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Lance Weldy

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The Progression of the Modern American Woman in O. E. Rölvaag, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Willa Cather

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ISSN 1614-4651

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ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover illustration: *The Chrisman Sisters on a claim in Goheen settlement on Lieban (Lillian) Creek, Custer County, Nebraska, ca. 1886. © Nebraska State Historical Society.*

Dieser Titel ist als Printversion im Buchhandel
oder direkt bei ***ibidem*** (www.ibidem-verlag.de) zu beziehen unter der

ISBN 978-3-89821-535-0.

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ISSN: 1614-4651

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-5535-4

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Stuttgart 2012

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Foreword

The bulk of this study is a close reading of O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (trans. 1927), Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) from a feminist point of view with a definite inquiry into the concept of space. Marilyn R. Chandler rightly notes that "Space is an ideologically weighted 'product,' and the idea of space is a highly charged issue for theorists and artists" (3). It is important to highlight this point early on in this study for at least two reasons. First, this connection between space and ideology denotes a politically liminal place wherein questions of identity, in this study specifically with gender, complicate and influence the socio-cultural hierarchy. By referring to space as a "product," Chandler implies that this entity becomes ideological as a result of a dominant, active agent that relegates behavior, both subtly and overtly. Second, as the latter half of Chandler's sentence suggests, scholars and authors have scrutinized the politics of space through essays and novels: writers of fiction which could include Rölvaag, Wilder, and Cather, and scholars of spatial and feminist criticism such as Bachelard, Showalter, and Irigaray. As Elaine Showalter states, "feminist criticism has shown that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experiences, [indicating] that women have also told the important stories of our culture" (introduction 3). An obvious question here is, as Rowena Fowler asks, "Should men practice feminist criticism?" (51). I believe this is a legitimate question requiring more than a single-sentence response. In the following explanation, I focus first on feminism itself and then discuss where men fit into feminist criticism.

According to Victoria Walker, "There is no single, comprehensive definition of feminism; feminism knows neither 'founding mothers' [. . .] nor a distinctive methodology. At best, we may speak of feminisms" which "have touched upon a vast array of critical problems," such as "the reconstruction of women's history and of a female liter-

ary tradition" ("Feminist Criticism, Anglo-American"). For the purposes of my study, I will be incoroporating Anglo-American feminist critique. Before moving on to the specific focus of feminism, I want to stop here and recognize two points. First, the essence of feminism's multivalence does not preclude, but actually *invites* participation from diverse viewpoints, including perspectives from unlikely candidates such as men. Second, this lack of an established definition inhibits a gatekeeper, elitist mentality. Walker points to the purpose that Anglo-American feminist studies has in common with the rest of feminist criticisms: "that of exposing the mechanisms upon which patriarchal society rests and by which it is maintained, with the ultimate aim of transforming social relations." She goes on to say that this goal of transformation is common among all feminists because "they believe patriarchal society operates to the advantage of men and serves men's interests above all others." What we can surmise from Walker's conciseness is that, essentially, feminism considers mainstream society as "man-based" and desires to provide sexual equality.

Again, the question arises: "What place does a man have pointing out patriarchal insensibilities?" Fowler summarizes some of the scholarly controversy about men entering the feminist criticism conversation, noting that, while teaching women's texts to women students, it could be problematic for men to (consciously or unconsciously) elect themselves as the authority figure in the classroom, leaving little room for input from the women. She also says that "There is also a tendency for male feminists to absorb women's insights and research findings without properly acknowledging them [. . .]. The problem has been that the terms on which men are to join the debate are not clear" (52). In other words, men who venture into feminist criticism are not always sure if they have a legitimate voice, yet at the end of this passage Fowler suggests that breaking down gender barriers has been a positive byproduct of feminist criticism: "one of the most enviable achievements of feminist criticism has been to mix and merge or bypass the tired binary symbologies of male head and female heart" (55).

She concludes: “The debate must be carried on not between men and about women, not among women only, but between and among women and men as peers” (60). Elaine Showalter concurs: “This enterprise should not be confined to women; I invite [male critics] to share it with us” (“Towards” 142).

Though Fowler contests K. K. Ruthven’s description of only extreme sides of feminist criticism, she would agree with him that men can engage in feminist discourse. According to Ruthven,

> It is no more necessary to be a woman in order to analyse feminist criticism as criticism than it is to be a Marxist in order to comprehend the strategies of Marxist criticism. In any case, whether or not men are eligible to take part in feminist literary studies at any level is an argument created and sustained solely within the domain of feminist discourse. It is not a problem which antecedes the invention of feminist criticism, but on the contrary is a function of it, and cannot possibly be regarded therefore as a prediscursive or extradiscursive mandate for the production of feminist criticism. This is as good a reason as any why men should not be put off by the intimidatory rhetoric of radical feminism, but confront the challenge of the new knowledge it proclaims by becoming involved not only in the production but also in the assessment of feminist criticism. (272)

Setting aside his statements on radical feminism, I found myself encouraged not only by Ruthven’s comments, but also by women scholars like Fowler and Showalter who, in the words of Ruthven, discredit “essentialistic theories of human behaviour which designate certain characteristics as male-specific and others as female-specific” (264), thereby discrediting the notion that feminist scholars writing about women’s issues must be female. I believe that William Handley has succinctly summarized the theoretical and scholarly direction for which I aim when he says, “I share in the revisionist spirit of feminist

scholars who have moved the focus away from masculine genres to literature by women, yet I have chosen to focus on both genders in relation to each other—to see women and men in texts by women and men" (3). In this same vein, I supply, through each main chapter, footnotes that comment on men who have written about literary women in positions or mindsets similar to the discussed female protagonist of each chapter. In so doing, I show that authors of both genders have written about women in similar positions. It is with the help of these scholars and through the submission of these footnotes that I find my legitimacy when participating in feminist discourse.

1. Constructing a Felicitous Space: Theories of Space and Gender and Historical Backgrounds

Paula E. Geyh notes, "Space is not inert, a mere site or setting for the action of our lives and narratives, nor do subjectivities simply 'inhabit' spaces that exist independently of them" (103). Rather,

> Subjectivity and space are mutually constructing: while subjects constitute themselves through the creation of spaces, these same spaces also elicit and structure subjectivities. To understand postmodern subjectivities and space, we must explore the complex ways in which they construct one another. (104)

In other words, the space an individual occupies indicates and even helps to determine the kind of person that individual is. In her essay, Geyh focuses "on the ways in which feminine subjectivity both constitutes itself and is constituted either through or in opposition to the space of the 'house' or the 'home' [. . .]" (104).

It follows, then, that if space allocation is differentiated by gender, space and gender have a significant influence on each other—an influence that can vary with time and culture. Doreen Massey comments on this influence in *Space, Place, and Gender*, when she notices

> the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations. Some of this connection works through the actual construction of, on the one hand, real-world geographies and, on the other, the cultural specificity of definitions of gender. Geography matters to the construction of gender, and the fact of geographical variation in gender relations, for instance, is a significant element in the production and reproduction of both imaginative geographies and uneven development. (2)

Though Massey's project focuses on geography, gender, and space in the modern day work place, I think her concepts about geography can apply to the nineteenth century, where indeed geography affected gender, evidenced by women on the American frontier.

Indeed, in the past, women have been stereotypically assigned to the house, to the inside space. During Geyh's discussion, she pays careful attention to the windows of the house, which, she believes, indicate "the boundaries of the house," so that "the very structure of the house, which relies on those boundaries, is simultaneously engendered and endangered. The window's double nature is apparent in the way that, closed or open, it might either divide or connect the inside and the outside" (110-11). In American literature, the sharpest division between inside and outside spaces for women occurs on the frontier, especially on the prairie frontier.[1]

How do people respond to the land of the outside spaces? Or, better yet, how does the land respond to people? D. H. Lawrence believes that even to the frontiersman and immigrant in America, "the very landscape, in its very beauty, seems a bit devilish and grinning, opposed to us" (50). In the first place, then, open space on the American

[1] Renée Hirschon has made some interesting assertions about open and closed spaces in the context of discussing the role of woman in Greek society: "Among the conceptual categories of the society is a set of perceptions surrounding two opposed states: that of the 'open' and that of the 'closed'" ("Open" 76). Essentially, she says that "'opening' is an auspicious state; it is propitious and desired. 'Closing' is associated with misfortune, it is unfavorable and, in its ideal sense, should be avoided" (76). She goes on to discuss the various ways in which "closed" and "open" states occur in women's lives: "For the woman this auspicious state can only be achieved through conjunction with her husband [. . .]. His role as a medium of opening for the woman is not only a physical one, but exists too in the context of sociable exchange beyond the family" (78). Also, "The woman's use of space is defined and restricted in terms of the domestic imperative" (81). Hirschon also has another interesting article focusing on inside and outside space:

> In the wider context of social life the fundamental dichotomy of the 'house' and the 'road,' the inner and outer realms, is the point of orientation for interaction between women in the neighbourhood. This spatial and symbolic division is mediated, however, by two items—the kitchen, which is the diacritical marker of each conjugal household and the exclusive area of each married woman, and the movable chair. ("Essential" 72-73)