adam has no inherent preference or sympathy toward Eve, and he is confused by her emotions. Not only does he not recognize Eve as a potential companion or spouse, but he places her on the level of the other animals in the garden, his only reference point for elements of the Creation that move and act independently. Eve, then, is referred to as “it,” until she teaches Adam pronouns like *she* and *we*. This is not the Eden Twain’s readers imagine.

As is true of many people, Adam tends to criticize what he does not understand. For some time, he has nothing but complaints regarding his new companion: “The new creature eats too much fruit. We are going to run short, most likely.” “It goes out in all weathers, and stumps right in with its muddy feet. And talks.” “There seems to be too much legislation, too much fussing, and fixing, and tidying-up, and not enough of the better-let-well-enough-alone policy” (“Extracts from Adam’s Diary” 99). Adam knows enough, or has learned

enough, to recognize that he should not share such criticisms publically (“[*Mem.* — Must keep that sort of opinions to myself,]” he writes), but because Twain offers readers the unique perspective of his diary, they see the relationship with new light, recognizing how challenging it might be for two humans to adapt to each other’s behaviors without the benefit of other models (“Extracts from Adam’s Diary” 99). Such an unexpected departure from the standard Christian myth requires readers to reconsider their assumptions regarding the first human union. Adam and Eve might be a match made in heaven, but their life together on Earth clearly requires some adaptation. Just as Adam’s raw perspective defamiliarizes the natural world, it also highlights many of the conflicting character traits present between some husbands and wives. For example, he writes that “when the mighty brontosaurus came striding into camp, she regarded it as an acquisition, I considered it a calamity; that is a good sample of the lack of harmony that prevails in our views of things” (Baetzhöld and McCullough 28).<sup>16</sup> Lack of harmony, no doubt, characterizes many unions, not just the most emblematic, and it takes time for Adam to recognize the beauty in what sometimes seems like cacophony.

Eve’s perspective on her relationship with Adam completes the defamiliarization of the well-known marriage. If Adam lacks patience for Eve’s gregarious nature and administrative tendencies, Eve finds Adam dull and

uninspiring. From Eve's first diary entry, Twain presents her as more self-aware and inquisitive than Adam, and she has a natural desire for human companionship that causes readers to second guess the superiority of Adam's self-sufficient, pragmatic attitude. Although Adam seems reasonable and capable in the "Extracts," Eve's voice reclaims for her an essential place in the human family. In contrast to Adam, who "has low tastes, and is not kind," Eve appreciates beauty and possesses a high level of concern for creation, particularly Adam ("Eve's Diary" 698). Adam views Eve's participation in the naming process as annoying and arbitrary, for example, but Eve's diary reveals a genuine sympathy for Adam, who apparently "has no gift in that line, and is evidently very grateful" that she is around to help ("Eve's Diary" 699). Eve tries to get his attention and please him, "improving the estate" and experimenting with fire, but she is repeatedly disappointed, for apparently "*nothing* interests him" ("Eve's Diary" 701, 704). Eve records her emotions often, and though she has moments of happiness, her life prior to the Fall is surprisingly sorrowful, largely because of the "lack of harmony" that Adam points out in their relationship. For Christians who understand Eden as a place of perfection and Adam and Eve as the model union, such details do defamiliarize the marriage.

After treating playfully Adam and Eve's relationship, Twain changes tone in both diaries after the Fall, as if to suggest that belief in a perfect paradise

without flaws stands as a barrier to true human happiness. As Adam and Eve come to better understand their codependence, Twain's attitude becomes less playful, more sympathetic. Without question, "Extracts from Adam's Diary" and *Eve's Diary* reveal a strong preference for the postlapsarian world. Only after their expulsion from the Garden, after experiencing hardship and death, can Adam and Eve gain a full appreciation for each other. Differences that frustrated them in the supposed paradise of Eden now become essential complements in a harsh but ultimately far more satisfying existence in the ordinary world. "Life without him would not be life; how could I endure it?" Eve writes in her final entry ("Eve's Diary" 709). For Adam's part, he comes to see that he "was mistaken about Eve in the beginning," for "it is better to live outside the Garden with her than inside it without her" ("Extracts from Adam's Diary" 107–108). Significantly, Twain revised Adam's final diary entry for republication, highlighting the necessity of mortality's trials in achieving true joy through human connection: "Blessed be the sorrow that brought us near together and taught me to know the goodness of her heart and the sweetness of her spirit!" (Baetzhöld and McCullough 16).<sup>17</sup>

Readers have noted that Twain composed *Eve's Diary* the year after Livy's death, appropriately labeling it his "moving" or "loving eulogy" (Baetzhöld and McCullough 19; Skandera-Trombley, "Afterword" 7). Twain's biographer and

literary executor Albert Bigelow Paine wrote that *Eve's Diary*, "in the widest and most reverential sense, from the first word to the last, conveys [Clemens's] love, his worship, and his tenderness for the one he had laid away." He believed that Twain's final line of that diary, the declaration by Adam at Eve's grave that "wheresoever she was, *there* was Eden," was "perhaps the most tenderly beautiful line he ever wrote" (1225). Indeed, Clemens had similar feelings regarding his own marriage. In a letter to Livy's brother Charley written shortly after her death, he felt lost without her: "Wherever Livy was, that was my country. And now she is gone" (*Which Was the Dream?* 23). In connecting his own marriage to Adam and Eve's and to nationhood, Twain implies that each marriage has the potential to create the world anew, to establish rather than passively perpetuate social norms. Such a vision of marriage decidedly emphasizes agency and individuality.

In displacing Adam and Eve from Eden in order to find their true home, Twain affirms the notion that marriage based on free, unfettered choice builds society from the ground up. Adam and Eve do not come together outside of the Garden because of social pressure. There is no Mr. Johnson or Mr. Wilson to wag a finger at them, coercing them to marry. In fact, their union seems highly improbable for most of the diaries. In Twain's account, Adam and Eve coming together is no simple process, but it is authentic and unencumbered. Without any



models or instruction, they flounder in ways that are unexpected and comical but instructive. While their initial contact is marked by an irrepressible urge to speak their view of the world in the act of naming their surroundings, they eventually also learn to listen. America's union was similarly unprecedented, the first political and social experiment of its kind, and it would also experience moments of dissonance. Ultimately, however, America did not have to insist on complete concord to maintain its strength and national identity. The illusion of Edenic utopianism shattered by war, Americans could now really get down to the business of learning to live with each other, to listen to each other. In an era of conformity, they needed to rediscover the defining traits of their nation by hearkening to the distinct voices within her.

For all of Twain's late-life cynicism, whether toward the "United States of Lyncherdom" or the human race generally, the tone of *Eve's Diary* is surprisingly affirmative. Unlike some Americans, Mark Twain envisioned a reunited nation after the Civil War that approximated more closely than ever the core principles outlined in its founding documents. He communicated that vision, in part, by defamiliarizing marriage, a predominant metaphor of the American experiment. Helping Americans reimagine the conventions and limitations of traditional marriages could then lead readers to reimagine a more expansive nation, freed from the restrictive and often hypocritical mores of Victorian propriety, the

destructive idealism of literary romanticism, and the oppressing prejudice of racism and sexism. For America to truly be a land of egalitarian democracy, equal opportunity, and firm justice, the white, middle class needed not only to increase its tolerance for beliefs, practices, and lifestyles different from its own, but also to strip away many of society's trappings that had accumulated over years, the unwritten rules of social behavior that gave the nation a sense of stability but that also masked or even encouraged social injustices. Twain understood how challenging such a project might be. Raw social relations experienced without the guiding principles of tradition and convention could be uncomfortable. Indeed, the marriage of a nation coming together after the Civil War would have to be unconventional to succeed, more open and flexible than it had been. Americans would need to learn to be adaptable in the face unexpected forms of diversity, for continued insistence on narrow, prejudicial, or destructive behaviors or actions simply out of habit or convention could undermine the entire American experiment. For all his criticisms, Twain maintained hope in that experiment, for he understood that a nation that let arbitrary conventions keep it from pursuing its core principles and promise would be nothing less than farcical.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The effect of Clemens's marriage on his writing has been the subject of much critical debate. Van Wyck Brooks felt that Twain was emasculated by Livy and that his writing suffered irreparable harm on account of his marriage. Bernard DeVoto and others have seriously called into question such interpretations. In any case, the fact remains that, for Sam Clemens the man, marriage was personally and permanently rewarding.

<sup>2</sup> As if in their own farcical marriage, the two personas combined in a single unit and mutually influenced each other while maintaining distinct identities, even if they seemed hard to separate at times. Unlike a marriage, however, Clemens and Twain were not separate beings, and one could never divorce his mind entirely from the other.

<sup>3</sup> According to Harriet Elinor Smith, Twain stalled in his composition of *Roughing It* during the fall of 1870, after writing only eight or so chapters. By his own account years later, he claimed that he could not write without a cigar, and that as soon as he took up the practice again, he finished the book without difficulty. Smith notes Twain's tendency to disremember or exaggerate episodes from his past, but she concludes that the key points of Twain's account of his smoking seem to align with available evidence regarding the composition of *Roughing It*. After struggling to write for several months, during which time Twain limited himself to two hours of smoking on Sundays, Twain finally took up daily smoking again in early 1871. Only then did he compose, or at least revise, the majority of the Mormon material. See *Roughing It* 818, 842.

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Elinor Smith and Edgar Marquess Branch, editors of the Works of Mark Twain edition of *Roughing It*, find no evidence that Mr. Johnson had a real-life model (*Roughing It* 600n). Nibbelink concurs that Twain invented Mr. Johnson simply as a character through whom he could write whatever he fancied about polygamy without having to attribute the statements to his narrator or imply their veracity (3).

<sup>5</sup> Sam Clemens met Charles Farrar Browne, who wrote and performed under the pseudonym Artemus Ward, while living in Virginia City, and the two became immediate friends. Similar in tone and content to Twain's account of Brigham Young's domestic affairs, "A Visit to Brigham Young" was published in *Artemus Ward, His Book* (1862). Other aspects of Twain's account, such as referring to Brigham Young as an absolute monarch or sovereign, had their

origin in *Artemus Ward; His Travels* (1865). Although Twain takes the premise of a visitor describing Young's home life and some of the content from Ward's descriptions, he diverges in important ways from his fellow humorist.

<sup>6</sup> In a 13 Feb. 1870 letter to Mary Fairbanks, Clemens writes about his difficulties in adjusting to keeping a coachman and having to dress the man in finer clothes than he himself wears (*Mark Twain's Letters* 4: 71).

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Cumming, appointed governor of the Utah Territory by President James Buchanan, left the territory after Lincoln's inauguration, knowing he would not be reappointed by a Republican president. In his absence, the territorial secretary Francis H. Wootton was serving as the acting governor at the time of the Clemenses' visit (*Roughing It* 591n).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sattelmeyer, Laura Skandera-Trombley, and Linda A. Morris offer different readings, or at least emphasize different aspects of the story. Sattelmeyer finds most significant Twain's depiction of Kate's seduction by a stranger and the puzzle over who are the protagonists and who are the villains ("How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Wilson" 98). Skandera-Trombley coins the term "gender-trickster" to describe those characters, like Nancy and Kate both, who draw attention to the fact that gender is socially constructed ("Mark Twain's Cross-Dressing Oeuvre" 93, 94n). Because "Nancy Jackson" involves coerced transvestism, a forced marriage between two women, and the imposition of "fatherhood" on an innocent young woman, Morris finds the story the most radical, sensational, and grim of what have been termed Twain's transvestite tales. In her view, it is precisely because Twain does *not* imagine any type of lesbian relationship between Nancy and Kate, which would have granted Nancy some degree of autonomy and power, that the story is so dark (142, 148).

<sup>9</sup> The story was untitled at the time of Twain's death. Albert Bigelow Paine called it "Feud Story and the Girl Who Was Ostensibly a Man." It was first published by Robert Sattelmeyer in 1987 in the *Missouri Review* as "How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Winslow."

<sup>10</sup> After introducing him as Budjurnsen Budjuggersen Budjorgensen, Twain uses the name Bjurnsen Bjuggersen Bjorgensen for the rest of the tale. The purpose in dropping the "ud" from each name after including it on the first mention is unclear, if it was intentional, but as Hamlin Hill points out in his edited version of the story, the name Bjuggersen puns on buggery, just as Wapping evokes thumping.

<sup>11</sup> Relevant details of the affair and the three letters Clemens wrote Livy regarding the incident were printed together with the story in 1981 by The Friends of the Bancroft Library, with an Introduction and Afterword by Hamlin Hill.

<sup>12</sup> In an autobiographical dictation on 10 April 1907, Twain claimed that he originally changed Alice's sex to male to make the story more marketable, indicating that a story regarding the possibility of a premarital sexual affair was too shocking for his readers. If Twain's explanation is genuine, he must have believed that his audience would not have imagined any homosexual undertones in the story, that by casting Alice as a male, he instantly removed in his readers' minds any possibility of sexual relations. John Cooley finds that nearly impossible, arguing that Twain's 1907 dictation simply amounts to authorial posturing (82). Susan Gillman agrees, adding that the autobiographical dictation constitutes intentional fiction and therefore becomes part of the complex set of documents that all contribute to the story (302). Hamlin Hill is not quite as ready to dismiss Twain's explanation. Twain initially marketed the story to *Harper's*, Hill explains, and he may have honestly believed that its genteel readership was naïve enough to see the relationship between "Alice" and Bjorgensen as "innocent." That Twain himself recognized the homosexual possibilities, though, is unmistakable, according to Hill (*Wapping Alice* 78). Regardless of his motivations, it is exceedingly clear that Twain's decision to cast Alice as a man results in a marriage far more "stranged" than would otherwise be the case.

<sup>13</sup> For additional reviews, see Budd 415–21, 531–37, 557–63.

<sup>14</sup> Many instances of Adam's pragmatism could be offered. In one representative example, Eve criticizes Adam for going over the waterfalls. He replies, "I supposed it was what the Falls were for. They have no other use that I can see, and they must have been made for something" ("Extracts from Adam's Diary" 100).

<sup>15</sup> See Genesis 2:23–24: "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

<sup>16</sup> When Twain wrote *Eve's Diary* he interposed additional "extracts" from Adam's diary.

<sup>17</sup> In the original, 1893 *Niagara Book* version, Twain had attributed the Fall of Man to a poor joke, an old chestnut. Adam's final entry, then, expresses gratitude for the "chestnut that brought [them] near together" ("Extracts from Adam's Diary" 108).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Yellow Fever: Sui Sin Far's Foreign Marriages

"Love, in this country, must be free, or it is not love at all."  
—Sui Sin Far, "Mrs. Spring Fragrance"

If Samuel Clemens had great joy in marriage and Mark Twain had great fun with it, Edith Eaton avoided it altogether, while Sui Sin Far could not escape it. The unhappy daughter of an English father and Chinese mother, Eaton felt a deep and abiding lack of belonging. In her autobiographical essay "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," first published in the *Independent* in 1909, she confesses that her parents' peculiar union tormented her: "He is English, she is Chinese. I am different to both of them—a stranger, tho their own child" (222). In the same essay she hints, through the experience of a supposed acquaintance, that she herself resisted marrying because suitors lacked appreciation for her racial heritage. But though Eaton never married, when she took up a pen and a pseudonym to advocate for the Chinese in America during a time of intense Sinophobia, it was to the topic of marriage that Sui Sin Far most frequently turned. Marriage may be the most ubiquitous institution in human societies, but

in writing about taboo and exotic interracial and arranged marriages, she gave matrimony a decidedly foreign feel.

In the late nineteenth century, anti-Chinese literature was good business. Bret Harte made a name for himself with “Plain Language from Truthful James” (1870), a poem that made use of popular stereotypes of Chinese immigrants and seemed to decry the “heathen Chinese.” Harte always insisted that the poem was a satirical indictment of racism, but Americans did not read it that way, and Harte did not hesitate to capitalize on the reputation he earned from misreadings. In fact, seven years later he and Mark Twain would collaborate on the play “Ah Sin” (1877), intended to showcase the Chinese character of the same name from “Plain Language.” The collaboration was a disaster and the play unsuccessful, but the writers’ assumption that “the Chinese question” would increasingly demand the nation’s attention proved accurate. Within five more years, anti-Chinese sentiment culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Literature that lacked Harte’s or Twain’s sympathy for Chinese immigrants became increasingly common and popular leading up to the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup>

First published in the San Francisco weekly newspaper the *Wave* in 1897, Frank Norris’s “The Third Circle” typifies what William Wu refers to as “Yellow Peril” literature. Norris’s title refers to the secret workings of San Francisco’s Chinese District, “the part that no one ever hears of” (13), and his descriptions



seep with racism. His narrator references, for example, the “dreadful life that wallows down there in the lowest ooze of the place” (13) and contrasts the Chinese with the “fresh, vigorous, healthful prettiness only seen in certain types of unmixed American stock” (16). The story highlights the supposed ring of crime in Chinatowns that preys on and enslaves women. When Hillegas takes his fiancé Harriett Ten Eyck to a restaurant in Chinatown without the assistance of a guide, he unwittingly jeopardizes her safety. When he leaves her for a few minutes to check on their food, she is kidnapped. “He never saw her again,” the narrator informs. “No white man ever did” (21). For the next twenty years she lives in a small basement of an opium den with other enslaved women, preparing drugs and, presumably, sexually servicing her captors, for, by now, she “like um China boy better” (25). Though the general racism of the story is obvious, the underlying logic of “The Third Circle” is that a debased underground life in Chinatowns directly results from a lack of Chinese women in the bachelor societies of western America.

Men greatly outnumbered women among the Chinese population in the United States during the Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, but that sex imbalance only increased after the United States federal government passed the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which strictly limited Chinese immigration but virtually ended it entirely for

Chinese women. Occasional exceptions were made for wives of merchants and a few other exempt classes, but by the turn of the century, the ratio of Chinese men to Chinese women in the United States was nearly twenty-seven to one (Hsu 16).<sup>2</sup> According to the 1870 census, nearly 72 percent of Chinese women living in the United States worked as prostitutes as part of a vast network of indentured servitude, a number that dropped significantly over the coming decades but that led to a lasting, negative perception of all Chinese women, a perception reflected in legislation as well as in literature (Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943" 97, 107).

Ironically, Chinese immigrants were accused of being un-American because they did not marry and start families, refusing to put down roots, even though Chinese women were largely restricted from entering the country and interracial marriage was strongly discouraged when it was not banned.<sup>3</sup> Under federal law, white women who married Chinese men forfeited their American citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Charles Lummis, editor of the literary magazine *The Land of Sunshine*, reflects this prejudice toward unmarried Chinese men. In his column "In the Lion's Den" he laments that the Chinaman "does not become a citizen. He is not assimilated, and he is not assimilable. He has no home, no wife, no child—and is prone to the vices of the homeless man. . . . As for his heart, it is never here at all" (369). In addition to accusations of national disloyalty directed

at Chinese immigrants, mainstream Americans also tended to assume that the men, lacking the womanly influence of wives, developed vices that threatened stable societies, particularly the solicitation of prostitutes, drug abuse, and gambling. J. Torrey Connor's "Only John," a journalistic piece describing a world that Martha J. Cutter has characterized as a "nightmare of gambling, prostitution, and opium addiction," typifies these attitudes (263). In it, Connor writes that opium "is the Chinaman's solace for the ills of life" and that he "is an inveterate gambler" (114). Such attitudes and language were typical in journals and newspapers.

Since her rediscovery in 1976, Sui Sin Far has been recognized as the first Asian American fictionist. In the 1890s she began to write short stories from the perspective of Chinese Americans. Contrasting sharply with the popular anti-Chinese literature of the time, Sui Sin Far's treatment of her subject challenged the widespread and widely accepted racial prejudice that existed around the turn of the century. In addition to the prejudice toward Chinese immigrants she witnessed firsthand, especially while living in Seattle and San Francisco, the journalist Sui Sin Far also read widely from newspapers and literary magazines that carried Yellow Peril literature. In fact, she would publish some of her stories in the same magazines, so she was familiar with the genre. Criticism on Sui Sin Far's fiction from the last four decades emphasizes her ability to give Chinese

Americans a voice at a time of violent anti-Chinese sentiment.<sup>5</sup> Some critics, such as Lorraine Dong and Marion K. Hom, find that, despite her identification with Chinese Americans, Sui Sin Far could never envision a space in which the two cultures could coexist harmoniously (165). Others, like Carol Roh-Spaulling, emphasize that Sui Sin Far's deepest sympathies rest not with Chinese or white Americans at all, but primarily with those of mixed race, like herself (156). Still, most agree with Diana Birchall that "her continuing efforts to portray Chinese people and culture sympathetically to white audiences in a way that was unfamiliar and thought provoking broke new ground" (79).

By deconstructing racial stereotypes, Sui Sin Far ran the risk of offending the majority culture of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, but she also rightfully earned her position, critics agree, as a pioneer of Chinese-American literature. Her most significant contribution in this respect came with her only collection of short stories in 1912, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, which, as the title suggests, deals predominantly with familial issues of Chinese Americans. Critics have noted Sui Sin Far's preoccupation with marriage and children. Hsuan L. Hsu points out that Sui Sin Far's writings are often set in Chinese settlements, but they focus on the experiences of women and children rather than on the "bachelor community" environment prevalent among the Chinese population of the United States (14). Annette White-Parks finds that, with the

restrictions placed upon women during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, women writers had to use subversive techniques in order to comment about broad cultural issues. She notes that, for Sui Sin Far, marriage and the home served as a microcosm of society in which she could safely but effectively challenge mainstream opinions or behaviors (149). A few critics, such as Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Yu-Fang Cho, have even made Sui Sin Far's use of marriage in her short stories the exclusive focus of several articles. These pieces of scholarship emphasize that depicting families offered Sui Sin Far a potential means for humanizing Chinese characters.

Sui Sin Far's fiction, and her treatment of marriage in particular, "broke new ground" in another important way, however. Rather than simply writing about married Chinese doing and saying the same things as white couples, Sui Sin Far intentionally seeks out curious marriages that are conspicuous, sensational, or even dangerous. By embracing the unthinkable possibility of interracial marriage between Chinese and whites, as well as the alien concept of arranged marriages, she creates in her fiction a decidedly foreign feel that causes American readers to revise, that is, to re-see, to examine again, their own nation's practices. Providing such a fresh perspective is the basic goal of defamiliarization, or *ostranenie*. In fact, with its Russian root *strana*, meaning "country," Viktor Shklovsky's neologistic term can be translated literally as "to

make to feel like a foreigner.”<sup>6</sup> That concept accurately defines Sui Sin Far’s literary project. A biracial writer who had lived in England, Canada, Jamaica, and the United States, she consistently presents contrapositions based on national or cultural expectations, only to invert them. Although she selects for her fiction marriages that are distinctly unusual, she does not always highlight their strangeness. Whereas Twain defamiliarizes marriage by emphasizing the outlandishness of, say, polygamy or transvestite marriages while subtly suggesting the familiar within them, Sui Sin Far frequently presents uncommon unions as if they were already familiar to her readers. This innovative technique creates a basic but important reversal: unassimilable Chinese immigrants in her fiction seem comfortable in the domestic spaces of America, while Sui Sin Far’s white readers feel slightly out of place, like foreigners, as it were.

By treating marriages among Chinese Americans in this particular way, Sui Sin Far not only humanizes immigrants, but she admits them directly into the home, into the heart of the nation. Because ideas of American identity were so inextricably tied to marriage, introducing the foreign into the domestic space unsettled mainstream attitudes and assumptions. As with any displacement, though, new position creates new perspective. Americans made to feel like strangers in their own land were to look with fresh eyes at the assumptions underlying their social and legal systems. By weaving marginalized groups into

the fabric of the nation through “stranged” marriages, Sui Sin Far hoped that un-American Sinophobia would become readily apparent. Sui Sin Far’s fiction had another goal, however, one even more fundamental to the nation’s identity. With their foreign perspective, Americans were to see again with fresh eyes and rededicate themselves to the hallmark of their native land—the supremacy of free, individual choice, even when, or especially when, custom, convention, culture, or conformity seek to efface difference.

*Bringing the Foreign Home: Interracial Marriage*

Among her many surprising reversals, Sui Sin Far inverts common tropes of anti-Chinese literature in her fiction, such as in “The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese” (1910), to reclaim Chinese immigrants, especially women, from prejudicial treatment in print and champion individualism in America.<sup>7</sup> The provocative title of her story recalls the stereotypes of Yellow Peril fiction, in which white women learn to “like um China boy better,” but the story repeatedly turns expectations on their head, disorienting readers and causing them to reconsider strongly held beliefs. In the process, Sui Sin Far interrogates the assumptions that marriages of the traditional or proper sort indeed protect and perpetuate the highest ideals of the nation and that a white woman achieves the fullest and most complete expression of her

individuality in entering into a submissive marital relationship with a white man.

Like much anti-Chinese literature of the time, “The Story of One White Woman” describes the victimization of a woman, but the culprit here is quite unexpected. The protagonist Millie is not mistreated by a debased Chinese man, but by her white husband, James Carson. When she overhears Carson making romantic overtures to another woman, she promptly leaves him, taking with her their infant daughter. Shortly after, Carson obtains a divorce on grounds of abandonment. As with other short fiction of the time, Sui Sin Far cautions against the abuses and exploitation at the hands of men, but she redirects the criticism from Chinese Americans to the white middle-class.

Employing a conventional but emotionally abusive and physically threatening marriage, she reveals the hypocrisy in accusing Chinese bachelor societies of predatory treatment of women. Fifteen years older than his bride, Carson himself spends sixteen years of his adult life as a bachelor. Judging from his treatment of Minnie and his general assumptions about marriage, he is just as prone to the supposed negative influences of single living as the Chinese men stereotyped in Yellow Peril literature. He demeans Minnie not only for her “little jokes” and stories, which begin to bother him shortly after their marriage, but also for her commitment to domestic roles. In fact, Minnie comes to realize that



she has become the recipient of Carson's "contempt" because she shows little interest in stereotypically masculine interests, such as politics and baseball (67). Though misogynistic ideas are certainly not limited to unmarried men, Carson's derisive attitudes toward traditional femininity seem to have developed long before he finally marries. Minnie surmises that she was a "novelty to him" at the outset of the marriage, "he having lived a bachelor existence until he was thirty-four," but it is "not long" before he grows "restive and cross" in the relationship (67). Additionally, he approximates the negative stereotypes usually reserved for Chinese bachelors when he displays sexual intemperance. Unlike the men of those bachelor societies, Carson has a devoted wife who seeks to please him, but her influence does nothing to curb his passions, and he makes advances toward another woman when his wife is in an adjacent room.

Carson not only exhibits insensitivity and infidelity, but he also becomes threatening and even violent after Minnie leaves him, once again reflecting the antagonists of anti-Chinese literature. Like the un-American polygamists of anti-Mormon literature, lustful Chinese men of Sinophobic stories frequently prey on helpless women and kidnap children, such as in Olive Dibert's "The Chinese Lily" (1903). In "The Story of One White Woman," however, it is the white ex-husband who displays intimidating behaviors that threaten peaceful social stability. When Carson meets Minnie on the street after more than a year apart,

he blocks her path, “planting himself in front of [her],” and condescendingly comments on her appearance: “Well, now, you are looking pretty well” (74). Shortly after, he sends her a note expressing a desire to reunite, fixating on her beauty and sexuality. “I was surprised to see you the other day, prettier than ever—and much more of a woman” (74). When Minnie ignores his letter, he threatens to take their child, and she moves to another part of town. Carson tracks her down and stalks her for a year until accosting her one day, grabbing her arm and again threatening to take the child if she struggles or makes a scene. Having gathered information regarding her situation, which he believes he can use as leverage in court to gain custody of Minnie’s daughter, he demands that they reconcile and live together again as husband and wife. Though Minnie refuses and Carson shortly thereafter dies of apoplexy, his actions nevertheless reveal the menace that early-twentieth-century American women could face even from white men.

Failed marriages were by no means new in fiction, but for Sui Sin Far, who endows marriages in her short stories with so much significance, the fact that one of the few instances of divorce occurs between white Americans directly challenges the national narrative that marriages of the right kind lead to greater social cohesion and stability. That skepticism merely reflected an already troubling trend among American marriages. Divorces were increasing across the

nation, and the American West, where the divorce rate was already higher than in the rest of the country, saw divorces more than double in the three decades leading up to the twentieth century (Riley 5). Many Americans felt a sense of general anxiety over the state of marriage and family, but Sui Sin Far provides a surprising reversal when family is stabilized and social order reestablished with an unfamiliar marriage.

Despite the significance of the deterioration of Minnie and Carson's relationship, this story centers not on a failed marriage but on a successful, though controversial, one. As suggested by its provocative title, "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" seeks to disrupt cultural and gender assumptions through its treatment of an interracial marriage, which Sui Sin Far accomplishes by continuing to invert typical Yellow Peril literature. Minnie's abuse at the hands of her white husband and his threats against the child of the story clearly flip the usual trope of Chinese men sexually exploiting women and kidnapping children, but the most profound indictment of racism comes through Minnie's second marriage. It is through that second marriage, not the failure of the first, that Sui Sin Far dramatically introduces a foreign element into her fiction and makes her readers feel slightly out of place.

To critique injustice against Chinese Americans, Sui Sin Far recognized the efficacy of employing a social arrangement charged with carrying the

society's most deeply held values and beliefs. Among Americans' expectations for proper marriages, the demand that spouses be of the same race was especially strong. Katharine D. Newman notes that "forbidden love between young people of different races or religions is the American form of *Romeo and Juliet*" (15–16). Yu-Fang Cho also notes the important relationship between proper marital conventions and America's sense of itself. She contends that proper marriages, namely heterosexual intraracial marriages, offered for those excluded from the national family a path to emancipation, humanity, and acceptance (127). In Cho's view, the women of Sui Sin Far's fiction see conforming to American matrimonial expectations as a way to reclaim their identity, erased through stereotypes of Chinese women as prostitutes and slaves. In reality, though, Sui Sin Far relies far more on non-conforming women and unconventional marriages to make her strongest statements about national belonging.

Minnie's marriage to the Chinese man Liu Kanghi offers perhaps the most explicit example of such efforts. From the first line of the story, Sui Sin Far acknowledges the most exceptional aspect of Minnie's second marriage: "Why did I marry Liu Kanghi, a Chinese?" (66). Narrating her history at least a year after her marriage, Minnie recognizes how controversial the union is, and she reveals that she has become a spectacle in her community. There are "many

Americans" who "look down" upon her simply on account of her spouse's race. On top of this general disapproval, "men cast upon [her] the glances they cast upon sporting women," seeing her as a prostitute or otherwise sexually promiscuous rather than faithfully wedded (77). Through her marriage, Minnie has made herself a spectacle, an object of both derision and intrigue. This emphasis on how Minnie is viewed illustrates the degree to which communities automatically provide surveillance of marital arrangements and sexual norms.

Notwithstanding the conspicuousness of her position, Minnie's explanation of her decision to marry a Chinese man is anything but head-turning. "Well, in the first place, because I loved him," she states as her primary reason, adding, "in the second place, because I was weary of working, struggling and fighting with the world" (66–67). Later, she reemphasizes her motivation: "Loving Liu Kanghi, I became his wife" (77). Such reasons to marry, love and security, are commonplace, the same that might motivate any woman to seek conventional marriage. In a response to the story's opening question regarding the choice to intermarry, Minnie's narrative essentially asks, "Why should I not?" This is hardly a marriage presented as deviant or perverted. Indeed, Sui Sin Far takes the absolute taboo subject of Chinese-white marriage and normalizes it. Minnie notices the looks she receives, but they do not affect her. In fact, she feels quite at home with her foreign marriage.

Even the narrative leading up to the Minnie's marriage to Liu Kanghi inverts Yellow Peril literature tropes and readers' expectations. After leaving Carson, Minnie faces the stigma of being a divorced woman in early-twentieth-century America. Rejected by her former friends, she and her child sink further and further into poverty and vulnerability. Having given up on life, she becomes an easy target for exploitation. At Minnie's lowest point, Sui Sin Far evokes dangers common to Yellow Peril literature. Walking through a dark, deserted area of town at night preparing to commit suicide, Minnie is watched by a lone Chinese man. As she recalls, "A strong hand was laid upon my arm and I was swung around against my will." The man asks to hold her baby, and she "surrendered [her] child to the voice," a stark contrast to the fight she puts up against her ex-husband when he desires to see the girl (72, 76). The Chinese man tells her to follow him, and she obeys. For those familiar with stories of kidnappings and sexual exploitation in anti-Chinese literature, the scene appears predictable until Sui Sin Far offers the surprising and sudden reversal: "Thus I met Liu Kanghi, the Chinese who afterwards became my husband. I followed him, obeyed him, trusted him from the very first." The possibility that there could be something amiss here is never presented. "It never occurred to me to ask myself what manner of man was succoring me," Minnie writes. "I only knew that he was a man, and that I was being cared for as no one had ever cared for

me since my father died" (72). Rather than predator, the Chinese man in this story becomes a savior.

While the provocative premise of "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" struck at mainstream America's anxiety over miscegenation, the notion of a white woman willingly marrying a Chinese man in preference to a white husband had some basis in reality. Chinese American journalist Wong Chin Foo addressed this very issue as early as 1888 when he wrote of the state of Chinese Americans living in New York City for *The Cosmopolitan*. Pointing out that there were over one hundred children born of white mothers and Chinese fathers living in New York and that the majority of these mothers were poor working class women who "through necessity married well-to-do Chinamen," Wong claimed that "the Chinamen often make them better husbands than men of their own nation, as quite a number of them who ran away from their former husbands to marry Chinamen have openly declared" (308). According to Jinhua Teng, this trend of interracial marriage between Chinese men and white women gained increasing attention at the end of the nineteenth century. "The public concern over 'miscegenation' was motivated to a large degree by Yellow Perilist fears," she writes, noting that this concern derived from the perceived threat against the "sanctity of white womanhood" (70).

Jane Hwang Degenhardt adds that, for some conservative Americans, the perceived threat against white female sexuality from Asian immigrants was compounded by changing attitudes regarding gender roles during the Progressive Era. By bringing about a marriage between a Chinese man and a white woman mistreated, divorced from, and then stalked by her first husband in "The Story of One White Woman," Sui Sin Far casts a Chinese man as the rescuer of female sexuality under attack. Controversial as that marriage was because it involved distinct races, Minnie and Kanghi's marriage is very conservative in all other ways. According to Minnie, her first husband James Carson denied her the satisfaction of living out her gendered identity by insisting that she seek accolades outside the home. In contrast, she praises her Chinese husband because he "never sought to take away from me the privilege of being but a woman" (77). Degenhardt finds that by "invoking patriarchal values as a vestige of authentic Americanness that is being eroded by social Progressivism, [Sui Sin Far's] stories fantasize the Chinese immigrant as a recuperative agent and protector of the debilitated white family" (656). The Chinese man is brought into the American home to save it.

In actuality, Liu Kanghi recuperates and protects not only the white family but also the individual. Unlike Carson, he empowers Minnie to use her talents to achieve greater self-sufficiency without expecting certain behaviors.



Before proposing marriage, Liu finds accommodations for Minnie and finds work for her. With his help, she is able to recover a sense of self-worth and identity. In extolling Liu's virtues, Minnie emphasizes that he made her "independent, not only of others but of himself" (77). Furthermore, Minnie enjoys, after her second marriage, "the privilege of being but a woman," free to express her own individuality. Though she chooses to conform to traditional gender role expectations, the story emphasizes that she is free to do so on her own terms, that her unconventional marriage grants her greater agency. Whatever shock readers experience in the casual treatment of interracial marriage, they are intended to see the absolute necessity of personal liberty within any union.

In "The Story of One White Woman," then, in an important reversal, a white man plays the role of menacing threat and sexual aggressor, while the Chinese American man is cast as the protector of the "sanctity of white womanhood." Minnie makes these roles clear in her final confrontation with Carson. "For all your six feet of grossness, your small soul cannot measure up to his great one," she tells him in response to his derision that she has placed her affections in a Chinese man. While Carson is "unwilling to protect and care for the woman who was [his] wife or the little child [he] caused to come into this world," Liu Kanghi "succored and saved the stranger woman, treated her as a

woman, with reverence and respect” and “gave her child a home” (77).

Statements such as this, which expelled a white husband and father from the domestic space and replaced him with an Asian man, surely disrupted the mainstream national narrative regarding Chinese immigrants. Elizabeth Ammons finds such characterizations unconvincing, identifying as a “major problem” in Sui Sin Far’s fiction her “idealization of Chinese men” (114), but they make sense in the context of Sui Sin Far’s efforts to invert the tropes of Yellow Peril literature. In reality, Sui Sin Far’s narrator admits flaws in Liu’s character, but that they are minor and contrast sharply with Carson’s reprehensible behavior. Ultimately, through those inversions, Sui Sin Far places the risky subject of interracial marriage in familiar territory and asks all readers to examine their received stereotypes regarding race and gender.

Lorraine Dong and Marlon K. Hom find that, despite Sui Sin Far’s efforts to humanize the Chinese in America, she never envisioned a space in which the two distinct cultures would harmoniously coexist. Notwithstanding her “gallant defense of the Chinese,” they write, she “could not help but be influenced by the contemporaneous belief that the Chinese and white American cultures were mutually exclusive and could not be mixed” (165). “The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese,” however, posits just such a possibility in a microcosm. Specifically, Minnie’s unconventional marriage to Liu serves as a

useful metaphor for a multiracial nation, one marked by unity in diversity, for Minnie never seeks to erase the racial or cultural differences between her and her husband. Rather, she insists that despite those differences, the intimacy, mutual respect, and support that she enjoys with Liu exceed in every way her first marital experience. Racial sameness meant little for Minnie in a marriage characterized by disdain and condescension. Of course, she and Liu both have personal flaws and idiosyncrasies, as do all spouses. According to Minnie, Liu is “hot-tempered and, at times, arbitrary,” but such traits do not threaten marital commitment (77). Minnie’s marriages speak not only to personal relationships but also to the nation as a whole: healthy, productive, and satisfying associations depend less on homogeneity than on the ability complement one another. As Minnie’s friend Mrs. Rogers claims, the majority of men “found more comfort in a woman who was unlike rather than like themselves” (68). This “stranged” marriage, therefore, is an affirmation of individualism as much as it is of union.

Arguably, Carson and Minnie’s relationship fails precisely because Carson insists that Minnie be more like him—ambitious, well educated, serious-minded, and eager to engage in social issues. Miss Moran, whom he praises and attempts to win over despite his marriage to Minnie, is described as “masculine-featured” with “a head for figures” (68-69). Their compatibility as spouses, however, is never explored, for Miss Moran abruptly and derisively ends their

professional relationship as soon as Carson broaches the subject of romance. Still, Carson serves as a useful caution against the dangers of a nation that demands strict conformity and seeks to erase vital difference. America's true strength, Sui Sin Far implies repeatedly, lies not in like-mindedness but in multiplicity.

Minnie is estranged from Carson because he denies her independence and individuality. Readers are estranged from him because he willfully transgresses marital commitments seen as essential to the well-being of the nation. The resulting distance makes room for Sui Sin Far to introduce a stranger, and, in contrast to Carson, she makes Liu right at home in the American domestic space. He is a true man, Minnie insists, willing to guard and maintain the American family. Furthermore, she finds great comfort and satisfaction in the fact that he allows her "the privilege of being but a woman," as she understands it, and grants her autonomy (77). Insistence on sameness, implies Sui Sin Far, whether in terms of race or gender roles, does not guarantee success in relationships and can very often disrupt them. Difference born of authentic individuality holds unions together. Domestic and social partnerships succeed when various roles and even diverse backgrounds combine in a shared vision.

Because Sui Sin Far's defamiliarization project rests on how foreign elements are viewed, and in inverting those images, she frequently employs metaphors of light or vision to represent awareness, understanding, or

affirmation of individuals. Minnie refers to her time before meeting Liu Kanghi as her “dark days,” days that began when her clear view of her role as a woman became clouded under the influence of her first spouse (77). When Liu discovers Minnie walking through the dark streets on the brink of suicide, he immediately seeks to remove her blindness. “Better come over where it is light and you can see where to walk!” he urges. Minnie accepts the invitation, allowing herself to “be led into the light,” where she sees others more clearly than she has in the past (72). When “an electric light under which [they] were passing flashed across [Liu’s] face,” revealing him to be Chinese, Minnie “did not recoil—not even at first,” another instance of Sui Sin Far presenting an unexpected element into her story but immediately normalizing it (72). Although foreignness is never hidden in her fiction, it is not exoticized either. In fact, Liu wears “American clothes” and has “his hair cut”; “even to [. . .] American eyes,” he is a “good-looking young man” (72). Readers are expected to see something foreign but recognize something familiar.

When Minnie examines the stranger carefully, peering beyond superficial markers of identity, she discovers simply that “he was a man,” not a *Chinaman*, as most Americans would label him (72). That is not to say that Minnie ignores or dismisses dissimilarities, nor that readers should. She recognizes clear differences between herself and her rescuer, but rather than shrinking in fear or

suspicion from those differences, she makes those differences the basis of her confidence. "I would much rather live with Chinese than Americans," she explains (72). Later, when James Carson returns, words like "shadow" (74), "cold" and "wet" (75), and "gloom" (75) associate his presence with darkness. Even in the short story's sequel Minnie refers to the "gray memory of James Carson" ("Her Chinese Husband" 78). The implication is clear: white Americans do not see reality clearly, blindly accepting faulty stereotypes regarding Chinese perpetuated through Yellow Peril literature. Like Minnie, they need defamiliarizing reversals to help them see with fresh eyes.

At least one contemporary reviewer recognized and appreciated Sui Sin Far's efforts to break down the stereotypes of Yellow Peril literature through unconventional marriage. In a review of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, the *New York Times* observed that the stories of the collection, though primarily about Chinese Americans, were actually written for white America to combat prejudice. Because of the intensity of anti-Chinese sentiment, such a task, the review claims, "would require well-nigh superhuman insight and the subtlest of methods" ("A New Note in Fiction: Mrs. Spring Fragrance" BR405). As demonstrated here, one of those subtle methods involved appropriating clichéd tropes of Yellow Peril fiction and redirecting them at her audience. To be sure, the reviewer finds significant flaws in Sui Sin Far's art. Like Ammons, for example, the review

criticizes a troubling superficiality in characterization. But if indeed Sui Sin Far aimed to disrupt stereotypes through reversals, her literary choices make sense, for she deals in types. In any case, the review finds that Sui Sin Far's work "has taken courage" and "has struck a new note in American fiction" ("A New Note in Fiction: Mrs. Spring Fragrance" BR405). Of all the stories in the collection, the short review singles out only two stories for special mention. The first is "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese," significant because it is the most explicit in dealing with the issue interracial marriage. The second is its sequel, "Her Chinese Husband" (1910), which builds on the condemnation of interracial prejudice and violence and also complicates Sui Sin Far's efforts to invert the negative tropes of anti-Chinese literature.

In Sui Sin Far's eagerness to reframe racial stereotypes and national prejudice, she never sought to discount the legitimate differences that exist among humans. On the contrary, she celebrated individuality and posited contradistinctions as vital to unions. Less a short story than Minnie's reflection on her marriages, "Her Chinese Husband" emphasizes cultural differences to a much greater extent than "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese." After contrasting Liu Kanghi with James Carson, Minnie reveals that Liu has been murdered by those who disapprove of their relationship. Somewhat surprisingly, Minnie implies that his attackers are not white Americans, who

often did exhibit violent intolerance toward immigrants, but rather members of his own community: “He was brought home at night, shot through the head. There are some Chinese, just as there are some Americans, who are opposed to all progress, and who hate with a bitter hatred all who would enlighten or be enlightened” (83). In another reversal of expectations, Sui Sin Far acknowledges that ignorance and intolerance are not restricted to any particular color. By assigning murderous violence to the Chinese community, Sui Sin Far offers white readers a safe distance from which to reassess Minnie’s relationship and reflect on their own prejudices. Because Minnie and Liu establish such a familiar domestic environment, the violence against him is “stranged,” or out of place, not the relationship itself. Having been rejected by her own race for transgressing marital restrictions, Minnie indicts American prejudice along with the murderer (83). Sui Sin Far draws attention to the injustices inflicted upon Chinese Americans in other short stories, but she employs an unconventional marriage for her sharpest and most poignant critique. Like the polygamy in *Roughing It*, Sui Sin Far’s interracial marriages are less about marital boundaries themselves and more about the everyday attitudes and assumptions of white Americans.

### *Arranging to Choose*

Perhaps even more than interracial marriage, the concept of arranged marriage threatened Americans and their sense of national identity. In the “land



of the free,” in which individual states willfully agreed to enter into a union, the notion that two independent parties could be forced, coerced, or even expected to marry without their own consent or choice offended the foundational principles of the country. California Senator James D. Phelan represented the standard view toward arranged or contracted marriages when he declared that such an arrangement is “no marriage at all” and showed support for banning from the United States wives who sought to enter the country to join husbands they had never met (*Congressional Record* 314). Young Carman, a student at the University of Washington in Sui Sin Far’s short story “Mrs. Spring Fragrance,” understands this perspective. When asked by his Chinese-American neighbor Mr. Spring Fragrance if love must come before the wedding in this country, Carman responds emphatically, “Yes, certainly. . . . Love, in this country, must be free, or it is not love at all” (24). Like most Americans, Carman views as foreign any marital arrangement that appears not to be established through the active exercise of agency on the part of the spouses.

Unsurprisingly, anti-Chinese literature was characterized by a loss of the will, the essential feature of Americanness. Men in Chinese bachelor societies became slaves to vice with no wifely counterinfluence, and women were most often cast as prostitutes with no recourse to escape what essentially amounted to a vast network of sexual slavery. Nancy Cott explains that “in the eyes of

opponents, both prostitutes and 'coolies' inhabited a slavelike status, evidence of Chinese acceptance of authoritative hierarchy and deference. Neither was capable of the free consent and voluntarism requisite for American political allegiance" (137). Not only were working bachelors and prostitutes identified with a loss of the will, but the tradition of arranged marriages in Chinese culture threatened to reinforce prejudice against Chinese immigrants as un-American because such arrangements apparently devalued individual liberty. "An arranged marriage," Cott writes, "represented coercion—whether brokered by a Jewish matchmaker or by a Japanese go-between, it seemed as un-American as Mormon polygamy" (151). Individuals so willing to forfeit their own choice on matters as personal as intimate relationships surely could not appreciate the absolute necessity of exercising individual liberty within a democracy. For a writer trying to defend Chinese immigrants against the stereotypes and prejudices of an America seeking unity in conformity, the topic of arranged marriage must have seemed risky. However, as with taboo interracial marriage, rather than try to avoid the subject in her fiction, Sui Sin Far appropriates arranged marriages by bringing the foreign practice into American homes, familiarizing the exotic. By the end of her career, she was comfortable enough inverting expectations that she even dared to suggest that contracted marriages epitomize the American ideal of individual will because of the daily choices

required of the spouses. This particular form of defamiliarization revealed certain fault lines in Americans' social absolutes, undercutting national assumptions regarding freedom and granting women agency in the process.

Surprisingly, Sui Sin Far's early fiction does little to contradict commonplace American attitudes towards arranged marriages. In fact, the majority of her stories from 1896 to 1898 adopt a tone critical of Chinese traditions generally and arranged marriages specifically, essentially echoing the popular views of late-nineteenth-century America. Whether she unconsciously reflected the dominant ideas of her time or simply felt compelled to write to her audience's expectations out of financial necessity, Sui Sin Far tends in her early fiction not to disrupt prevailing attitudes and assumptions. By examining critically the seemingly arbitrary conventions of Chinese culture in her early fiction, Sui Sin Far eventually was able to regard American ones with fresh eyes. As her writing matured her depictions of arranged marriages take on greater nuance and depth, allowing her to defamiliarize marital customs and encourage her readers to examine familiar conventions with new perspective.

One of Sui Sin Far's first known stories with Chinese characters reflects typical American attitude toward arranged marriage. On the night before her departure to America to be married to a man she has never met, Ku Yum, a young woman betrothed without her consent, behaves as most cultures without

arranged marriages would expect her to behave: she weeps. "Her heart ached sadly," Sui Sin Far writes, "for tomorrow she would no longer be reckoned as belonging to her father's family, but then and for evermore would be the chattel of a stranger" (29).<sup>8</sup> From the short story "Ku Yum," published in June 1896 in *The Land of Sunshine*, this opening passage reaffirms the assumption that a young woman in a forced marriage would feel anguish at the prospect and would be facing virtual slavery in an unwanted union, a very dangerous sentiment in postwar America. Ku Yum's horrors are compounded when she learns that, in the arrangements for her marriage, her maid A-Toy was presented in her place because of the maid's superior beauty. Unwilling to disgrace her father by not following through with the marriage, and equally unwilling to have her husband Tie Sung accuse her and her family of deception, she changes places with A-Toy on the voyage to America. After a week of cruel treatment at the hands of her former servant, now married to her former betrothed, Ku Yum leaps off a veranda to her death.

Despite Sui Sin Far's sympathy for the plight of the Chinese in Canada and America, "Ku Yum" unambiguously criticizes certain Chinese customs or attitudes. The entire process of families making marital arrangements comes under intense scrutiny. In this short story, it is a process of scheming and deception. After presenting A-Toy as their daughter, Ku Yum's parents instruct

Ku Yum to “keep her veil tightly drawn down” during the proxy marriage, lest the groom’s family learn the bride’s true identity and call off the marriage on account of her appearance (29).<sup>9</sup> When Ku Yum later discovers the reason for these “particularly strict injunctions,” she feels enormous shame, presumably the appropriate response from the narrator’s perspective (30). Furthermore, Ku Yum’s father represents the callous attitude that the family’s honor comes before all other considerations, including the wellbeing of his own children. Ku Yum’s internalization of this attitude indirectly leads to her suicide. “I will not [. . .] do aught that will disgrace my father. But I will die before I hear Tie Sung say: ‘I have been deceived,’” she says (30). Unable to live with the impossible dilemma, she does indeed die.

As with much Yellow Peril literature, Chinese culture in this story completely robs a woman of her agency—first, because Ku Yum is bartered in marriage like chattel; secondly, because the circumstances of the arrangement require her to change her identity; and, finally, because an impossible dilemma leads her to take her own life. Chinese women living in America were most often portrayed as prostitutes or slaves without individuality. Though Ku Yum is presented sympathetically, she is subject to the same soul-destroying forces as other women of her race. The most pointed criticism of foreign attitudes comes at the end of the story with Ku Yum’s burial, when her identity is finally fully

erased. Even after her death, her father Ha You insists on maintaining the deception that it was his daughter who entered into the arranged marriage. So when Tie Sung return's Ku Yum's body to China, believing it to be that of the maidservant A-Toy, Ha You allows her to be buried among the slaves in order to avoid disgrace. Now entirely stripped of her identity, Ku Yum enters an anonymous grave while her mother "stood afar off and wept" (31).

Arranged marriage leads to self-effacing suicide in two other early Sui Sin Far stories. As with "Ku Yum," the deaths result from an incongruence between the expectations of Chinese culture and the feelings of young women. In other words, they all reflect commonplace American attitudes. But whereas Ku Yum's trouble comes from the circumstances of her betrothal and her commitment to filial duty, the problems in "A Love-Story of the Orient" (1896) and "Sweet Sin" (1898) stem from the protagonists' unwillingness to marry against their will, in large part because both young women already love someone. This posture, entirely reasonable for Americans, is reflected in a letter from Ku Lau to his lover Mae in "A Love-Story": "If, before I had met you, I had been married by my father to some girl chosen by him and to me unknown, to what a dull existence I should have been doomed! for there is no joy or life where there is no love, and there is no love in such marriages" (205). But American attitudes toward love and marriage combined with Chinese expectations for marriage clash tragically

in these short stories. As Mae and Ku Lau make plans to marry, their parents, independently and without the knowledge of their children, also arrange for them to marry each other. When Mae learns that she has been betrothed, she commits suicide, not realizing the identity of the intended groom. Similarly, the eponymous protagonist of "Sweet Sin" cannot bring herself to marry an American man who holds deep prejudices against the Chinese, despite her love for him, but she cannot bear the thought of leaving him either, particularly to be married off in China to a stranger. Consequently, she commits suicide on the night before her father plans to take her to China to find a suitable husband. These stories seem to imply the literary impossibility of a Chinese American woman freely exercising her agency. Without room in the American collective imagination for such a strong, independent character, she must be killed off.

In all three short stories, Chinese cultural expectations are inescapable and devastating. Such a pattern does not necessarily suggest, however, that Sui Sin Far sought to reject these cultural norms outright. While the custom of arranged marriage seemingly threatens the agency of the three protagonists and readers are meant to sympathize with them, their complete loss of all agency through death actually comes in each case from a refusal to marry, not the arranged marriage itself. Furthermore, in "The Story of Iso" (1896) the young woman who rejects Chinese conventions is presented by the storyteller as a cautionary tale.

Like Mae and Sweet Sin, Iso rejects the idea of marrying against her will, but rather than seeing it as an inescapable problem and succumbing to death, she challenges her parents' judgment and tells them that she will make her own decision regarding the match once she has gotten to know the prospective groom. "I can not marry any man whom I do not know well," she tells them. "Let him come here and see me; let me become acquainted with him before marriage, and after the passing of two months I will tell you whether I will become his wife or not. My husband must be pleasing to me, and whether or not he will be so no one can judge save myself; for we all look through different glasses" (119). Her attitude, though perfectly sensible for cultures that emphasize free choice in marriage, scandalizes both Chinese families involved, and the marriage offer is withdrawn. No more proposals come, a clear consequence, the storyteller suggests, of Iso's loose tongue. Finally, Iso exerts her independence and leaves home. After emigrating with strangers, she apparently leads a lonely life until her early death. Back in China, the older folk repeat her story as evidence of what becomes of a "woman who talks too much" (119).

While "The Story of Iso" seems a straightforward condemnation of individuals who challenge well-respected traditions within a particular culture, Sui Sin Far calls that entire perspective into question with a very brief frame story. Though almost the entirety of "The Story of Iso" is told by old Tai Wang,



the story is prompted by a question from the narrator's unidentified but presumably American cousin. Upon hearing the conclusion of the story, the cousin approves of the narrative but makes a profound observation that changes its meaning: "She who is called in China 'The woman who talks too much' is called by us 'The new woman'" (119). Coined just two years previously, the term "new woman" to describe the progressive feminist movement just before the turn of the century had obviously gained significant traction. Whereas an independent, opinionated woman in China becomes a legendary deterrent example, an American woman displaying similar characteristics is understood to be progressive, even if she is not universally celebrated. Recasting Iso as a "new woman," then, invites a comparison between Chinese and American cultures and marks important shift in Sui Sin Far's fiction. Whereas her early stories about the Chinese derided Eastern traditions seemingly at odds with Western values, the recognition of the correspondence between cultures in "The Story of Iso" leads Sui Sin Far to turn a critical eye toward America's own conventions. The result is a more mature writing marked by increasing nuance and an effort to defamiliarize the nation's unquestioned assumptions. Whereas the women in these early tales seem trapped, truly captives without escape, the women of Sui Sin Far's later writings, even those in arranged marriages, achieve an impressive level of independence and agency.

“The Sing Song Woman” (1898), the earliest work to be included in Sui Sin Far’s 1912 collection of short stories *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, illustrates an important transition in the writer’s depictions of Chinese customs generally and arranged marriages specifically. Although Mag-gee, one of the primary characters of the story, exhibits the same despair and resentment toward arranged marriage as characters in earlier stories, “The Sing Song Woman” is the first story about arranged marriage that does not end in tragedy. Born in America to a Chinese father and white mother, Mag-gee has no interest in her Chinese heritage and certainly not in the custom of arranged marriages. After learning that her father has made arrangements for her to marry a Chinese man and move to China, Mag-gee despairingly offers an American explanation for her feelings to her friend Ah Oi: “I am to be married tonight to a Chinaman whom I have never seen, and whom I can’t bear. It isn’t natural that I should. I always took to other men, and never could put up with a Chinaman” (126). Mischievously, Ah Oi suggests that the two women trade places so that Mag-gee can elope with her lover while Ah Oi takes her place behind the veil in that evening’s wedding ceremony. The ruse works, and Mag-gee is able to escape the devastation of a forced marriage by running off with her true love.

Were that the full story, “The Sing Song Woman” would deviate in tone only mildly from Sui Sin Far’s earlier tales about arranged marriages. The Sing

Song Woman of the title is not Mag-gee, however, and this tale about arranged marriage is also a tale of the actualization of the title character's true identity. The playful actress Ah Oi, who switches places with Mag-gee, has little trouble playing the part of her friend throughout the wedding ceremony, keeping her veil drawn throughout. At the moment of the unveiling, though, Mag-gee's family expresses dismay and outrage upon discovering the deception. They explain to the bridegroom Ke Leang that Ah Oi has tricked them, labeling her an "imposter, an actress" (127). Having learned the art of imitation and gained a reputation as a prankster, Ah Oi seemingly leads a life of carefree guile, but her behavior simply masks her unacknowledged desires and motivations. Only Ke Leang accurately perceives her true character and helps her realize it. While Mag-gee's family hurls insults at Ah Oi, Ke Leang recognizes that, beneath an apparently thoughtless prank, she was motivated by a genuine concern for Mag-gee's happiness. He announces that he will honor the marriage and take Ah Oi to her homeland in China, where she has long secretly wished to be. Significantly, Ke Leang announces in response to Ah Oi's protests that she was only being mischievous, "You shall act no more" (128). Arranged marriage in this case puts an end to deception. Sui Sin Far's inversion, this time through literally switching characters, disrupts expectations surrounding a foreign marital practice and creates space to reconsider assumptions regarding marriage, identity, and free

will. Though Ke Leang had no part in selecting the woman behind the veil in his wedding ceremony, he actively chooses to accept her as his wife. Sui Sin Far brings the foreign home by combining the supposedly un-American practice of arranged marriage with the quintessential American ideal of free choice. That exercise of free will, the first show of “true kindness” that Ah Oi has seen “for many a moon,” turns soft “something in Ah Oi’s breast, which for a long time had been hard as stone” (128). Insofar as the heart symbolizes the core of a person’s identity or soul, Ah Oi achieves individual personhood through a marriage very strange.

As Sui Sin Far displayed more willingness to turn a critical eye toward accepted aspects of American culture and identity, her fiction became increasingly complex. In “The Wisdom of the New” she continues to represent dominant American views toward arranged marriages, but she exhibits far more balance in perspectives. For one thing, the longer story has a larger cast of characters with a wider set of backgrounds, but the characters also tend to confound expectations. By complicating rigid stereotypes, Sui Sin Far does more to defamiliarize traditional marriage in these later stories than she had in her earlier work. Not only does she renegotiate the status of arranged marriage, but she also raises questions regarding commitment and agency in more common matrimonial arrangements.

Wou Sankwei's Americanization begins when he leaves his home in China to find wealth in California so that he can restore his family's prominent position in their small south coast town. Prior to his departure, however, his mother insists that he participate in one final Chinese custom that will ensure he remember his Chinese heritage: he is married to a wife of his mother's choosing. Sankwei moves to America without Pau Lin, his new wife, where he rises economically. As he becomes more Americanized, Sankwei maintains a clear tie to China through his wife and young son, conceived before but born after Sankwei's departure.

Throughout "The Wisdom of the New," multiple perspectives regarding the Wous' foreign marriage place it in American context. This process of defamiliarization not only complicates prevalent assumptions regarding Chinese bachelor societies, but it also results in an affirmation of Pau Lin's agency, despite her willingness to accept an arranged marriage. Sankwei's American friend Adah Charlton finds it strange that Sankwei does not write letters to his wife Pau Lin, but her aunt Mrs. Dean explains that she cannot read anyway and accuses Adah of being "too romantic." "But, Auntie, isn't it dreadful to think that a man should live away from his wife for so many years without any communication between them whatsoever except through others," Adah exclaims, to which her aunt replies, "It is dreadful to our minds, but not to theirs.

Everything with them is a matter of duty. Sankwei married his wife as a matter of duty" (45). Rather than editorializing, as she does in many of her previous works, Sui Sin Far is content in this story to offer multiple perspectives without seeking to suggest to readers how exactly they should view or value those perspectives. These later stories, then, become presentations of full people rather than simply parables with a narrow purpose.

"The Wisdom of the New" offers additional examples of emphasizing the foreignness of certain customs while also seeking to recast them. The narrator reveals that Pau Lin is very open to the possibility of Sankwei taking another wife, undoubtedly a surprise to American readers, especially given the fact that she seems so jealous of Sankwei's female friends and suspicious of the relationship between Adah and her husband. In Pau Lin's eyes, though, it "seemed natural and right" that her husband "should take to himself two wives, or even three, if he thought proper" (51). That Sankwei would, in fact, take another wife seems entirely plausible if he still accepts Chinese customs. He has no particular emotional connection to Pau Lin. When he first meets her in America after their seven-year separation he does not even recognize her, "looking over and beyond her" (45). The narrator reveals that Sankwei adjusts easily to married life, not because he and Pau Lin get along so well but because she does not interfere much with his established routine, even eating her meals

in a separate room. As the narrator describes their relationship, "Pau Lin was more of an accessory than a part of his life" (46). These realities and descriptions counter American notions of proper matrimony and reinforce assumptions about bachelor societies. In other ways, though, Sankwei and Pau Lin's marriage is just like any other, better than many, in fact. Regardless of their differences, Sankwei recognizes that "she was his wife and the mother of his son," and he tries to make her comfortable, providing fine clothing, ornaments, and food (44). More importantly, he also treats her well, for "to be kind to her was not only his duty but his nature" (50). Despite Pau Lin's willingness for him to marry another woman, he exhibits no interest in another wife and no infidelity, a clear contrast to the Chinese men of Yellow Peril literature.

The tension in the Wous' marriage between Chinese and American expectations is perhaps best seen in Adah's conflicting observations. On the one hand she claims that there is not "any real difference between the feelings of a Chinese wife and an American wife" (53). In almost the same breath, however, she also states her belief that Pau Lin "became more of an American in that one half hour on the steamer than Wou Sankwei [. . .] has become in seven years," a reference to Pau Lin's arrival by ship to the United States and her jealousy in seeing her husband with white female friends (53). The contradiction in beliefs regarding the essential sameness in feelings and distinct cultural identities

becomes even more apparent when Adah tells Sankwei that Pau Lin has done for him what no American wife would do. She “came to you to be your wife, love you and serve you without even knowing you—took you on trust altogether,” Adah explains (58). Her comments reveal a level of cultural blending though inverted expectations that often lies at the heart of Sui Sin Far’s writings.

In distinguishing Pau Lin from an “American wife,” Adah unconsciously and ironically highlights in Pau Lin the most important element of American matrimony: agency. Pau Lin’s marriage is depicted as an active choice rather than a passive acceptance. She “came to” Sankwei and “took [him] on trust.” These descriptions stand in stark contrast to the images of captivity presented in the story and associated with marriage. For example, Adah reminds Sankwei that Pau Lin was “chained in a little cottage” for years out of marital duty (58). She also perceives that marriage restricts Sankwei, noting that were he not married he would be “a man free to advance” (57).

By bouncing back between various perspectives and images of captivity and free choice in marriage, Sui Sin Far implicitly recognizes the uselessness of categorizing or describing large groups according to marriage practices. Agency, after all, is centered in individuals, not customs, and Pau Lin’s determined will clearly disrupts assumptions about self-effacement in arranged marriages.

Elizabeth Ammons finds that Pau Lin is silenced by her husband and America



(113–14), but in reality she is far from powerless. Though Sankwei literally overlooks her when she arrives in America, she asserts herself as a strong presence who takes definitive and conclusive action when she poisons her son so that he will not become Americanized. Through the act, horrifying as it is, Pau Lin takes complete control of the family, for Sankwei immediately leaves his work and new home to return with her to China.

While Dong and Hom would view “The Wisdom of the New” as evidence of Sui Sin Far’s skepticism toward cultural assimilation, the truth is that Sui Sin Far, like Mark Twain, employs a dramatic and unusual instance to cause readers to reflect on commonplace marriages. Though poisoning a child is extremely atypical of both American and Chinese marriages, disagreements over raising children transcend cultures. Whatever qualms Americans may have had for Pau Lin’s attitude towards assimilation and her homicidal method for enforcing her will, they could not accuse her of un-American-ness on the grounds that she had no appreciation for individual freedom. In her eyes, the act of poisoning her son was a deliberate choice of love, intended to liberate the boy from the confines of “the wisdom of the new.”

“Mrs. Spring Fragrance” presents a more affirmative view of arranged marriage but one that is no less complicated. Sui Sin Far’s most famous story, it presents the clearest example of her primary defamiliarization-through-inversion

strategy, presenting a conspicuously foreign marriage within an easily recognizable American domestic space. As with “The Wisdom,” “Mrs. Spring Fragrance” battles stereotypes of bachelor societies and enslaved women not by attacking them directly but by writing about the exception, in this case a married Chinese couple living normal lives in Seattle in the early twentieth century. Subversively, Sui Sin Far reveals that their very happy union was arranged by their parents. Here, as with other stories that treat arranged marriages sympathetically, she interrogates the assumption that spouses who choose each other necessarily exercise greater agency than those who do not. Simultaneously, she offers the possibility that individuals in arranged marriages can, in fact, exercise a great deal of agency by *choosing* to love each day.

Sui Sin Far disarms prejudice at the outset of her story by emphasizing that Mrs. Spring Fragrance is entirely “Americanized” (17). In fact, she is so attached to American principles that she has no reservations about stealthily intervening to disrupt the betrothal of her friend Mai Gwi Far so that she can instead marry Kai Tzu, the man she truly loves. Mrs. Spring Fragrance affirms the value of free choice in her friend’s marriage even as she exerts her own will and independence. In fact, she plays matchmaker without her own husband’s approval, as he is far more committed to Chinese traditions. Eventually, however, the narrator indicates that Mrs. Spring Fragrance herself entered into a

marriage that had been prearranged for her, a revelation that would seemingly make her interference in her friend's engagement more problematic.

But while the commitment to free choice and acceptance of an arranged marriage seem antithetical, Sui Sin Far intentionally places her "Americanized" protagonist in such a marriage in order to repurpose it. As her attitudes and behaviors toward her husband indicate, Mrs. Spring Fragrance exercises agency within her arranged marriage by constantly choosing love and commitment. This same deliberate choice is not evident in the young lovers of the story, who emphasize the power of romance. Young Carman offers the clearest illustration of this attitude. When asked to interpret two lines of poetry, he tells Mr. Spring Fragrance that "it is a good thing to love anyway—even if we can't get what we love, or, as the poet tells us, lose what we love," and he reflects fondly on a dozen past love affairs (19). When Mr. Spring Fragrance questions the wisdom in such an attitude, Carman insists that, in America, love is not learned or developed but spontaneous, explaining that "everybody falls in love some time or another," but a woman could not love a husband if their marriage was arranged for them (24). In Carman's view, love is something outside one's control, something that happens to a person. Mai Gwi Far's and Kai Tzu's attitudes toward love and marriage are less explicit, but they seem to hold similar views to Carman's. Whatever the basis of their relationship, the narrator

states only that Mai Gwi Far “had a sweetheart” who was “American-born, and as ruddy and stalwart as any young Westerner.” The young man, Kai Tzu, is one of the finest baseball pitchers on the West Coast and can sing a love song when Mai Gwi Far plays the piano (17). Without any additional evidence or explanation for their attraction, readers may conclude that theirs is a relationship based more on appearance and performance than on character. In any case, Mai Gwi Far’s father explains to Mr. Spring Fragrance after the dissolution of his daughter’s betrothal that Mai Gwi Far has “long had a loving feeling” for Kai Tzu. Furthermore, he indicates that her betrothed broke off the engagement because he was “so under [the] influence” of “some untrustworthy female” (25). Clearly for the young people of the story, love is something that happens to a person, a view common to Americans generally at the time. In their study of a representative American town, Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd found that a belief in “romantic love as the only valid basis for marriage” was absolute from the 1890s to the 1920s (114).

In contrast to these characters, who fall in love, the Spring Fragrances deliberately step into it. Mrs. Spring Fragrance illustrates this contrasting attitude toward love when she describes marriage as “two pieces of music made to complete one another” (20). The metaphor implies harmony rather than passion, but it also suggests that Mrs. Spring Fragrance views marriage as a

complementary arrangement in which two parties cooperate for their mutual benefit. Such a view departs significantly from standard views of arranged marriages as forms of slavery or forfeiture of agency. By placing the foreign marriage of the Spring Fragrances in a recognizable American domestic setting, Sui Sin Far causes it to be viewed with new eyes, and the result is indeed surprising. The active choices that the Spring Fragrances make in their marriage typify the complementary harmony that Mrs. Spring Fragrance sees as the ideal union.

Part of the harmony of their marriage rests on the importance of gift giving. When Mrs. Spring Fragrance travels to San Francisco, she purchases for her husband a new pipe. She thinks so much of the act that she mentions it in a letter home. The narrator makes special mention of the fact that Mr. Spring Fragrance's smoking chair was a gift from his wife. On his part, Mr. Spring Fragrance views giving gifts as essential to being a good husband, a sentiment Mrs. Spring Fragrance seems to share. The narrator emphasizes that in five years of marriage, he has never failed to provide for her what she desired. Additionally, Mrs. Spring Fragrance pays deference to her husband, in accordance with Chinese tradition, and exhibits maternal concern for him. Besides making him treats and pouring him tea, from which she derives great satisfaction, she also gives him motherly reminders, such as feeding the cat and

birds and not eating too quickly. These conscious choices—actions, not feelings—lead to what they consider a successful and happy marriage.

The clearest contrast between romantic notions of marriage and ideas of matrimony as union based on duty, respect, and support comes in Mr. Spring Fragrance's conversations with Carman. The young man insists that love must come before marriage, but Mr. Spring Fragrance counters that "In China, it is different! But the love is in the heart all the same" (24). Implied in Mr. Spring Fragrance's rebuttal lies the key difference in perspectives on marriage: for Mr. Spring Fragrance, love is not something that occurs to a person and qualifies or prepares him or her for marriage; rather, love is something actively chosen by those who agree to form a union, whatever the circumstances of arranging that union may be. In fact, Mr. Spring Fragrance views the ability to love someone to whom one is not married to be a distinctly American possibility (24). None of this indicates an overwhelming passion on the part of the Spring Fragrances, but rather a deliberate decision to live in a mutually beneficial relationship. This conscious decision to love as an act of agency forms the basis of Sui Sin Far's inversion of Yellow Peril literature, offering an important counterpoint to its depictions of lustful bachelors. In this version of love and marriage it is the American student who approximates the intemperate bachelors of anti-Chinese literature. Reflecting on "more than a dozen young maidens," Carman pensively

states that “some [fall in love] many times” (19, 24). The Spring Fragrances, however, despite the circumstances of their marriage, exhibit both fidelity and agency, breaking through disparaging stereotypes and emerging as fully humanized characters. In an ironic reversal, Sui Sin Far suggests that those in an arranged marriage may actually exercise more agency than those who choose their own spouse. If love is understood as something one falls into, something beyond the control of the lover, it is not an act of agency. Spouses in an arranged marriage, by contrast, must make frequent and consistent choices regarding how they will behave (not *feel*) in their marriages.

By acting, not just feeling, by exercising their free will in choosing to re-enter into marriage daily, these characters of Chinese heritage achieve the American ideal of individual liberty. Sui Sin Far never married, but matrimony nevertheless became central to her fiction. In recognizing the power of marital forms to carry a culture’s highest ideals and values, she discovered an effective vehicle for her important work of challenging the extreme national racism and sexism aimed at Asians at the turn of the century. By normalizing unconventional, or foreign, marriages, she recast them in ways that caused white Americans to reconsider their prejudices. In the face of anti-Chinese sentiment and hypocritical prejudice aimed at Chinese bachelor societies and Chinese American women, Sui Sin Far employed fictional marriages considered taboo by

the dominant culture to invert popular conventions of Yellow Peril literature.

Given the emphasis in the United States on the centrality of proper marriage to the establishment and stability of the nation, Sui Sin Far struck at the heart of Sinophobia by introducing Chinese into the American home.

As part of her effort to combat racism, though, Sui Sin Far also sought to remind Americans of the core values of their nation. In bringing the foreign home, she not only humanized immigrants, but she also invited white readers to review their unquestioning commitment to their own cultural practices and remember the absolute necessity of individual free choice and liberty in a democracy. During a time of intense pressures pushing for marital conformity, Americans had good reason to step back from status quo assumptions and evaluate whether their cultural customs and legal regulations did, in fact, strengthen the nation, or if homogeneity was simply a mask of unity. Mark Twain had highlighted the farcical in unfamiliar marriages to reemphasize the importance of individuality beneath common social conventions, and Sui Sin Far normalized foreign marriages to reemphasize free will and choice. When it came to insisting on individual autonomy in the context of matrimony, however, neither was as married to the subject as Willa Cather.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a full study on the topic of anti-Chinese literature, see William F. Wu's *The Yellow Peril*.

<sup>2</sup> According to census data, women comprised 7.2 percent of the Chinese population in the United States in 1870, but only 3.6 percent two decades later after the enactment of the Page Act and Chinese Exclusion Act. Only in the twentieth century did these numbers begin to rise, due more to female births in the United States than changes in immigration demographics. Still, by 1920, just over 12 percent of Chinese Americans were women (Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943" 94). For fuller treatment of the Chinese American experience in the American West and of the efforts of the United States to restrict Chinese immigration, see Sucheng Chan's *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America* (1991) and Arif Dirlik's *Chinese on the American Frontier* (2001).

<sup>3</sup> California banned marriage between "Mongolians" and Anglo Americans in 1880. Fourteen other states had similar miscegenation restrictions. For full studies, see Paul R. Spickard's *Mixed Blood* (1989), Betty Lee Sung's *Chinese American Intermarriage* (1990), and Peggy Pascoe's *What Comes Naturally* (2009).

<sup>4</sup> See Expatriation Act of 1907, Section 3. The Cable Act of 1922 repealed this portion of the law, but it did not extend to women who married foreigners ineligible for U. S. citizenship, that is, Asians.

<sup>5</sup> S. E. Solberg was among the first to attempt to bring Sui Sin Far to critical recognition. Though she finds fault with Sui Sin Far's art, she praises her as a spokesperson for Chinese-American communities along the West Coast during a time of deep anti-Chinese sentiment (30). Amy Ling is more appreciative of Sui Sin Far's work but agrees with Solberg's assessment of its historical importance. That assessment is given fuller treatment in Annette White-Parks's important 1995 biography, which reviews in detail as many of Sui Sin Far's writings as were then known and charts the writer's development as an artist. In her chapter "Audacious Words: Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*," Elizabeth Ammons makes the most explicit claims about Sui Sin Far's ability to find a voice when other Chinese Americans were silenced. Similarly, William Wu sees Sui Sin Far as an "insider" writing about the Chinese experience in America and considers her writing an important counter to the Yellow Peril literature of time (130).

Xiao-Huang Yin also praises Sui Sin Far for her “conscientious effort to create a more objective image of Chinese Americans,” particularly through her intense focus on individual characters (50). In examining Sui Sin Far’s letters alongside her published fiction, Martha J. Cutter concurs that the writer deconstructs stereotypes of Chinese Americans and insists upon their “fundamental humanity” (260).

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Joe B. Fulton for this translation and for calling attention to the correspondence between the term and Sui Sin Far’s project.

<sup>7</sup> Collected in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, “The Story of One White Woman” was originally published in the *Independent* in 1910.

<sup>8</sup> Here, as with other early stories, Edith Eaton spells her penname Sui Seen Far.

<sup>9</sup> Arranged marriages often made use of a “go-between,” a man trusted by two geographically separated families. By passing between the two families photographs, information, and the terms of a proposal, the go-between would attempt to strike a marital agreement between the families. When successful, such arranged marriages were usually formalized by a ceremony in which a “proxy” stood in for the groom so that the woman was already married when she met her husband, usually upon arriving to the United States from Asia (Cott 151).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### With Friends Like These, Who Needs Husbands? Deferral, Not Deference, in Willa Cather's Fictional Marriages

"The whole question of a young man's marrying has looked pretty grave to me for a long while. How have they the courage to keep on doing it?"

—Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*

Mark Twain played with marriage in his fiction, while Sui Sin Far embraced it in hers. Willa Cather, both the woman and the writer, interrogated it and the conventions surrounding it. Always skeptical of the arrangement, Cather turned down at least two earnest proposals for marriage in her life. Of the first one, she conceded in an 1897 letter to her friend Mariel Gere that "it would be a very excellent match in every way," but she confessed that she didn't care for the suitor. Though she supposed that fact "really does'nt [*sic*] matter much," she eventually declined (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 44). Available correspondence does not identify the precise reason for her refusal, but it was not an outright rejection of marriage itself. Like some of her characters, she deferred an ultimate decision regarding marriage to a later time. Within a year, she was already considering another proposal. This time, when she broke off the relationship she was clearer about her reservations. Not "able to feel very

deeply” about the latest admirer, she wrote to Gere that “his friendship is so warm and comforting and near to me that I don’t want to change it for the other article in which the personal equation would be sure to make trouble.” In Cather’s personal life, as in her fiction, friendship was superior to romance. Then, as if to explain in one sentence all of her reservations, she emphatically penned, “O I have grown enamoured of liberty!” (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 49). For Cather, whatever possible benefits marriage promised, it always carried with it a threat to individual freedom. With such a risk involved, indefinitely putting off potential marriages made sense.

Cather’s fear of losing some measure of liberty in matrimony was not necessarily paranoia. Though the dynamics of individual marriages have always varied widely, conjugal laws and traditions near the turn of the century still privileged men. Married women’s rights in individual states to hold property and earn income had steadily increased throughout the nineteenth century, but husbands still commonly controlled those assets. Husbands also spoke for their wives in political and social matters. At the time Cather declared that she had grown “enamoured of liberty,” women held voting rights in just four states. The 1910s saw the expansion of full women’s suffrage in nearly a dozen states and limited voting rights in others, but until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women in much of the country could not vote at all.

Though remaining unmarried made no difference in a woman's qualifications to cast a ballot, the institution of marriage nevertheless helped justify the disenfranchisement of women, as men were still seen as the voice of the family. For some, to marry was to tolerate oppressive laws stemming from traditions and expectations surrounding matrimony. In addition to legal constraints, women also faced strong social codes upon marrying that some women found limiting, particularly the expectations of childrearing and housekeeping. According to some postbellum feminists, marriage was the new slavery (Stanley xii), and some Cather protagonists seem determined to avoid it.

Notwithstanding the gender-based restrictions women might expect to find in matrimony near the turn of the century, they experienced enormous social pressure to marry—and to marry young. In his 1916 guide to virility and marriage, for example, Bernarr Macfadden wrote, "I believe definitely and emphatically in early marriages" (21). Nineteenth-century marriage manuals generally insisted that women marry before the age of twenty-four, with the recommended age varying between eighteen and twenty-three (Hudson 90; Hollick 337–38). Such recommendations reflected standard practice. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, the median age for women's first marriage in 1890 was twenty-two. During the first decades of the twentieth century, that number

actually dropped. By 1920, the average marrying age for women was just over twenty-one.

The expectation that women marry young stemmed at least partly from the notion that a woman could not and should not support herself financially and the assumption that women's primary role was to bear children and raise families. The Reverend George Hudson wrote in his 1883 marriage guide, for example, that young adults could not afford to wait for marriage opportunities to present themselves, since "marriage should be a matter of business, carried out on business principles" (45). Marriage was an economic contract as much as it was a romantic union. Just as men had a social responsibility to provide for a wife, women were expected to perpetuate the social order by accepting marriage proposals when they arose and not become an economic burden on the community as they aged. Furthermore, a large part of the business of marrying, and marrying young, consisted of bearing and raising children. Since, according to the Reverend Hudson, "the one great object of marriage is the generation of children," women had a moral responsibility to marry upon maturity (76). Even the prominent physician William Josephus Robinson, a proponent of birth control, reflected in 1917 the common expectation that married women had a societal obligation to bear children. Couples who are "in excellent health" and "fit to bring up children," he argued, "should have at least half a dozen children.

If they should have one dozen, they would deserve the thanks of the community" (*Sex Knowledge for Women and Girls* 143).<sup>1</sup> With such pressures, deferring or forgoing marriage, as Cather did, or avoiding children once married did not seem to be viable options for most women.

Because marriage was tied to childbearing and family-rearing, strict religious requirements and social expectations governed sexuality in and out of marriage. Both men and women were to avoid sex before marriage and to respect its primary use for procreation in marriage. A strong proponent of women's rights, Eliza Bisbee Duffey offers a typical condemnation of premarital sex in her 1876 *The Relations of the Sexes*, republished in 1898. Preserving "perfect chastity" until marriage is absolutely necessary, she writes, and "any one whose teachings are to the contrary of this, belies nature and blasphemes God" (186). Macfadden likewise condemned sexual contact before marriage. His comments do reveal, however, that the expectation for sexual abstinence was far greater for unmarried women than for unmarried men. In decrying the use of the term "sowing wild oats" to excuse or tolerate premarital sex in young men, he unconsciously reveals his unquestioned assumption that such excuses or tolerance would never extend to women under any circumstances: "A young man has no more right to the perilous privileges indicated by this pretty phrase than his sister or mother" (120). In short, pressure was strong at the turn of the

century to marry young and promptly conceive children and to avoid all sexual contact before marriage—pressures openly disregarded by Cather’s protagonists.

Despite popular images of single frontiersmen settling the wilderness, the push toward marriage was just as strong in the American West, where economic realities made domestic partnership seem a near necessity for most women. In many instances, rural existence depended on a husband and wife working together for mutual survival. According to Florence E. Ward, who wrote a short tract in 1920 assessing the state of American farms, the fierce demands of an agrarian lifestyle were more than compensated by the freedom that these women experienced. Because she worked directly for “the happiness and comfort of her family” and “experienced the satisfaction of living in the open country,” Ward contends, a rural wife enjoyed a greater liberty than her “average city sister” (5). Deborah Fink points to such comments as representative of a dominant agrarian ideology, particularly the notion that “women were liberated rather than limited by their service within the family farm” (2). Like Cather, Fink challenges such an ideology, arguing that most rural women had no other choice but to marry and work hard. She further contends that while some recent historians point to a woman’s participation in a joint production of material goods as a liberating effort, the reality was that “carry[ing] water, wash[ing] clothes on a washboard, and scratch[ing] the earth to put food on the table” was as burdensome as it



sounds and “not an avenue of freedom” (5). In fact, the Reverend Hudson implied that even when a woman works alongside her husband for their family, she is not forwarding her own status or expanding her own agency, but rather working “to help him get money” (54). Whereas husbands benefitting from their wives’ labor could engage in civic affairs, women were much more restricted in their scope of engagement, often cut off from the community and even close friends by the distance between farms and ever-present family responsibilities. In short, women of the West felt great pressure to marry young and quickly learned, if they didn’t already know, that marriage carried with it rigid assumptions about a woman’s role as wife, mother, and domestic manager that limited possible expressions of individualism.

These realities of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century marriages clearly did not discourage most women from wedding, and plenty of Cather’s characters willingly and happily choose marriage. Indeed, Fink finds that rural women around the turn of the century “do not appear to have questioned the broad contours of their lives,” that “they married (some of them unhappily), remained loyal and deferential to their husbands, and raised their children to reach beyond their roots to new successes” without “decisive actions or words of resistance” (xv). Cather, however, saw clear risks. Like Twain, she insisted that decisions to marry be deliberate and intentional, not merely the product of

custom or convention, and, like Sui Sin Far, she demanded that women maintain individual identity and liberty regardless of their personal arrangements. In a departure from the work of those two writers, though, marriage in Cather's fiction does not constitute the bedrock foundation of successful, stable societies, and young women and young men have no social obligation to wed. Marriage is not synonymous with childbearing and rearing, nor with community building. William Handley argues that while the formula Western links national unity to romance and traditional marriage, "Cather's western marriages (and non-marriages) are allegories of the refusal to do so" (125). In contrast to the popular view that saw an unbreakable link between proper marriages and national identity, matrimony in Cather's works privileges the individual. Individuals, particularly women, ought to marry only when it involves an empowering of the will, not its surrender.

Readers have long noted themes of independence in Cather's fiction, but scholars struggle to reconcile these themes with the abundant marriages found in her works. In fact, Doris Grumbach, Shunji Tsunoda, and John H. Randall III (95) find in Cather's writings a strong antipathy toward the institution. Grumbach, for example, finds that Cather gave readers "the most coruscating view of the institution of marriage ever produced in America until [her] time" (242). And while Grumbach's assessment refers especially to three novels written after 1922,

when Willa Cather felt the world “broke in two” (*Not Under Forty*), her conclusion has limitations, for works such as “Neighbour Rosicky” (1928) appear to affirm marriage as strongly as *My Ántonia* (1918). Without question, though, Cather’s efforts to emphasize female independence sometimes appear at odds with an institution seen historically as restrictive for women. These contradictions lead to what at least one scholar terms “the marriage problem in Cather’s fiction” (Shively 15). Rather than cast Cather’s views on marriage in overly simplified terms, Shirley Foster prudently observes that Cather’s “awareness of the complex and often contradictory nature of female aspiration produces ambiguities or dualities in [her] writing, a reflection of ambivalence as much as of outrage” (154). In the case of the unconventional marriages in *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia*, those ambiguities and dualities are readily apparent.

For all of Cather’s skepticism toward marriage, she persistently returns to the subject, having her female protagonists marry even after they or other characters have written it off. Criticism that highlights animosity toward marriage must fairly account for why Cather pushes marriages into her novels, even when they have little relevance to the narrative. The common literary convention of ending novels with a marriage does not explain the move, for in two of the three novels examined here, the marriages are all discussed after the

primary narrative has closed. In reality, Cather saw in some forms of marriage potential for the expansion of the individual will rather than its restriction. Only by defying standard marital conventions, though, could Cather's women reclaim marriage as a statement and source of independence rather than as a submission to society's gender expectations.

While early-twentieth-century women faced expectations and pressure to marry young and raise families, Cather's female protagonists defer marriage in three of her first four novels. These novels are particularly useful in an examination of Cather's intentional defamiliarizing of conventions, for, by her own account, her trip to the Southwest after her first novel *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) caused an important shift in her aims as a writer. In her 1931 essay "My First Novels [There Were Two]" Cather admits that in *Alexander's Bridge* she intentionally followed the "conventional pattern" of a novel, established most clearly by Henry James and Edith Wharton, but that after her six-month sojourn in Arizona she "recovered from the conventional editorial point of view" (91–92). Setting out to write a book "entirely for myself," Cather "ignored all the situations and accents that were then generally thought to be necessary" while composing *O Pioneers!*, her second novel that she really considered her first (92–93). Part of the novelty of *O Pioneers!* was its setting, of course. Ignoring the drawing rooms of James and Wharton, Cather chose to return in her fiction to

unliterary Nebraska, prompting one New York critic to remark, "I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it" (qtd. in Cather, "My First Novels [There Were Two]" 94). Just as significantly, though, Cather's break from literary convention in her next three novels resulted from her unusual treatment of marriage. William Handley notes that "Cather disavows [. . .] the purposes to which marriage is put in the marriage plot" (139). When the novel was still dominated by tropes of courtship and marriage, Cather intentionally chose to write about unwedded adult female protagonists.

In *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, Alexandra and Thea reject opportunities in young womanhood to wed, despite deep affection for a suitor. In both cases, the heroine embraces the freedom of single life to pursue professional ambitions. Only after achieving acclaim and financial success does either finally accept marriage. Conversely, *Ántonia* seeks marriage at a young age, only to be abandoned by her fiancé in *My Ántonia*. Through necessity, she must defer marriage and learn to live with the stigma of a ruined woman. In each case, however, the woman eventually does enter a marriage, and because of her previous decisions, she does so as a clear and deliberate choice, not as a result of conventions or societal pressure. As a result, each achieves true companionship rather than a hasty pairing based on unrestrained emotion and community expectation. For these women, therefore, deferred marriage serves to affirm

independence and empower the will. For Cather, “stranging” marriage through its deferral serves to dislodge the institution from its accepted place as the bedrock of stable societies and the backbone of worthy literature.

### *Mature Marriage*

Successful marriages in Cather’s early novels must meet two essential criteria: they must be based on strong friendship rather than romantic passion, and they must also allow women to independently exercise their will. Such arrangements were rare, and readers of *O Pioneers!* can easily perceive why some critics attribute to Cather a cynicism toward marriage. Poor or failed marriages abound, making the final, mature marriage between Alexandra and Carl all the more strange. Beginning in just the second chapter, Cather offers a rather dismal portrait of the institution when the narrator describes the decision of Alexandra’s paternal grandfather to remarry as “despairing folly” (29). Pressured to meet the demands of his extravagant, unprincipled wife, he speculates, loses his own and others’ money, and dies disgraced, leaving his children nothing. In Alexandra’s estimation, his marriage destroys his good character, robbing him of his authentic identity (211).

After moving his family to Nebraska from Sweden to provide a better life for them, Alexandra’s father John Bergson repeats the cycle of poverty for the next generation. He does not feel the same pressure from his wife as his father

apparently did from his, but though she is not overly extravagant, Mrs. Bergson is still proud and possess a "love of comfort." Her "mania" for preserving, gardening, and housekeeping places a "serious drain upon the family resources" (33–34). John implores his children to indulge her, since she has been a good mother, but his marriage lacks any evidence of deep affection. Though the narrator declares that "John Bergson had married beneath him," the financial pressures of married life seem to divide the couple more than their prior socio-economic status (33). Mrs. Bergson "had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth" to toil amid disorder and poverty. Her range of possibilities for individual expression and self-fulfillment is already slim, so she prefers to be "let alone" by her husband and her children (34). Though he does manage to pay off his debts, Bergson still leaves no money to his desperate, struggling family when he dies young, only forty-six years old.

Emil's friend Amédée Chevalier dies even younger, just months after his promising marriage and weeks after the birth of his son. Of all the marriages in the novel, Amédée and Angélique's seems to hold the greatest potential for happiness and success. A month after his wedding, the beaming groom declares to Emil that marriage is "the greatest thing ever!" (145). Marked by vitality and deep affection, the union constitutes a major symbolic event for the community. Part of the wedding ritual involves a large supper, for which "all Angélique's

folks are baking [. . .], and all Amédée's twenty cousins," and a vibrant dance, made even more spirited with "barrels of beer" (79). In Nancy Cott's terms, this is a marriage comprised not just of private but also public vows. Such a gathering not only celebrates the popular couple's happiness but also affirms the community's expectations for marriage of the proper sort, a conventional union of two young people who promise to perpetuate the ideals and values of the group while contributing to its economic and material development. Amédée and Angélique are young; share the same religion, race, and cultural heritage; and are committed to raising a large family. Amédée promises to "bring many good Catholics into this world" (145). With all of "the zeal of the newly married," Amédée and Angélique dote, brag, flirt, and work, and Emil rejoices to see their "sunny, natural, happy love" (146–47). In short, Angélique and Amédée's union embodies all that a community can hope for in a marriage. All of the anticipated happiness proves a false promise, however, when Amédée suddenly and unexpectedly collapses in the field and dies shortly after. Unlike John Bergson, Amédée has enough wealth to ensure that his family will have their immediate needs met, but his death nonetheless devastates his small family and their hopes for the future. As if fate were taunting the optimism of a young married couple, Amédée's death directly defies his wife's assumption that "only good things could happen to a rich, energetic, handsome young man like Amédée, with a



new baby in the cradle and a new header in the field" (216). Now with a new baby in the cradle and a new header in the field but no energetic young man to run it, Angélique finds herself more encumbered than liberated by her short marriage.

Even when family life is not marked by poverty, struggle, or death, marriage still frequently appears bleak in the novel. Oscar and Lou, referred to as Alexandra's "married brothers," seem generally dissatisfied with their circumstances (92). Oscar's wife is so often pregnant that she misses family gatherings, though she doesn't get along with Oscar's siblings in any case. She is ashamed of Oscar and refuses to let her four boys learn Swedish, an important part of Oscar's identity. Oscar shows little evidence of complaining, but the narrator emphasizes his dullness (93). In Lou's case, marriage costs his wife Annie some of her femininity, despite her preoccupation with jewelry and fancy clothing. During their marriage, she "has grown to look curiously like her husband," her face sharper and more aggressive (93). Lou, in turn, shows deference to Annie. Afraid that Alexandra will withdraw her offer to purchase a piano for their daughter if Lou upsets her, Annie uses warning tones with her husband that he immediately recognizes and heeds. Apparently inhibited when Annie is around, Lou looks for opportunities to "[get] his wife out of the way" (104). She also manipulates Lou in subtle ways, such as when she pries

information from Alexandra's domestic servants to "[use] to her own advantage with Lou" (98). In each case, the marriage constitutes a tolerable, self-centered arrangement more than a true union, and each spouse seems unable to freely express his or her own individuality.

Marriage not only has the potential to stifle the happiness of those in it, but it can also devastate those outside it, as in the case of Emil. In love with Frank Shabata's wife Marie, Emil tortures himself by waffling between leaving home and sustaining a dangerous flirtatious relationship with Marie. Significantly, his indecision between respecting the conventional boundaries of marriage and pursuing his own romantic feelings occurs on what Cather labels the Divide, a high plain watershed where water eventually flows one of two ways. Caught on his own divide, so to speak, stymied by the legal and social restrictions surrounding marriage, Emil experiences deep discontent, complaining that he too has to "pay" for Marie's rash, ill-fated decision to marry young (206). While Amédée pushes him toward marriage, unaware of his secret love for Marie and insisting that there are plenty of women whom he could marry, Emil grieves that "he should have to hide the thing that Amédée was so proud of." He puzzles that "the feeling which gave one of them such happiness should bring the other such despair" (148). Because of the conventions and expectations surrounding marriage, Emil and Marie do not speak openly about

their feelings for years. Marie hopes that she can continue to enjoy Emil's company without risk so long as she pretends not to have romantic feelings for him. Such a course frustrates Emil, though, who tells her bitterly, "You don't help things any by pretending" (142). In recognition of the impossibility of pursuing Marie openly, he struggles to determine a satisfactory course of action. His frustration is compounded because he finds the legal and social restrictions that prevent him from expressing love for Marie arbitrary. In short, he is caught on the Divide, unable to move one way or the other, unable to progress, and blaming it all on a rash marriage. Contrasting his love with others', he finds a metaphor in the varying levels of fertility in Alexandra's seedcorn: "From two ears that had grown up side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted; and nobody knew why" (148). While marriage has the potential to grant happiness for some, it also inexplicably carries the potential to rot the love in others.

That rot becomes apparent in Frank and Marie Shabata's marriage. Married in a passion, as was expected of most couples, they quickly grow unhappy, at least partly because of Frank's intense jealousy. Convinced that his wife takes sides against him (129), he holds grudges and suspicions, which ultimately constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy. He works hard to maintain his

farm and provide for Marie, but he displays little affection and leaves her frequently to go into town, which Marie admits makes her lonely. For her part, though she tries to play the role of a supportive wife, Marie recognizes that she and Frank are simply not meant for each other. Like most couples, and as expected of them, they married young, before understanding “exactly the right sort” of spouse they each needed (177). Due to social expectations surrounding marriage, Marie finds that “you almost have to marry a man before you can find out the sort of wife he needs; and usually it’s exactly the sort you are not” (177–78). At twenty-three years old, Marie feels like “everything is done and over” for her and acknowledges that “getting married was n’t very good for [Frank] either” (180). They both feel trapped by marriage, a product of their impulsiveness, and their love quickly deteriorates, a strong contrast to the novel’s final marriage, when Alexandra agrees to wed only after age and experience have allowed her to truly know herself and prepared her for the commitment.

All of this skepticism toward marriage in *O Pioneers!* culminates with a powerful indictment of the institution at the disastrous termination of the Shabatas’ marriage. A good deal of the novel centers around Alexandra’s efforts to console Marie in her unhappy marriage to her jealous, proud, and vengeful husband, but neither anticipates how that marriage will end. After making

themselves miserable for years by fixating on and flirting with each other, Emil and Marie finally lose their self-control and give vent to a powerful and sudden overflow of emotion. The day before Emil is to leave for good, he unexpectedly meets Marie in her orchard. A clear allusion to the site of Pyramus's and Thisbe's deaths in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the white mulberry tree in Marie's orchard too represents forbidden love. But whereas Pyramus and Thisbe are partitioned by their parents' wishes, Emil and Marie have only the legal and social restrictions of marriage to separate them. Defying those restrictions in a moment of passion, they give full expression to their mutual love for a single evening, lying in each other's arms beneath the mulberry tree. There they are eventually discovered by Marie's husband Frank, who shoots them both in a violent rage. The blasts that take Emil's and Marie's lives simultaneously ruin Frank's and seemingly execute the institution of marriage, the apparent cause of unhappiness for all three parties.

These examples seem to reveal particularly strong misgivings, if not hostility, toward matrimony and the naïve and even dangerous assumptions that often accompany it. Cather's biographer James Woodress points to the tragedy between Emil and Marie as evidence of Cather's belief in "the destructive nature of romantic love," adding that Cather's "skepticism about marriage kills off Amédée" (244). And yet, despite this apparent denunciation, Cather's use of

marriage is not as simple as it first appears. Whatever criticism *O Pioneers!* holds for marriage, it offers a strong rebuttal to the many failed marriages in the novel in Alexandra's own deferred marriage. Avoiding marriage early in life and dedicating herself instead to the growth of her father's farm places Alexandra on the outskirts of respectable mainstream society, as it deviates sharply from the standard narrative of American marriages in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. William Handley recognizes that Cather depicts Alexandra in heroic terms, but she does so while "pointedly den[ying] her character and plot the formulaic expectations of her time" (140). Those formulaic expectations are even reflected by Cather's other characters. Amédée tells Emil, for example, "you wanna get married right off quick!" adding that the choice of spouse mattered little and that twenty-two years old was too old to be without a girl (145). Annie applies similar pressure when she meets Carl Linstrum for the first time after he has been away for sixteen years, exclaiming almost immediately, "And you ain't married yet? At your age, now!" (103). But while Alexandra's refusal to marry young makes her suspicious in others' eyes, it also allows her to break the generational cycle of poverty and despair, even as she forgoes the possibility of bearing children herself. She invests both money and her best hopes for the future in her brother Emil and her nieces. If marriage was the best possible chance of financial security for rural women in the West, who felt enormous

pressure to find a husband by early adulthood, Alexandra's refusal to pursue marriage signifies a courageous autonomy and a defiant rejection of social norms.

While Alexandra resists social pressure to marry young, she again resists pressure *not* to marry once she has passed the acceptable age. When Oscar and Lou first oppose her attachment to Carl, upon his first visit after sixteen years away, they act not as concerned kin but as representatives of the social order. "Why, Alexandra, you are forty years old!" Oscar exclaims in disbelief when the topic of marriage arises (155). A late marriage is so odd and preposterous, so irresponsible, that Oscar insists that she "is old enough to know better" (156). Though Marie regrets that she married too young, before she could make a proper choice, Oscar and Lou reflect the more common opinion that women ought to marry in their early twenties or not at all. In their amazement, the brothers reflect their neighbors' attitudes, for even rumors about a possible attachment between Alexandra and Carl draw the watchful eyes and judgment of the community. "People have begun to talk," Oscar complains to Alexandra, and Lou, ever concerned about his reputation and appearances, accuses her of "making us all ridiculous" (150). Normally a cause for communal celebration, as was Amédée and Angélique's wedding, the marriage of a forty-year-old woman to a thirty-five-year-old man would be instead an object of universal derision. To

emphasize the point, Oscar laments to Lou that “if [Alexandra] was going to marry, she ought to have done it long ago, and not go making a fool of herself now” (156). The insistence on the foolishness of a late marriage for someone previously unmarried reaffirms social expectations: women were to marry young in order to bear and raise children and help support their husbands. Other forms of marriage, particularly ones not seemingly motivated by the passion of youth or the economic necessity of partnership, were strange indeed.

In addition to defying marital expectations to bear and raise children, an unconventional marriage of a grown, independent, financially successful woman to an unaccomplished younger man seeking his fortune threatens to disrupt important gender power dynamics and the economic order of the community, all reinforced by traditional marriages. In their plea to Alexandra to send Carl away, Oscar and Lou demand she recognize that he is only interested in her money and property. “He wants to be taken care of, he does!” (150), they tell her, adding that “everybody’s laughing to see you get took in,” especially since “he’s nearly five years younger than you, and is after your money” (155). In their derision, the entire community helps police the appropriate boundaries of marriage and the social order they help sustain. For Oscar, Lou, and the town of Hanover, and, by extension, for many in early-twentieth century middle-class America, marriage is still a financial arrangement as much as it is a romantic one, and proper



marriages must conform to a particular pattern in which women rely on husbands for financial support. "The property of a family," Oscar declares, "really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title" (152). The possibility of a man getting ahead through marriage outrages Oscar and Lou and offends American sensibilities regarding hard work and self-sufficiency.

While Oscar and Lou and the faceless community can reasonably be expected to oppose Alexandra, her youngest brother Emil feels far more affection toward her. *O Pioneers!* reveals the strength of prejudice against late marriages, then, when Alexandra asks Emil for his opinion regarding a potential union between her and Carl and he, too, disapproves. Despite his open-mindedness and his staunch support of his sister, even Emil finds the notion of her marrying "too farfetched to warrant discussion" (159–60). That someone as close to Alexandra as Emil is finds her marriage unthinkable offers a final testament to the perceived absurdity of the potential arrangement. In fact, though he agrees that she should do whatever she likes, he is "a little ashamed for his sister," feeling that "there was something indecorous in her proposal" (161). Though he has a hard time understanding why, he intuitively senses that there is something socially improper or unseemly about her marriage. In reality, Emil is unsettled by Alexandra's question because, like the youth in "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," he cannot separate the idea of marriage from the powerful emotions he feels toward

another person. His emphasis on intense love as the basis for marriage helped characterize Americans' assumptions regarding the institution generally. Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd found that ordinary Americans in the early twentieth century regarded "romance in marriage as something which, like their religion, must be believed in to hold society together" (114–15). Emil does not see such romantic feelings in his sister, and so her contemplation of marriage strikes him as strange and vaguely inappropriate. He fails to recognize that, for Alexandra, marriage is about companionship and the affirmation of one's individual identity, not the surrender to uncontrolled emotion that leads to captivity or ruin. Due to his own particular vision of marriage, Emil, who has his own personal reasons for denigrating the institution, reflects that "there was trouble enough in the world [. . .] without people who were forty years old imagining they wanted to get married" (161).

Despite all of the negative pressure, Alexandra seriously entertains the notion of marriage on Carl's first visit. A strong protagonist, Alexandra thereby causes a divide between readers' sympathies and their expectations regarding marriage, communicated through the novel's various naysayers. That distance allows Cather to defamiliarize marriage, to invite readers to consider it not as the culmination of romantic feeling and an erasure of the individual will through a

surrender to passion but as the culmination of mutual understanding and an empowering of the will through mature and judicious use of individual agency. In reply to her brothers' frantic exclamations that Carl is after her money, Alexandra offers a radical reply: "Well, suppose I want to take care of him? Whose business is it but my own?" (150). Rather than worry about others' opinions, Alexandra emphasizes her desires. She does not feel obligated to help Carl, even if they were married; she simply *wants* to take care of him, and she is determined to carry out her own will. Because Alexandra privileges individual liberty over social order, she views marriage from an entirely different perspective than her brothers. It is not the bedrock of civilization or the glue of society, and, therefore, it is none of the town's business how she approaches it. That attitude characterizes her treatment of Crazy Ivar, an elderly man viewed as dangerous or threatening. Like her controversial decision to take in and care for him against the town's wishes (and, as usual, over her brothers' objections), a "ridiculous," "fool[ish]," and "indecorous" marriage that shocks the community is, for Alexandra, simultaneously a chance for companionship and a statement of independence. Conforming to traditional conventions surrounding marriage means a surrender of her individual will. As she explains to Emil, others telling her whom or when she can marry is equivalent to telling her that "[she has] no right to change [her] way of living," a notion she thoroughly rejects (159).

Unconventional marriage, then, becomes an opportunity to express her independence, to realize her own will in the face of conforming pressures. Marie understands the restrictions Alexandra feels, and believes it would be just and instructive for the community if Alexandra were to “walk off” with Carl (160).

In fact, Carl does walk off after his first return to Nebraska, though Alexandra does not go with him. Confronted by Alexandra’s brothers, who insist he not pursue their sister, Carl departs earlier than planned to seek his fortune in the Northwest. For Carl, the social expectations and pressures surrounding proper marriages are too strong to flout. As he explains to Alexandra, he does not possess the fortitude to stand up to Oscar and Lou, much less the entire community. Driven by the expectation that a respectable prospective husband will have attained a suitable level of financial stability, regardless of the financial circumstances of his bride, Carl tells Alexandra that he must go away until he has “something to offer” her (162). Unlike Alexandra, who consistently demonstrates an ability to see more clearly and farther than those who surround her, Carl cannot divide his own sense of self from others’ opinions of him, even when, or perhaps especially when, those judgments involve marriage. When presented with the opportunity to marry Alexandra, Carl demurs, despite his personal feelings: “I must make the usual effort. I must have something to show for myself” (164). For Carl, as for many Americans, the prospect of doing

something genuinely unusual is too intimidating. Such is the power that marital conventions hold, and as Carl departs, the unconventional Alexandra gives up any hope of having a sustained, satisfying relationship with any man.

In the end, Carl does return to marry Alexandra. Significantly, though, he does so not because he achieves success in the Klondike and can now meet the community's expectations regarding marriage but, rather, in response to the disastrous conclusion to the Shabatas' marriage and the affair between Emil and Marie. Feeling that Alexandra needs him, Carl leaves his prospecting efforts in Alaska to be with her, and the two determine that, in light of the recent events, they should immediately move forward with marriage plans. The possibility of an unconventional marriage between Alexandra and Carl, therefore, is only brought about after the complete destruction and devastation of a conventional one. Such a series of events is suiting, at least according to Susan Neal Mayberry's reading of the novel. To arrive at a "new heroine's marriage," one that discarded the worn-out patterns that women in nineteenth-century literature were forced to repeat, it was necessary for Cather to enact violence on the traditional domestic space (38).

Still, for all the uproar that Alexandra's possible marriage to Carl initially causes among the Bergson brothers, Alexandra and Carl's final decision to wed strikes some readers as unremarkable. Woodress, for example, finds the final

section of the novel anticlimactic (233). In fact, their decision to marry—it can hardly be called a proposal and acceptance—is so subtle that readers get only a general sense of the upcoming marriage with very few specifics. “You won’t feel that we ought to wait longer, on Emil’s account, will you, Alexandra?” Carl asks vaguely, to which Alexandra simply replies, “No, Carl; I don’t feel that way about it” (268). Anticlimactic though it may be, the marriage strikes other readers as troubling. Steven B. Shively finds that some find it “too contrived and too conventional as a plot device,” while others express skepticism regarding its success since it seems to be nothing more than a “convenient arrangement between old friends who happen to be particularly needy” (10). But though the decision of Alexandra and Carl to marry in the final pages of the novel may seem rather dull or unsatisfactory, it is by no means an empty afterthought.

Considering the extensive skepticism toward marriage found in Cather’s novels, all matrimony in her fiction is intentional, even when it is deemphasized. If Alexandra and Carl’s ultimate decision to marry goes without comment at the end of the novel, it is only because Cather finally situates marriage where she believes it should reside, with individuals instead of with communities. Given all the gossip and criticism originally prompted by the possibility of their union earlier in the novel, Cather actually defamiliarizes marriage in the very act of glossing over it because readers have been given every reason to believe that

such an arrangement will offend the social order. In the end, the simplicity of the marriage plans seems strange, but that only helps Cather make her point about individuals over institutions, independence over convention.

Though most women tended to accept the traditions and social norms of the time, Cather and others saw marriage as potentially limiting or restrictive. In particular, absolute financial dependence on a spouse, the strong probability of bearing children, and the social expectations that a wife show deference to her husband and exert her influence only within the domestic sphere were seen as inescapable and oppressive realities of matrimony. In Alexandra's case deferring marriage eliminates those concerns. Not only has the passage of time allowed her to acquire wealth and precluded the possibility of childbearing, but it has also reinforced in her the predisposition to speak her mind to the men in her life and resist their attempts to control her. As a single adult woman, Alexandra has successfully rebuffed attempts at influence or manipulation from various men and the community generally. In addition to her confrontations with her brothers she also skillfully deflects challenges to her authority from her farmhands, who question her farming decisions, and her neighbors, who complain when she takes in Crazy Ivar. "I have had to think for myself a good many years," she tells Carl, "and am not likely to change" (109). As K. P. Stich argues, Alexandra

exhibits such power over men throughout her life that any marriage on her part must necessarily be characterized by freedom (38–39).

Moments after agreeing to marriage, therefore, Alexandra verifies that Carl will make no attempts to override her will. She agrees to travel to the Klondike with him but immediately inquires, “you would never ask me to go away for good, would you?” (271). Carl, who knows Alexandra’s temperament as well as her love for the Nebraskan land, reassures her, prompting her to declare, “I’ve lived here a long time. There is great peace here, Carl, and freedom” (272). Even in marriage, Alexandra is determined to maintain that peace and freedom. Only because Carl is willing to accept the marriage on Alexandra’s terms does their engagement hold the promise of success. Reginald Dyck points out that Alexandra’s choice to marry comes as she is literally returning from prison, having just visited Frank Shabata in the penitentiary (168). The contrast in conditions—Frank has lost all freedom, while Alexandra returns to it—is complemented by a contrast in relationships. Frank and Marie elope, while Alexandra forgoes marriage for years before easing into it. Alexandra decides to enter into matrimony fully aware of what it looks like to lose one’s freedom, confident that her marriage will not lead to a restriction of her will, as it has with so many others.



That confidence grows with the recognition that her marriage will not be built upon the fiery passion of youth. She reflects upon this fact with Carl as they approach her home:

How many times we have walked this path together, Carl. How many times we will walk it again! Does it seem to you like coming back to your own place? Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we shall be very happy. I have n't any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like—those young ones. (273)

Having just passed the Shabatas' property, the site of Emil's and Marie's deaths, Alexandra rejects the perilous impulses of youth. As much as Alexandra cares for her, Marie comes to typify the suffering "young ones." "Incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her," Marie "simply did not know how to give a half-hearted response," a characteristic that makes her attractive but also indirectly leads to her death (194). Americans' stipulation that young adults freely select a spouse of their own choosing based on love paralleled the nation's ideals of union by free choice. For Cather, however, it also ironically led too often to a careless surrender of one's individualism. A person who impetuously gives himself or herself over to another out of intense emotion, such as the Chevaliers or Alexandra's grandfather or her parents, might forfeit a large measure of self-determination. More commonly, the rash entry into marital vows under the influence of passion could lead to mismatched spouses who restrict the full and free expression of each other's will, as in the case of Oscar and his unnamed wife,

Lou and Annie, and the Shabatas. In America, marriages were supposed to follow from young people falling in love, but such passion frightens Alexandra. In fact, she is so afraid of the “suffering” of “those young ones” that whenever she experiences a recurring dream with sexual undertones, she rushes to dump cold buckets of water over herself.<sup>2</sup>

But the Shabatas’ farm has significance beyond recalling the hazard of youthful passion. As Carl’s old home, it also represents for Alexandra lasting companionship that reaches back decades. In contrast to the sudden intensity of Marie and Emil’s affair beneath mulberry tree, Alexandra gradually comes to a determination to marry her old neighbor and lifelong friend. As Jean Tsien points out, passionate love affairs in Cather’s fiction tend to end in violence, as does Emil and Marie’s, while successful heterosexual unions, such as Alexandra and Carl’s, are “based on companionship rather than love” (5). With Frank Shabata removed from the scene serving his sentence and Carl returning to the Divide, overcoming his internal division, *O Pioneers!* presents, after all of the tragic and failed marriages, one “safe” marriage. Practical Alexandra replaces her recurring ardent dream with the stability of uniting with a proven friend, a bargain well worth making in her eyes.<sup>3</sup> But though their marriage is marked by security, it is nonetheless progressive. Alexandra’s decision to wed late in life is only another instance of her steady refusal to conform to expectations. Unlike

Oscar, Lou, “most of their neighbors,” and most Americans generally, who “were meant to follow in paths already marked out for them” (49), Alexandra determines that social convention, even in something as fundamentally basic to community as marriage, will not dictate her course.

Having witnessed unsatisfying conventional marriages firsthand and the consequences of unrestrained passion, Alexandra can lean on Carl, express her exhaustion with what she has experienced, admit that she has been very lonely through it all, and take comfort in an authentic, if delayed, union (273). It has required sacrifice and patience, but by finally entering into a deferred marriage, Alexandra finds a satisfying culmination to her life’s work—far more satisfying, the novel suggests, than those who blindly sacrifice their individual wills for social convention or fleeting passions and “suffer” as a result. Their slow walk home is not the surrender to passion, the falling in love, that Americans associated with marriage. Like Mr. and Mrs. Spring Fragrance, Alexandra and Carl are defined by deliberate choice and self-determination. They therefore actively choose to step into marriage rather than fall. In their mature marriage, Alexandra and Carl gain support through mutually beneficial companionship without being slaves to passion or the victims of rash mismatches.

It is that support through marriage that expands and empowers Alexandra’s individual will and gives her greater opportunity for self-

fulfillment. Burdened by the deaths of Emil and Marie, Alexandra is on the verge of sinking into despair and giving up on life before Carl returns and offers her a relationship that can help sustain her without restricting her. When she wanders off to the graveyard and gets stuck in a storm, nearly dying, her former kitchen girl Signa suggests just how lost she has become, crying, "I can't believe it's Alexandra Bergson come to this, with no head about anything" (246). Though her visit to Frank in prison revives her to some extent, it is Carl's return and his promise to stay with her that ultimately restore Alexandra to herself. Though strongly independent, she murmurs to Carl in the same breath that she is "tired" and has "been very lonely," suggesting the difficulty of living out one's authentic identity fully and continually without the sustaining power of companionship (273). The novel's final line, which includes Alexandra and Carl crossing the threshold into a home, suggests that Alexandra will now achieve full self-actualization, that her heart will continue to grow until a distant day when the "fortunate country" will receive it "into its bosom" (274).

*O Pioneers!* makes clear that the prospect of Alexandra's marriage appears "ridiculous" and "indecorous" to outsiders, but her ultimate decision to wed occurs almost without comment. Like Sui Sin Far, Cather takes a shocking marital arrangement, startling in this case due to age and economic expectations, and brings it comfortably into the American home. Her third novel, *The Song of*

*the Lark*, follows a similar outline, although much of the criticism toward marriage comes from the protagonist herself. Thea Kronborg forgoes marriage early in life while she dedicates herself to a career, only to marry later in life, anti-climactically and “off-stage.” Unlike Alexandra, though, who chooses not to pursue marriage while she is young, Thea explicitly rejects it. In Alexandra’s case, she has long considered the possibility of marrying, even though she does not actively seek it. She and Carl eventually just settle into marriage, but Thea insists from a young age that she is not interested in becoming a housewife or mother. Her determination to avoid those roles is so strong that Shirley Foster asserts that *The Song of the Lark* is the most overtly radical of its time in terms of a female protagonist rejecting sexual orthodoxies (168).<sup>4</sup>

Because of Thea’s persistent denunciation of marriage, the Epilogue’s revelation that she is happily wed genuinely stuns many readers. *The Song of the Lark* traces Thea’s struggle to become a great artist in the face of oppositional forces, including marital prospects. That she overcomes obstacles and ultimately achieves success as a renowned singer, then, might reasonably be seen as a testament to her determination as well as a rejection of her need for a husband. Foster is clearly troubled, therefore, by the subtle disclosure at the end of the novel that Thea has married Fred Ottenburg after her rise to fame. In the end, Foster writes it off as an unimportant detail that Cather possibly felt compelled

to include due to the pressure of literary convention. "This last-minute suggestion," she writes, "that Thea's self-dependence is not so secure as it seemed and that women do need the fulfilment of conventional sexual relationships is incongruous with the preceding narrative and too undeveloped to make any real point." In what is otherwise a "triumphant portrayal of independent womanhood," Foster finds the mention of Thea's marital condition "an unconvincing conclusion" (173). In reality, though, the culmination of Thea's career in a marriage that asserts her independence and empowers her will is not at all unpredictable, for *The Song of The Lark* builds upon the patterns established in *O Pioneers!* If *O Pioneers!* posits "safe" marriage between friends as the only responsible choice and the only type of marriage likely to lead to self-actualization, *The Song of the Lark* emphasizes even more strongly the dangers of unwise unions selected out of unrestrained emotion and the paradoxical but inescapable connection between individualism and companionship.

As with her previous effort, Cather introduces failed conventional marriages into the novel almost immediately, but this time she dwells on them more extensively. In the first chapter readers learn bluntly that Dr. Howard Archie's "marriage was a very unhappy one" (10). Since young Belle White pursued him primarily for his economic potential and clung to his money with an unreasonable stinginess after their marriage, the condition of their

relationship is unsurprising. In fact, even Belle's sisters predict a doomed marriage for the couple as early as their wedding (38). As with Alexandra's parents and grandparents, the majority of the blame for this unsatisfying marriage lands on the wife rather than on the physician of Moonstone, Colorado. Having "fastened herself on someone," Mrs. Archie proceeds to make life uncomfortable for her husband, shutting up the house, frightening off visitors, and even withholding food from the doctor (38). However, though Mrs. Archie is "now dry and withered up at thirty," the narrator also implicitly faults traditional ideas surrounding marriage and love for Dr. Archie's unhappiness (93). A young man simply doing what he thinks is expected of him, Archie "married Belle White because he was romantic—too romantic to know anything about women," or much about himself, for that matter (96). Social pressures dictated that young people fall in love and marry, so, like Marie of *O Pioneers!*, that is what Archie does.

The Archies' marriage does not end in the violent tragedy that kills the Shabatas', but the narrator insists that the lives of Howard and Belle are themselves tragic. As if to emphasize the full consequences of a poor marriage, Dr. Archie wonders whether "all [his] life's going to be a mistake just because [he] made a big one" in his marriage. For him, it "hardly seems fair" that young people are burdened by strong tradition and social pressure with the choice of

selecting a spouse before they have a chance to truly understand themselves (93). Yet, despite his antipathy for certain communal expectations, Archie never seems to consider the possibility of breaking convention. Though the Archies' marriage is so dismal that the narrator implies that divorce would be the wisest route, Dr. Archie only consoles himself that "other people's were not much better" (95). As if to sum up all of the novel's criticism of conventional marriage in a single sentence, Dr. Archie tells himself that "if wiving went badly with a man,—and it did oftener than not,—then he must do the best he could to keep up appearances and the help the tradition of domestic happiness along" (95). For Archie, as for Americans generally, looks matter in marriage. For all the emphasis on love-matches and free choice in America, Archie recognizes and concedes the underlying reality that marriage is more about social cohesion than personal satisfaction. As he fully realizes, Moonstone watches his marriage closely. "Every one was curious about his wife," as if she "played a sort of character part in Moonstone" (94). The Archies' marriage, therefore, like marriage generally, is a drama production for the community, but one with high stakes for the entire group. Under the watchful eyes of the community, Archie does "the best he [can]," playing his own part in maintaining the façade. Though he recognizes the shortcomings and even dangers of strong social conventions, he still finds it impossible to disregard them.



Fred Ottenburg, a great admirer of Thea after her move to Chicago and her eventual spouse, learns a similar lesson about the social aspects of marriage when he, too, marries young and naively. After knowing Edith Beers only three days, he agrees to elope with her since she has lost all affection for her fiancé. At twenty years old, he marries Edith on a whim, reasoning “one had to marry somebody” (370). As might be expected of one founded solely on such a dubious, albeit persistent, premise, Fred and Edith’s marriage is disastrous from the start. Fred detests his wasteful, cruel wife and begins drinking heavily, making himself conspicuous in public. His prominent family is scandalized by the whole affair, his marriage becoming a spectacle for everyone to witness. The brewing community to which the Ottenburgs belong disapproves of Edith and questions Fred’s judgment, leading to tensions in the family business. Despite the far-reaching consequences of the marriage, Fred and his family are virtually powerless to do anything about it. Although the problems in his marriage are obvious, he nevertheless feels compelled, like Archie and many other unhappily married spouses, to keep up appearances. Edith will not agree to a divorce, and although “she had insulted her husband before guests and servants, had scratched his face, thrown hand-mirrors and hairbrushes and nail-scissors at him often enough,” she knows that he will not take such evidence to court (373). Fred does not wish to prosecute Edith, despite their mutual distaste, but he also feels

it necessary to preserve his reputation and show deference to assumptions regarding the established order. Eventually Edith agrees to take a luxurious home in Santa Barbara while Fred moves to Chicago. Though the expensive villa buys Fred a “furlough,” he shares Dr. Archie’s feeling that one mistake made when he was young will determine his entire future (373). He finds that the constraints of being expected to marry someone while still young, keeping up appearances of a successful marriage afterward for the benefit of the community, and abiding by the legal and social requirements of matrimony severely limit his independence and the expression of his true identity, a realization that becomes even more painful to him after he meets Thea.

While Dr. Archie and Fred Ottenburg come off as somewhat heroic for putting up with unpleasant wives, Mrs. Tellamantez is criticized for her own long-suffering with her spouse. A notorious drunk, Spanish Johnny frequently abandons his wife on a whim to travel south down through Mexico, singing and playing his mandolin from saloon to saloon. Though he never writes, Mrs. Tellamantez follows his movements in the newspapers, eagerly awaiting his return. When he finds himself “wrung out and burned up,—all but destroyed,” he comes home expecting his wife to take care of him and nurse him back to health, and she invariably does (48). She receives no sympathy from the community for her loyalty or patience. While Johnny retains his notable

popularity in the Colorado town of Moonstone, “everybody was disgusted with Mrs. Tellamantez for putting up with him.” As with many women in Cather’s unhappy marriages, “Mrs. Tellamantez got all the blame” (48). Thea’s own attitude toward Mrs. Tellamantez suggests part of the reason why women tend to be faulted so often in Cather’s fiction for their marital circumstances.

Particularly repulsed by Mrs. Tellamantez’s behavior, Thea feels that “there is nothing so sad in the world as that kind of patience and resignation” (48). In her view, and in Cather’s, a woman has an obligation to herself to exercise her will and live her own life, regardless of her marital condition. Young women who subject themselves to marriage without careful consideration, who marry out of social expectations or conventions, or even out of deep romantic love alone, deserve little sympathy, these novels suggest.

Thea’s own mother Anna Kronborg, a much more developed character than Alexandra’s mother, does not fall into the category of passive wife unwilling to exercise her will. Lacking confidence in her minister husband’s “administration of worldly affairs,” for example, she retains in her own name property left to her by her father (13). That independence likely contributes to the fulfilling and satisfying relationship she shares with her husband. Their marriage, however, is primarily characterized by their children, who are abundant. Peter Kronborg certainly sees his wife in terms of her role as a mother,

appreciating “the matter-of-fact, punctual way in which his wife got her children into the world and along in it” (13). For her part, Anna seems to embrace the role. She sees it as her work to keep the children’s “bodies, their clothes, and their conduct in some sort of order, and this she accomplished with a success that was a source of wonder to her neighbors” (13). This is a marriage that truly satisfies the social order. But despite their happiness, the novel suggests that their large family limits the scope of Kronborgs’ vision. As the novel opens, Mrs. Kronborg has just had her seventh child, and the excitement and anxiety of childbearing distracts the parents from Thea’s serious case of pneumonia. That inability to see or meet Thea’s needs continues as she ages, and though her mother encourages her musical interests, she has neither the resources nor the knowledge to provide Thea with the type of support she really needs to fulfill her potential. Thea is further hampered by the expectation that she care for her baby brother Thor frequently. Her constant care for her sibling somewhat sours her against having her own children, but her outlook on marriage itself is even bleaker.

While the novel’s descriptions of marriages raise a certain level of skepticism toward the institution, Thea’s own resistance to matrimony is reinforced by attitudes and statements of those closest to her. Thea’s Moonstone music teacher Professor Wunsch recognizes young men’s interest in his pupil and, divining one particular suitor’s marital hopes, begins to fear that Thea will

become distracted from her studies and get married. When Thea asks if she will become a successful singer, he replies coldly, "That is for you to say. You would better marry some *Jakob* here and keep the house for him, may-be? That is as one desires" (83). Thea insists that is not what she wants, and her father seems to agree that marriage would not suit her. "Thea is not the marrying kind," he tells Mrs. Kronborg. "She's too peppery and too fond of having her own way. Then she's got to be ahead in everything." When women like that marry, he suggests, "they fret all their energy away, like colts, and get cut on the wire" (113). A conventional marriage would simply hold Thea back, if not damage her, Mr. Kronborg implies. Her father also recognizes, however, that Thea's potential for independence and self-realization depends not just on avoiding marital entanglements but in being able to provide for herself. For most women of the time, marriage meant money, whatever else it brought. During a discussion with Mrs. Kronborg over letting Thea quit school and teach music lessons full-time, Mr. Kronborg cautions his wife that Thea will have to be proactive if she is to avoid marriage. "If you don't want her to marry Ray," he instructs, "let her do something to make herself independent" (113). Marrying, Cather implies, generally involves inertia rather than the active exercise of agency. Because of the expectations surrounding it, marriage simply happens to most young people who don't actively make and pursue other plans. While that pattern of falling

into love and marriage works out well for some, it can be a dangerous precedent for others, particularly those resolved to carry out their own will and individuality rather than having it be determined by another.

Certainly due in part to his own unsatisfying marriage, Dr. Archie, too, cautions Thea against marrying out of convenience or convention. When discussing her future outside of Moonstone, she is coy about her plans, so he tells her to do “anything you like; only don’t marry and settle down here without giving yourself a chance, will you?” She has too much potential, he feels, to “get tied up” (91). The image of captivity is certainly intentional on Archie’s part, since he feels trapped in his own marriage, and it resonates with Thea, who identifies both with the lark of the novel’s title and the eagle she sees soaring freely over the canyon during her visit to Arizona.<sup>5</sup> Fred Ottenburg’s attitude toward marriage reinforces the sense that it is a trap to be avoided or at least approached very cautiously. As he tries to make Thea understand, an unwise marriage constitutes a “bondage” that is not easily escaped (372). When Dr. Archie asks Fred about his wife, he explains that she has been confined to a mental institution for seven years with no possibility of recovery, while he is “tied hand and foot.” Overwhelmed and frustrated by the laws and conventions of marriage, he despairingly asks, “What does society get out of such a state of things, I’d like to know, except a tangle of irregularities?” (437). Keenly aware

that his marriage has as much to do with the community as it has to do with his personal relationship with Edith, Fred seeks to thwart the societal rules governing what he sees as his personal affairs by convincing Thea to marry him in Mexico, which she nearly does. Ultimately, however, Thea's strong will prevents her from carrying out the plan. Once she learns of Fred's first marriage, she adamantly refuses to enter into a bigamous relationship, no matter the circumstances.

Thea's refusal to marry Fred after learning about his past solidifies her skepticism toward marriage and family life. The many unsatisfying marriages and negative comments about the arrangement throughout the novel converge in Thea's own attitude, which is as unconventional as it is strong. When Fred describes for her a scene of domesticity in which she has plenty of luxuries and privileges and a family to raise, she glares at him and pronounces the whole idea "perfectly hideous!" Her biggest fear of marriage is that it will rob her individuality and ambition. As long as she remains single, she explains to Fred, "It's waking up every morning with the feeling that your life is your own, and your strength is your own, and your talent is your own; that you're all there, and there's no sag in you" (350). Her need for independence is so fierce that she insists on separating from Fred, even with the possibility of marriage between them removed, because she fears she begins to rely on him too much. Without

her own name and means, Thea cannot bear the idea of entering a relationship in which she perceives some kind of debt or obligation. Everything she gives, she insists on giving freely.

For nearly all of *The Song of the Lark*, then, marriage means restriction, a devious trap set to rob young people of their ambition and potential. The novel repeatedly suggests that Thea would not have achieved success as an artist if she had married. To argue that the novel therefore dismisses marriage out of hand, however, is to misread it. Near the end of the novel, after the many indictments of marriage, Thea has a single experience, “something that had touched her deeply,” that calls into question all of her certainties about marriage. Attending a recital after having established herself as a professional singer, Thea sits behind an old couple who command her attention. Their “friendliness with each other” interests her more than the music, and when the wife touches the husband’s sleeve with her “plump hand” and “they [look] at each other in recognition” with “such a look!” Thea has a strong urge to “put her arms around them and ask them how they had been able to keep a feeling like that, like a nosegay in a glass of water” (516). After years of advanced musical training, Thea realizes suddenly that she has not experienced the full emotional range of human relationships. Though she has long felt that her dedication to her career carried a high personal cost, this couple grant her an important glimpse of a type of



companionship she has not previously considered. This is not the passion of young lovers normally associated with marriage, but a “friendliness” that survives for decades. If marriage has the potential to rob a person of individual achievement, foregoing marriage threatens to limit individuals to a circumscribed set of personal relations. Only after achieving professional success does Thea begin to suspect that in marriage she might find a certain fulfillment that has eluded her despite her hard-earned fame, a companionship that augments her individuality and identity rather than restricts them.

Thea’s observance of the old German couple, therefore, makes explicit a tension that has been subtly drawn throughout *The Song*—the supposed dichotomy between great success in a particular field and personal fulfillment in marriage or other close relationships. That tension between achieving one’s goals and embracing one’s impulses surfaces in a conversation between Thea and Fred during a hike. Weary, Fred lies down to smoke and rest. “It’s a good thing to know when to stop, Thea,” he says. Thea, however, insists on reaching her planned destination. “I’m not going to stop now until I get there,” she tells him, adding, significantly, that she’s willing to go on alone. Indeed she is required to make the steep climb by herself, for Fred informs her that he’s there “to enjoy [himself]” (352). Repeatedly the novel suggests one can achieve great success or take pleasure from life, but not both.

The choice between making a difficult climb alone to reach one's goals and enjoying oneself with others is not as easy or simple as Thea initially makes it out to be. As the novel proceeds, she constantly confronts the fact that she is sacrificing personal happiness for artistic mastery and that proceeding without deep relationships wears her down. Archie mentions this to Fred after they see her perform to great acclaim after her rise to success: "I was just thinking how tired she looked, plucked of all her fine feathers, while we get all the fun" (465). His comment recalls Alexandra's own confession at the close of *O Pioneers!* that she is tired, despite having achieved individual liberty and self-realization. Like Alexandra, Thea learns that sustaining her independent personhood takes an enormous toll. When Archie raises his concerns with Thea herself, she reveals that she is aware of the sacrifice she is making. "I'm afraid you don't have enough personal life, outside your work, Thea," the doctor states, to which she replies, "My dear doctor, I don't have any. Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It's like being woven into a big web. You can't pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life" (501). But even though Thea recognizes and accepts the personal sacrifices she must make for her music, she never feels entirely resolved with her decision. "My life hasn't been a gay one," she admits to Fred, adding, "I guess it's always that way, the

good and the bad all mixed up" (513). If conventional marriage carries the danger of captivity, not marrying all but guarantees a limited scope of emotion and the danger of exhaustion.

Fred finally learns this lesson when he is nearly forty years old, having accepted the fact that he and Thea will never marry. In his mind, he gave Thea up ten years earlier, allowing her to pursue her professional goals rather than pressure her into marriage. After she achieves great success, however, he feels regret, not satisfaction. "You've done what I hoped for you, what I was honestly willing to lose you for—then," he tells her. "I'm older now," he continues, "and I think I was an ass. I would n't do it again if I had the chance, not much!" (512). With maturity and experience Fred realizes that marriage is not the culmination of youthful passion but an enduring commitment to another person that sustains one throughout life. After five-hundred pages of denigrating marriage as a stifling force that robs individuals of their potential, *The Song of the Lark* concludes with a crescendo of voices expressing skepticism toward a sustainable, satisfying unmarried life. Thea's aunt Tillie, a pitiable single woman living alone in Moonstone after the deaths of Thea's parents and the focus of the novel's Epilogue, provides another useful example. Despite the novel's abundant cautions against marriage, the unmarried Tillie lives vicariously (and shallowly) through her niece. In short, no easy marital formula exists that women or men in

the novel can reliably follow to achieve happiness. Thea and those closest to her take negative views toward marriage throughout the novel, worried about how stifling such a relationship would be for her, yet, in the end, like Alexandra, she is revealed to be a successful but lonely and unhappy woman. The need for independence is not an indication that she does not crave companionship. In *The Song of the Lark*, personal relationships necessarily suffer through professional ambition. When Thea's mother gets sick and dies, for example, Thea chooses not to abandon her work in Europe to go home to visit, a choice Dr. Archie never really understands but one that Fred insists was necessary. The novel sets up a dichotomy between personal relationships and professional achievement, suggesting that they are incompatible. As Foster contends, *The Song*, just like Cather's other major works, presents ambiguities and dualities regarding female ambition and marriage that are incapable of simple reduction.

These ambiguities certainly stemmed, in part, from Willa Cather's personal views and experiences. As biographers and critics have pointed out, *The Song of the Lark* is one of Cather's most autobiographical works, for she saw herself as an artist struggling against oppressive forces, including societal pressure to marry and raise a family.<sup>6</sup> That struggle came into clearer focus when she wrote a profile piece of three professional singers for *McClure's* magazine in 1913. That piece greatly influenced *The Song of the Lark*, for Cather modelled Thea

in many ways on a leading Wagnerian soprano of the time, Olive Fremstad. Cather's work on this article also had more personal significance, though, for she strongly identified with these women artists. Cather found in Geraldine Farrar a similar skepticism toward marriage, particularly its negative potential to rob one's potential. Farrar did not believe, Cather writes, that "conjugal and maternal duties are easily compatible with artistic development" nor that "for an artist, anything can be very real or very important except art" ("Three American Singers" 36–38). Confirmation of such views seemingly comes in Cather's assessment of the third singer of the article, Louise Homer. Although Cather gives her a strong review, she finds that Homer, a devoted wife and mother of five children, "seldom rises above her standard of excellence" ("Three American Singers" 33). In contrast to Fremstad and Farrar, whom Cather found entirely devoted to their art and true inspirations, Homer had split allegiances: "Domesticity is not a role with Mme. Homer: it is her real self" ("Three American Singers" 34). Noble though her abilities were, Cather concludes, Homer forfeited the very highest level of artistic achievement for a family. That dilemma was something Cather wrestled with throughout her life. Dedicating oneself to art at the exclusion of deep personal relationships was not always sustainable or fulfilling. *The Song of the Lark* constitutes Cather's best attempt at reconciling these apparently contradictory forces.

As with *O Pioneers!* the protagonist's marriage occurs "off-stage." When the final chapter closes, Thea stands at the outset of a promising career and entertains no thoughts of marriage. In fact, she has rejected another suitor since breaking with Fred, and the narrator offers no indication that she has any ambition other than professional success. The rest of her story, Cather writes, "is the story of her achievement" (527). The novel seems content to close with the "account of how a Moonstone girl found her way out of a vague, easy-going world into a life of disciplined endeavor" (528). That the Epilogue alludes to Thea's success as a singer, then, is unsurprising. The off-handed mention that she has married Fred Ottenburg, however, is genuinely shocking, albeit subtle. With the narrative focus shifted to Thea's aunt Tillie in the Epilogue, the narrator hints at Thea's success by revealing the effect it has had on the people of Moonstone. Tillie takes great satisfaction in hinting at Thea's accomplishments, to the mild amusement of the townspeople, and Thea's marriage to a rich businessman is mentioned simply as one additional fact that might add to Tillie's vainglories. In Cather's 1937 revisions to the novel, the revelation that Thea has married is even more subtle. In reviewing a trip that Tillie took to see Thea, the narrator mentions simply that Tillie was treated well by Thea's husband Fred Ottenburg. No account of a proposal or wedding ceremony is given, nor is a description

offered of the quality of the marriage, other than the implication that Fred continues to be supportive of Thea's professional goals.

Subtleness in this case should not be confused with unimportance. The simple fact of being married or unmarried matters very much to Thea. When Fred emphasizes the superiority of intentions, motivations, and relationships when trying to convince Thea that his marriage to Edith is meaningless, Thea counters that "being married is one thing and not being married is the other thing, and that's all there is to it" (396). Cather's inclusion of this detail matters, however much some critics would like to dismiss it. While Thea's marriage constitutes an intentional and essential detail on Cather's part, that marriage undoubtedly differs in important ways from more conventional marriages, and in this regard Cather joins Twain and Sui Sin Far in defamiliarizing the institution. Scarce though the details regarding the marriage are, readers nevertheless learn that Thea has kept her own name, even if only professionally. She is still referred to in the papers as Madame Kronborg, and Tillie frequently mentions, even after Thea's marriage, that she shares the same last name with the singer. Furthermore, like Alexandra, Thea consents to marry only after she has matured and achieved financial independence—one thousand dollars a night, to trust Tillie's reports. And while Thea most likely marries in her thirties and can still possibly bear children, her professional demands make it unlikely. By

deferring marriage, Thea positions herself to enter into a matrimony that relies as much on independent identity as it does a shared relationship.

At the same time, Thea's unexpected marriage provides the novel's final affirmation of the necessity of human companionship. *The Song* hints at such a necessity before the Epilogue. Reflecting on his life after the death of his wife and his unexpected increase in fortunes, Dr. Archie realizes that his marriage was unhappy because it lacked emotional correspondence, just like his recently acquired wealth is disappointing without someone with whom to share it in a meaningful way. He attempts to put the money to use in helping him develop satisfying professional and political relationships, but like his marriage, those efforts fail. The only years he would care to relive, he realizes, are his college years, when, presumably, he was surrounded by friends, and the years in Moonstone when he grew close to Thea (439–40). The implication seems obvious: marriage does not guarantee emotional satisfaction, but individuals require human companionship in some form. Thea, who has struggled with this reality throughout her life as she equivocates between personal attachments and professional achievement, ultimately determines that the best way to ensure that companionship is to marry later in life, when age and maturity have prepared one for the commitment. At various points in her life she convinces herself or others that her art "is enough," but after resisting marriage as a young woman,



she unexpectedly marries when the strong temptation seems to have passed (513). Fred admits that he had “gradually, gradually given [her] up” (513). She does not marry, then, in the heat of passion or under pressure. She declares that “who marries who is a small matter,” and, recognizing that Fred has “cared longer and more than anybody else” about her and her work, she finally settles into marriage (514). The best explanation that she gives of her motivation is simply that she would “like to have somebody human to make a report to once in a while” (514). Thea, then, reverses the pattern of Dr. Archie, achieving personal, professional, and financial success first and seeking permanent companionship after, with a far more satisfying outcome.

In the end, the marriages of Thea and Alexandra both offer a rebuttal to the notion that one must permanently give up strong emotional human attachments to achieve individual success or maintain a distinct identity. In fact, both suggest that those close personal relationships are ultimately necessary in those efforts. When Thea and Alexandra cease deferring marriage and purposefully step into it, they do so with the recognition that, in their cases, at least, and despite their independence, companionship and individuality are paradoxically linked. Their marriages do not make such assertions in any kind of trite or simplified way, however. If Thea and Alexandra both experience satisfaction in matrimony, they represent a possibility, not a pattern.<sup>7</sup>

These deferred marriages reflect Fred's apt observation that successful marriages cannot universally conform to a predetermined set of conventions or expectations but must account for unique individualities. Expecting marriages to meet a set of prescribed conditions only creates an environment of deception and peril. Highlighting the duplicity involved in trying to follow established norms or social regulations, Fred concludes that "between men and women, all ways [are] more or less crooked" and "those which are called straight [are] the most dangerous of all" (376). All societies have a vested interest in maintaining boundaries of decorum that their members find appropriate. Discerning between the acceptable, or straight, and the deviant, or crooked, marks civilizations and helps preserve order. Fred worries, however, that, over time, the gradual accumulation of rules and regulations, customs and conventions, creates a path of propriety so straight and narrow that individuals must live dishonestly to walk it, either because they misrepresent themselves to others or because they cannot be true to themselves. The strict laws and social regulations of such communities are like "windowless stone walls," and their "rectitude" is "achieved at the expense of light and air." In the stifling, "unquestioned regularity" of such bastions of the social order, individuals suffocate, and when it comes to societies' essential bulwarks, no mainstays are more important in limiting deviant behaviors than marital norms (376).

Given the importance awarded to marital regulations, the frequent commitment by Dr. Archie and others to “keep up appearances” makes sense, even when such actions belie their true desires or identities. Thea and Alexandra are unwilling to make such a compromise. By deferring marriage, marrying from a position of power and independence rather than economic necessity and social pressure, they renegotiate the terms of the marital and social contract. In doing so, they reveal the absurdity of seeking to maintain appearances for the sake of the community. In defamiliarizing matrimony through its deferral, they reject the premise that young persons have the responsibility to help the nation expand rightly in new territories through conventional marriages of the proper sort, and they manage in that effort to find a measure of happiness. Cather, like Twain and Sui Sin Far, pulls the mask of conventional matrimony off well-ordered societies and demands that readers look carefully to make sure that no individual is effaced beneath it.

### *Ruined Woman*

In Cather’s concern over the potential of social norms to negate individuals, she recognized that deferring marriage was not always intentional but that the disapproving eyes of the community in such cases could be just as piercing and the consequences just as severe. In fact, the town of Black Hawk monitors *Ántonia* more strictly than Hanover or Moonstone surveils Alexandra

or Thea. Because marriages were seen as the foundation of stable societies in the early twentieth century and were tied to notions of childbearing and family-rearing, strict conventions governed not only the age of potential brides and grooms but also their sexuality. While religious requirements and social conventions dictated that neither men nor women should engage in sexual activities outside of marriage, the consequences for violating such rules often fell upon women. Thus, when *Ántonia* returns from Colorado with a pregnancy but no husband in *My Ántonia*, the narrator Jim Burden writes off her future. No one would now marry her, he assumes, and without a husband, he reasons, she has dim prospects of security and comfort. The Widow Steavens agrees. "I wish she could marry and raise a family," she tells Jim, "but I don't know as there's much chance now" (310). A young woman with a bastard child has offended the communal order and defied strict conventions, their comments suggest, and her marital possibilities are inevitably narrow. *Ántonia*'s brother Ambrosch understands this reality, which is why he threatens to drown *Ántonia*'s infant when she is born. The Widow Steavens intervenes to save the child, and, at twenty-four, *Ántonia*'s future seems set. With an infant daughter and no marriage prospects, she can anticipate a life of hard labor and loneliness on her brother's farm.

Ántonia's situation is particularly affecting since, unlike Alexandra and Thea, Ántonia actively pursues marriage. Despite the fact that nearly everyone disapproves of her suitor Larry Donovan, she anxiously anticipates marriage. The Widow Steavens, who helps Ántonia with her wedding preparations, comments that she "never saw a girl work harder to go to housekeeping right and well-prepared" (300), adding that "Ántonia is a natural-born mother" (310). Such pursuits and aptitudes do not receive the same disapproval in *My Ántonia* as they do in *The Song of the Lark*, but they are not immediately successful either. Ántonia's marriage is deferred not because she has other ambitions but because her plans are disrupted. After travelling to Denver to wed, Ántonia realizes that Larry is without work. They live together until her money runs out, and then Larry disappears. Gradually, Ántonia comes to realize that Larry never really intended to marry her at all. The jilted Ántonia returns to her hometown of Black Hawk just a month after leaving, a primary subject of the town's gossip.

The reaction of the residents of Ántonia's hometown Black Hawk reveal the strength of early-twentieth-century marital conventions, particularly the prejudice toward a "ruined woman." Although the townspeople are easier on Ántonia than they might otherwise be because of her industry and humility, they nevertheless gossip. Most compare her to the other immigrant girls of Black Hawk, expressing surprise that the modest Tony, as they call her, "falls" while

more disreputable girls like Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball go on to achieve respectability and professional success. Others in the town express keen embarrassment regarding her situation. When Jim visits the photographer, for example, he notices a baby photograph displayed on the wall. The photographer, whose job it is to look closely and make a visual record of the community, gives a “constrained, apologetic laugh,” as if caught in an embarrassing moment. He explains that *Ántonia* had commissioned the portrait of her daughter and insisted on the expensive frame (295). As if to excuse its presence, the photographer irrelevantly tells Jim that it should be gone by the end of the week. Though it is necessary for him to view, acknowledge, and document the product of *Ántonia*’s sexual misconduct, he remains entirely uncomfortable with the situation. Even the Widow Steavens, who sympathizes with and supports *Ántonia* more than any other considers her “disgraced” (305). All of these reactions underscore a tacit agreement on the part of the community—anyone who violates the rigid code governing sexuality and marriage must automatically be relegated to the margins of the community.

Jim’s disapproval is particularly telling. *Ántonia*’s closest childhood friend, Jim is generally open-minded and sympathizing, but even he cannot “forgive [*Ántonia*] for becoming an object of pity.” He emphasizes that he is “bitterly disappointed in her” (290). Notwithstanding his longstanding distaste

for Larry Donovan, he blames *Ántonia* for her situation. Although she acts in good faith when she takes the train to Denver, her willingness to live with Larry prior to their official marriage constitutes a rejection of social norms, something that Jim, for all his broadmindedness, cannot countenance. As his conversation with Lena Lingrad illustrates, Jim unquestioningly accepts and perpetuates standard assumptions regarding matrimony. He refuses to believe that Lena will actually part with convention by refusing to marry altogether: “Nonsense,” he tells her after she informs him of her plans. “That’s what girls say, but you know better. Every handsome girl like you marries, of course” (282). Jim’s inability to separate customary patterns from individual needs makes him a perfect foil for Cather’s comments about potentially stifling marriages.

The state of Jim’s own marriage further reveals his strict allegiance to the status quo. He has sacrificed much, including his own happiness, to conform to marital conventions. Although his marriage to the wealthy, respectable easterner Genevieve Whitney advances his career, it satisfies neither party. She is irritated by him and cannot appreciate his humble background. For his part, Jim experiences sharp disappointment when Genevieve does not reciprocate his romantic sentiments or ardor, and Jim’s friends conclude that she only “married this unknown man from the West out of bravado” (x). For all their disillusionment, though, they both remain committed to the institution of

marriage. Genevieve “has her own fortune and lives her own life,” but “she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden” (xi). She discourages her husband’s friends from seeing him, and, like Dr. Archie, Jim feels trapped by his marriage, but divorce never occurs to him. Those willing to break those conventions, in his eyes, destabilize the established order and deserve at least some measure of the scorn they receive.

Strong reactions to *Ántonia*’s supposedly reckless behavior and scandalous pregnancy make her ultimate successful marriage especially surprising. Although exceptions exist, women in American fiction who violate strict prohibitions against premarital sex generally suffer despair or even premature death.<sup>8</sup> But notwithstanding the strong stigma against “ruined women,” *Ántonia*’s marriage, like *Thea*’s, occurs without controversy or even much comment. Jim simply learns from a secondhand source that *Ántonia* has married a Bohemian man since he last saw her. The only view of the marriage that Cather offers comes from Jim’s short visit to their home nearly twenty years after their marriage. Having heard of the large number of children in the family and their extreme poverty, Jim is relieved to learn that his idea of *Ántonia*’s marital life is not as dreary as he had imagined. Although her family is large and by no means affluent, Jim discovers a domestic space of order, vitality, and fulfillment—a stark contrast to many other marriages in Cather’s fiction.



Cather “stranges” *Ántonia*’s marriage not only by deferring it until after she has had an illegitimate child but also by reversing common tropes of literary marriages. Like a traditional comedy, *My Ántonia* essentially concludes with a presentation of marriage, but rather than offering a wedding, the novel instead examines the marriage approximately twenty years after its consummation. As with the Realist fiction Allen F. Stein analyzes in his study *After the Vows Were Spoken*, *My Ántonia* shows the workings of a marriage rather than end with the culmination of a courtship. This is not to say, however, that *My Ántonia* prefers to deal with institutions rather than individuals, one of the traditional marks of literary Realism. On the contrary, Cather refuses to accept marriage as servant of the communal order or as a token of social stability and the perpetuation of accepted norms, as it is in many works of fiction. In *Ántonia* and Anton’s case (and theirs is certainly not representative), their marriage simply works for them, not for a larger purpose or greater good. If anything, the marriage weakens the community because it essentially removes Anton as a willing and active participant in it. Anton explains to Jim that he misses the city and experiences great delight on his rare visits to town, but he has accepted that his marriage has essentially cut him off from society since they live on a remote farm. Jim sums up Anton’s position simply: “His sociability was stronger than his acquisitive instinct. He liked to live day by day and night by night, sharing in the excitement

of the crowd.—Yet his wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world” (355).

The isolating nature of this marriage is certainly striking, but so too is the power that *Ántonia* seems to hold over Anton. In contrast to the numerous fictional and actual marriages in which wives showed deference to their husbands, *My Ántonia* grants marital authority to a stereotypical “ruined woman.” As Jim remarks, Anton “had been made the instrument of *Ántonia*’s special mission,” and though life on the farm had its advantages, “it was n’t the kind of life he had wanted to live” (355). Anton accepts his situation without much complaint, but it is clearly the strength of *Ántonia*’s personality that maintains the family arrangements. Referring to the first years of working the land, Anton admits to Jim that he would frequently feel “awful sore on this place and want to quit,” but he stuck with it at *Ántonia*’s insistence (354). Only after two decades together, with a stable farm and a strong marriage just “like at first,” does Anton recognize the full wisdom in his wife’s vision and express gratitude for her resolve (354).

*Ántonia* defies conventions not only in the authority she holds over her husband, despite her controversial past, but also in the way that she welcomes her illegitimate child and finds in her as a source of strength rather than shame. Although Larry’s abandonment devastates her and forces her into hard physical

labor during pregnancy, the birth of her child empowers her and gives her a sense of confidence and purpose that she previously lacked. *Ántonia* embraces motherhood with an eagerness uncommon in other Cather protagonists.

Whereas Alexandra and Thea achieve professional success in the absence of marital and maternal duties, *Ántonia* never gains financial comfort or social esteem but receives an unusual level of vitality through childbearing. In another reversal, then, *Ántonia*'s illegitimate pregnancy does not rob her of life but grants it in greater abundance. Rather than experiencing humiliation regarding the circumstances surrounding her first child, *Ántonia* actually becomes embarrassed for Jim instead when he reveals that he does not have any children of his own (325). Though conventional and respectable, Jim's marriage is rather dead. In contrast, *Ántonia*, for all of her hardships, produces through her children "a veritable explosion of life" that makes Jim dizzy (328). Seeing her surrounded by children twenty years after the birth of that first daughter, Jim reflects, "I know so many woman who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow had faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life" (325). Children constitute such an important part of *Ántonia*'s identity that each birth amplifies rather than diminishes her.

These reversals reveal Cather's individual-centered vision for marriage.

When marriage was initially deferred against her wishes, *Ántonia* lacked the will

to pursue her own aspirations. When asked upon her return to Nebraska why she did not insist on a civil marriage at once that would give her some hold on Larry Donovan, *Ántonia* replies that her “patience was wore out, waiting so long,” and that she was reluctant to push her fiancé (305). With her illegitimate baby came deep humility, but she also gained through the experience greater determination. When marriage does finally arrive for *Ántonia*, she is a much different bride than she would have been the first time. In defying social expectations for a “ruined woman,” distancing her family from the community, and exerting strong influence over her husband, all while maintaining a healthy and happy marriage, *Ántonia* typifies William Handley’s observation that “Cather undercut the alignment of both masculinity and marriage with nation-building out West” (125). By granting her the ability to execute her own will, then, deferred marriage broadens *Ántonia*’s agency rather than constrict it.

Although *My Ántonia* offers the fullest and most positive examination of married life, it by no means endorses the institution unequivocally. As with *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, the novel refuses to reduce gender roles and familial relationships to simple terms. In framing the novel in her Introduction, Cather makes questions of marriage and marital conventions central by criticizing Jim’s wife and their unhappy marriage—points seemingly irrelevant to the narrative but useful in offering a counterexample to *Ántonia*’s eventual

marriage. Other unhappy or failed marriages receive even more attention, again reminding readers why many critics find Cather's fiction so antagonistic toward marriage. One anecdote in particular exemplifies a dismissive attitude toward marriage. The story is told by Pavel, one of two Russian men living near Black Hawk, bachelor friends who live as if they themselves were married. As young men in their home country, Pavel and Peter were invited to be groomsmen for a close friend's wedding party. Upon returning home in sleds in the middle of a winter night, the wedding party was beset by wolves. One by one, each sled was overrun and its passengers killed until only one sled with Pavel, Peter, and the newlyweds remained. Insisting that they must lighten the sled if they were to survive, Pavel knocked the bride and groom off the sled. The episode is by no means condoned. Pavel and Peter are expelled by one city after another as residents learn their past, and they carry the shame of what they did their whole lives. Nevertheless, it carries enormous symbolic weight in a novel that questions marital traditions and conventions. In a destructive situation resulting from a long wedding celebration and from which there appears to be no escape, a new marriage is literally thrown to the wolves to save two individuals.

Easily the most destructive and disturbing marriage of the three novels examined here is the Cutters'. Wick Cutter and his wife live "in a state of perpetual warfare" but never actually consider separating (204). Mrs. Cutter

threatens to leave if her husband cuts down the cedars that surround the house, but notwithstanding this “opportunity,” as Jim puts it, Wick never touches the trees (207). He insults his wife, quarrels with her ceaselessly, and flaunts his sexual infidelities, but he never pursues a divorce, possibly because of his “pious bringing-up,” of which he is proud, or, more likely, because he dreads losing any money to Mrs. Cutter in the split (202). That paranoia of having his money go to his wife and her family eventually leads to the termination of the marriage and the Cutters’ lives. After composing a letter explaining that he had outlived his wife and that she nor her family could therefore inherit any of his money, Wick Cutter shoots his wife through the heart and then kills himself. He fires a shot through a window simply so passersby will come into the house and witness that he outlives Mrs. Cutter. Whatever else the Cutters’ story suggests (like *Ántonia’s*, it certainly cannot be considered representative), it becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of unwanted marriages. They are not easy to escape, due both to legal restrictions as well as social expectations, and they tend to crush life and restrict individual agency.

As these examples illustrate, *My Ántonia*, like *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, refuses to offer a reductive statement on marriage. The best personal arrangements in Cather’s fiction are ones in which individuals complement each other but also maintain some level of independence, whether they are married or

not. Lena and Tiny exemplify such a relationship. After Tiny makes a small fortune during the Klondike Gold Rush, she invites Lena, now a successful clothier in Nebraska, to move to San Francisco with her. Lena accepts the invitation because it offers companionship without the risks she perceives in marriage. Just as she insists to Jim, she tells Frances Harling that she is not interested in marrying any man. "I've seen a good deal of married life," she explains, "and I don't care for it. I want to be so I can help my mother and the children at home, and not have to ask lief of anybody" (157). Later she elaborates. Family life, she tells Jim, is "a place where there were always too many children, a cross man, and work piling up around a sick woman" (283). Despite such a possibility, Jim warns that she will become lonesome, an eventuality prevented by her move to San Francisco. There she sets up shop near Tiny and keeps her well-dressed and sociable. For her part, Tiny audits Lena's accounts and invests money for her. Their unique relationship, both independent and complementary, reflects not only Willa Cather's own longstanding companionship with Edith Lewis but also partnerships of unmarried men who "batch" together in the novel, like Pavel and Peter and Anton Jelinek and Jan Bouska (103). When these types of relationships do occur within marriages in Cather's fiction, they are more often found in deferred marriages than in conventional marriages.

Ántonia's marriage is an extraordinary exception, then, in its surprising success and in its unconventionality. Cather emphasizes the power that convention and respectability have in any given community when she outlines the common pattern of marriages in Black Hawk. According to Jim, "Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used" (195). Such a pattern reinforces class and ethnic distinctions, along with their accompanying prejudices, for by "Black Hawk boys" and "Black Hawk girls," Jim refers to educated, middle-class, non-immigrant, white Americans. By Jim's own account, the townspeople view all "foreigners" as "ignorant people who could n't speak English" and refuse to see Ántonia, Lena, Tiny, and the other immigrant young women as anything other than "hired girls" (194). Despite their work ethic and important contributions to the local economy, the Bohemian and Scandinavian girls whom Jim admires "were considered a menace to the social order" because they threatened to disrupt established marital patterns through their strong attractiveness to the young men of Black Hawk (195). "Anxious mothers" fretted that their sons would be unable to resist the girls' beauty, which, to the respectable citizens of Black Hawk "shone out too boldly against a conventional background" (195).



Anything that threatens to disrupt established patterns and expectations of who marries whom when threatens the entire community.

Despite the hazard that the immigrant girls pose, though, in the end convention triumphs, and the Black Hawk boys marry girls of their own background and station, for “the respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth” (195). Young Sylvester Lovett, who is “daft” about Lena, offers a prime example. Jim secretly hopes that he will marry Lena and thus improve the standing of the immigrant girls in the community, but as he eventually realizes upon reaching adulthood, such wishes are naïve. Despite his infatuation, Sylvester recognizes that he cannot possibly marry Lena due to social restrictions regarding ethnicity and class differences. Instead, he runs off with a rich older widow “to escape from his predicament,” a “remedy,” Jim writes, that apparently works (197–98). Even Jim himself dallies with Lena for a time before marrying a wealthy woman who advances his career but offers him little affection. As John J. Murphy points out, “Jim reveals himself as one of the respectable young men” of the town, willing to flirt and dance with the girls on the margins of society but unwilling to go so far as to wed one (153). When a community invests so much of its identity and so many of its core values and assumptions into its marital conventions, those expectations are not easily broken, even by its most forward-thinking members.

When those expectations are broken in Cather's fiction—the forty-year-old Alexandra marries an unsuccessful younger man; the independent and accomplished Thea marries, at the height of her career, a widower whom she has already rejected; the “ruined” Antonia turns her shame into a source of pride and adds to her illegitimate daughter a host of children born in wedlock—the deviations resonate beyond individual unions. Other female protagonists, such as Isabel Archer in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, had put off marriage in the fear of losing some measure of independence, but whereas James's characters tend to look eastward to situate themselves within a European-based civilization, Cather's protagonists seek to build something new in the American West. Each of these marriages expands the wife's agency rather than restrict it, but they also expand the possibilities for a developing nation. When Jim arrives on the Nebraska Divide in *My Antonia*, he finds “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (7). These novels suggest that that raw material can be put to new uses, particularly ones that foster individualism and creativity. Just as Cather's protagonists find greater freedom in unconventional marriages, the citizens of the nation needed to be liberated from stifling social codes that restricted agency.

As the United States moved west, Americans continually emphasized conventional marriages as the carriers of their deepest values. Despite the

stereotypes of fierce, masculine independence in the West, Americans understood that, ultimately, conquering new lands was a means to an end, that it paved the way for domesticity and the perpetuation of the nation's ideals. Not incidentally, land was offered to pioneers as "homesteads," and men with families were rewarded with larger grants, tying marital expectations directly to the land itself. Territories, states, and the federal government tried further to regulate unions in the West through anti-miscegenation and anti-polygamy laws. Willa Cather, however, refuses to accept the appropriation of the land on behalf of conventional marriage. As Handley notes, Cather's writing "implicitly but bluntly acknowledges that the continent cannot—any more than our stories about it—be mastered or honestly put to the service of American beliefs in [. . .] marriage as the cornerstone of civilization" (125–26). Despite Americans' expectations for a seamless extension of national identity through westward expansion, Cather's writings imply that the expansive varieties of lived experience cannot be regulated or assimilated into a single national or cultural narrative. As Cather displaces traditional marriage from the center of her novels and long works of fiction generally, she simultaneously challenges its place at the center of the Americanizing experience in the West.

Willa Cather, Sui Sin Far, and Mark Twain all saw the dangers in widespread conformity that sought to reunite the North and South after the Civil

War through marital restrictions based on racism, religious intolerance, greed, cultural prejudices, sexism, or ageism. Submission to arbitrary restrictions in the name of unity could not continue to mark a nation founded on individual liberties. From the frontier, where peoples, values, and cultures met without strict governing bodies operating to quell diversity and ensure conformity, these three writers recognized that such an expansive country had room to accommodate much diversity. Through their fiction, they sought to remind the nation that it was at its strongest when all its members felt at home, that no matter how strange a place, it must be free from strangers. With *e pluribus unum* as its motto, the United States was uniquely positioned to join together into a national family groups and individuals with diverse practices, beliefs, and expressions without insisting on sameness. That would be a strange marriage, indeed, but it would also be a more perfect union.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A eugenicist in favor of contraception education, medical tests for venereal and mental disease before marriage, and sterilizing the “feeble-minded, degenerate, and criminal,” Robinson advocated birth control for what he saw as reasons of physical and mental health (*Practical Eugenics*).

<sup>2</sup> The dream, which Alexandra experiences from her childhood, consists merely of Alexandra being lifted up and carried by a large, strong, swift man across fields. While the description of the dream and its aftermath emphasizes Alexandra’s “gleaming white body,” the emphasis shifts from sexual passion to relief from weariness as she ages (186).

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra tells Carl immediately after they agree to marry that she will tell him of a dream she had that will never come true now in the way she thought it might (273).

<sup>4</sup> Foster compares *The Song of the Lark* to Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, which she considers leading examples of works near the turn of the century that articulate a “sense of the destructiveness of conventions which condemn women to a single function” (155).

<sup>5</sup> As Thea watches the golden bird sweep down the canyon, the narrator exclaims on her behalf, “O eagle of eagles! Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art!” (354). In her Preface to the 1932 edition of *The Song of the Lark* Cather clarified that the title refers not to Thea’s vocal accomplishments but rather to a painting depicting a peasant girl stopping on her way to the fields to listen to a lark. “The title,” she writes, “was meant to suggest a young girl’s awakening to something beautiful” (*The Song of the Lark*, 617).

<sup>6</sup> Biographer James Woodress, for example, finds Part I of *The Song of the Lark* “the most autobiographical fiction she ever wrote” (266). Shirley Foster agrees that the novel is a “semi-autobiographical portrait” (168). See also Jonathan Goldberg’s *Willa Cather and Others* (49) and Joan Acocella’s *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (2).

<sup>7</sup> Though it involves important differences, particularly childbearing, Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868/69) offers

another example of this pattern of deferring marriage and choosing mature companionship over young ardor.

<sup>8</sup> Young women who violate the prohibition against premarital sex (or, in some cases, are merely believed to have violated it) and suffer premature death are found in such American works as Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878), Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), and, less than a decade after *My Ántonia*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Epilogue: What the United States Has Joined Together, Let Not Marriage Put Asunder

Having just revealed that he has been cohabitating with a black woman he considers to be his wife, Jack Boughton smiles at the Reverend John Ames in Marilynne Robinson's 2004 *Gilead* and states, "You have made a somewhat—unconventional marriage yourself. You know a little bit about being the object of scandal" (230). Ames disputes the fact that there is anything shameful about his marriage, but, given the 35-year age gap between himself and his wife, there is no denying that Robinson's 2005 Pulitzer Prize winner plainly extends the trope of nontraditional marriages in American fiction into the twenty-first century. Nearly fifty years before the founding of the United States, William Byrd had suggested intermarriages between European Americans and Native Americans as a stabilizing social force and a way of unifying disparate groups. Over 275 years later, however, Americans were still debating proper forms of marriage and the role of unconventional marriages in their nation's identity.

Jack's visit to Ames in 1956, in fact, is motivated by enduring uncertainty respecting attitudes toward atypical marital practices. A white man still legally prevented in many states from marrying the mother of his son due to interracial

marriage bans, Jack returns to his hometown of Gilead, Iowa, to assess its tolerance for a mixed-race family. So unpredictable are opinions about marriages across racial lines that Jack considers the possibility that news of his common-law marriage to an African American might actually kill his own ailing father. In truth, even Ames, who has lived virtually his entire life in the town, most of it as a minister, cannot confidently forecast how the community would be likely to respond. He points out that Iowa does not have anti-miscegenation laws, and he believes that Jack and his wife Della would be left alone, but he admits that Gilead has not had many persons of color living in it for a long time and he can't offer Jack any guarantees. The topic of interracial marriage has never even come up in his many conversations with his best friend, Jack's father. Quite simply, after decades of debate, the United States still had no consensus regarding the appropriate boundaries for marriage.

That point was popularly made again even more recently with the release of the 2016 film *Loving*, which also reflects on the history of race-based marriage laws in the United States. Whereas the outlook for Jack's marriage appears bleak when *Gilead* closes in 1956, the marriage of Richard and Mildred Loving, of the film's title, is finally validated with the 1967 United States Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* to overturn all state bans against interracial marriage. In the case of the novel and the film, the narrative is set approximately



fifty years in the past, raising the possibility that these controversies are now behind America. Though ambivalence toward interracial marriage at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement is unsurprising, the topic was presumably far less controversial in 2004 or 2016, when *Gilead* was actually published and *Loving* was first released. Both achieved critical success, however, and their acclaim suggests that they engage ideas with continued relevance for modern America.

As if to suggest that specific sources of anxiety change but general angst over proper forms of marriage remains constant, Robinson provides another potentially objectionable marriage for comparison. Jack makes that comparison explicit when he turns the conversation about his family to Ames's own wife. The novel's first-person narrator, Ames downplays the age disparity in his second marriage, particularly since he is writing to his son of that marriage, but Robinson finds subtle ways to "strange" his marriage regardless. In responding to Jack's suggestion that Ames's marriage to the much-younger Lila has been something of a scandal, Ames demurs, but writes, "If a few people did make remarks, I just forgave them so fast it was as if I never heard them, because it was wrong of them to judge and I knew it and they should have known it" (230). Despite his attempt to convince his son that he is entirely comfortable with his marital arrangement, he nevertheless reveals the community's surprise, if not disapproval, regarding what is undoubtedly for them a conspicuous marriage. In

another subtle but eye-opening passage, Robinson reveals through Ames that, had the daughter of his first marriage survived, she would be ten years older than his second wife Lila (20). Even in a time when slang terms like “cradle-robber,” “trophy-wife,” and “cougar” are commonly employed to denote age disparity between romantic partners, the possibility of having a spouse a decade younger than one’s own child draws attention and elicits debates over propriety. Whether the issue is race, as it is for Jack, age, as it is for Ames, or any number of other considerations, Robinson implies that Americans will continue to find reasons to police the boundaries of marriage as a way of maintaining the social framework.

Like much of Twain’s, Sui Sin Far’s, and Cather’s fiction, *Gilead* is set west of the Mississippi River and takes up the theme of social convention and public opinion in conflict with individualism. In fact, in its frequent flashbacks to Ames’s grandfather, *Gilead* denounces widespread apathy that merely accepts and then gradually embraces the status quo. Ames’s grandfather saw violence as the only way to unsettle that apathy and correct the social injustices he perceived in the aftermath of the Civil War. While *Gilead* does not endorse such a philosophy, it nevertheless highlights the dangers of mindless conformity and ingrained prejudices. Robinson does not advocate physical violence, but her novel suggests the necessity of intellectual violence against reified social norms

that maintain order at the expense of the individual. In the ways that they assault their communities' comfortable notions regarding race, age, gender roles, parenthood, religious truths, and romance, the "stranged" marriages of Jack and Ames cause their neighbors and readers to revise many of their assumptions, a process truly painful for most people. Whatever power matrimony has to restore order to a community and reinforce social norms, Robinson, like other American writers before her, implies that it holds just as much power to disrupt and challenge.

The disruptive power of nontraditional marriages was recently made plain in yet another controversial debate over marital propriety, this one over same-sex marriage laws in the United States. When over seven million Californians cast a ballot in 2008 to revise their state constitution to define marriage as valid only between a man and a woman, they constituted the largest official vote in United States history seeking to reclaim and preserve a conventional form of marriage. The ballot measure, referred to as Proposition 8, received national attention as Americans saw California as a test case for similar bans on same-sex marriage elsewhere. Campaigns for and against the ballot measure combined to set a new national spending record for a social policy initiative, drawing money from all 50 states. With a price tag of over \$106 million, the battle to define the proper form of marriage became the costliest race

of the 2008 election after the presidential contest and remains one of the most expensive propositions in U. S. history (Wilson; Ewers; “Proposition 8”).

Beyond the financial cost, the fight over same-sex marriage in California involved thousands of campaigning hours and phone calls and hundreds of speeches, organized events, and protests, some of which turned physically violent. Opponents of the measure cast the issue in terms of civil rights, insisting that if the proposition passed, gay and lesbian couples seeking to wed would be denied the legal protections of due process and equal protection. Significantly, proponents also cast their arguments in terms of defense, adopting the slogan “Protect Marriage” and asserting that disrupting traditional marriage would upend the very foundation of a stable society. Clearly, participating parties felt that much more was at stake than a private arrangement between individuals. As they have since the founding of the nation, forms of marriage continue in the twenty-first century to transmit America’s most deeply held assumptions.

When the Proposition 8 initiative passed with 52% of the vote, therefore, supporters viewed it not just as a victory for traditional marriage but also as a victory for traditional American values. And when the United States Supreme Court later ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 that all bans against same-sex marriages were unconstitutional, it not only overturned the California vote, but it also extended a long American tradition of recognizing as valid certain forms of

nontraditional unions in the face of mainstream opposition. In all, the recent debates and contentions over same-sex marriages illustrate a paradox that has marked the nation since its beginning: Americans are deeply committed to individualism and independence but cling fiercely to the notion that how one marries is everyone's affair.

For many, the 2015 Supreme Court ruling seemed to put an end to the last major legal dispute over proper forms of marriage. Identity markers such as race, sex, gender, religion, ethnicity, and age after adulthood made no difference in one's legal ability to wed another. As Robinson's novel implies, however, humans will continue to disagree over marriage's boundaries so long as the institution is seen as a building block of society and not a private arrangement. Within months of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, polygamists flooded the steps of the Utah state capitol, insisting that if marriage was no longer defined as a union between a man and a woman, the institution now must account for the possibility of a union between a man and several women. One protest sign read, "If Adam & Steve can be together then why can't Adam, Eve, & Lily?" (Winslow). Predictably, others countered with arguments regarding the jeopardy of women's and children's rights, contentions that arise from assumptions about the purpose of organized societies and their responsibilities to their members.

Given marriage's literary history as a symbol of the return to social order after some menacing threat, the protectionist rhetoric surrounding perceived challenges to traditional matrimony is unsurprising. And yet, Mark Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Willa Cather all find that the nation's return to its true identity and greatest strength might be better facilitated by a consideration of nontraditional marriage as opposed to more conventional forms. Certainly other Americans have and will continue to employ the trope in their art, but the nation's emphasis on conformity through strictly regulated marital practices made the decades between the Civil War and World War I a particularly compelling time to enlist unconventional marriages for purposes of social criticism or satire. In fact, Clare Virginia Eby argues in *Until Choice Do Us Part* (2014) that, due to a radical shift in ideology in which marriage came to be seen as a voluntary rather than compulsory arrangement, reformers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries began to view the institution as a vehicle for social change. The writers studied here used that perspective to their advantage. If marriage had long been a dominant American metaphor for national unity, unconventional marriages in the Progressive era could be a metaphor for unity in diversity, for communal solidarity as well as individualism and independence.

Recognizing the unusual treatment of marriage by Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather allows scholars to rethink certain truisms of American literary history.

For one thing, it further complicates the dubious, though persistent, idea that American literature is divided between works that reject domesticity and those that endorse it. As the story goes, on the one hand, there are the Natty Bumppos, Ishmaels, and Huck Finns, who embody the true American spirit of independence and flee the constraints of the home, while, on the other hand, Hope Leslie, Ellen Montgomerys, March sisters, and other heroines perpetuate the essential American values of perseverance and self-sacrifice by overcoming hardships and eventually embracing traditional gender roles around the hearth. Clearly there are abundant exceptions to this characterization of American literature, especially beginning with the realists' critical examinations of marriage after the Civil War found in the works of writers such as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Frank Norris, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser. The work of the three writers considered here, however, offers something that other exceptions do not: a reconciliation between the apparently contradictory American ideals of independence and family. In "stranging" marriage, Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather embrace both and demonstrate a false dilemma at the heart of American fiction.

These three also call into a question another accepted verity of American literary history—that Realism was marked by a preference for large social concerns and institutions over individuals. In distancing themselves from

Romanticism, literary realists certainly tended to privilege the mundane happenings of everyday people in the context of social, economic, or material forces over abstract reflections on a person's relationship to the universe; however, Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather demonstrate that a rejection of the modes of Romanticism was not necessarily an outright rejection of its interests. They could avoid the sentiment, exuberance, and fancy that marked antebellum writing without abandoning the very personal questions of the human experience. These writers certainly concern themselves with social issues in their fiction, but by defamiliarizing marriage they repeatedly emphasize that individual agency and identity must not be erased in the scramble to reform.

In addition to complicating established ideas of American literary history generally and Realism specifically, these three writers also invite through their defamiliarizing projects a reconsideration of the place of love and marriage in literature more broadly. One of the most common themes of literature, love and courtship leading to marriage dominated especially the rise of the novel in Europe. Because novels were commonly employed to reinforce the values and assumptions of the governing social group and marriage was assumed to betoken the return to communal order, readers generally found within their pages accounts of the events leading up to a marriage rather than details about marriage itself. The journey toward marriage paralleled the effort to overcome



threats to the community so that all could, ever after, live happily. Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Cather insisted, however, that the institution of marriage could not be broadly wielded in defense of the status quo or mainstream ideas without question. The very forms of marriage themselves must be examined to see what they reveal about a society's values or prejudices. They cannot be overlooked even when, or especially when, they are presented as routine or uncontroversial. In a nation characterized by so many distinct parties united in common cause, taking marital forms for granted meant placing institutions above individuals, an offensive prospect in the land of the free. Fiction about courtship leading to conventional marriages was fine for Europe, but Mark Twain, Sui Sin Far, and Willa Cather insist that, in America, there is more to the story.

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