Willa Cather’s My Antonia and Ecriture Feminine

Chikako Tanimoto

One of the main projects for poststructuralists is to reconsider the relationship between language and meaning. According to Chris Weedon, a poststructuralist feminist, social reality does not display any fixed meaning for us unless it is defined through language.\(^1\) In this sense, language is no longer a reflection of each experience but, on the contrary, each experience is given its meaning only through language. Consequently, as long as human linguistics operates in all understanding of our experiences, our comprehension of these experiences is always determined by language. To this point, Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests that “language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world.”\(^2\) Since, in language, the connection between a signifier and its signified is not fixed but vulnerable to change over history, and the connection reflects the ideologies of the particular period and society, whenever we use language, we are influenced by the ideologies that the language manifests.\(^3\) For example, the concept “to be a woman” does not have any essential meaning, but once it is expressed through a particular language, it is defined according to the hegemonic idea which that language reflects. In a patriarchal society where “the cult of true womanhood”\(^4\) is the norm, “to be a woman” is therefore defined as being subordinate to men, dometic, sexually passive, and so on. Language is not ahistorical nor essential but it is the reflection of the ideology of the society where it is used, and, therefore, there is no essential meaning for “to be a woman.”\(^5\)

To deny the essentiality of the experience of “to be a woman” takes us to the trap: we would ask “then what is ‘to be a woman’ if it is not what we have understood”? Poststructuralist feminists do not answer to this question yet.\(^6\) Nevertheless, Hélène Cixous’s idea of écriture féminine can provide the first step in understanding femininity in the way which is not ruled by the conventional definition by language. Her theory of écriture féminine is influenced by the Lacanian notion of language as a symbolic order in which the phallus signifies power and control.\(^7\) In Lacan’s theory, woman has no access to such phallocentric symbolic order in her own right; rather she is an object defined in the symbolic order and eventually deprived of her subjectivity. In her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous urges woman to write herself. Through the act of writing herself, woman regains her subjectivity from which she has been driven away in the phallocentric symbolic order. In Cixous’s text, “woman’s body” is the symbol of femininity.\(^8\) But she eschews using the term “femininity” because the term “femininity” would itself imprison her within the patriarchal terminology which she is trying to deconstruct.

True femininity cannot be identified in the conventional phallocentric language; therefore it is necessary for woman to write herself in her own language which is not controlled by the conventional definitions. Cixous suggests that feminine writing is different from masculine writing although she admits that it is impossible to define it. Based on the hypothesis of deconstructing phallocentric language, écriture féminine starts from pre-linguistic stage where there is nothing but imagery. Feminine writing is therefore close to the voice which possesses the power of “touch” passing through ears.\(^9\) Woman should write her own experience, which would not be categorized as “woman’s experience” in the conventional meaning, because her existence itself is the only answer to the question “What is ‘to be a woman’?”\(^10\)

However, it is important to remember that woman, even when she is drawn in écriture féminine, cannot totally be free from the cultural and historical context including language itself. As long as woman lives in a certain historical time and place (as, of course, all women,
all humans, must), we can no longer imagine any single woman without any cultural and historical background. Nevertheless, écriture féminine at least succeeds in looking at woman who is different from the conventional definition of "woman."

Although Willa Cather, having lived before poststructuralists emerged as a school of thought, had no knowledge of poststructuralism, her skepticism about the patriarchal definition of womanhood is a poststructuralist one. Abhorring the social distinction between male and female roles, she created a masculine persona for herself during her own adolescence. Cropping her hair and donning boyish clothes, she disguised herself as a boy, "William Cather, Jr." In her childhood, while her sexual role was still undefined, she usually identified herself with those male heroes who possessed power and autonomy in the books of her favorite authors such as Kipling. Nevertheless, when she reached her adolescence, she came to realize that she never could play the male hero's part because, as a woman, she would never be able to achieve male power and authority. In short, she was all too aware that the male hero's role was prohibited for women in her society. Acting out a man's persona was her escape from the socially constructed role of woman, and, at the same time, an expression of her "penis envy." For her to be a man meant achieving autonomous power and authorship in the world. Yet her performance as "William Cather" challenged "the cult of true womanhood" by showing woman's ambition for achieving independence, authority and power which had been characterized as being masculine. The challenge in her adolescence was the necessary stage for her to question the conventional definition of femininity and to redefine it herself. Even after she stopped acting the masculine role, she gradually came to free herself from the prevailing definition of femininity through her fiction writing.

Cather's love for other women is already a well known fact for literary scholars. Her letter to her college friend, Louise Pound, reveals both her love for Louise and her agonizing notion that such love is "unnatural." However, lesbianism is regarded as "unnatural" only in the language where heterosexuality is the norm. Once the binarism of femininity and masculinity is called into question, heterosexualism which is based on the binarism cannot be the norm any more. Outside language, there is no "natural" nor "unnatural" sexuality. In other words, our sexuality becomes "natural" or "unnatural" only in the binary categorization of our sexuality. I am not sure that Cather reached this notion. However, her sense of marginality in the heterosexual-centered society would make her skeptical about the hegemony of heterosexuality as well as about the conventional understanding of both femininity and masculinity.

Her love for women contributes to her understanding of true femininity. Regarding feminine value in her female beloved, she came to realize that true femininity was different from what she and patriarchal society had been considering it. While she was performing "William Cather," she felt ambivalent about the notion of "femininity" itself: while she was rejecting its conventional meaning, she was still trying to modify its meaning to suit herself. Through an examination of femininity in her female beloved, she concluded that true femininity could not be categorized in the phalliccentric symbolic order. Moreover, she felt the existence of such femininity even in herself, and came to respect it.

This new notion of femininity contributes to her creation of various female characters in her fiction. As a woman writer, what she is trying to do is to deconstruct the dominant definition of what it means "to be a woman" in her generation. Creating a manly woman such as Alexandra in O Pioneers! and a womanly man such as Professor St. Peter in The Professor's House is one of her steps in redefining the experience of man and woman. Yet, her intention in such creation is not to praise masculine characteristics in woman nor
to disparage feminine characteristics in man. " For example, a manly woman such as Alexandra is not an ideal for Cather. Although Alexandra’s masculine quality is agreeable and somehow attractive, she lacks understanding of female sexuality through her exercising a masculine role: for example, Marie’s passion for Emil is completely foreign to Alexandra. Unlike Alexandra, Marie expresses her female sexuality. Although the author seems to punish Marie’s adultery by giving her a death, the author does not reproach Marie’s passion itself. On the contrary, Marie’s struggle for crawling towards Emil’s dead body indicates the greatness of female sexuality. Cather’s beautiful description of white butterflies above Marie’s and Emil’s dead bodies shows her celebration of Marie’s accomplishment of her love at the moment of her death. For Marie, death with her lover is more valuable than life with her patriarchal husband. With her passion, Marie is an attractive woman in a different sense from Alexandra. Alexandra and Marie express their true femininity in different ways—Alexandra shows the ability of a woman to take a male role and Marie shows the power of female sexuality. In short, they are created as real women by the author. In the end of the story, however, Alexandra loses Emil and Marie is killed by her jealous husband. Both are punished by the patriarchal husband for expressing desire for masculinity on one hand and female sexuality on the other.

Like many other women writers, Cather seems to have felt an “anxiety of authorship” which originated in her sense of marginality as a woman writer in the male-centered literary canon. Familiar with male writers’ works rather than female writers’, she identifies pen with penis.” For her, creative power is always associated with the male so that she is anxious about her own ability as a woman writer. Although she has difficulty in identifying woman with authorship, she recognizes woman’s artistic ability through her experience at the opera house. Impressed with female opera singers’ magnificent performance, she feels that they not only represent but also incarnate female art. She creates the female version of metaphorical equivalence: “vessel/womb/throat/voice/woman/artist.” Recognition of this equivalence is for her the departure from prevailing phallocentric symbolic order in language. From now on the female voice would become a metaphor of feminine writing. In her works, she writes of her heroines’ various experiences. Although she does not write about herself as Cixous urges women to do, her creation of unique female characters such as Alexandra and Marie is her version of écriture feminine.

In *My Antonia*, Cather employs a male narrator, Jim Burden. Many critics have already discussed the significance of her using a male point of view to present Antonia’s story. Considering Cather’s ambivalent consciousness of her lesbianism, Deborah G. Lambert, for example, insists that Jim’s prohibited and unsuccessful presentation of his love for Antonia implies Cather’s dilemma about homosexual love. Going further than Lambert’s perception of Cather’s ambivalent treatment of Jim’s love for Antonia, both O’Brien and Judith Fetterley agree that Cather’s use of male point of view is the mask of her lesbian love. They agree that Cather places her concealed homosexual story behind the heterosexual love romance. They read the account of the frontier boy’s unrequited love for an older girl as but a surface story behind which the prohibited homosexual context is concealed. In their reading, within the homosexual context Jim is a woman who loves a woman.

However, interpretation of the novel as the implicit presentation of Cather’s prohibited hidden homosexual love confuses the author’s identity with the narrator’s. Although Jim’s life is similar to Cather’s—both were born in Virginia, immigrated to Nebraska, studied at Lincoln, and moved to the East for work—Jim is created to be a completely different person from the author. He is not merely a male disguise Cather wears to conceal her homosexuality but an
independent agent who perceives what is going on around him with his own eyes and sometimes misunderstands it. As one of the author’s creatures, the narrator is morally and emotionally distant from the implied author. But the most important difference between Cather and Jim is their gender. Jim, as the male, possesses a masculine sense of value against which Cather rebels in the novel. As a consequence of Jim’s distance from Cather, there is a gap between Jim’s understanding and Cather’s intention in creating Antonia’s story. Generally speaking, Jim’s point of view somehow represents that of the male, and Cather’s creation of Antonia is her performance of écriture féminine although it is written in Jim’s patriarchal language. Applying Jim’s point of view to Antonia’s experiences, Cather presents how “woman’s” experience is interpreted by the male. On one level, Cather’s employment of the male point of view is her experiment of paradoxically testifying the limit of the patriarchal language in narrating woman’s experiences.

At the beginning of the novel, Jim, taken from Virginia to Nebraska, is put in a place which gives him the impression that “[t]here was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (7). Placed on the stretching earth without any mark of human civilization, he feels that “the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction” (8). Feeling separated from the conventional world, he loses the conventional way of defining the things around him. In other words, he is deprived of the conventionally fixed connection between language and meaning. Without this connection, the only thing he perceives is the fact that he is in the place where there is nothing but land and that “what would be would be” (8) no matter how it is distinguished in human language. He does not say his prayers that first night he spends in Nebraska because he no longer finds any connection between the words of the prayer and its significance. He feels as if he were in the primitive stage of human history before language provides any meaning to human experience.

However, the pre-linguistic image of frontier that Jim attains in the first chapter is only the illusion. If there is no immigrant, the New World is no longer a new world because the immigrants from the Old World always bring, along with their language, the ideologies which they have achieved in the Old World. Jim notices it as soon as he perceives the existence of his grandmother. Although having immigrated into the New World, his grandmother still keeps her patriarchal sense of value which she has brought from her old world. Her concrete vision of gender roles reveals her advocacy of the patriarchy. She dislikes Antonia’s working in the field, for example, because she thinks it spoils Antonia’s feminine elegance. Instead, she tries to teach Antonia how to cook. In her opinion, the woman’s sphere is a kitchen instead of a field.

In his frontier life, Jim is always with his grandmother rather than his grandfather. Instead of working in the field as other boys—Jack Marpole and Otto Fuchs—do, he stays in the kitchen and sometimes helps with his grandmother’s gardening. If femininity involves staying inside the house, the quality of his life is characterized as quite feminine. Nevertheless, he is not required to learn cooking as Antonia is because unlike Antonia, he has a penis. Staying beside his grandmother, he gradually absorbs her phallocentric sense of value in spite of the sense of loss of identity that he felt the first night he spent in Nebraska. When he leaves the frontier and moves into Black Hawk, Nebraska, he comes to learn conventional gender roles not only from his grandmother but also from the boys and girls of his age at school. These boys and girls in the town are educated with the patriarchy as a standard of value in the town. Jim learns, from his schoolmates’ behavior, how to “fight, play ‘keeps’, tease the little girls, and use forbidden words as well as any boy” (94). To fight, tease girls, and use profanity is a boy’s role and to be teased by boys is a girl’s role in the school.
In spite of his natural feminine quality, he still has male privilege. He first realizes this privilege when he is flattered by Antonia for killing the snake. Watching the scene in which he kills a huge snake, Antonia praises his courage and power in facing such a dangerous creature, and exaggerates the fact when she tells the story to others. It is through Antonia’s praise and exaggerated story that Jim achieves the “masculinity” associated with power. In Antonia’s story, Jim is no longer a little boy but becomes a mature “man” who bravely faces and fights with the spiteful huge snake in order to save a little girl. But to tell the truth, Antonia colors the fact with her imagination, and her story is not fact but fiction. This implies that Jim’s “masculinity” presented in Antonia’s story is also fictional.

In this episode, both Jim and Antonia play the role determined by their gender. Jim plays the role of a brave hero who kills a beast, and Antonia plays the role of a heroine who praises the hero’s courageous behavior. But, to tell the truth, it is lucky for Jim that the snake is old and dull, and that he has a spade in his hand. If the snake had not been old and weak, it could have killed Jim. Or it could have been Antonia who killed the snake if she had been carrying the spade. In this sense, it can be said that the whole episode is merely an accident. The accidentality of this episode implies that the distinction of sex roles is also accidental. However, no matter how fictional and accidental his achievement of “masculinity” is, Jim does not want to give it up because “masculine” pride and female respect for it are pleasurable to him.

The episode in which Jim is nearly raped by Wick Cutter reassures Jim about his male privilege in the society to which he belongs: as long as he is male, he does not have to be afraid of being raped. Nevertheless, his unreasonable anger with Antonia reflects his displeasure that his male privilege was violated when he took over the role of a woman. At the same time, the experience of being a victim of near rape gives him a fear of castration through intimacy with a woman. This fear is one of the reasons Jim leaves Antonia for two years after that incident.

Jim’s sense of male privilege prevents him from fully understanding Antonia’s life. As long as he is looking at her from a masculine point of view, his understanding of the significance of Antonia’s life is only partial. When he shows his manuscript to his friend in “Introduction,” he writes “Antonia” on its face. But he is not satisfied with that title and prefixes another word, making it “My Antonia.” Giving this titling, in some way, represents his desire to possess Antonia. Ironically, however, it implies at the same time that his narration is no more than “his” version of Antonia story. That is to say, his title implies his partial understanding of Antonia. His whole narrative is about his memory of Antonia, not about Antonia herself.

Antonia’s Bohemian language is a metaphor of her foreignness to Jim. It implies Jim’s incapability in fully comprehending Antonia. To Jim, she is as unintelligible as the Bohemian language. Eventually, however, Antonia’s father asks Jim to teach her English. By teaching her his native language, Jim tries to draw her to his own intelligible world where the meaning of language is supported by the patriarchal ideology. In this sense, Jim’s English lesson to Antonia is the process of teaching her the patriarchal ideology.

Metaphorically, the Bohemian language is a female language as English is a male language. While English, the dominant language in the frontier, reflects the patriarchal ideology in early twentieth-century American frontier, Bohemian reflects its speaker’s ethnic status which means something foreign to the English speakers—marginal, poor, and weak. The female language is foreign to the male as Bohemian is foreign to the English speakers. As Bohemians should learn English, women should learn the male language; otherwise a masculine translator, such as wicked Krajeik, takes advantage of the female, the weaker side, and what women want to
say is not correctly translated.

That Bohemian is the female language does not mean that Bohemia is the matriarchal country. Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch’s idea that the eldest son should be the center of the family after their father’s death is patriarchal in itself. Bohemians as well as Americans are dominated by the patriarchal ideology to some extent. However, once Bohemians are immigrated into American frontier, those who cannot speak English cannot take the initiative in the English speaking society. They are poor, stupid ethnics who cannot speak English and are suppressed by the dominant Americans. Patrriarchy is based on the binary notion of the suppressing and the suppressed, the governing and the governed, and the suppressed and governed are always the female. In this binarism, Americans are on the male side and Bohemians on the female side.

For Jim, Antonia is an ideal woman. There are several reasons that she becomes his ideal woman. For example, except for Antonia’s sister Yulka, Antonia is the first girl he meets in the frontier. Her love and submissiveness to her father are agreeable to his patriarchal viewpoint. But the most important reason is that she provides him with “masculinity” in her praise and storytelling about his killing the snake. After that incident, he achieves “male” identity, and perceives Antonia as the “female”—an ideal female figure. Influenced by his grandmother’s patriarchal ideology, his notion of ideal womanhood is similar to “the cult of true womanhood”: woman is domestic, sexually passive, and submissive to the male. He considers woman only in her relationship to the male. Accordingly, his ideal womanhood is a good sweetheart, a good wife, a good mother and a good sister of a man, and she never exists without her relation to the male.

His idealization of Antonia prevents him from looking at her real humanity. His own ideal “Antonia” that he creates in his own imagination becomes more real and important to him than the real person so that he comes to be afraid that Antonia’s actual behavior destroys his ideal image of “Antonia”. Eventually, whenever he sees Antonia acting disagreeably in his patriarchal view, he tries to forget her and leaves her for a while. In this sense, he is similar to Neil in Cather’s later novel, *Lost Lady*. Neil idealizes Mrs. Forrester as a woman who is as pure as the fresh morning air. But when he finds out about her adulterous sexual affair with Frank Ellinger, he feels as if he had lost “one of the most beautiful things in his life” (71-72). After recognizing Mrs. Forrester’s sexuality, which is contradictory to his ideal womanhood, her existence presents no meaning to him any more. To tell the truth, Neil has not been looking at Mrs. Forrester herself but has been creating his ideal womanhood in her. Therefore when his ideal is destroyed by Mrs. Forrester’s expression of her sexuality, she is driven out of Neil’s mind along with the figure of his ideal womanhood. Both Neil and Jim treasure the fancy of their ideal beloved woman so much that they fail to admit the realities of those women. In other words, both the idealization of Jim and Neil are based on the sacrifice of their beloved women’s real humanity.

What Jim hates in Antonia is her harsh masculinity and sexuality, because they are qualities contradictory to his image of an ideal woman. He does not like Antonia to eat noisily like a man, yawn often at the table and keep stretching her arms over her head, because this behavior violates the feminine elegance which he tries to find in his ideal “Antonia.” He attributes her harsh masculine behavior to her working outdoors, and refuses to admit it as her own. He imagines that she is only imitating Ambrosch. Eventually, he fails to recognize the necessity of Antonia’s working in the field like a man because of her family’s poverty, and moreover, he fails to recognize that she is enjoying her outdoor work.

Nevertheless, what Jim is not willing to admit the most is Antonia’s sexuality. As an ideal woman, his Antonia should be
sexually innocent. His rejection of recognizing her sexuality is clearly presented in the fact that he never has a sexual dream about Antonia while he dreams his kiss scene with Lena many times. When Antonia refuses to kiss him, he is not disappointed. Rather, he feels proud of her sexual purity and her maternal protective manner in removing Lena’s seduction from his mind. He is excited at recognizing that she is still “his” Antonia who is sexually innocent and protects him from other women’s sexual seductiveness.

However, the true reason she refuses to kiss Jim is not her sexual purity. Actually she almost kisses him. There is no evidence that she does not offer her kiss to anybody. The only episode available as the evidence of Antonia’s refusal of kiss is Mr. Paine’s case. But it is only because she knows that Mr. Paine will marry soon. Antonia refuses Jim her kiss because she does not want her younger friend to think of a kiss as merely a pleasure. She rebukes Lena’s behavior for the same reason.

It is when he is nearly raped by Wick Cutter that Jim crucially realizes Antonia’s sexuality. The night when Jim sleeps in Antonia’s room in order to substitute her responsibility of watching Cutter’s property, Cutter, not knowing that Jim substitutes Antonia’s place, tries to rape Jim. The experience of the near rape is disgusting for Jim partly because it gives him the fear of castration. But the chief reason he feels it disgusting is that, at that moment, he realizes Antonia’s sexual reality. The thought that Antonia—his ideal woman who is pure and innocent—could be a victim of rape makes him crazy because it destroys his idealism. He is not ready to accept the reality that she, with a woman’s body, could be an object of a man’s sexual desire. At that point, his ideal is more important for him than the reality. After this incident, he leaves Antonia under the impression that he never wants to see her again. It is because he fears that Antonia’s sexuality will destroy his fantasy of his “Antonia”—an ideal woman.

After Jim leaves Antonia in the end of Book II, he encounters her only twice. During his absence, a lot of things happen in Antonia’s life. Her love affair with Larry Donovan, leaving for Denver in order to marry him, being abandoned by him, illegitimate pregnancy and childbirth, marrying a young Bohemian, and eleven other childbirths and bringing up eleven children—all these things are important for a woman’s life. However, Jim does not narrate them in detail. There is no love romance nor affectionate conversation between Antonia and Larry described in his narrative. Especially as to Antonia’s love affair with Larry and the birth of their illegitimate child, Jim does not tell them even in his own voice. Rather, he only transmits Widow Steavens’ recounting of these things.

What we should mark here is that all Antonia’s experiences that Jim is not willing to mention are related to her sexuality. Actually Antonia mentions her illegitimate baby only once in their conversation in Book IV, but Jim soon changes the topic by telling his abstract feeling towards her. It is because her child is the inevitable evidence of Antonia’s sexuality which Jim tries to overlook. In fact, throughout the narrative, Jim never meets her illegitimate child.

Jim’s narrative does not present any impression that Antonia and Cuzak’s marriage is based on love. Rather he describes their relationship as “easy friendliness” (229). Book V identifies Antonia as a typical mother/wife in the patriarchal family. In fact, Cuzak is a patriarchal father who only mentions his sons in spite of the fact that he also has daughters. Only through the brief encounter, Jim becomes fond of Cuzak because Jim notices that both share the same kind of patriarchal point of view. Both of them identify Antonia’s body with the reproductive organ. Moreover, both Cuzak’s mentioning his sons and Jim’s titling of his last section of his narrative “Cuzak’s boys” imply their patriarchal notion that woman’s proper role is a mother of boys. 32

However, the title of Book V also implies another thing. The night
he stays with the Cuzakhs, he insists that he sleep with Antonia's sons in the heymow. Also, during his visit, he spends much time with Antonia's sons. These facts, along with his titling, reflect his wish to be one of her sons. It is because to be a son is the easiest way to forget his mother's sexuality. Throughout this section, he emphasizes Antonia's maternal function. By identifying Antonia with a mother of many children, Jim succeeds in confining her to the "proper" role for a woman. "[N]atutal-born mother" (204) is the most respectable title that he gives to Antonia. Associating her sexuality with merely a reproductive function, he no longer has to fear that sexuality would destroy the pure image of "his" Antonia.

Nevertheless, he does not totally underestimate Antonia's sexuality. While he is trying to overlook the fact she is a woman who is not only a mother but has female sexuality, he still does not want her to be only a mother/wife on the other hand. He says to her sons: "[s]ometimes ... it doesn't occur to boys that their mother was ever young and pretty" (222). He continues to say: "I couldn't stand it if you boys were inconsiderate, or thought of her as if she were just somebody who looked after you. You see I was very much in love with your mother once, and I know there's nobody like her" (222). These words are quite contradictory to his willingness to identify Antonia with a natural-born mother. This contradiction indicates his dilemma that he has been keeping since he left her after the near rape incident. Although he is trying to forget Antonia, the real person, in order to keep his pure image of her, he cannot help being attracted to her. That is why he has kept on pondering upon her for many years and ends up seeing her. It is her body which keeps on fascinating him. Her body in which all the strong things of her heart came out has been "so tireless in serving generous emotions" (227).

In order to describe Antonia as an ideal woman, Jim tries to overlook the undesirable facts. As I said before, he describes Antonia's love affair with Larry and the childbirth as little as possible as if they were not important. Although they are unwelcomed facts for Jim, however, they are important for Antonia because they are her experiences. If Antonia had written her own story, she would have written in a quite different way from Jim's narrative. She could have written more about herself focusing on her feeling at each moment. However, even in Jim's subjective narrative, we can figure out her real personality and experience which are sometimes beyond Jim's comprehension, because no matter how Jim describes her, she is there as an autonomous being.

Even when she is a little girl, she has her own opinions about every thing and she is able to make them known to people. They are quite unusual features for a female child in a patriarchal society, but she manages them in an agreeable way. She has her own opinions about her parents—she loves her father more than her mother. People tend to consider the daughter's love for her father as an agreeable value in the patriarchal society. Nevertheless the important thing is that Antonia loves her father from her own will. Her love for Mr. Shimerda cannot be easily categorized as patriarchal misogyny nor penis-envy. Antonia and Mr. Shimerda have a common female characteristic—both of them like to give their things away to the people they love. Mr. Shimerda offers his gun, and Antonia offers her ring to Jim. On the contrary, Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch show masculine characteristic—they like to take things from other people. Actually Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch are more patriarchal than Mr. Shimerda. Especially in Mrs. Shimerda's mind, her eldest son is the center of the family. It is she who decides against her husband's will to come to the American frontier for Ambrosch's future. Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch possess more power than anyone else in their family. Antonia's awe of her brother is more patriarchal than her love for her father. And ironically, her awe of her brother is one of the most disagreeable things for the patriarchal narrator.
As I said before, Bohemia is metaphorically identified with the female while the American frontier is with the male. It is Mrs. Shimerda's masculine force that brings Mr. Shimerda and Antonia to the male site represented by the American frontier. Mr. Shimerda and Antonia's nostalgia for their home country represents their search for their female origin. However, when they are taken to the male sites, they are forced to give up their maternal language to get along in the phallocentric society.

Even though she is deprived of her maternal tongue, however, she does not lose her own voice. When she is working for the Harlings, she sometimes tells her stories to the Harlings' children. Her stories are based on her own experiences, and everybody likes them. But the most impressive thing in her story-telling is not the contents of the story but her voice. "Jim describes the quality of her voice as follows: "Her voice had a peculiarly engaging quality; it was deep, a little husky, and one always heard the breath vibrating behind it. Everything she said seemed to come right out of her heart" (113). The vibration of the sound, verbal mood and emotional aura of the story suggest both her physical and emotional existence.

Antonia's dance is another expression of her inner self. Through dancing, she learns how to move her body to express her emotional feeling and inner energy, and acquires the ecstasy of the female body. In one sense, dancing is the expression of sexuality because the motion of the body exposes one's inner energy, some of which is sexual. When Mr. Harlings forbids her going to a dance, she chooses to leave his house rather than to give up her dance. It is because she does not feel ashamed of exposing sexuality but enjoys expressing herself through the energetic movement of her body.

Antonia's sexuality is abused by Larry. But the miserable ending of the love affair does not drive her to the skepticism about love. On the contrary, she still has much affection in herself — towards her family and her old friend Jim. People in the society think that her experience is "poor," "bad" and "grievous." But Antonia is not ashamed of it. Rather, she accepts it as her own experience.

Antonia is not free from the patriarchal society. Before she marries, her brother rules her with his patriarchal power. After her marriage, her husband seems to govern her. However, it is Antonia who supports her family economically. Before marriage, she works in the field with her brother and works in the Harlings' kitchen as a hired girl. After marriage, she insists on staying in the frontier and works in the field with her husband. Moreover, since Jim's narrative tends to emphasize Cuzak's patriarchal notion of his wife, we almost overlook Antonia's power over her husband. Yet the fact is that although Cuzak prefers living in a city, he is still living in the country, because Antonia wants to live there. Cuzak's patriarchy does not have the power to take Antonia away from the country she loves. On the other hand, Antonia's power succeeds in changing Cuzak's original way of living. Cuzak is so attracted to Antonia that he cannot leave Nebraska where her life is.

Cather's intention to create the male narrator is to show how the heroine's experience is given meaning by the male narrator, and how his story is different from the reality. Antonia is no longer Antonia as herself once she is understood and described by the male narrator. She is only "his" Antonia. Nevertheless, while reading the novel, we are not always seeing "his" Antonia. On the contrary, behind his narration, we can recognize the existence of Antonia, the real person, who motivates the narrator to write and yet evades his modification of her behavior in his narrative. Such an Antonia is not necessarily the "true woman," but she is described by the author as a real person, whose actual behavior is not always agreeable to men. This implies that Cather's real intention in her writing (écriture féminine) is to present vividly, though paradoxically, the heroine's real figure which the male narrator fails to describe.
true womanhood with piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

4 As an anti-essentialist, Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking*, calls into question the possibility of defining essence of identity. Essence is merely a sign temporally employed in a particular social field, and, moreover, it does not depend on any interior values intrinsic to the sign.

5 Fuss notices the fear that once we have deconstructed identity, we will have nothing stable and secure. Although she suggests that the deconstruction of identity is not a disavowal of identity, her argument does not succeed in getting rid of this fear.

6 See Weedon, Chapter 3.

7 Some critics such as Ann Rosalind Jones, who reproach Cixous for emphasizing female sexuality, overlook her point that a woman’s body is the text that we should examine as the metaphor of femininity.

8 See Cixous’s “Castration or Decapitation?”

9 For the general information of the concept of *écriture feminine*, see Toril Moi’s *Sexual/ Textual Politics*.

10 According to the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, “there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture would not be the clever savages…” (49).

11 Freudian psychoanalysis considers that feminine psychology is dependent upon penis envy. However, as Kate Millett suggests in *Sexual Politics*, we should ask why woman might feel penis envy. In a patriarchal society, a penis represents the male privilege and power which woman, not possessing a penis, is never permitted to achieve. If Freudian analysis of woman’s penis envy is true, her envy is not for the penis itself but for the power which the penis represents.

12 See Sharon O’Brien’s *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* and “The Thing Not Named.”

Foucault examines how discourse on sex has changed throughout history. He suggests that "[w]hat is said about sex must not be analyzed simply as the surface of projection of these [society's] power mechanisms" and that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together"(100).

14 When I use the terms "feminine (or femininity)" and "masculine (or masculinity)" to characterize a certain quality of the characters in Cather's works, I employ the conventional meanings of these terms. Although my intention is to deconstruct these terminologies, as long as we have to use language to discuss this point, it is necessary to rely on the conventional terminology. This is a crucial problem for any deconstructionist.

15 The term comes from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic.*

16 Sharon O'Brien characterizes Cather's belief that authorship is originally male with the following metaphor: "weapon/sword/pen/penis"(*Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice, 148*).

17 From *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (171).

18 Cixous inspires woman to write her own experiences.

19 See Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction.*

20 Also, on the political level, the history of the immigrants' cultivation of their "New World" is at the same time the history of their exclusion of Indians. For the immigrants, the frontier is the "New World," but for Indians, it is not new at all. The same frontier is understood in different ways from different perspectives.

21 Susan J. Rosowski suggests the same point in her *The Voyage Perilous.* She insists that Jim's narrative is the masculine romance in which Antonia is the muse.

22 Gilbert and Gubar indicate the same point in *No Man's Land.* *Vol. 2: Sexchanges.* According to them, the last section's title implies Jim's patriarchal notion that "the biological function provides the only proper role for women who are supposed to produce boys"(204).

23 Cixous describes how woman has given her body and man has taken it throughout history. ("The Laugh of the Medusa") Woman's nature is to give and man's nature is to take.

24 In *Willa Cather and France,* Robert J. Nelson suggests how Cather highly qualifies the human voice—its verbal mood and emotional aura.

Likewise, suggesting that woman's writing is close to the voice, Cixous well esteems the touch of the voice when it passes through the ears (Cixous, 1981).

Works Cited


Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Basil