

ENTRAPMENT IN MOTHERHOOD AND WIFEHOOD: MARRIAGE AS A THREAT TO WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-FULFILLMENT

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Must not some one watch baby, house, and garden? And who is more fitting to perform all these duties, which no one else wishes to do, as she who brought sin into the world and all our woe!

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

In *The Troll Garden*, her first collection of short stories, Willa Cather denounces how love can become a destructive feeling when women depend totally on their beloved. In this collection and in *Obscure Destinies*, the writer also condemns marriages that shackle women's independence and self-fulfillment. Cather herself considered marriage and art incompatible when women lose everything that makes them themselves, when they lose their capacity for delight. Cather is not simply against marriage or housekeeping; she is against anything that subverts an individual. Indeed, Cather believed that even homemaking could contribute to art if this activity were completely satisfactory in all respects:

The farmers's wife who raises a large family and cooks for them and makes their clothes and keeps house and on the side runs a truck garden and a chicken farm and a canning establishment, and thoroughly enjoys doing it all, and doing it well, contributes more to art than all the culture clubs (qtd. in Wasserman 97).

Cather added that a woman who finds housekeeping a thoroughly satisfying activity could

appreciate "the beautiful bodies of her children, of the order and harmony of her kitchen, of the real creative joy of all her activities, which marks the great artist" (qtd. in Wasserman 97). Cather considers such a housekeeper an artist because, for her, "art [was] a matter of enjoyment through the five senses" (qtd. in Wasserman 96). According to Cather's concept of art, marriage and housekeeping are not deterrent to women's fulfillment if absolutely gratifying.

Some of Cather's critics, such as Marilyn Arnold and Ann Romines, assert that Cather's characters find marriage difficult and not mixable with art. In "Repudiating Home Plots," Romines affirms that Cather separates art from domestic ritual and marriage due to her lesbian identity (133). This argument is very questionable because to assert that Cather was lesbian on the basis of her strong attachment to women friends and her unmarried status is to shut her into patriarchal gender roles. Romines' assertion that Cather detaches art from domestic ritual is also debatable. When asked about the movement of women into business and the arts, Willa Cather declared, "it cannot help but be good" (qtd. in Wasserman 98). She also asserted that women should not have to choose between their home and their career:

As for the choice between a woman's home and her career, is there any reason why she cannot have both? In France the business is regarded as a family affair. It is taken for granted that Madame will be the business partner of her husband... Yet

the French women are famous housekeepers and their children do not suffer for lack of care (qtd. in Wasserman 98).

Unquestionably, Cather was not against the mixture of marriage and family life with business or art. She favored this combination when asserting that if a woman's business is art, "her family life will be a help rather than a hindrance to her; and if she has a quarter of the vitality of her prototype on the farm she will be able to fulfill the claims of both" (qtd. in Wasserman 98).

However, Cather does punish those relationships in which marriage and domestic ritual block women's self-fulfillment. She undermines marriage and housekeeping when women with an affinity for art commit themselves entirely to a life of housekeeping and motherhood, hindering their access to a life of self-satisfaction. This concern surfaces in stories where women who exchange their artistic loves and drives for those of motherhood and wifehood are utterly defeated by their entrapment in domesticity. In *A Wagner Matinee* and in *Old Mrs. Harris*, Cather poignantly explores this theme. In the first story, Cather presents a clear juxtaposition between the life of an artistic young woman and her unsatisfactory married life. "Old Mrs. Harris," on the other hand, is a more complex story because there are three female protagonists; the fact that they are unable to reach fulfillment due to their homebound sphere is their crucial connection.

A Wagner Matinee: Domestic Subversion

In *A Wagner Matinee*, the female protagonist sacrifices her career as a music teacher to elope with "the most idle and shiftless of all village lads" (T.G., 108). She felt "one of those extravagant passions which a handsome country boy of twenty-one sometimes inspires in an angular, spectacled woman of thirty" (T.G., 108). This "inexplicable infatuation" ended in elopement. Georgiana abandons the intellectual world of the Bostonian Music Conservatory to run away with a young New Englander to stake out a homestead in the rugged plains of Nebraska, where she becomes enshrined in domesticity.

[Georgiana], after cooking three meals—the first of which was ready at six o'clock in the morning—

and putting the six children to bed, would often stand until midnight at her ironing board, with [her nephew] at the kitchen table beside her, hearing [him] recite Latin declensions and conjugations, gently shaking [him] when [his] drowsy head sank down over a page of irregular verbs (T.G., 109).

Through Georgiana's feminine stereotype of good housekeeper and mother, Cather poignantly portrays Georgiana's limitations and servitude to her household. Her entrapment in a homebound sphere has deprived her of what she loves the most: music.

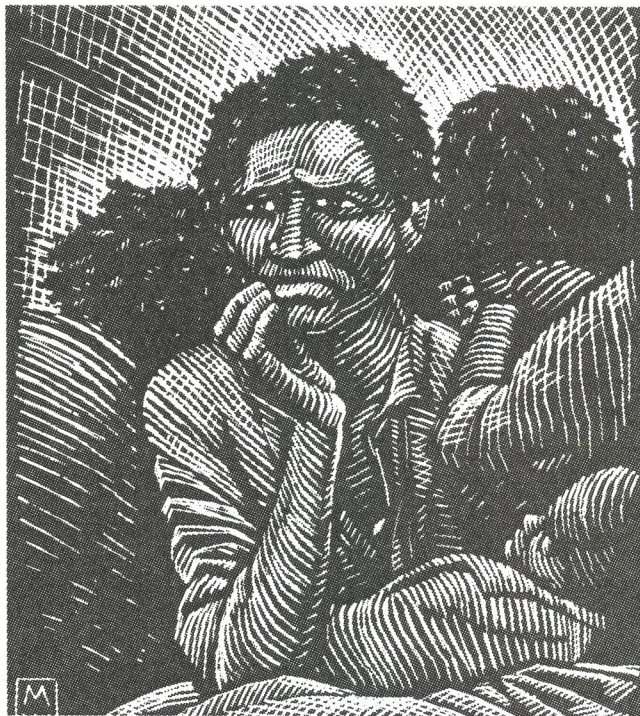
In this story, housekeeping does not contribute to art but rather hampers it by confining Georgiana to domesticity. Prairie life batters Aunt Georgiana physically and psychologically. Through a male narrator, her nephew, the reader gets to know the rough, grotesque figure of Aunt Georgiana:

My poor aunt's figure, however, would have presented astonishing difficulties to any dressmaker. Originally stooped, her shoulders were now almost bent together over her sunken chest. She wore no stays, and her gown, which trailed unevenly behind, rose in a sort of peak over her abdomen. She wore ill-fitting false teeth, and her skin was a yellow as a Mongolian's from constant exposure to a pitiless wind and to the alkaline water which hardens the most transparent cuticle into a sort of flexible leather (T.G., 109).

This misshapen figure reveals Cather's aversion towards domesticity or domestic ritual which hinders self-realization. She creates defeated women who exchange their artist talents for those of motherhood and wifehood. In this passage, Aunt Georgiana's bent shoulders and sunken chest symbolize her subordination and slavery; her entrapment in household affairs thwarts her self-fulfillment. The image of her leather-like skin also suggests the stiffness and petrification of her hands, the hands of someone who is no longer a pianist. The images of her hands, as Romines asserts, "signal Cather's concern with uses and abuses of domestic culture" (137). Indeed, Aunt Georgiana has reverted to primitive conditions: "Their [her family] water they got from the lagoons where the buffalo drank, and their slender stock of provisions was always at the mercy of

bands of roving Indians. For thirty years my aunt had not been further than fifty miles from the homestead" (*T.G.*, 108-109). In this primitive, uncivilized world where she lives, there is no place for culture and art. Domesticity has blurred and paralyzed her artistic abilities.

Romines clearly describes this situation when she asserts that in Aunt Georgiana's case "housekeeping is the thief of art, and the artist's gifts are leached away into the byproducts of domestic life: food, drink, and cleaning solution" (130). Aunt Georgiana was deprived of music for thirty years. Fifteen years after her arrival at the rugged plains of Nebraska, "she had not so much as seen any instrument, but an accordion that belonged to one of the Norwegian farmhands" (*T.G.*, 109). Aunt Georgiana "had been a good pianist in her day... and her musical education had been broader than that of most music teachers of a quarter of a century ago" (*T.G.*, 112). Having been raised in that cultured environment, her deprivation of music is her martyrdom. Her words confirm this when she says "tremulously," "Don't love [music] so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you. Oh, dear boy, pray that whatever your sacrifice may be, it be not that" (*T.G.*, 110). It is significant that these striking words are the first direct quotation of Aunt Georgiana. Clark, her nephew, narrates "A Wagner Matinee," as it is mainly through his recollections that the reader enters Aunt Georgiana's consciousness; however, Cather ensures reliability by quoting Aunt Georgiana directly when she reveals her feelings about her renunciation of music and about her trip back home at the end of the story.



After thirty years of being deprived of art and music, Aunt Georgiana returns to Boston to receive a small legacy from a deceased relative. There, her nephew Clark prepares a surprise for her to repay her for the wonderful moments at her farm where, after her

husband had spoken sharply to him, she used to tell Clark about splendid performances. Clark plans to take Aunt Georgiana to a Wagner concert. Before the concert, Cather portrays an environment of sleepiness around Aunt Georgiana to contrast the drowsy world in which she lives with the lively world of music she had renounced. She arrives at Boston in a "semisomnambulant state" (*T.G.*, 110). In this sleeplike condition, Aunt Georgiana "[seems] not to realize that she [is] in the city where she had spent her youth, the place longed for hungrily half a lifetime" (*T.G.*, 110). She questions Clark absently about various changes in the city, but her mind goes back to the rugged plains of Nebraska. Her aunt's drowsiness makes Clark think that his aunt has lost her refined sensitivity to music. He thinks she is no longer able to enjoy and entertain herself in the troll garden where the trolls are industrious artists and that it would be better to "get her back to Red Wallow Country without waking her" (*T.G.*, 111). Symbolically, Aunt Georgiana is dead; her sleepiness keeps her from living a social life. Domesticity has taken her away from the luring world of music.

Clark's invitation to a Wagner Matinee is an invitation to taste the goblins' fruit. Indeed, Clark, is himself a goblin offering her the possibility of drinking the luscious nectar of art. When Aunt Georgiana enters the concert hall, she starts waking up; "she [is] a trifle less passive and inert, and for the first time seem[s] to perceive her surroundings" (*T.G.*, 111). The adjectives "passive" and "inert" reinforce the image of a dead body. However, the inactive body of Aunt Georgiana starts to move again in the concert hall, "stepping suddenly into

the world to which she had been dead for a quarter of a century" (*T.G.*, 111). Clark describes Aunt Georgiana's dormant, devastated figure when confronted to the vivacious world of art by comparing her with old miners who, after being isolated in the mines, return to the

civilized world. They, like Aunt Georgiana, have been separated from their society and share the same aloofness; when entering the Brown Hotel at Denver, they are ragged figures with “their linen soiled, their haggard faces unshaven; standing in the thronged corridors as solitary as though they were still in a frozen camp on the Yukon” (*T.G.*, 111). When Aunt Georgiana arrives at Boston, she also has the appearance of an unburied body: “her linen duster had become black with soot, and her black bonnet gray with dust” (*T.G.*, 108). Indeed, she resembles an old miner stained with soot and dust. Cather plays with important images; she emphasizes the haggardness of both Aunt Georgiana and old miners and their dusty and tattered appearance in order to portray how their lives have physically and mentally deteriorated.

Besides, both Aunt Georgiana and the miners are “conscious that certain experiences have isolated them from their fellows by a gulf no haberdasher could bridge” (*T.G.*, 111). Mine work and home drudgery have obstructed their access to the social world. An enormous gulf separates these two worlds. Cather points out the magnitude of this gulf by using the image of the deteriorated hands of Aunt Georgiana to describe her inability to readjust to playing the piano again. Her domestic sphere has thwarted her potential to the extent that her hands are unable to recall the piano score they had once played.

Poor old hands! They had been stretched and twisted into mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with; the palms unduly swollen, the fingers bent and knotted—on one of them a thin worn band that had once been a wedding ring (*T.G.*, 113).

Through this passage, Cather rejects home drudgery and overworked, overburdened women. Aunt Georgiana’s hands are no longer instruments to create art but mere worn, ill-treated graspers. Cather subverts fixed patriarchal female roles by covertly stating that women are not naturally domestic machines. Aunt Georgiana’s hands have been unnaturally fixed and extended to perform domestic chores; they have been “stretched” and “twisted.”

Cather also exposes women’s serfdom when she describes how Aunt Georgiana’s fingers have been “bent” and “knotted.” The verb “bend” is poignant

because it suggests subjugation; her fingers have been forced to assume a different shape and direction, a domestic direction. They have also been knotted, which suggests their entanglement in domestic affairs. Cather also attacks housedruidgery by depersonalizing Aunt Georgiana’s hands; her hands are mere tentacles that hold, lift, and knead. They have become machines which do menial work. Cather suggests that Aunt Georgiana’s domestic sphere has drained her artistry and that her life ended up battered as her wedding ring, even though it has been her own choice.

When Aunt Georgiana enters the concert hall and the music starts playing, her painful awakening begins. Quivering, Aunt Georgiana murmurs, “‘And you have been hearing this ever since you left me, Clark?’ Her question was the gentlest and saddest of reproaches” (*T.G.*, 114). At this moment, Clark realizes that his aunt’s sensitivity has not been drained, and Aunt Georgiana realizes the dullness in which she has lived for thirty years. Now that she has entertained herself in the troll’s garden, in the artists’ world, the realization of what she has renounced is so painful that at the end of the concert “she [bursts] into tears and [sobs] pleadingly: ‘I don’t want to go, Clark, I don’t want to go!’” (*T.G.*, 115). Cather juxtaposes Aunt Georgiana’s two worlds at the end of the concert: “the orchestra went out one by one, leaving the stage to the chairs and music stands, empty as a winter cornfield” (*T.G.*, 115).

Symbolically, Aunt Georgiana is confronted with her two worlds because “just outside the door of the concert hall” lay the grim world to which she must return: “the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards; naked as a tower, the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dishcloths hung to dry; the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door” (*T.G.*, 115). Significantly, the story ends with these gloomy images that resemble Aunt Georgiana’s defeat. The curled boards and crook-backed ash seedlings symbolize Aunt Georgiana’s bending and subordination to the patriarchal society’s fixed gender roles. The word “ash” also conveys the meaning of human remains, the remains of Aunt Georgiana. Cather plays with death images to portray the female protagonist’s defeat. In *A Wagner Matinee*, Cather undermines the Victorian conception of the female as “a priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world” (Pastourmatzi, 153) by making the home world itself

abrasive. Even though Aunt Georgiana makes her own choice, the fact that she has to choose at all is a limitation on her personal realization and fulfillment.

Old Mrs. Harris: Dimmed Gender Destinies

Cather also thwarts the domestic ideal of a patriarchal society in "Old Mrs. Harris." In spite of the fact that this story responds to a variety of approaches, Cather's critics have overlooked it by seeing in it solitary old age or clashes between the South and the West. However, in this story, Cather goes beyond these political differences by juxtaposing three generations of women. Mrs. Harris, who is an old homemaker, confirms and clings to the remnants of Southern plantation society. Victoria Harris Templeton, her married daughter, is a stylish, willful Southern belle who does not want to assume a domestic role and who is unable to take control of her own life. Vickie, Victoria's daughter, is probably, of the three, the one who most wants to achieve her goal of making her own way, but her dreams are truncated.

Probably in none of her short stories does Cather denounce women's limitations and powerlessness as strongly as she does in *Old Mrs. Harris*. Mrs. Harris represents a "typical" old woman who sacrifices everything for her family. In her Southern society, she owned a big house, but her son-in-law sold it to finance his trip to the West. Ironically, she does have her own money at her command, but when she asks for part of her money to finance Vickie's education, Mr. Templeton denies it because he has used part of the money for his trip and invested the rest. She could have complained; however, she "looked downcast" and said nothing. Throughout the story, Mrs. Harris assumes a submissive role. She represses herself and does not defend her rights. However, through a third person narrator, the reader gets to know how she feels. Her thoughts are poignant; when her son-in-law denies her the money, she thinks that "invested" is a word "men always held over women, and it always meant they could have none of their own money" (*T.G.*, 302). Mrs. Harris is not pleased with this situation, but she accepts it. She has "the kind of quiet, intensely quiet, dignity that comes from complete resignation to the chances of lie" (*T.G.*, 263).

In this story, Cather exposes how old women in Southern and Western societies do not have lives of their

own. Mrs. Harris is deprived not only of her property and money but also of her individuality and privacy. In her daughter's house, she does not have a decent room: Mrs. Harris' room, "between the kitchen and the dining-room, [is] rather like a passage" (*T.G.*, 269). And she has to wait for the children to be upstairs and Victoria somewhere else to "be sure of enough privacy to undress" (*T.G.*, 269). Her own daughter has not even accorded her a shelf for her few personal toilet articles; she even had to carry her comb in her pocket.

Indeed, "Mrs. Harris and her 'things' were almost required to be invisible" (*T.G.*, 272). As Romines asserts, in *Old Mrs. Harris*, "nothing is superficially heightened, and even apparently trivial matters speak eloquently of Grandma Harris' needs" (171). For example, the night when Mrs. Harris could not sleep because her "lounge had no springs, only a thin cotton mattress between her and the wooden slats" (*T.G.*, 271), she could feel the "hard wooden slats under her, and the heaviness of the old home-made quilts, with weight but little warmth, on top of her" (*T.G.*, 270). The old home-made quilts stand for the Southern tradition, which presses rigid gender roles on women which limit them. Besides, society is cruel when women try to deviate from imposed patterns of behavior; it is hard as the wooden slats where Mrs. Harris sleeps. Through this passage, the omniscient narrator reveals how Mrs. Harris' family and her Southern tradition are unable to provide warmth. But Mrs. Harris clings, as Arnold points out, to "a set of empty, self-demeaning customs" (143) because she is committed to the continuation of Southern tradition. She has been taught not to complain and to have other people decide her fate, which is why "she did not regret her decision [to go West]; indeed, there had been no decision. Victoria had never once thought it possible that Ma should not go wherever she and the children went..." (*T.G.*, 271). Grandma Harris never thought it possible either. Neither of them thought their destinies could be separated because they are attached and cling to the gender cage in which they have been enclosed. In fact, Mrs. Harris "didn't believe that women, especially old women, could say when or where they would stop. They were tied to the chariot of young life, and had to go where it went..." (*T.G.*, 271-272). Mrs. Harris' life belongs not to her but to a set of fixed rules.

She is a depersonalized character who becomes "someone" to her own family only through hard

domestic work: "Housekeeping is Mrs. Harris's entrée into a group life" (Romines, 166). By performing domestic tasks, she becomes "part of the group, becomes a relationship" (*T.G.*, 290). Housekeeping is also the only sphere of her life in which she feels useful, so it is not surprising that her place is a passage between the kitchen and the dining-room. For Grandma Harris, domesticity is life itself. The narrator describes how in the South, among middle-class people, when a "a woman [is] a widow and ha[s] married daughters, she consider[s] herself an old woman and [wears] full-gathered black dresses and a black bonnet and [becomes] a housekeeper. She accept[s] this estate unprotestingly, almost gratefully" (*T.G.*, 238). She ceases to be a wife or mother and becomes just a housekeeper, a servant. While young married women rule the front porch and the parlour, "an old woman, a mother or mother-in-law or an old aunt... managed the household economies and directed help" (*T.G.*, 287). They were kept in their daughters' background; however, since they were the housekeepers, they ruled the background, and "ruled it jealously... the old women spent most of their lives in the kitchen and pantries and back dining-room" (*T.G.*, 287). These women have so many restrictions and limitations that their only sphere is housekeeping, and they cannot go beyond these boundaries.

When Mrs. Harris and her relatives move to a "snappy little Western democracy," their family's system is awkwardly out of step. Their neighbors do not understand the rules, assumptions, and customs that govern their household. Mrs. Harris and her family are "hurt and dazed" (*T.G.*, 288). Victoria, her daughter, is constantly criticized and censured for keeping her mother in the kitchen; however, Cather points out that it is not Victoria's fault; it is a matter of Southern tradition. Cather creates this old mother who does not want to be pitied. "To be pitied was the deepest hurt anybody could know" (*T.G.*, 272). Besides, Mrs. Harris is not Victoria's victim, but her society's, and she accepts the way things are imposed on her: "She herself didn't like the way [women who belonged to clubs and Relief Corps] lived. She believed that somebody ought to be in the parlour, and somebody in the kitchen" (*T.G.*, 288). Most important of all, Mrs. Harris has a low opinion of her female neighbors as housekeepers. She completely dislikes them. "She wouldn't for the world have had Victoria go about every morning in a short gingham dress, with bare arms, and a dust-cap on her head to

hide the curling-kids, as these brisk housekeepers did" (*T.G.*, 289). Mrs. Harris criticizes these housekeepers sharply and wants to "keep Victoria different from these ordinary women" (*T.G.*, 289). She wants to keep Victoria away from housekeeping and make her the most attractive woman in their neighborhood.

Mrs. Harris partly succeeds in the task of making Victoria widely accepted and admired because Victoria is popular among men, but not among women. Victoria can barely stand this rejection and feels unhappy and "as if her mother and Mr. Templeton must be somehow to blame" (*T.G.*, 286). They brought her to a society that rejects her role as a Southern belle. Cather exposes how this woman is envied and rejected at the same time. She is rejected because she does not fit into the role of the frontier woman "who was defined as a worker. Her role as housewife and mother was unabashedly active" (Pastourmatzi, 153). Victoria Templeton is not the "ideal" home-oriented female who becomes a domestic saint, but rather a worldly woman. She is a sensual woman who is widely liked by men: "All the merchants downtown will take anything from [Victoria]. She is very popular wi de [sic] gentlemen..." (*T.G.*, 266). Even her closest neighbor, Mr. Rosen, is so fond of her that once he "quitted his store half an hour earlier than usual for the pleasure of walking home with her" (*T.G.*, 267). It is no surprise that women in town censure her.

These women are enraged at Victoria not only for her flirtatious nature but also for her undomestic role. At an ice cream social, Mrs. Jackson, a woman "effective in regulating the affairs of the community because she never lost her temper, and could say the most cutting things in calm, even kindly, tones" (*T.G.*, 285), verbally attacks Victoria; she sniffs that she would never have someone in the kitchen to bake for her. However, she contradicts herself when she remarks that "[her] idea of coming up in the world would be to forget [she has] a cook-stove, like Mrs. Templeton. But [women] can't all be lucky" (*T.G.*, 285). Behind Mrs. Jackson's malice is her desire to free herself from her imposed role as housekeeper. Her discontent and resentment are aroused by Mrs. Templeton's "freedom" from the kitchen.

Through Victoria Templeton, Cather also explores women's ambiguous feelings toward motherhood. At the beginning of the story, Victoria is portrayed as a

Madonna with child; she appears nursing and holding her baby snugly. However, at the end, she is confronted with another pregnancy. In spite of Victoria's love for her children, when she learns of her fifth pregnancy, she sobs helplessly, "revealing her unconsolable distress over the discovery that another baby will soon be demanding space in the already cramped Templeton house" (Arnold, 148). Victoria does not want another baby because this baby symbolizes more home and family responsibilities, which restrain her freedom.

Indeed, "she was sick of it all; sick of dragging this chain of life that never let her rest and periodically knotted and overpowered her" (*T.G.*, 308). Cather "writes with a deep appreciation of woman's paradoxical biological destiny" (Wasserman, 59). Even though Mrs. Templeton loves children, with another baby she will never be freed from domestic entanglement. Like the other women in this "democratic" Western town, she is forced to drag this chain of life that subdues her. She cannot understand why her society suppresses her individuality and imposes an inferior, subservient status in the home. Through this character, Cather exposes the social pressure imposed on women and the great gap between what women really want and what they get. Patriarchy encloses women in roles of motherhood and wifedom, and if they do not assume these roles, they are considered unfulfilled women. Many women assume these roles not because they really want to, but because they do not want their society's disapproval and stigmatization.

These gender restrictions on women create a sense of suffocation and imprisonment. Cather portrays this feeling of confinement through the size of the Templeton's house. When Victoria receives the news of her fifth pregnancy, she can only think that another person will demand space in their already cramped house. She sees her house as a crowded cage: "Why must she be for ever shut up in a little cluttered house with children and fresh babies and an old woman and a stupid bound girl and a husband who wasn't very

successful?" (*T.G.*, 308). Meyering also refers to this aspect when she asserts that "the plan of the house itself is emblematic of the confinement of generation after generation of women" (169). Besides, the fact that "no scenes occur in the spacious outdoor, and even when one does, like the Methodist social, the women are trapped again, in a tent full of gossip" (Meyering, 169) reinforces women's limitations in a male-dominated society.



In *Old Mrs. Harris*, Cather explores the different phases and roles of a woman's life. The first phase is youth, a time when a girl should be "carefree and foolish." The second one is wifedom and motherhood; in this stage of life, a woman must enact "a role to which every other aspect of life must be sacrificed" (Meyering, 171-172).

And the third phase is old age, an age in which she remains at the mercy of her children. This story is mainly the story of the three women in the Templeton household who are trapped in their domestic sphere and who "repeat each other's destinies" (Romines, 173). They have to deal with soul-racking conflicts. Grandma Harris clings to a declining plantation society but foments its continuance. Paradoxically, in here few moments of self-assertion, she makes sure Vickie, her fifteen-year-old granddaughter, has the money to go the University of Michigan. Even though Grandma Harris "[does not] know what's got into the child" (*T.G.*, 295), she defends her granddaughter's scholastic pursuits. She wants Vickie to achieve her goal because helping Vickie to go to college is the only thing she can do to free her granddaughter from surrendering to domesticity. Grandma Harris cannot verbalize what she thinks, but her actions speak for themselves. Victoria's selfishness, on the other hand, prevents her from seeing beyond herself. Her daughter is a threat to the role Grandma Harris and she has played for years. She is unable to understand why her daughter cries when she does not have enough money to go to college: "If it were a love-affair that the girl was crying about, that would be so much more natural—and more hopeful!" (*T.G.*, 301). This assertion clearly describes patriarchal ideology. Victoria is reinforcing it by assuming that women are

to be tender and loved, and that these are “natural” or God-given characteristics. The tension between her cultural conditioning and her personal needs makes Victoria contradictory.

Although both Mrs. Harris and Victoria attempt to subvert patriarchy at some point, one by helping Vickie go to college and the other one by questioning her maternal role, they fail. Vickie, who defies her male-oriented society by preparing to go to college, thinks that “Everyone [is] an enemy [and that] all society [is] against her” (*T.G.*, 301) when her father let her have the money to pay for her education. Vickie hardly knows why or what she wants to study in college, but she is certain that if she does not go to college, “everything [will be] over” (*T.G.*, 298). Housekeeping is not an alternative to her; she dislikes it so much that she tries to be outdoors most of the time. However, when Grandma helps her get the money, her mother gets pregnant, and Grandma Harris dies. All this happens when she has only two weeks to get ready for school, and no trunk or clothes or anything. Her future, one more time, is uncertain.

With Grandma Harris’ death, Victoria and Vickie’s lives change. Mrs. Templeton’s freedom does not last forever; she eventually has to assume her domestic role as Mrs. Harris did. In fact, Victoria is never truly free; she is manipulated by her Southern tradition. Even though she does not live in the South, she is a remnant of its tradition. She acts as was expected in that society. Victoria Templeton is a puppet of male-dominated ideology. She, like her mother, will continue strengthening traditional roles of women because she

was not taught anything else. Grandma Harris is unable to help Victoria build her future, or the life she really wants to live, because her society has imposed roles on them that are passed on from generation to generation. Grandma Harris, being subdued by these impositions, can neither deviate from them nor prevent her daughter from living a life full of limitations. Romines describes this situation well when she declares that

a mother is twice committed to continuance, because she has borne a child and because she (probably) keeps house. With such commitments, what can a mother say, to help her daughter survive, unslaved? How can she find the plot that is her chance? (190).

What could Mrs. Harris do or say to help Victoria free herself from her imposed role, if she herself failed to do so?

The Templeton women do not have a language of their own, but rather the language of their patriarchal society. They are unable to communicate what they feel of think and accept male authority as given. In fact, like Aunt Georgiana, they are trapped in the domestic plot. Cather makes a poignant statement when she declares that “when an imposed duty, homemaking not only curtails woman’s self-determination severely, but also stifles any pleasure of self-expression she may find in domestic activity” (qtd. in Pastourmatzi, 183). Cather uses these domestic women to expose their powerlessness, dependency, and servitude. She also uses them as foils for the strong women in other stories who invade “male” territory by shattering patriarchal order.

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