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Hired Girls and Country Doctors:

Working Women in the Domestic Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather

Critic Ann Romines discusses the domestic rituals which appear in the writings of five women writers, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather and Eudora Welty, as representations of a tradition of writing specific to women and passed, like those rituals, from one woman writer to the next. She points out that this tradition of writing has not been included, for the most part, in the widespread literary discussion of a canon which focuses primarily on the “quest for self discovery” of mostly male writers and characters, with women featured only as objects of male desire or subjection. “The theories that have determined the American literary canon have taken little notice of texts by women that focus on women's domestic lives” (11). Romines’ work, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual*, seeks to define a tradition of writing by women about home and hearth while analyzing the struggle of five women authors with their place in that tradition. While Romines’ text is a fascinating work of literary definition that is integral to a serious critical inclusion of some of the greatest writing in American fiction, it dismisses some of the variations from her theme which appear in the writings of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather because they aren’t domestic enough. This is an irony in that probably because of *A Country Doctor*’s and *My Ántonia*’s “domestic” themes, they

have been largely ignored or dismissed by literary tradition and, if dismissed by women critics as simply “a vigorous feminist novel,” (Romines 48) the elements of a woman’s experience which include domestic as well as non-domestic life are forgotten by the very people who should be discussing them. The working women in the novels that have been defined as “domestic” fiction are in themselves pioneers. In a world where middle-class white women rarely worked outside the home, Jewett’s Nan Prince finds fulfillment outside of marriage as a doctor and Willa Cather’s Lena Lingard decidedly proclaims her intention to never marry—becoming instead an important and skillful businesswoman. The “working women” of domestic fiction take their place in the “man’s world” of economic independence, just as the women writers of these novels are able to do through their writing. These non-domestic characters are important to study in order to find a merging point with the sometimes divisive “halves” of modern woman’s quest for self-identity: housewife and professional woman.

The domestic novel and domestic ritual are defined, of course, in housekeeping terms.

The domestic novel features:

fictional women spilling soup, piecing quilts, frosting cakes, scrubbing floors, digging herbs, serving supper-- engag[ing] in these and other literarily unmentionable acts, acts that our mothers and grandmothers had almost certainly committed, acts that we might ourselves continue. Traditionally, housekeeping has been an essential rhythm of most women’s lives. (Romines 15)

This essential part of women’s lives is, according to Romines, an essential part of Jewett and

Cather's novels. Along with the appearance of housekeeping details we find references to a mythology of "traditional" women's work. The Demeter myth, stories of Hestia, Persephone and Circe— domestic Goddesses of mythology— are often featured in the writings of women along with and relating to the lives of "mortal" housekeepers.

Current criticism has been much interested in reading Demeter's story in nineteenth-century American women's culture . . . this crucial myth of the separation and union of earthbound mother and journeying daughter [is apparent] in Jewett's generation and then follows . . . in the next generation of American women writers. (Romines, 39)

This connection to myth is vital to establishing a women's literary tradition because it links women's writing to a greater body of legends and tales featuring women throughout all literary periods, including Classical mythology. This body of Literature connects generations of women together in domestic ritual and tradition and in turn writing about these rituals and myths connects women's literary traditions. Romines quotes Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi's work *The Sacred and the Feminine* as a way of linking the domestic rituals of our women foremothers to the work of writing women:

To do a task precisely as you observed or were taught by your mother or grandmother is to experience a portion of what they did . . . The ritual enactments of housework thus helps[sic] provide continuity from one generation of women to another . . . Homemakers in general are the largest group still to connect back in this particular fashion to their forebears . . . It is one of the major ways that women (whose lives have typically been

isolated from the public sphere dominated by men) have been able to share in the entire community of women. (Romines 52)

The feeling of community and passing on of “tradition” for women writers through depictions of domestic tradition seems well-illustrated by the short but meaningful relationship between Jewett and Cather. Cather, struggling to find her identity as a writer, received this advice from Jewett: “You can’t do it in anybody else’s way— you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don’t let that frighten you.” (In Person II, quoted in Romines 135). But Cather’s way, despite finding its own style, owes a debt and much affection to Jewett as a precursor. According to Romines, Jewett is one of the first American writers to feature a serious discussion of women’s lives in an anti-sentimental way, a pattern which Cather was to follow. Romines quotes “Nina Baym [who] describes the prototypical plot of a ‘sentimental’ novel as the story of a woman ‘who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world.’ These heroines are domestic outsiders by definition,” (7) whereas the women of Jewett’s stories (especially *Country of the Pointed Firs*) are domestic initiates, familiar with herb gathering, sewing, death rituals, and sitting by a fireplace telling stories. The same affinity and connection that Cather felt for Jewett seems to have been felt by Jewett for the woman writer she considered her fore-mother, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Jewett wrote affectionately if sadly of Stowe’s novel *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* “I shall never forget the exquisite flavor and reality of delight that it gave me . . . alas that the writer is at the mercy of much unconscious opposition”

(quoted in Romines 20). The oppositions which “hinder” her writing, of course, are Stowe’s domestic chores and children. Women writers have traditionally had to either sacrifice part of their work or reject “families,” and Jewett seems quite conscious of this fact. Whether or not there is a true feeling of community or ritual completion in the writings of these women, the domestic novel is, or has been, uniquely a woman’s literary home. But in Jewett’s *A Country Doctor*, that home is, in part, rejected by the novel’s main character and domestic perfection is shown to be elusive and fragmented in other characters’ lives as well.

A Country Doctor begins with a mysterious woman’s suspiciously uncertain quest to return to her parents’ home, contrasted with the second chapter that opens “indoors [with] cheerful company” (Jewett 5) and neighborly spinning and sewing. Like the mythological spinners, the Moera of Greek “Fate,” these three women are discussing the lives of their neighbors, children, husbands and others, while the lives of the mysterious woman and her child that the reader is introduced to in Chapter One hang in suspense just outside the door— so near to completion of the “quest” but so tantalizingly far. The domestic ritual of offering refreshments to guests has been temporarily forgotten, but when Mrs. Thacher disappears into the “black pit” (9) of the cellar, only the cat is really “anxious” about the outcome of this diversion from comfortable rocking and conversation. Mrs. Thacher easily gathers golden apples, cake and cider for her company and they all enjoy “this mild attempt at a festival” (10). Again, a quick look to domestic Mythology reminds us of several stories— the tale of Persephone’s descent into an underworld and encounter with pomegranates, the golden apple of the judgement of Paris, and

the golden apples which a suitor throws at the feet of Atalanta to slow her race and impede her progress.¹ The quiet comfort and domestic ritual that the women have been enjoying abruptly ends with the discovery of the woman and child outside the door, but before the reader has a chance to find out what happens next, “fate” is put off and we are introduced instead to another strikingly domestic scene between two twin brothers in the Dryer household. The two husbands’ attempts at domesticity are inefficient and inevitably uncomfortable. They heat the fire too much, sneaking their chairs slowly across the room to avoid admitting that their attempts at doing a better job than the women are failing. They appear quite relieved when Mrs. Dryer shows up to interrupt their attempts at homemaking, and she, although she notices the “high treason”(22) which has occurred, feels no need to scold. She knows they have learned their lesson and this comic scene reminds us that it is women who are the masters of the kitchen. All of these occurrences are elements of Romines’ domestic plot, deftly handled by Jewett.

Other beautifully domestic scenes of the novel appear— the funeral of the wayward daughter and the domestic ritual of burial and consolation – but as we see Nan Prince grow and mature, her life is quite consistently portrayed “outside.” Nan is a wild girl, “who would not be driven to school, much less persuaded, . . . playing in the brook, or scampering over the pastures when she should be doing other things” (35). Many of Nan’s most important decisions are made outdoors, in the shelter of a cedar tree rather than inside the domestic comfort of kitchen or

¹The mythological references here are pretty common, but for a more in-depth analysis of how women’s mythology applies to modern women’s writing and tradition, see Barbara Walker’s work, listed above in the Works Cited.

bedroom. Her mother, upon her death bed, passes Nan not into the hands of the “woman’s tradition” of domesticity, marriage and children but into the hands of the country doctor, Dr. Leslie, and we most often see Nan reflected through his eyes. She is affectionately known to the town’s people as “the doctor’s little girl,” (110) and the first time we begin to see the world partly through Nan’s perspective is in Chapter Eight, when Nan’s grandmother dies and she moves to town to live in Dr. Leslie’s house. Just before Nan’s grandmother’s death we hear that “it seemed natural now that she should stay in the house,” (59) but before this comfortable feeling flourishes, allowing Nan to take over the running of domestic chores for her grandmother, the grandmother dies and Nan is sent to live in Dr. Leslie’s “male” house– with a female servant who is the one that performs the domestic duties necessary for continued existence. Nan’s attempts at domesticity are ineffectual at best and neglectful at worst– we find Marilla (in proper domestic fashion) chastising her for “set[ing] a mug of flowers into one o’ the spare-rooms . . . and leave[ing] it there a week or ten days to spile” (69). This sort of instruction is the type that Romines envisions passing domestic tradition from one generation to the next, but with Nan it appears to be only half-remembered. When Nan, Dr. Leslie and a visiting friend, Dr. Ferris, venture into the kitchen while Marilla is away at church they raid the pantry, depleting the bread and Marilla’s “best [strawberry] preserves” (71) so that the domestic bliss of the next day’s breakfast is by no means assured. Marilla, a more than competent domestic goddess, manages a splendid breakfast but Nan– comfortable in her male world– is not curious to learn how she can do such housewifely chores. She wants instead to ride with the Doctor on his medical visits. As

Nan grows up, she becomes even more restless with housework (which she does sporadically, forgetting to dust her one room— the doctor’s study) and longs for “The Great Something Else”(128). She rejects being a teacher, one of the few accepted roles for women outside the home, in favor of becoming a doctor, like her mentor Dr. Leslie. “I don’t believe I should ever be fit for anything else, and you know as well as I that I must have something to do. I used to wish over and over again that I was a boy, when I was a little thing . . . and the only reason I had in the world was that I could be a doctor, like you” (135). Nan declares this in her “acceptance of the idea” (135) of becoming a doctor. Dr. Leslie thinks it strange that the rejection of her expected role, that of a woman in a household with domestic duties, “should have troubled her so much” (135) but the fact of the matter is that Nan is rejecting the woman’s world which she has been born into for a “man’s world” of working outside the home. This rejection ultimately leads to her giving up the possibility of marriage and children of her own, and although the image of Nan as country doctor to her small village is a very nurturing one, as she seems to become mother to many more people than would be possible in her own family, it is still a position which deprives Nan of her own home. The presentation of Nan as a working woman who is on the outside of societal expectations is one of Jewett’s incidents of “straying” from domestic bliss in the novel, though by no means the only one.

Miss Prince, Nan’s aunt, (an unmarried woman who feels more like a young girl than anything else), is another example of incomplete domesticity. When Nan first comes to visit her, she has held a bit of a grudge for years against Nan’s mother and the circumstances that took

Nan's father away from the Prince home in Dunport. Soon after Nan's arrival, she looks at "the same old bushes and trees which we used to play among; [thinking] I have hardly changed at all" (167). This of course, is not true. She is no longer the young girl who used to play in the garden with her brother and other children, she is an adult woman whose expected role in life—mother/wife—has never materialized. We hear that she had planned to marry at one time but lost her intended husband because of a disagreement. In a sense, Anna Prince loses her domestic chance for the same reasons Nan is chastened: she too has a "strong mind" (208). Anna Prince's "maternal" feelings have been devoted to the young son of the man she would have married, but the relationship between Miss Prince and George Gerry is more like that of patron and student than mother/son. Miss Prince does love her home, but she cherishes it as a memento of the past where the echoes of her father's voice are still heard. She is concerned more with the history of the household furnishings and keeping the house the way it always has been than with anything else. The house is more like a museum than a home— it is full of antiques and fine marble topped tables. We hear that Miss Prince has maintained the house in such a way that if her "grandmother could return to Dunport from another world, she would hardly believe that she had left . . . it presented so nearly the same appearance" (150). However, despite this effort at being the perfect hostess, (a domestic duty not to be neglected by a woman of a respectable family) the effort to keep up with the tradition of Prince women as unrivaled social leaders in the town, "had somehow been a failure, and Miss Prince had given fewer entertainments every year" (150). Miss Prince believes herself to be "hardly changed" from her youthful self but is described as changing

“while she was still a young woman, . . . [into a woman with] a certain quaint and elderly manner” (150). Miss Prince seems to be very much like someone who is watching over the family home until there is some young wife to take it over, and for a while she expects Nan to fill the house with children and homeliness. However, Nan rejects this domesticity for her profession. “Once she fancied herself in a quiet home; living there, perhaps in that very house, and being pleased with her ordering and care taking . . . but as the night waned, the certainty of her duty gr[ows] clearer and clearer [and she declares that she] must be about [her] business” (229). That “business” being one which rejects marriage and home.

Another example in Dunport of a non-domestic adult woman who seems stuck in an extended childhood is Miss Fraley. Having lost her only love in a sea accident years before, she lives with her aging mother who refuses to relinquish the status of social “grande dame.” Yet, the scolding and very domestic “serious tea drinking” at the home of this determined matriarch which takes place in Chapter Eighteen as a way of discouraging Nan from moving out of domesticity into professionalism is a failure. Nan does not “accept her rebuke meekly” (208) as expected but instead argues quite decisively for her own way of thinking. Miss Fraley, too meek to fight for herself, warns Nan that she will be scolded in time for Nan to reason out her own defense against the attacks of the women who feel she should give up her idea of medicine in favor of marriage. Thus, Miss Fraley and Nan are uncertain allies against the traditions the women of society (represented by Miss Fraley’s mother) expect them to hold in high regard. Even when George Gerry enters and the women look to him to rescue Nan from herself the scene

shifts to his observations of the imperfect housekeeping of the ship keeper's wife and when his next encounter with Nan takes place outside, reflected against the rigging of the ship, we know that Nan will prevail. Why? Because Nan is most at home outside, and outside is where she is destined to stay. George senses that he has lost the battle when Nan reflects that "a vessel like that belongs to the high seas, and is like a prisoner when it touches shore," (226) just as Nan would eventually feel a prisoner in the constraints of societal expectations.

By omitting any discussion of non-domestic women in Jewett's novels, Romines has left out an important link in her "woman's tradition." Not all women are housekeepers, and not all women are taught by grandmothers and mothers to participate in a tradition of women's work, just as not all women writers are the same. But by noticing the elements of domestic fiction which contradict Romines' hypothesis, we receive a more complete picture of the women who wrote these "domestic novels." Jewett and Cather, like the cultures they live in, are in liminal phases of history when the expectations of women are changing, and this confusion is often reflected in the contradictory nature of some of their characters.

Willa Cather is even more problematic to Romines' hypothesis of domesticity than Jewett. It is easy to leave *A Country Doctor* out of a discussion of Jewett's work, it is not seen as the Jewett masterpiece. However, any serious critic cannot ignore Cather's *My Antonia* which features some definite clashes between domestic and non-domestic worlds. Romines does admit that despite what some critics refer to as Cather's "mystical concern with pots and pans," (Trilling 12) she has an ambivalent attitude toward domestic life but she then glosses over that

ambivalence, instead discussing the places where domesticity rules. Cather is at the same time both connected to and very distanced from domestic ritual. “Throughout her writing life, Cather was engaged with the problem of domestic ritual. That subject . . . was often troubling excess baggage for young Willa Cather. Yet it was baggage she could never entirely abandon, for it was essentially a part of herself” (Romines 133). One of Cather’s early methods of dealing with domesticity is in running away from it. We find similarity with Nan Prince in Cather’s young life: “Cather emphasized her own resistance to confinement, claiming that she spent hours outdoors, riding her pony across fields, evading housekeeping and school” (Romines 134). For Cather, the housework and lifestyle that she associated with a woman’s work meant confinement, and a loss of originality, and she wove this feeling of loss into much of her fiction. Stories like “A Wagner Matinee,” “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” even “Coming Aphrodite” feature struggles between the expectations of societal roles and the free exercise of the individual will.

For young Cather, conventional female trappings seemed the foe of what she professed to admire most . . . “An Original [sic] mind” (Bennett, quoted in Romines 135) . . . the most crucial encounters often occurred when “an original mind” wrestled with double loyalties to the life of the household, the stuff of home plots, and the impulse to run away.

(Romines 135)

Often, Cather used the fictional device of male narrator as a tool to distance herself from the domestic world she was so fascinated by yet repelled from. According to Romines we see in *My Ántonia* the male point of view as a narrative strategy used by Cather to:

write about domestic ritual without getting caught in its trap . . . tak[ing] advantage of a male character's relative mobility and his propensity to see domestic ritual from outside and thus to romanticize it, pro or con. Another is the double plot, which plays a housekeeper's story against that of a character who is not centrally involved in domestic ritual . . . *Ántonia* against Jim. Usually the housekeeper's tale is filtered through her opposite. (139)

Romines' examination of Cather's use of these plot elements is effective, accounting for many of the inconsistencies and trouble spots other critics have put down to a struggle with her homosexuality (Irving) and ambivalence toward sex (Gelfant) or to weakness in talent (Daiches) or the unreliable nature of Jim's narrative (Shaw) or other reasons too numerous to name here. But what Romines misses, along with the other critics, is that intertwined with Cather's domestic scenes are characters and situations that deserve discussion as reflections of Cather's conflicts with societal expectations of domesticity.

Lena Lingard is the best example of a non-domestic central character which appears amidst the domesticity of *My Ántonia*. Often the sections which feature Lena instead of *Ántonia* are seen as confusing divergences from the plot line of a novel that purports to be about the woman named in the title. However, since Lena appears in the novel almost as often as *Ántonia*, and more often than any other character except Jim, she is a central character. And she is a working woman who refuses to accept the constraints society places upon her. Even when society predicts that by becoming a dressmaker instead of marrying she will fail and become a "loose"

woman, she disrupts their expectations and succeeds. The first image of Lena in the novel is as newly arrived, pseudo-sophisticated country girl who has come to town to learn the trade of dressmaking.

However, from the beginning of our knowledge of Lena she is anti-domestic. Lena recognizes that marriage is difficult– she is never caught up in the “idea” of romance which leads *Ántonia* to a disastrous relationship and unwed motherhood. *Ántonia* takes the dances and socializing much more seriously and ends up in trouble, whereas Lena enjoys dancing and kissing but is merely having fun. When asked about her mother, Lena responds, “Oh, mother’s never very well; she has too much to do. She’d get away from the farm, too, if she could” (Cather, 104). When Frances Harling teases Lena about a suitor who the town thinks Lena will marry, she responds, “I don’t want to marry Nick, or any other man, . . . I’ve seen a good deal of married life, and I don’t care for it” (105). It seems impossible for the town to believe that a beautiful girl will not become a wife or mistress, that she can succeed without the help or hindrance of men. No one really expects Lena to continue working, her period of “paid employment [is] expected to be a temporary activity engaged in only before marriage” (Weiner 24). After Lena leaves the Harling place, we hear the town’s opinion of Lena, based on the rumors which surround Ole Benson’s infatuation with Lena. The story is very pastoral, Lena is described as a barely dressed and beautiful “something wild, that always lived on the prairie . . . yellow hair burned to a ruddy thatch on her head . . . [with skin that] kept a miraculous whiteness which somehow made her seen more undressed than other girls” (Cather 106). The town accuses her of “making Ole Benson lose the little sense he had” (107). In other words, the married adult

man who is really the one who should know better than to run around chasing a young girl is tempted by the “dangerously seductive” Lena.

Lena can be interpreted from the beginning of our acquaintance with her as a softly erotic beauty who enchants. Even Jim seems convinced of her dangerous seductiveness and in the dream sequence Jim has featuring Lena, she is “a surreal image of Aurora and Grim Reaper as one . . . the archetypal landscape of ballad, myth, and drama, setting for la belle dame sans merci who enchants and satisfies, but then lulls and destroys” (Gelfant 105). But Lena never deliberately participates in or encourages this enchantment, it is the men who follow her and become obsessed of their own will. As Lena puts it when Mrs. Shimerda says she should not “make somethings with your eyes at married men,” “I never made anything to him with my eyes. I can’t help it if he hangs around, and I can’t order him off. It ain’t my prairie” (Cather 109). Even when she first visits Jim in Lincoln she gives him the option to ignore her, saying “maybe you have all the friends you want,” (173) and no time to be distracted by her.

Cather’s portrayal of Lena can also call to mind the mythological pictures of the Fates and Arachne— while she watches her cows she is “always knitting” (106). Ole Benson’s infatuation with her reminds us of the infatuation of Hades for Persephone, or even Zeus’ infatuation with a number of beautiful peasant girls. She seems to be Jim’s Muse, allowing him deeper insight into the poetry of Virgil just by virtue of her appearance in his room for a short visit. However seductive and mythologically alluring Lena may seem to others, she has no intention of seducing anyone permanently. She declines offers of marriage as often as she receives them. Even in

Lincoln she declares her intention to never marry: “You can’t tell me anything about family life. I’ve had plenty to last me” (187). Critic Blanche Gelfant who, unlike Romines does not ignore Lena as a character, claims that the interlude in *My Antonia* which features Lena illustrates Cather’s fear that sex equals destruction and that Lena is attempting to lure Jim into domestic life and ultimately, death, but as Jim puts it “she never tried to hinder me or hold me back” (Cather 188). Lena is not a sexual enchantress or woman looking for a husband but an independent woman. This newly emerging feature of society, “the independent woman,” was seen as both threatening and endangered. Her morals were questioned at the same time society worried about her future fitness as a mother. “The woman living on her own, it was feared, was prone to behave in an immoral fashion . . . without the anchor of domesticity, she was adrift in a sea of ambiguous identity . . . in moral danger” (Weiner 37). Lena, by her very anti-domesticity, is both dangerous and vulnerable in the eyes of society.

So what is Lena, if she is not a domestic figure? She does sew for a living, which is a decidedly domestic career for a woman to participate in, but as Jim explains when he wonders at Lena’s success, it’s not as though she pursues sewing because she thinks it a profession of which society will approve. She sews for the same reason she dances— because she likes it and is good at it. She seems to enjoy designing clothes, and good taste and style come “instinctively” to her. “I couldn’t help thinking that the years when Lena literally hadn’t enough clothes to cover herself might have something to do with her untiring interest in dressing the human figure” (179). Jim observes somewhat naively believing that fashion sense can come from a lack of exposure to

fashion. Jim, however, does not understand Lena's success because it doesn't fit into his expectations of success "she was so easy-going; had none of that push and self-assertiveness that get people ahead in business" and although he thinks "her manner with customers very good" he wonders "where she had learned such self-possession" (179). Jim is confused because Lena doesn't fit his preconceived notions of how a business-woman should act— like a man. Lena is not "mannish," or too assertive, she is an ultra-feminine and sexual female that is successful. She may need help staying out of candy stores but she can ask a pretty sum of money for her work— she is even successful enough to be occasionally late delivering that product. All of the personal traits which would seem to be against success instead contribute to her success. She is easy-going, beautiful and feminine, and instead of getting her into trouble, these things cause her to find life easy. But, Jim's observations are limited. He sees her sometimes "alone in her work-room, draping folds of satin on a wire figure with a quite blissful expression" (179) but to him this is not work. He does not notice Lena's efficiency— it only takes her ten minutes to sew up Mr. Ordinsky's vest. He does not see the hours Lena spends at her work— work which she continues even during the relationship which causes Jim to forget his studies. For Lena, as a woman, the price of failing at her business is that she will be alone and financially dependent upon her family or a man. Whereas Jim gets more than one chance to succeed because men are expected to "sow their wild oats," Lena will be seen as a fallen woman if she fails and we are told that indeed, Lena's counterpart, Tiny Solderall, is spoken "severely of" (192) for defying the expectations of the town. Tiny, however, also defies the town's expectations and lives "to lead

the most adventurous life and achieve the most solid worldly success [of] all the girls and boys who grew up in Black Hawk” (192). Both of these women, then, defy not only the expectations of the society they grow up in but also challenge the status of the novel that features them. How can *My Ántonia* be a solely “domestic” work when it contains these professional women who are definitely not traditional domestic figures? If women characters are shown who participate in a tradition which is not dependent upon ritual housework they may be the founders of new traditions in women’s writing of women. Analyzing this tradition of women characters who are not defined only by their status as mother/housewife is as important as finding a definitive women’s canon that features a “domestic plot.”

Ann Romines does a great job of defining the traditions which have appeared in women’s writing, but she leaves important elements of those novels out of her definition. Without the mothers and caretakers of our society we would all be in trouble, but without fictional representations of trailblazers and independently minded women like Lena Lingard and Nan Prince, the roles for women represented in fiction would be very limited and limiting. Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett are representatives of a tradition of women’s writing that “takes on women’s lives as ‘significant subjects,’” rejecting “the quest-pattern that has dominated Western literature [since it] ‘may not be formally appropriate to express traditional female experience’” (Romines 6-7). However, defining women’s fiction as only representing the “domestic plot” limits and ignores the non-traditional female experience which is just as important to analyze. The Nan Princes, Lena Lingards and Tiny Solderalls of the fictional world deserve and demand

critical attention not for what they don't do (the dishes) but for what they are— working women.

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