Willa Cather and John Steinbeck: Authors of Unconventional American Characters

Hanna Szigeti

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Jesse Fillerup

Replace with name of Thesis Advisor plus academic degree, e.g. Joseph Harris, Ph.D.

Richard G. Andrews

Replace with name of Departmental Reader here including academic degree

Rodney E. Wagstaff

Replace with name of College Reader here including academic degree

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Signature of Author: Hanna R. Szigeti Date: 4/20/15

Printed Name of Author: Hanna R. Szigeti

Street Address: 42 Belle Alto Rd

City, State, Zip Code: Sinking Spring, PA 19608

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Hanna Rebecca Szigeti

Senior Honors Thesis

Dr. Teresa Gilliams, Dr. Richard Androne, Dr. Rodney Warfield

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I.

What defines an exceptional American character? Does the definition stem from the way he or she appears physically or from the actions that he or she performs to contribute to the movement and development of a novel? Does the unconventional and outstanding nature of "different" characters derive from the experiences afforded by such a character's racial identity? Does the economic and social situation of a character determine his or her inimitability as an American character? Concerning an intellectually impaired character, where might he or she appear in the spectrum of unconventional characters? Most of these questions do not form, at least initially, in the minds of readers while they are exploring novels from the American literary canon, as these characteristics are atypical for both fictional characters and in terms of what one may consider a normative image of an American.

Two renowned American writers, Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, challenge normative standards of 20th century society through the fictional presentations of behaviors and opinions as conveyed by their characters. The characters in *My Ántonia*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and *Of Mice and Men* are prime examples of non-normative characters of 20th century American literature. The characters in these novels, Ántonia, Nancy, Curley's wife, Crooks, Candy, and Lennie, embody at least one characteristic that removes them from categorization as an "average" American character. "Average" American characters, as opposed to unconventional characters, exhibit physical, social, emotional, and academic traits that the majority of society accepts as "normal" or "average." Cather and Steinbeck create foils for their unconventional characters with Jim in *My Ántonia* and George in *Of Mice and Men*. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* include non-normative American characters who are distinctive due to gender, race, and intellectual ability; these

unconventional characters challenge the standards of a “true” American character, and Cather and Steinbeck convey pertinent themes—even in the 21st century—through their exceptional characters.

In *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Willa Cather creates unique characters that do not project “typical” American characteristics. The protagonists in both of these novels are women; one is an immigrant, the other is a slave. The social, political, racial, and economic positions of Ántonia, Jim, and Nancy are also distinctive. In her descriptive development of these characters, Cather unveils her views about what it means to be an American, highlighting consistently themes of determination, freedom, endurance, and the pursuit of happiness—normative traits that she pairs with distinct characters, such as Ántonia and Nancy.

Ántonia and Nancy are set apart, most distinctively, I would like to argue, as unconventional characters due to their close encounters with rape. Cather uses rape as a metaphor in *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* to represent the gender and patriarchal distinctions between men and women. Since rape surfaces boldly in both books, this presentation of personal violation is not merely a coincidence. As the protagonists seek freedom and happiness, their fear of rape compromises their opportunities to live freely as Americans.

Several questions drive the focus of this paper, inciting a closer analysis of Cather’s portrayal of her characters in *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: What is Cather’s definition of an American in each novel? What are the roles of supporting characters? How does Willa Cather’s background contribute to the unique nature of each novel? Is she writing unconventionally for her time? How do themes and the plot in each novel contribute to Cather’s definition of an American? Why and how does Cather infuse herself physically in each of the novels? What is the significance of rape in each of the novels, and how does Cather relate to

these scenes of violence as an author. These are just a few of the effectual questions that drive the central thesis.

In order to examine Cather's construction of character, Cather as an individual and author must first be analyzed because she was not a traditional author of her time; in fact, she was as unique an author as she was a woman. Willa Cather was born in 1876 in Winchester, Virginia, and died in from a cerebral hemorrhage in 1947 (Boynton 373; "Willa Cather's Biography"). Cather published *My Ántonia* in 1918 and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in 1940. As an adolescent, Cather cross-dressed, had a short haircut, and adopted the nickname "Willy" (Harris 302). Biographers consider her to have been a lesbian due to her "deep emotional attachment" and living arrangements with two women, Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis (Harris 301-302). Since Cather was born at the height of the Victorian era, her sexuality was considered to be far beyond "inappropriate" (Wolff 3). Cather's identification as a lesbian may have been a result of possible childhood trauma. She may have felt the need to hide her femininity in order to make herself unattractive to men…in order to protect herself due to her potential experiences as a child victim of sexual abuse (Scala 147). One wonders. Nonetheless, Cather's thematic presentation of gender in *My Ántonia* may, in fact, be a reflection of her sexuality and her identification as a lesbian. She constructs female protagonists as if they were male characters. Her female characters dress, act, and function as men in many cases, and Cather models her male narrator, Jim, after herself. This switch in roles upon the normative standards of gender, especially considering the time period, operates as Cather's way of asserting her lesbianism.

Cather's identity as a woman directly ties to her work as an author and to her construction of American characters. Although many of her works are considered classics of American literature, "Cather probably did not consider herself part of a female literary tradition" (Harris

312). In fact, as Jeane Harris contends, “she would undoubtedly have been insulted by such a notion” (312). Her identification as an author tremendously surpassed her identification as a woman. Due in part to her lesbianism and feminist writing, Cather most likely desired to be seen as a successful author rather than a successful woman. To that end, Cather portrays characters as unique Americans—as unconventional as she was. Willa Cather even models Jim Burden, the narrator in *My Ántonia*, after herself, as he has many of the same characteristics as she does (Cavanaugh 246). Both *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* include a protagonist that is atypical and non-normative. Cather’s protagonist in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is African American; in *My Ántonia*, her protagonist is an immigrant.

II.

Ántonia, the protagonist in *My Ántonia*, is a Bohemian immigrant girl who moved to the Nebraska prairie with her family. She is quite distinct, as she is part of an immigrant family, and her submergence into American prairie culture and the American lifestyle contributes to her individuality. Bloom writes, "Ántonia Shimerda. . .is that best sort of second generation American who learns or retains some of the intellectual and artistic tradition of Europe without losing the American freshness and without falling into the common trap of a commercial and limited practicality" (43). Cather merges Ántonia's heritage and familial traits as an immigrant with American characteristics. By fusing together the Old World of Europe with the New World of America, Cather creates a distinct and complex protagonist. Cather based Ántonia's character on a woman whom she knew. Cavanaugh, in her article "In Support of a Visual Approach for Teaching *My Ántonia*," argues:

> The prototype for Ántonia, Mrs. Annie Sadilek Pavelka, the daughter of Bohemian immigrants, had arrived in America at age twelve…While she was a young girl, Annie's father (Frank Sadilek) told the family that he was going out to shoot rabbits, but instead he took his own life and was buried on the corner of their farm. (Cavanaugh 245)

As Cavanaugh reveals, the characters in *My Ántonia* are not purely figments of Cather's imagination; they are based on real people. Annie Sadilek's father committed suicide, and Mr. Shimerda, Ántonia's father, also committed suicide. Like Frank Sadilek, Mr. Shimerda "said he was going out to hunt rabbits. He must have gone right down to the barn and done it then" (*My Ántonia* 63). Mr. Shimerda loses his sense of self partly due to the relationship that he has with his wife. Mrs. Shimerda alienates him—intentionally or not—not only from his homeland, but

also from his own identity. “He [Mr. Shimerda] is committed to a woman who alienates him from himself; and it is loss of self, rather than the surmountable hardships of pioneer life, which induces his despair. Suicide is his final capitulation to destructive forces he could have escaped only by first abnegating sex” (Bloom 91). Mr. Shimerda impregnates one of his family’s servants, and instead of paying her money to compensate her, he honors her with marriage. If the Shimerda family had stayed in Bohemia instead of moving to the United States, they might have been a middle-class family, but since they left Bohemia, they live as lower-class people. Mr. Shimerda left the old world and the comforts of his home behind to forge a new life with his family, and his family is living in a hole in the ground with little food and money. The loss of identity, the hardships of life as a pioneer, and the struggle to survive are notable themes revealed and highlighted in Mr. Shimerda’s suicide.

In *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden, the narrator, declares, “I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country…Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish: he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer” (*My Ántonia* 66-67). Jim realizes that the perspectives of others in his community differ from his own concerning Mr. Shimerda’s death. He realizes that Mr. Shimerda is a scrupulous man, and although he committed suicide, Jim does not believe that such an action warrants his eternal damnation. Of course, the perspectives of the Shimerdas and the other Burdens differ from Jim’s own beliefs on the matter. Cather bases Ántonia’s character on the idea of an individual whom she knew. An immigrant on the Nebraska prairie, a true pioneer, is not the first image that comes to mind when one seeks to describe an American character; however, Cather’s Ántonia is rich and lively, even in the face of adversity, as is the case concerning Cather’s complex presentation of Mr. Shimerda’s suicide.

By incorporating the reality of suicide in the novel, Cather characterizes Ántonia as fully capable of enduring hardship and further develops her as an American character. A well-known theme in American literature is the pursuit of happiness, and Cather truly embodies this theme in the novel, especially while describing Mr. Shimerda's suicide. Mr. Shimerda is the head of his family, and his death forces Ántonia and her siblings to work harder in order to provide for the entirety of their family. Ántonia has to get a job and do "man's work" in the fields alongside her brother, Ambrosch. Like many adolescents in the western part of the United States during this time in history, Ántonia works on her family's farm. Ántonia states, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm" (*My Ántonia* 80). In Ántonia, Cather presents a determination and will that represent the embodiment of a true "American character." In Ántonia, Cather infuses an unconventional character, an immigrant, with American traits to prove that Ántonia epitomizes the very nature of an American. Despite knowing the importance and value of education, Ántonia still makes the decision to be supportive of her family in their time of need, even if it means forfeiting the education that her father considered essential.

The theme of gender is prevalent in *My Ántonia*, and Cather is deliberate about defying gender norms in the novel. Since Ántonia undertakes work considered to be "man's work," she develops masculine qualities in the middle portion of the novel. Jim and the Burdens perceive Ántonia to be undertaking work and traits that are typically categorized by American society as masculine. Although societal standards deem Ántonia's labor and behavior to be inappropriate for a woman, Ambrosch has no problem with sending Ántonia out into the fields, which reflect his values as a peasant and impoverished immigrant. Instead of attending school and learning the

roles that will allow her to become a young lady, Ántonia instead works alongside men in the field. Jim describes his observations of Ántonia's masculine qualities in the fields, saying, "She was out in the fields sunup until sundown. . .She was too proud of her strength. I knew, too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl out not to do, and that the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it" (*My Ántonia* 81). Ántonia's masculinity is a part of her character, and as Harris argues: ". . .In many Cather stories, a woman's goodness and attractiveness are in direct proportion to her masculinity" (309). Harris' statement is profound in that even though Ántonia develops masculine qualities and remains a hard-worker throughout the remainder of the novel, she does not lose her good nature and intent. Ántonia manages to complete chores that are physically challenging for a woman, and she is proud of her efforts in successfully completing tasks that would present difficulties for a grown man. In times of adversity, she perseveres in the face of hardships and continues to live with tenacity. This tenacity is part of Ántonia's character as an immigrant and signals a characteristic of many early Americans. Ántonia's perseverance throughout her youth causes her physical looks and demeanor to fade as she ages, but she remains a hard worker during her life—regardless of how the laborious tasks of farming affect her face and physical condition.

Halfway through the novel, Ántonia seems to be doing well and applying herself in every aspect of the work she does, evidenced by her beginning to identify success as an American. She acquires a job in the town of Black Hawk, and she begins to earn money for herself. She establishes a life that affords her many opportunities and suggests her great potential for future success. Like many Americans, she pursues happiness through her determination and work-ethic. She manages to get a job in the town of Black Hawk and move away from the laborious nature of farm work. She becomes a caretaker for the Harling and Cutter families, and she finally begins

to “move up” in the world. Ántonia is most free as she emerges from a teenager into a young adult. The source of Ántonia’s freedom comes from her high-spirited nature and her will not only to survive, but also to thrive. She does not allow herself to be limited, and she stays true to her individual identity. Her freedom entails a plethora of opportunities. Whereas Ántonia still works hard, she embodies the meaning of freedom by managing to take the time to go to dances and make friends with some of the other “hired girls.” The narrator, Jim, describes Ántonia’s free-spiritedness when he declares, “When you spun out into the floor with Tony, you didn’t return to anything. You set out every time upon a new adventure. I liked to schottische with her; she had so much spring and variety, and was always putting in new steps and slides” (*My Ántonia* 142). The character that Jim is describing here is free from responsibilities and cares during the dances; she puts her work and responsibilities aside and is intentional about taking time to enjoy herself. Ántonia is able to live life to its fullest, and Jim realizes this as he grows older and interacts with her and the other girls in Black Hawk. Ántonia has an endearing nature that underscores her desire to be free and enjoy life; however, the time that she remains truly free is indeed limited. In his article entitled “Willa Cather,” Boynton writes:

> Ántonia has no spark of creative artistry; yet she feels the artist’s desire to live a full, free life. She falls in love with a cheap seducer, and is abandoned, on what she thinks is to be her honey-moon, to become a mother without benefit of clergy. Later she marries a good, dull man, brings up a big family, and in the play of her native courage finds a very homely and very old-fashioned fulfillment of life. (Boynton 376)

By describing her desire to be free and happy in life, Boynton insists that Ántonia’s freedom is short-lived due to her involvement with a deceptive man. Although Ántonia experiences freedom

as a teenager and young adult, her freedom is compromised by her free will to choose and the negative experiences that ensue. Mrs. Burden encourages Mrs. Harling to hire Ántonia, and Ántonia works well with the Harling family, and the children love her (*My Ántonia* 98-99). Ántonia develops a balance between working in the kitchen and playing with the Harling children (*My Ántonia* 100). Eventually, her playing with the Harling children is not enough for Ántonia, and she begins to go to dances and enjoy herself after working during the day (*My Ántonia* 131-132). After a close encounter with a young man who was engaged to be married to another woman, the Harling family allows Ántonia the choice of either remaining with them as a caretaker and cook or leaving them to participate in the dances (*My Ántonia* 132-133). Ántonia leaves the Harling family, works for the Cutters, and after a series of events, including attempted rape, she begins to realize the consequences of her decisions and actions. After Mr. Donovan impregnates Ántonia, refuses to marry her, and leaves her, Ántonia returns to her home on the Nebraska prairie (*My Ántonia* 200-201). Even though Ántonia endures these hardships, she perseveres. Instead of giving up, she displays a highly celebrated American characteristic by continually pursuing happiness. The Widow Steavens describes Ántonia's situation and endurance to Jim, noting;

> My Ántonia, that had so much good in her, has come home disgraced…I marvelled at her calm…She was quiet and steady. Folks respected her industry and tried to treat her as if nothing had happened. They talked, to be sure; but not like they would if she'd put on airs. She was so crushed and quiet that nobody seemed to want to humble her. She never went anywhere. (*My Ántonia* 201-202)

Ántonia clearly experiences struggles with a lack of support from the community; however, she continues to survive. Her survival is not without hardships, both physical and emotional, but she

manages to endure. Indeed, she eventually marries a man and raises her own family. Since Ántonia is able to persevere even after she is abandoned by her would-be husband, she remains distinguished by this perseverance. Ántonia secures work and provides for herself and her child even before she marries. Cather characterizes Ántonia's perseverance as an American trait due to her will to find work and support herself and her child before she is married. However, Ántonia marries and feels more fulfilled with a houseful of children. She sticks to her Bohemian roots by marrying a man from Bohemia, and her children are able to sustain identities as a Czech-Americans. Cather makes it a point to describe Ántonia's womanhood as being tied to her perseverance. Ántonia finds success and work before she is married, but she feels truly successful after she is married and has many children. Schroeter writes, "Ántonia's great achievement and the chief subject of the book is the founding of a family" (273). Schroeter asserts that Ántonia is successful when she is finally able to marry and have a family of her own. Ultimately, Ántonia's character is marked by her perseverance as both an American and a woman.

In addition to Ántonia Shimerda, Jim Burden, the narrator in *My Ántonia*, possesses many characteristics of an American character. Jim, is a rather conventional character, a foil to Ántonia. He displays qualities that are acceptable for a young American man during this time in history. He is originally from the South; he moved West to the Nebraska prairie as a boy. What could be more American than a pioneer? Jim's negative experiences (i.e. the death of his parents) add to his Americanism as a character: "In the idiom of American myth, this [journey] opens him to enormous possibilities in the way of freedom and positive development. The death of his parents, the complete change of scene—all point to the fact that Jim has an opportunity to be formed as a veritable "new man" (Feger 776). Common American literary themes, such as

determination, freedom, endurance, and the pursuit of happiness are evident in Jim Burden's character, as they are, too, in Ántonia's. Jim and Ántonia have a desire to be free and overcome their negative experiences. Jim's most provocative struggles are concentrated at the beginning and end of the narrative, whereas Ántonia's struggles are distributed throughout the novel. The parallelism between these two characters also contributes to their characterization as Americans. Wilhite, in his article entitled "Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," develops this idea contending that:

> The shorthand compound "im/migration" is not intended to elide the very real historical and political distinctions between immigration and migration. The freedom to migrate internationally or intranationally remains a fraught topic of debate across scholarly disciplines, but Cather's focus in *My Ántonia* on the necessary connection between place and subjectivity suggests that both the immigrant Ántonia and the migrant Jim share a common, albeit distinct, desire to form symbolic connections to place, to create a personal sense of "at-homeness." (Wilhite 270)

Immigration and migration are two essential themes in American literature. Throughout American history, immigrants have had a tremendous impact on shaping the United States. Immigrants from all over the world have resided (and still currently reside) within the United States. Since the majority of Americans today are either descendants of immigrants or are immigrants themselves, the impact of immigration on the founding and development of the United States cannot be overlooked. Ántonia's immigration to the United States with her family alludes to the importance of immigrants and their role in founding and shaping America. Jim's migration to the West also supports the role of migrants in the foundation of the United States. If

Americans did not have the courage to move west and settle the harsh prairie lands, then the United States as a whole would be a very different place. Cather reflects upon the courageous pioneers who migrated west by merging Jim's character with that of a pioneer. As Harold Bloom states, "…Jim's experience is the American experience, his melancholy sense of loss also his country's, his longing for something missed in the past a national longing" (108). Cather's characterization of both Jim and Ántonia magnifies the importance of immigrants and migrants in moving to the United States and settling the West. As a migrant and an immigrant, Jim and Ántonia display American characteristics in the novel.

The subjects of "place" and "identity" are crucial in *My Ántonia*, and Wilhite refers to their importance in relation to Jim and Ántonia:

> There is a real androgyny to region in *My Ántonia* as old and new worlds collide, one that complements the novel's gender repressions, insecurities, and ambiguities. Bohemian, Southern, Midwestern, and even quasi-mystical landscapes coexist within the narrative as shifting sites of alienation and identification for Jim and Ántonia. (Wilhite 270)

In her efforts at collapsing the relationship between place and identity for Ántonia, Cather touches on several themes in the novel relative to gender, immigration, migration, and qualities that deem one "American." Of course, there are multiple themes at work simultaneously in the novel, and Wilhite makes an effort to explain the complexity of these themes. *My Ántonia* incorporates a plethora of themes that Cather develops well. She presents a story that causes the reader to think critically due to the integration of ideas and themes that she addresses in her works.

While Jim is a migrant from the South, and Ántonia is an immigrant from Bohemia, they meet and two characters relate with one another on the Nebraska prairie. Jim and Ántonia grow up on the prairie lands, and it is a location that both of them consider to "home." Although they hail from different places and backgrounds originally, their movement to the prairie and the town of Black Hawk allows a fusion of cultures to occur. Ántonia brings with her experiences and many stories from Bohemia, and Jim frequently remembers his life in the South in the elements and people he encounters. These two characters display American characteristics in that they were removed from their original homes and alienated in the plains of Nebraska. Fortunately, they find friendship and solace in one another's company.

Alienation and displacement are part of Jim and Ántonia's characterization, and they are also a part of the overall characterization of Americans. Americans who migrate from state to state experience displacement; immigrants who emigrate from another country to the United States experience separation from their original homeland. In addition to adjusting to a new land and home, immigrants often experience hostility from individuals who are already settled in a particular area. Jim expresses his feelings about Ántonia's immigration to the reader. Lois Feger, author of a provocative article entitled "The Dark Dimension of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," writes:

> It is not hard to recognize a perennial American type in the youthful Jim's "People who don't like this country ought to stay at home. We don't make them come here." A passage such as that on immigrants suggest that perhaps Jim is lacking in the human dimensions which would be essential to making his "Western" education a success: Jim who is able to have advantages such as

> schooling does not seem to be able to sense Ántonia's real deprivation or her own awareness of it. (Feger 777)

The judgment of an individual based on his/her country of origin is a common theme that pervades American history and literature. Immigrants travel and settle to a particular area, and they experience the "cold shoulder" from people who are already settled there. This judgment is evident in Jim's expression of his feelings towards Ántonia's immigration to the West with her family. Jim's opinion on this matter is a stereotypical American opinion of immigrants: "People who don't like this country ought to stay at home…We don't make them come here" (*My Ántonia* 59). Jim's comments are harsh, and he makes no effort to consider the physical and economic struggles that the Shimerda family endured in order to travel to and remain in the United States. To the extent that his comments are rude, they reflect the truth of some Americans' perspectives of "newcomers." Although the United States is composed mainly of immigrants, whose ancestors displaced the natives who originally settled the lands, Americans frequently verbalize disdain for individuals who emigrate from other nations. Like Jim, many Americans insist that immigrants need to go back to where they came from because they are perceived as inferiors who take Americans' jobs, fail to pay taxes, and live in the United States illegally. Ironically, Jim displays a rather American characteristic in expressing hostility towards immigrants, specifically Ántonia and her family. Cather infuses Jim with a judgmental perspective in order to illustrate the prejudice exercised by many Americans. She chooses Jim specifically in order to demonstrate a parallelism between his loss of innocence and acceptance as he ages and his own understanding of the world around himself. His perception of Ántonia and her family reflects artistic intentionality on Cather's part. As she shows in this specific instance, Cather is not adverse to describing events as she perceives them to be (Schroeter 105).

She allows Jim to express his judgments freely, and he states his opinions blatantly in front of Ántonia in an effort to express his own thoughts on her inferiority when compared to him.

Concerning education, immigrants are at a disadvantage, and the second portion of an assertion from Lois Feger's article provokes analytical thought, as it describes some of the disadvantages immigrants experience. Jim's inability to comprehend Ántonia's educational deprivation displays his insensitivity to her situation. Jim's insensitivity is due to his immaturity, as he is a young boy when he makes these strong judgments concerning Ántonia and her family. Though he is a boy, many adults in the United States also make judgments concerning immigrants. Insensitivity to immigrants reigns in 21st century America, and many Americans judge immigrants for their educational background, or lack thereof. Providing educational opportunities for all people, regardless of their background, shall create informed and tolerant citizens.

My Ántonia was originally published in 1918, and the novel takes place in the 19th century on the prairies of Nebraska. Because Ántonia is an immigrant, she is at a disadvantage. When Jim first meets her, she speaks broken English, and her sentences in English are not complete. Mr. Shimerda pleads with Jim, "Te-a-ach, te-e-ach my Ántonia!" (*My Ántonia* 20). Jim complies with Mr. Shimerda's plea and begins to teach Ántonia to speak English. Ántonia is able to speak English more fluently as the novel progresses. When the two are old enough to attend school, Jim attends and Ántonia works instead of obtaining an education. Due to her lack of education, she is at a disadvantage. Many immigrants in the United States today also experience disadvantages due in part to their limited education. The native language of these immigrants, often enough, is not English. Due to the language barrier for many, school is already more difficult for new English language learners because they have to complete assignments and

take tests in a language other than their native one. Although Ántonia does not obtain a formal education, she is still able to succeed. Jim perceives her success upon visiting her twenty years after he graduates. He is a wealthy lawyer and has travelled the world; however, he is unhappily married (*My Ántonia* 2), and opinions concerning the reality of his success may differ tremendously. Schroeter reflects upon Jim and Ántonia's success as individuals: "It is as if Ántonia actually lives life, while Jim merely records it, or at best lives vicariously through her…His personal life falls apart when he leaves her, however successful he may be in his professional role" (Schroeter 274-275). Jim may be wealthy and have an excellent job as a lawyer, but he loses his identity and joy in life, as Schroeter reveals. Jim comes into his personal understanding of identity and value making by observing Ántonia and then remembering her years later. Jim observes Ántonia as successful in staying true to herself and not losing her true identity, even after twenty years: "Whatever else was gone, Ántonia had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away" (*My Ántonia* 216). Jim notices Ántonia's success by observing her choices, sometimes unpopular, and her interactions with her own family. Although she has a difficult life, Ántonia is hard-working and perseveres during periods of adversity.

III.

The judgment of an individual based on his or her identity politics is a common theme that pervades American history and literature. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Willa Cather characterizes Nancy as a distinct American character. Nancy is slave, and she is an unconventional character, especially for 20th century literature. Cather advances several noteworthy themes in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* that allow for the further characterization of her characters. Like Ántonia, Nancy exercises endurance, determination, the pursuit of happiness, and desire for freedom. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is rich and dynamic in its exploration of themes, events, and characters. "Cather's last completed effort, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* explores the oldest, deepest things: Virginia, slavery, the untellable story" (Wolff 6). David Stouck, author of "Willa Cather's Last Four Books" writes, "Willa Cather's preoccupation with power and possessiveness is nowhere as strikingly in the foreground as in her last novel, *Sapphira and* the *Slave Girl*, with its focus on the question of slavery" (Stouck 47). The racialized dynamics that inform the development of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* serve to highlight the differences between slaves and masters, powerlessness and control. The presentation of slavery that drives the action of Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* allows Cather to create anew American ideas of enslaved womanhood. In fact, through Nancy's character, Cather demonstrates some of the horrors and realities of the institution of slavery; she shows Nancy's powerlessness to Sapphira, and she illuminates events that demonstrate Nancy's fears and horrible treatment. Overall, Cather creates a distinctive and unconventional American character, Nancy, through her authorship of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

Nancy experiences adversity throughout her life, evident most obviously in Sapphira's poor treatment of her. Sapphira, Nancy's mistress, treats her poorly. As Nancy grows into a

young woman, Sapphira believes that her husband, Henry Colbert, is having sexual relations with Nancy (Stouck 48). Sapphira is a jealous and conniving woman, and she invites her nephew, Martin Colbert, to her home in order to achieve revenge through him. Sapphira begins plotting by writing a letter of invitation to her nephew (*Sapphira* 30). After her nephew arrives, he begins to pursue Nancy on more than one occasion. Martin kisses Nancy against her will (*Sapphira* 166), and then tries to rape her in the laurel bushes (*Sapphira* 172-174). Martin realizes that Sapphira is aiding him in his attempts to exercise physical control over Nancy, and he uses this aid to his advantage (*Sapphira* 176). A short time later, Martin is relentless with Nancy and haunts her in the cherry orchard and while she sleeps outside of Sapphira's door (*Sapphira* 178-181, 194-196). Of course, Nancy and her master never had sexual relations, but Sapphira does not believe this to be the case, and she attempts to use Martin to get back at Nancy and assert power over her own husband. After speaking with Bluebell, one of the other young slaves, Martin becomes furious with the idea that Henry Colbert may have had his way with Nancy long before he arrives at the Mill House due to Bluebell's implications on the matter (*Sapphira* 186). Throughout the majority of the novel, Martin Colbert pursues Nancy and leaves her in a fearful state. His intentions to rape this young slave are blatant; the scenes in which he goes after Nancy are vivid and dramatic, and towards the end of the novel, Nancy's fear of Martin grows tremendously. She sleeps outside of Sapphira's door at night in order to attend to her mistress. Nancy describes her fears to Rachel, Sapphira's daughter:

> It's worse at night, Miz' Blake. You know I sleeps outside Miss Sapphy's door, an' he's right over me, at the top of the stairs. One night I heard him comin' down the stairs in his bare feet, an' I jumped up an' run into the Mistress's room, makin' out I thought I heered her callin' me. She was right cross 'cause I'd waked

> her up, and sent me back to my bed, an' I layed there awake till mornin'. If I was to sleep sound, he could slip in to me any time. (*Sapphira* 216-217)

This scene that Cather conveys through Nancy's perspective is indeed vivid. Nancy is afraid to sleep because she knows that Martin's intentions are to harm her, and he could do so at any time. She does not sleep well because she knows that he desires to possess and take advantage of her physically, mentally, and sexually. Nancy is clever enough to wake her mistress and cause a disruption in the quiet house to avoid Martin's sexual advances. Instead of assisting Nancy, Sapphira becomes upset with her, which is borne out of Sapphira's irrational jealousy and imitation of patriarchal control. Sapphira's behavior is horrible, and the lack of humanity in Nancy's description of this account shows how terrible the reality of enslaved womanhood. According to Morgenstern, "the novel is not without its 'ancestral secrets; hints of incest; long, drafty, dark halls and creaking stairs'…*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*…generates its narrative out of attempts to distance, disguise, or contain scenes of brutality" (Morgenstern 186-187). As Morgenstern points out, the sexually graphic scenes, descriptive indeed, represent historically the stain and shame of American slavery. Cather's vivid descriptions add to the reader's perceived horrors of slavery.

Cather's descriptions of sexuality and womanhood in this novel are unlike her descriptions in *My Ántonia*. Many of the scenes in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are sexual and disturbing. She writes of the several times that Nancy evades rape; Nancy avoids rape because of her own intuition in addition to her being offered assistance by Sapphira's daughter, Rachel, and other slaves. The scenes in which Nancy is almost raped are graphic, and Nancy's fear of Martin grows with every such instance. Dr. Jewell of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln writes, "The near-rape in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is based on research into the lives of slaves". In order to

write effectively and realistically about Nancy's struggles throughout the novel, Cather conducted research to be well informed about slavery. Cather's personal experiences with her family members also allow her to write about slavery and Virginia from a unique perspective. As Schroeter writes, "*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, more nearly a successor to the historical novels, evokes Virginia before the Civil War, the Virginia of which she [Cather] heard tales when she was growing up…" (84-85). Cather heard stories of human enslavement while she was growing up, and she used her knowledge of American slavery to create complex relationships among her characters under the themes of race and gender. Such personal insight contributes to her overall desire to explain and present her stories as she perceived events to be—whether or not the truths of situations may make her reader uncomfortable. In describing the themes of sexuality and womanhood in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* Cather does not attempt to "soften" the ways in which she addresses the freedoms of men in comparison to the limitations of women—both mistresses and slaves. Cather writes about the limited freedoms of those who are both "free" and enslaved. She questions the freedoms of American women and asserts that during the 1800s, American women did not experience the freedoms that the Constitution grants to every individual.

Ironically enough, and not coincidentally, in *My Ántonia*, Ántonia also evades rape by allowing Jim to take her place as a house-sitter. When Wick Cutter unexpectedly arrives at his home without his wife and with the intention of raping Ántonia, he mercilessly beats Jim because Jim takes Ántonia's place and spoils Cutter's chance of raping her (*My Ántonia* 157-159). By writing a switch between Jim and Ántonia into her novel, Cather avoids describing a rape scene; she instead describes a violent beating. Cather is deliberate in her avoidance of describing a rape scene, as James Schroeter describes in *Willa Cather and Her Critics*: "…When her [Cather's]

mind is presented with something unpleasant, it shies away from it. The problem of evil is posed, but not commented on. Instead she is evasive and changes the subject" (292). Cather is truly a master of presenting a problem and shying away from her own bias and opinions of the problem that she presents, especially concerning rape. By allowing the reader to form opinions about the problem, Cather challenges the reader to think of solutions and a plausible conclusion to the events in the novel. She challenges her reader by presenting the struggle for determination, freedom, endurance, and the pursuit of happiness among American characters in her novels.

Before the situation with Wick Cutter unfolds, Ántonia makes conscious choices that have consequences. Ántonia expresses her determination to be free and to pursue happiness. She sets aside anything that she believes compromises this freedom, and pursues of her own happiness, which, at this point in the novel, manifests in her attendance at the dances. She desires to have freedom and to have the opportunity to come and go from the Harling house as she pleases, like the other hired girls. When the Harlings present her with the ultimatum of staying and giving up her freedom to go out at night or leaving their home, she decides to work for the Cutters. Ántonia's rebellious behavior, as Schroeter suggests, is her assertion of her own freedom:

> The significance of her rebellion is that it shows Ántonia's asserting her independence from her family as well as from the Harlings. This is a vitally important step for Willa Cather's early heroines, since they seem to feel that without completely rejecting parental authority they cannot be individuals in their own right. (299)

Ántonia behaves as any inexperienced young American. She values her freedom, and she is willing to place herself in a dangerous situation in order to maintain her freedom. Of course, this

decision comes with consequences. Her involvement with the Cutter family causes Wick Cutter to form inappropriate ideas and intentions for Ántonia.

Wick Cutter, like many of Cather's characters, is based on a real individual from Red Cloud, Nebraska (Jewell). The prototype for Wick Cutter has the name of Mathew R. Bently. In an email dated January 10, 2014, Jewell, citing *My Ántonia: The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition*, describes Bently's suspicious activities:

> Mathew R. Bentley (1841-1912), [is] the prototype of Wick Cutter…He and his wife came to Red Cloud in the 1870s…He became mayor of Red Cloud in 1895. However, after his death a later editor of the *Red Cloud Chief* said, "He accumulated his money by the most extortionate usury. There was no practise in this undesirable business of which he was not accused. We have not heard a word of commendation of his character or life[.]" (18 April 1912)

The people in Red Cloud knew that Bentley was engaging in unscrupulous activities. He was a wealthy man, and *My Ántonia: The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition* suggests that he engaged in immoral activities—business—involving women. Bentley is quite similar to Wick Cutter, especially in "business practices." In *My Ántonia*, Wick Cutter involves two Swedish girls in his "business" schemes. Cather writes, "One of them he had taken to Omaha and established in the business for which he had fitted her. He still visited her" (*My Ántonia* 135). Wick Cutter not only rapes these two Swedish girls, but he also relocates one of them to another city and establishes her as a prostitute. Cather goes on to write that Cutter "visits her" still (*My Ántonia* 135). The man that inspires Cutter's character, Bentley, did, in fact, engage in immoral "business." Cather shows the subjection of American women through Cutter. Rape and prostitution are detrimental

to the rights and freedoms of women, and Cather presents the limitations of women's supposedly inherent rights through Cutter's character.

After Wick Cutter's attempt to rape Ántonia, Ántonia leaves with a young man who promises to marry her. Cather demonstrates the dysfunction of heterosexual relationships, and she uses Ántonia's experiences with Wick Cutter (the rapist) and Mr. Donovan (impregnator and abandoner) to illustrate her own opinions. The prolificacy in which Cather refers to themes of sexuality and gender in *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is outstanding. Although Ántonia becomes pregnant, Cather does not describe the sexuality between Ántonia and the man who abandons her. This expression of sexuality is quite different from the descriptions that Cather offers in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The distinction is not a racial one; it is the heterosexual relationships that these two women experience—voluntarily or not—which cause a distinction in the descriptions. As Abbott suggests, "Cather's novels consistently portray heterosexual sex as violent and dangerous[. . .]when they link these depictions to Cather's own rejection of heterosexual relationships and her apparent desire to be a man" (34). Cather is clearly making a statement with her presentation of the amount of violence that surrounds both Ántonia and Nancy. The scenes in this novel are dramatic, and in her earlier novels, Cather would have avoided such scenes as these, as is evident in her 1918 novel, *My Ántonia* (Stouck 50).

In both *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and *My Ántonia*, Cather creates traumatic scenes in which two women barely avoid rape. Even though twenty-two years separate the publication of these novels, the formation of such vivid events is not merely coincidence. Cather is quite intentional in her writing, writing about rape with the purpose of challenging stereotypes about gender and patriarchal control. The characters and places in *My Ántonia* represent Cather's

knowledge of people and geographical spaces, and many of the anecdotal stories featured in the novel parallel Cather's experiences on the Nebraska prairie. To that end, Cather writes, then, about many of her own experiences. Given that she writes about rape in three of her works (the third being a short story entitled "The Old Beauty") (Tucker), one may conclude that Cather may have experienced rape or sexual assault either directly or indirectly. There is no documentation of Cather's being a victim of rape or sexual assault (Jewell), but Cather did burn many of her own letters (Acocella). Since she burned many of her letters, evidence of Cather's own rape or sexual assault could have been burned as well. Cather was a private individual, and her writing conveys her efforts at hiding her personal life from the public's view. If rape or the attempt of rape did occur to Cather or someone she knew, it may very well have happened prior to 1918, the publication date of *My Ántonia*. Of the texts that Cather published that include the presentation or mention of rape, *My Ántonia* is the oldest of the three and the first in Cather's oeuvre where the violation of a woman's sexuality is evident. In her article published by *The New Yorker* in April of 2013, Joan Acocella illuminates some of the mysteries of Cather's past. Acocella writes, "She [Cather] burned quite a few of her letters, and in her will she forbade publication of any that remained." When Cather's will expired, her letters were released to the public and are now published in a book entitled *Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Cather may have been trying to hide something by burning several of her letters and forbidding the publication of the rest of them. Cather's writing about rape in her novels serves the intent of achieving symbolism through describing the effects that a male-dominated society has on women and their rights and individual freedoms (Tucker); however, she could also have been attempting to hide a personal encounter of sexual assault as she so vividly describes in both *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

J. Gabriel Scala argues in her essay entitled "At the Center of Her Mystery: Sexual Trauma and Willa Cather" that Cather was a victim of sexual trauma as a child. In her provocative essay, Scala begins by reinforcing Cather's secretive nature and her attempt to burn all of her letters (Scala 137). Following this assertion of secrecy, Scala continues by writing about how Cather includes elements of herself through her characters and stories in several of her novels, including *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Scala then provides evidence from *The Song of the Lark* to support the claim that Cather was a victim of sexual trauma as a child; the parallels between Cather's "fiction" and her own life experiences are closely connected—concerning both characters and events. When she was a child, a boy threatened Cather, telling her that he was going to cut off her hand (Scala 144). After explaining the psychological trauma of such an event, Scala continues with the contention:

> Cather's recurrent fictional pattern linking predatory, sexually aggressive, or exploitive men [such as Wick Cutter and Martin Colbert] with violence provokes the very likely assumption that Cather herself had experienced a violent sexual encounter. In fact, if Cather associated the hands with masculine power—an easy leap to make for a person who chose a male-dominated career that depended on the use of her hands—then the mutilation of those hands would be equivalent to a man's violating or raping her of her power. (Scala 144-145)

Scala's insistence on a pattern within Cather's texts which links men to sexual violence is a reflection of Cather's own fears; thus, one may conclude that the author may have been a victim sexual assault. Cather's characters are subjected to violence, especially if they are women. The violence that women experience is quite clear in *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, suggesting that Cather attributes violence, especially sexual violence, to men. Cather was most

likely a victim, as she wrote about rape thrice in her works, and as Scala argues, the author needed time to heal from the violence she may have experienced. She sought healing through writing, giving speeches, and allowing interviews (Scala 146). Cather needed to express the trauma that she experienced as a child. The evidence vividly claims that she was probably sexually assaulted, and her coping mechanism became writing about her traumatic experience. Sexual violence and the attempt of rape appear in *My Ántonia* and drive the plot of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Since both Ántonia and Nancy evade rape, one can only assume that Cather could not find the words to recreate the explicit sexual trauma that existed as part of her human experience. Though Cather deliberately evades describing an explicit rape scene in these novels, she does highlight themes concerning sexuality and violence unabashedly.

Cather was probably a victim of childhood sexual trauma, and her efforts to describe her experiences through the characters of Ántonia and Nancy are commendable. Ántonia and Nancy are young when they almost encounter rape, and they are unconventional, like Cather. Cather is a lesbian; Nancy is a slave; Ántonia is an immigrant, yet their unconventional nature as American women adds to the impact of the events they confront throughout their lives. Rape limits them as women; it strips from them their opportunities of obtaining freedom and pursuing happiness. The constructs of American identity are themes that Cather is working with as she crafts images of rape, enslavement, and the hardships of prairie life. She attempts to make sense of gender and race in *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and she attempts to do so, in addition to challenging and discomforting her reader, through the lives of Ántonia and Nancy.

A nonconformist, Cather not only constructs unconventional characters, but she also integrates themes that are uncomfortable for readers, addressing the intersections of gender, race, and rape with great clarity and tenacity. Relative to Cather's daring style in *Sapphira and the*

Slave Girl, Schroeter writes, "In its central framework *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is probably Cather's most ambitious book, the first of her novels to attempt to come to grips with a difficult and complex social environment" (198). As an author and an individual, Cather is unafraid of tackling many themes and topics that are "taboo" and "uncomfortable" for many Americans. Cather's does not write with a sensitive perspective concerning issues of gender and race, but instead she makes it a point to observe the societal discomforts with gender, race, and rape, and she addresses them directly and without causing offence. Cather, to put it plainly, writes based on her observations of the sexism that pervades American society. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* Cather addresses slavery, rape, race, and gender. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, author of "Time and Memory in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," describes the interlocking metaphor of race and gender that informs the novel's central conflict:

> In American culture, accounts of race and gender are linked by more than a metaphor: stunted, perhaps mutilated, both are remarkable as much for what has been *omitted* as for what has been *disclosed*…Willa Cather seems to have understood the connection between these two forbidden narratives at a very young age…(1)

Nancy is simultaneously a slave and a woman, and Cather writes boldly about Nancy's struggles. Race and gender remain taboo in 21st century America; they have been, historically, for centuries, and many Americans still deem them "sensitive" and "unspoken" topics. Angela M. Salas, author of "Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: Extending the Boundaries of the Body," writes that "in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* Cather does raise and face many of the complexities surrounding race, gender, authority, ethics and equality still facing our culture" (97). Cather defies the normative standards of her time by writing about race and gender in

Sapphira and the Slave Girl; however, Morrison asserts that Cather does not fully address the themes of race and gender in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Morrison writes that Cather struggles to directly address "the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence" (Morrison 20). This struggle to directly address these themes may be a result of Cather's desire to avoid bias and to allow readers to form opinions and conclusions themselves. Even though more than seventy years have passed since Cather published this novel, race and gender are still uncomfortable topics for Americans today. People fear what they do not know; people tend to avoid others who are different. Instead of confronting personal fears and accepting individuality and self-expression, Americans have done a superb job of pushing people either to conform or die. The societal constraints on gender are implicit, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and *My Ántonia* confront these constraints openly; Cather defies the gender norms that are socially acceptable in her 20th century writing, and she also defies the gender norms of the 21st century with her integration of complicated and uncomfortable themes in these two novels.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl and *My Ántonia* invite readers' close scrutiny of gender norms and societal influences that enhance or compromise one's gender. The theme of gender is relative to *My Ántonia* also, and Ántonia's "masculine qualities," as described by Jim, are intentional on Cather's part. As an author, Cather models Ántonia after herself and gives Ántonia qualities—both physically and mentally—that one may typically observe in American male characters. As in *My Ántonia*, Cather also addresses gender in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Sapphira is an interesting character to examine when one considers gender. She is the mistress to her slaves, but she is not truly free, as Morrison argues, ". . .the real fugitive, the text asserts, is the slave mistress" (20). Over a period of several years, she loses control of her physical body to "dropsy" (*Sapphira* 10). Even though Sapphira is technically not a slave, she is not free.

Morrison observes that Sapphira has "absolute power over the body of another woman. . .It is after all *hers,* this slave woman's body, in a way that her own invalid flesh is not" (Morrison 23). The women in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are not free due to the presence of masculine control that limits their (desired) freedoms. The women who are slaves live under Sapphira and Henry's control, and selling slaves is a right that only Henry as the master possesses (*Sapphira* 8). Sapphira does have control over the lives of the slave women, domestically speaking, especially Nancy, as she reveals when she invites Martin Colbert to the Mill House and begins to plot to rape Nancy; however, Sapphira does not have control over her own body given her disability. She is a "slave" to the dropsy that prevents her from walking and living independently, and as her husband so readily reminds her, he is the patriarch and maintains charge over all business matters. The women in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are truly powerless.

On the other hand, the men, even the men who are slaves, have physical freedom. As the master, Henry Colbert is free to come and go as he pleases. He does not sleep in the Mill House with his wife, but he instead sleeps at the mill and constantly attends to his business there instead of hiring a foreman to run the mill for him (*Sapphira* 6). As Mr. Colbert is free, some of his male slaves also have opportunities for freedom as well. Tansy Dave, for example, ran away from the Colberts, and nobody went after him. He eventually decided that he wanted to go back to the mill, and so he found his way back (Sapphira 207-208). Tansy Dave is able to come and go as he pleases, but he always makes his way back to the mill—often without proper clothing and frequently drunk (*Sapphira* 208). As a slave, Tansy Dave is not helpful in any way, yet he is able to leave and return as he pleases because he is a man. In addition, Henry Colbert offers Sampson, another slave, freedom, and Sampson refuses (*Sapphira* 109). Cather writes, "He [Henry] had considered buying Sampson from Sapphira and sending him to Pennsylvania a free man. Three

years ago he had called Sampson into his room one night and proposed this plan to him. . .But when it was his turn to speak, he [Sampson] broke down" (*Sapphira* 109). Sampson has the opportunity to be a free man, and he declines this opportunity; he finds the opportunity to live as a free man to be an insult to the hard work that he has done with his master (*Sapphira* 109). The choice of freedom that Henry gives Sampson is important to note. Men are given the opportunity to choose whether or not to be free, and women are denied opportunity and choice concerning freedom.

Slavery, Cather reveals, is horrible for all women—not just the slaves who are women. Cather asserts her position concerning the gender distinctions within slavery very overtly. She argues that even the mistresses of slave are still under the societal gender constraints. Even a mistress of slaves is not truly free because she is still subordinate to her husband. Sapphira's assertion of control over the slaves who are women demonstrates her desire to be identified independently from her husband. She desires to have control, especially over her own physical body. Sapphira is a secondary human being because she is a woman; she is below men, even slaves who are men.

Martin Colbert's nod toward Nancy and Nancy's reactions to these advances illustrate the American themes of determination, freedom, endurance, and the pursuit of happiness, all of which constitute Nancy's character as American. As Martin becomes increasingly forceful, Nancy's desire to become free and live without fear increases. Before Martin arrives at Sapphira's home, Nancy displays no desire to run away and be freed. She has no expressed intentions of escaping from slavery—at first. However, as Martin pursues her with intentions of raping her, Nancy becomes determined to escape from him. She first seeks help from other slaves when Martin finds her in the cherry orchard. Cather describes the scene with detail. She

explains, “Martin framed his face closer and shut his eyes…He seemed murmuring to himself, not to her, but all the time his face came closer. Her throat felt tight shut, but she knew she must scream, and she did” (*Sapphira* 181). Nancy evades Martin’s advances in the cherry orchard, and she escapes his sexual intentions with the help of the other slaves who heard her scream. This scene in the novel is graphic and quite bold in its rendering of female violation. In an article entitled “A Good Girl Like Nancy: Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*,” Traci Abbott writes about Cather’s boldness in the novel concerning scenes of sexuality. The details of sexuality contribute to Cather’s courageous descriptions, and as Abbott writes, “The position’s simulation of oral sex, a daring choice on Cather’s part, recalls the most positive aspect of sexual interaction, pleasure, perhaps the reason some critics find it unthreatening” (37). Cather’s writing about sexuality so freely during the 1940s is audacious. Cather then creates an interaction between a young slave, Nancy, and Sapphira’s nephew, Martin. Martin forces himself upon Nancy, and he is consistent in his attempts to rape her. One cannot overlook Cather’s revolutionary boldness in relation to the presentation of sexuality in this specific scene.

Nancy escapes not only from Martin—she escapes slavery as well—an action that signals her desire to live as free as any other American in order to pursue the happiness that she deserves as a human being. She endures Martin’s advances long enough to escape. Fortunately, she receives help from the other slaves, Rachel, and even Mr. Henry Colbert, the miller and master. A few of the slaves help Nancy in the cherry orchard, but after this event, they realize that they are unable to offer Nancy the protection she truly needs. The slaves are indeed powerless to their masters. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison describes one of the primary themes of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as “the power and license of a white slave mistress over her female slaves” (18). The men who are slaves realize their lack of power and control concerning female slaves;

indeed, Sapphira has control over the physical (sexual) and mental (emotional) processes by which Nancy and other female slaves function. Upon realizing his own powerlessness, Sampson speaks to Mr. Colbert about Nancy's situation; however, the miller "is fond of Nancy, as a father of a daughter, but does nothing to protect her from his nephew's advances; his role in helping her escape is a clandestine, noncommittal gesture of leaving some money unguarded in his coat pocket" (Stouck 50). Mr. Colbert does not do much to help Nancy escape from Martin save providing her with enough money to flee her situation. Rachel is proactive in helping Nancy. Nancy first goes to Rachel to seek protection from Martin after Sapphira asks her to pick flowers in an isolated meadow. Rachel accompanies Nancy to the meadow, and sure enough, Martin arrives (*Sapphira* 172). He is not able to rape Nancy due to Rachel's presence. Rachel is Sapphira's daughter, so Martin is unable to touch Nancy during this instance. Even though Sapphira and Rachel do not have the best mother-daughter relationship, Martin would not dare to rape Nancy in Rachel's presence due to their identification as cousins. Martin consistently tries to take away Nancy's rightful freedoms by exercising sexual dominance over her. He denies freedoms and rights that she should have as an American woman with his threat to rape her.

Nancy's pursuit of happiness occurs after Rachel helps her escape from slavery and Martin. Nancy returns to the home of her previous mistress and master twenty-five years after she escapes (*Sapphira* 273). Nancy achieves freedom, and her prosperity as a free woman is evident in her discussion with Till and others at the end of the novel. Up until Nancy receives her freedom, she is subjected to the horrors of slavery, and Sapphira is not a merciful mistress. Among her slaves, and all slaves for that matter, "men are emasculated; women cannot avoid rape; spouses are chosen for or kept from them; their children are endangered at every turn; they have no agency and no legal status to demand justice for themselves. They are condemned"

(Salas 101). Nancy's situation prior to her escape makes her a witness to all of these aspects of slavery. As an American character, her ability to endure challenges beyond the confines of slavery, with all of its calamities, proves that she has the strength to endure. This endurance is part of Nancy's characterization as an American character.

Willa Cather daringly adds her feminist voice to the accounts of Ántonia and Nancy's. In *My Ántonia*, Cather appears at the beginning of the novel as Jim's friend, and Jim offers her his manuscript which tells of Ántonia's and his own experiences (1-2). In response to the argument that Cather presents herself in the beginning of the novel, Bloom writes, "The preface thus establishes a relation between Jim Burden and Willa Cather outside the narrative that is important to the relationship of Jim and Ántonia within the narrative" (Bloom 59). Jim and Ántonia have a friendship that is the foundation for the novel. By portraying herself as a character within the first few pages of *My Ántonia*, Cather suggests the importance of the manuscript (the novel) that Jim writes and presents to her. In a different stylistic approach, Cather appears at the end of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a child (*Sapphira* 283). Morrison writes, "*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* turns at the end into a kind of memoir, the author's recollection of herself as a child witnessing the return, the reconciliation…In returning to her childhood, at the end of her writing career, Cather returns to a very personal, indeed private experience" (27-28). Cather is present in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* for one of the most significant events in the novel. She recollects hearing about Nancy throughout her childhood (*Sapphira* 281), which adds to the importance of Nancy's return in Cather's eyes. Willa Cather's use of different ages adds to the complexity of her opinion of the diversity of American characters; it is the diversity and unconventional nature of her characters that suggests the importance of individuality—a truly American characteristic.

IV.

The timelessness of an American novel is evident within or characterized by the creative abilities of its author, and John Steinbeck is certainly a master where one considers the craft of writing. When one compares John Steinbeck to an author such as Willa Cather, one may believe that he is a conventional fellow; however, Steinbeck's life and experiences are far from ordinary. John Steinbeck was born in "Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902" (George xx). In an essay entitled "John Steinbeck: Footnote for a Memoir," John Kenneth Galbraith describes Steinbeck's personality and appearance in detail. He writes, Steinbeck was "a shrewd and perceptive man, much interested in politics and contemporary anthropology and not only droll, but very, very funny. He was a large man, still clean-shaven, exceedingly homely. . .He spoke in a carefully subdued mumble" (49). Physically, John Steinbeck is not an exceptional man, and his physical appearance separates him from Cather. The most curious part of this quotation from Galbraith is that Steinbeck mumbled—a man of Steinbeck's fame and large physique does not seem like a man who mumbles—his shyness sets him apart as an author. In a published interview, Thom Steinbeck, John Steinbeck's son reflects, "He [John Steinbeck] was a very shy man. . .Normally he was a very quiet-spoken man" (4). Steinbeck's son and other family members observed that Steinbeck was a soft-spoken and shy man. His third wife, Elaine Steinbeck, tells an interviewer in "'John Believed in Man': An Interview with Mrs. John Steinbeck" that "John *really* mumbled. . .He was *genuinely* shy with new people. . ." (23). Although Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* has several engaging and provocative themes and characters, and is a truly bold and demanding work, the author of the novel was shy when he was speaking, as the evidence from many sources suggests. Steinbeck's soft-spoken nature is not what one would typically expect after reading the politically audacious and intriguing *Of Mice and Men*.

Even though Steinbeck was a shy man, his life experiences were not at all inhibited. His son, Thom Steinbeck, describes his father in an interview entitled "My Father, John Steinbeck," saying, "He was a total American. There's no question about it; Steinbeck loved America more than anything else. He believed in America and what it did. And he was also close friends with (Lyndon) Johnson" (8). As Thom Steinbeck describes, John Steinbeck truly loved being an American, and he was even friends with a former president of the United States. It is imperative to reflect upon Steinbeck's love for America while reading *Of Mice and Men*, as Steinbeck is quite critical of American society in his novel. He writes about inequality and differences among people and requires readers to confront all that makes them uncomfortable; simple differences make many of his characters unconventional, and it was—and still is—difficult for many Americans to accept others who many have physical, emotional, intellectual, or academic differences. Although Steinbeck is quite critical of American society, his family members do observe him as an American through and through.

Even Steinbeck's process of writing *Of Mice and Men* was rather unconventional, as he had to write the novel twice. Remarkably, Steinbeck was able to remember almost every word while he was writing the novel a second time, and there is very little difference between the first version of the novel and the second. In her essay entitled "'I Think I Just Saw God': Thoughts on John Steinbeck," Virginia Scardigli describes the creation of *Of Mice and Men*, and she details the loss and recovery that Steinbeck experienced during the writing process:

> There was this horrible feeling in the room. In the corner there was a black-and-white pup named Toby…And Toby was there with his paws over his nose. Well, I knew that John would never hurt a dog, so I said, 'What happened?' John just pointed at Toby and said, 'He ate the book.' He was talking about *Of Mice and*

> *Men*…I said, 'John, how long is it going to take you to rewrite it?' And he said, 'Oh, I'll be about three months.' He wrote for three months, and then *Of Mice and Men* comes out, and there were three words different from the version Toby ate. I know this because Carol told me and she did all his typing. That's why there isn't one wasted word in *Of Mice and Men*—that book, to me, is the pearl of his writings. (45-46)

Steinbeck is truly a notable author—to rewrite a text almost exactly word-for-word is not an easy feat. In the above quotation, Scardigli describes *Of Mice and Men* as "the pearl of his [Steinbeck's] writings," and one may readily agree with this opinion. Since it only took Steinbeck three months to write the novel, one may conclude that he knew exactly what he wanted to write. The text remains a classic to this day, even though it is a novel published in 1937—the power of Steinbeck's words, themes, and characters allow *Of Mice and Men* to remain poignant, even as the 21st century advances.

Thomas Fensch, author of an article that reviewed *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia*, quotes Jackson Benson, who writes, "Few American writers have been the source of so much controversy as John Steinbeck" (125). John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is infused with politics, controversy, and unconventional American characters. The question of morality that he creates while examining the events concerning and actions of Lenny, an intellectually impaired character, is a profound theme and question that Steinbeck asks continuously throughout the novel. Steinbeck's examination of the submission and exploitation of women and African American workers brings to light the inequality at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States. Steinbeck writes without apology and warning, and his characters are unconventional,

raw, and burdened with the reality of American hardships that permeate from one century to another.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* advances the key concerns of several American characters that are unique. At first, it appears that Lennie, a man with intellectual impairment (Steinbeck), is the only unconventional character within the text; however, Curley's wife, Crooks, and Candy are also distinct in their physical and behavioral attributes. With this particular novel, Steinbeck "wished to challenge his audience's sense of values" (Hart 33) because he was "a social critic…and such functioning can be highly conducive to a meaningful thinking about morality" (Hart 33). In fact, as Richard E. Hart contends within his article "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection," Steinbeck presents several social and societal discrepancies that exist in 20th century America (and still exist in 21st century America):

> *Of Mice and Men* presents dramatic situations and characterizations that allow us to see and hear and feel ethical dilemmas and such social problems as racism, sexism, and economic exploitation in an immediate, firsthand way. Such issues are dramatically contextualized so as to provoke reader reflection…Steinbeck, of course, offers no resolutions or sweeping answers…He means to agitate, to provoke, to anger, to cause doubt and raise a multitude of questions. (33-34)

Of Mice and Men addresses the negative societal constructs and beliefs that were present in 20th century America, and many of these negative societal constructs and beliefs are still present in 21st century America. Racism, sexism, and economic exploitation still exist in our modern world; Americans are both the victims and victimizers even today. In his text, Steinbeck employs Crooks as a character that experiences racism; he uses Curley's wife (a woman who is never

given a name for the reader to note) to address sexism. The economic exploitations of the workers are evident throughout the text, as they work and live in harsh conditions for very little pay—these men are truly survivors. As Hart asserts, Steinbeck means to provoke his readers in order to demand them to reflect on what they have read. How could a reader take lightly the provoking themes Steinbeck addresses through Crooks and Curley's wife? Surely one cannot! The racist remarks in the novel are blatant, and the men in the novel never refer or regard Curly's wife by her own name, which demonstrates that she is the property of Curly. If she were on an equal level with Curly, would not the other characters address her by her first name? Or even by her last name? Crooks has a different skin tone from the other workers, and he is exiled to sleep and eat separately from them. Racism and sexism are not topics that one may regard lightly. Steinbeck's characters demand thought, and as with many Americans, the true embodiment of their being is more than skin-deep; however, we must look past the skin tone and sex of an individual.

Curley's wife is an unconventional character in *Of Mice and Men*, as her interactions with the other characters advance the plot. Steinbeck uses situations involving Curley's wife to illustrate the "male-dominated and sexist attitudes of the time and culture" (Hart 35). Women were socially limited during the 1930s, and patriarchal family values dominated societal views and restrictions of women. Curley's wife is only ever referred to as such—Steinbeck does not give her character a proper name within the novel (Hart 35). Curley's wife's sexuality becomes a remarkable indication of her presence in *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck describes, "A girl was standing there looking in. She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages" (Steinbeck 31). The negative view that they have of Curly's wife is due to her appearance, as the men lust after her.

Steinbeck also characterizes Curley's wife as "a trusting yet hardened girl accustomed to a male-dominated society, pretending to be something she is not, alone and unloved" (Hart 36). Curly's wife has lost her identity to her husband because she is forced to attend to his every demand, and she has to pretend that she is a loving housewife, which clearly, she is not. She feels alone, unloved, and lost among the working men. In his work "Moral Experience in 'Of Mice and Men': Challenges and Reflection," Richard E. Hart describes Curly's wife's situation in this manner:

> She marries Curley to escape from the narrow confines of her home, breaking away from what she perceived as family repression, only to find herself ironically confined to a ranch, wife of a relatively well-to-do little monster. The social and cultural context, it seems will not permit her to better herself, regardless of where she is. (Hart 38)

Curley's wife originally believes that she is escaping from a home that limits her and prevents her from achieving her own dreams; instead of fleeing her childhood home and pursuing her dreams, she believes she may find solace by running into the arms of Curly. Instead of obtaining freedom and achieving her dreams, Curly's wife finds herself more confined than ever before. Curley is often searching for his wife, and his bitter accusations toward the working men demonstrate the limitations of his trust toward his wife and her involvement with other men (Steinbeck 53). He is possessive and demanding of her, and his nature as a character prevents her from maintaining her individuality.

Crooks is another unconventional character in *Of Mice and Men*, and he is a victim of racism. In his article "Moral Experience in 'Of Mice and Men': Challenges and Reflection," Richard E. Hart contends that "besides sexism, racism is perhaps the most poignant moral issue

in *Of Mice and Men*, which confronts the full effects of prejudice, principally on a lone black man, but also on the whites who live and work around him" (39). Curley's wife experiences the effects of sexism, and Crooks experiences the effects of racism, and these effects illuminate these two distinct characters. The individuals working on the ranch alienate both Crooks and Curley's wife repeatedly (Hart 41). The cause of this alienation is the physical differences between the individuals working on the ranch and Crooks and Curley's wife. Crooks is an African American man, and Curley's wife is a woman, and they both are physically distinct from the other workers on the ranch.

In America, the 1930's present a great difference in culture when one compares the decade to the 21st century. Culturally, women were expected to run the home and to serve men, and racism prevailed in many communities. In a global context, racism and sexism continue to prevail, and the themes that Steinbeck highlights with Crooks and Curley's wife are contextual to many societies around the world in the 21st century. In April 2014, Boko Haram, a terrorist group, abducted two hundred girls from a school in northeastern Nigeria (Abubakar). In 2015, ISIS terrorizes men and women who culturally different from their organization. Cultural differences exist, and Boko Haram and ISIS are not tolerant to these differences. In Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, cultural differences also exist between the men who are working on the ranch and Crooks and Curley's wife. The men on the ranch are not tolerant to differences; therefore, one may conclude Steinbeck's themes and unconventional characters are relevant in the 21st century, as intolerance still affects men and women in the world today.

Lennie is the most obvious unconventional character in *Of Mice and Men*, as he and George, his companion and guardian, are the main characters and are central to the advancement of the plot. George is a foil for Lennie, as Jim is a foil for Ántonia. Lennie is a connecting force

between himself and Crooks, and then between himself and Curley's wife. Like Curley's wife and Crooks, Lennie is also labeled as a societal outcast due to his intellectual impairments; however, Lennie is able to connect with and trust both Curley's wife and Crooks because they tell him about their own past experiences and aspirations—these two characters are able to relate to and trust Lennie enough to tell him about their own desires. Lennie may not be able to process everything that Curley's wife and Crooks tell him, as he needs repetition in order to memorize basic information, but he at least appears to these two characters as if he is listening. Curley's wife and Crooks need to share their burdens with someone, and Lennie is the man with whom they choose to speak.

Since Lennie is one of the main characters of the novel, a close examination of his actions is helpful in understanding the text's complexities. Many of the characters in the novel focus on Lennie's intellectual impairment; they notice that he is exceptional and question and challenge his intellect before they even get to know him as an individual, whereas the other characters are rude in their curiosity, often demanding that George allow Lennie to speak for himself when Lennie is clearly uncomfortable with speaking to the working men (Steinbeck 22). Lennie goes far beyond the fact that he has an intellectual impairment; he is, after all, a man who deserves the respect of the other characters. Lennie is intellectually impaired (II), but the richness and depth of his character extends beyond a mere label.

When George and Lennie first arrive at the ranch, George speaks with the boss, highlighting all that Lennie *can* do as a worker in order to distract the boss from Lennie's intellectual impairment. George describes Lennie as "a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull" and tells the boss that Lennie "can do anything you tell him[…]he's a good skinner. He can rassle grain bags, drive a cultivator. He can do anything" (Steinbeck 22). George is confident in

what Lennie is able to do, and Lennie is a large and muscular man; he is perfectly capable of completing the laborious tasks of the ranch. George works with Lennie constantly, and he supports Lennie by protecting him and providing for him. In order to keep Lennie safe, George encourages Lennie to repeat after him when he must remember something important (Steinbeck 7). This repetition is key—George is trying to protect Lennie by helping him remember important information via repetition; however, Lennie often struggles when trying to remember something.

Throughout the novel, Lennie accidentally hurts and kills animals, and eventually, he ends up killing Curley's wife. He enjoys stroking soft items, such as animals, as he takes comfort in the softness of fur. At the beginning of the novel, George takes a dead mouse away from Lennie, who simply wanted to stroke its fur (Steinbeck 5-6). Steinbeck associates Lennie with taking comfort in soft items.

Toward the end of the novel, Curley challenges Lennie after he mistakes Lennie, who is "still smiling with delight at the memory of the ranch," for laughing at one of Curley's own misfortunes (Steinbeck 62). Curley immediately challenges Lennie to a physical fight, striking Lennie in the face and drawing blood. Lennie is unsure of how to react because he relies on George to tell him what to do. George encourages Lennie to fight back, and when Lennie does eventually gain the courage to do something, he grabs Curley's mid-air in his large hand, crushing it. Curley began to cry, and George slapped Lennie in the face in order to get him to let go of Curley's hand (Steinbeck 63-64). Lennie does not realize how strong he is; he is capable of hurting another man tremendously. Lennie's thought-process is unable to keep up with his physical body, which explains why he unintentionally hurts people and small animals. Lennie is

truly an unconventional American character, as the effects of intellectual impairment create a distinction between himself and the other characters of the novel.

There are many people in the world today who suffer from the same effects as Lennie. There are limits to his abilities to think abstractly and solve problems, and someone who is unable to think abstractly and solve problems will meet the world differently than one who does. Lennie faces discrimination because of his inability to solve problems and understand the world around him. He excels physically, but he struggles emotionally, socially, and academically. Lennie does have physical strength, as do many people with an intellectual impairment. One of the problems with Lennie's strength is his body does not keep up with his mind, and he does not understand when he is hurting others.

In 21st century America, there are accommodations for intellectually impaired persons, and one of these accommodations is special education within the school system. In the 1930's, American schools did not provide accommodations for exceptional learners. Special education was not available in the 1930's. Lennie would be a completely different character—though still an unconventional character—if he lived in 21st century America.

Like Curley's wife, Crooks, and Lennie, *Of Mice and Men's* Candy is also an unconventional American character. Candy is physically distinct from the other men on the ranch. Since he lost his hand on the ranch in an accident, he works as a "swamper," or one who performs odd jobs (Steinbeck 59). Steinbeck first introduces Candy with his old sheep dog, and the man and his dog are both seen as a nuisance on the ranch. The sheep dog, like Candy, is old. When George first encounters Candy and the sheep dog, he sees "a drag-footed sheep dog, gray of muzzle, and with pale, blind old eyes. The dog struggled lamely to the side of the room and lay down, grunting softly to himself and licking his grizzled, moth-eaten coat" (Steinbeck 24).

Although the sheep dog may not seen like much to George or Lennie, to Candy, this dog is important, as he "had 'im ever since he was a pup" (Steinbeck 24). The significance of Candy's dog becomes apparent when the other ranchers convince Candy to let them shoot his old sheep dog (Steinbeck 45-47). Candy's dog is physically disabled, as he is blind and limps. These physical disabilities connect the dog to Candy, as he is also physically disabled.

When Candy overhears George and Lennie talking about the small farm that they would like to own one day, he realizes that this opportunity would provide him with security. He tells George and Lennie about how he could contribute financially and physically, stating, "S'pose I went in with you guys. Tha's three hunderd an' fifty bucks I'd put in. I ain't much good, but I could cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some" (Steinbeck 59). Candy is focused on how he shall contribute, and what he *can* do physically. He is seeking acceptance and security, and his unconventionality as a character is forthright in the novel. The fear that Candy has of losing his job is one that many modern Americans share; people fear that others will focus on what they are unable to do rather than focusing on what they are able to do in a work environment, or in any environment, for that matter. Although he may be old and handicapped with only one hand, Candy is certainly a worthy unconventional character, as Steinbeck demonstrates in the novel.

In 21st century America, individuals with disabilities experience greater acceptance within American homes, communities, and society than just a few decades before. In America today, opportunities are also available for individuals with an intellectual impairment (such as Lennie), and physical disabilities (such as Candy). Individuals with disabilities can obtain jobs in which they receive coaching or aid. The focus on these individuals in working and academic environments is not what they are unable to do, but what they are able to do. Unfortunately, the

acceptance of individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities was not as great in the 1930s, which marked the setting and publication decade of *Of Mice and Men*, as it is in 21st century America; however, we have certainly come a long way. Although Americans have made progress in accepting and accommodating for individuals who are disabled, there still needs to be progression of this acceptance and accommodation in 21st century America.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is truly a remarkable novel. His universal themes are relatable—even decades later among readers engaged in the narrative's complexities. Morality is a question that Steinbeck challenges the reader to consider, yet he never provides an answer that satisfies the reader; Steinbeck merely presents the story, the situation, of the characters and requires the reader to determine the effects of good and bad scruples based upon the novel's characters, events, and themes. *Of Mice and Men* is raw, unnerving, and poignant due to its characters and drastic events that spiral into an ending that leaves readers troubled with more questions than answers.

V.

In conclusion, Cather presents Ántonia and Nancy as characters with distinctive and memorable American traits. Though profoundly unconventional as an immigrant, Ántonia does not conform to the status of a typical American; as a slave, Nancy is not considered by many to even be a full-fledged human being before the end of Civil War, let alone an American. Both women persist in personal fulfillment in the face of hardships, pursuing happiness, desiring freedom, and expressing their determination to achieve. Despite the limitations they face in light of their social, political, racial, and economic positions, they overcome adversity. Ántonia and Nancy are Willa Cather's most unconventional American protagonists, and they are as unique as their author. John Steinbeck's non-normative characters, Lennie, Curley's wife, Crooks, and Candy, are also distinctive due to their unconventional traits. Lennie's characterization as intellectually impaired makes him an unusual character in 20th century American literature. With Curley's wife, Steinbeck creates a powerful statement about the limitations of womanhood and the patriarchy of American society in the 1930s. The other characters in the novel treat Crooks as a lesser human being, as they require him to live in the stables due to his race. As a man with a physical disability, Candy faces many hardships throughout the novel, and Steinbeck highlights the problems that he faces as an older man with one hand. Though Cather and Steinbeck are American authors of the 20th century, their characters and themes are relevant to the 21st century. Cather and Steinbeck prove there is not an "average" image of an American. An American is not any one gender, race, or culture. Physicality, socioeconomic status, and intellectual ability do not determine who is an American citizen. Americans are a blend of men and women from diverse backgrounds, who, like Ántonia, are immigrants or are descendants of immigrants. Many Americans are the descendants of those enslaved in the United States prior to the Civil War—

they may face or may have faced the effects of racism, like Nancy or Crooks. In 21st century America, people with disabilities obtain more accommodations than ever before through education, work programs, and the advancement of technology. Lennie and Candy represent those Americans who meet the world differently from the "average" American. American women, such as Ántonia, Nancy, Sapphira, and Curley's wife, face the adversity of a patriarchal society on a daily basis. Even in 21st century America, women are not equal to men in many ways, and these female characters highlight some of the unfair treatments that women in America face today. *My Ántonia, Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and *Of Mice and Men* contain American characters who are distinctive due to their attributes, and these unconventional characters convey that a "true" American character is not average, but is truly exceptional, like Steinbeck and Cather.

Works Cited

Abbott, Traci B. "A Good Girl Like Nancy: Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*." *Southern Quarterly*. 46.1 (2008): pag. 26-38. Web. 12 Jan. 2014.

This source focuses primarily on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and the sexual scenes and themes that are found in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The article references specific scenes from the novel in addition to referencing scholars. I use this source to further analyze Nancy's character.

Abubakar, Aminu. "As Many as 200 Girls Abducted by Boko Haram, Nigerian Officials Say." *CNN*. 16 April 2014. Web. 12 April 2015.

This news article highlights the tragedies of the abduction of two hundred Nigerian schoolgirls in 2014. I use this article to support my argument that Steinbeck's characters are relevant in the 21st century.

Acocella, Joan. "What's in Cather's Letters." *The New Yorker*. 9 April 2013. Web. 9 Jan. 2014.

This article from *The New Yorker* describes the letters that Willa Cather wrote during her lifetime. These letters were originally kept private by Cather, as she wrote in her will that she had every intention of keeping her letters from the public. Her will expired in 2011 with the death of her nephew, and since then, the letters have been published into a seven-hundred-page book. This source reinforces the idea that Cather kept many of the details from her life hidden, and she burned many of her own letters. This fact alone supports the idea that Cather had an experience with rape, or knew someone who had been raped.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Willa Cather's My Ántonia: Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. Print.

This source contains information concerning themes, characters, and symbols in the novel *My Ántonia*. Critics offer a variety of interpretations in this source. I use this source to closely examine the American characterization of Cather's characters in this novel and how they relate to the motifs and themes that are presented in the novel.

Boynton, Percy H. "Willa Cather." *The English Journal*. 13.6. (1924): 373-380. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Oct. 2013.

Ántonia's character is dissected in this source. The author is quite critical of Cather's characterization of Ántonia. I incorporate quotations from Boynton's article into my own research.

Cather, Willa. "The Old Beauty." *Collected Stories*. New York: Vintage Classics, 1992. Print.

This source includes "The Old Beauty." It is a short story that was written by Willa Cather, and there are some significant elements in it. One of the women in the story, a minor character, has an androgynous appearance—she has short hair—and she is an actress who assumes male roles. One of the main events in the short story is the main character is almost raped by another man. She escapes rape due to the help of another man. This short story supports the thesis and stresses the impact of childhood sexual abuse on Cather's writing.

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918. Print.

This novel is essential to the research for this paper. The heroine, Ántonia Shimerda, is one of the protagonists I use in order to analyze Willa Cather's formation of an American character. As an immigrant, Ántonia is an unconventional American character.

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia: Willa Cather Scholarly Edition*. University of Nebraska Press, 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2014.

Dr. Jewell quoted a note from this source in an email. The note contains biographical information about Mathew R. Bentley, the prototype for Wick Cutter in *My Ántonia*.

Cather, Willa. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940. Print.

This novel is essential to the research for this paper. The heroine, Nancy, is the protagonist. She is an unconventional American character, and I use this work to analyze Willa Cather's formation of Nancy and other American characters.

Cavanaugh, Cynthia. "In Support of a Visual Approach for Teaching *My Ántonia*." *Rocky Mountain Review*. 63.2. (2009): 241-252. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Oct. 2013.

This source illustrates background information for the novel *My Ántonia*. The novel originally included illustrations, and people Willa Cather knew inspired the characters. I use this source to provide contextual evidence in introducing the novel in my research.

Feger, Lois. "The Dark Dimension of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *The English Journal*. 59.6 (1970). 774-779. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Oct. 2013.

The novel *My Ántonia* is the focus of this literary analysis. The author focuses on the "dark" elements within the novel. Feger examines some of the descriptions in the novel in addition to describing some of the novel's tragedies. I use this source to define American character, and I relate this definition to Ántonia and her experiences in the novel.

Fensch, Thomas. Rev. of *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia*, Eds. Brian Railsback and Michael J. Meyer. *The Steinbeck Review* 2007: 125. Web.

This source highlights the controversy of *Of Mice and Men*. Fensch compares Steinbeck to other American authors, stating that Steinbeck's writing highlights controversial topics and political "hot button" issues.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. "John Steinbeck: Footnote for a Memoir." *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute*. Ed. Stephen K. George. Westport: Praeger, 2002. 49-53. Print.

This source highlights John Steinbeck's character and personality. Galbraith also describes Steinbeck's physical appearance. These unique descriptions contribute to the argument that Steinbeck is an unconventional American author.

George, Stephen K. "Introduction." *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute*. Ed. Stephen K. George. Westport: Praeger, 2002. 49-53. Print.

George states biographical information about John Steinbeck in his text. This paper includes a small amount of the biographical information from *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute*.

Hart, Richard E. "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection." *The Steinbeck Review*. 1.2. (2004): 31-44. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 May 2014.

Sexism and racism are two universal themes that appear in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men.* Hart's "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection" examines the sexism and racism in the novel and simultaneously notes the characters (Curley's wife and Crooks) that are affected by the racist and sexist beliefs and actions of other characters. Hart also examines Steinbeck's style as a social critic, noting the context of morality and values in the novel.

Harris, Jeane. "A Code of Her Own: Attitudes Toward Women in Willa Cather's Short Fiction." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 31.6. (1990): 301-312. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Sep. 2013.

This source focuses mainly on Cather's own life. As partially biography and partially literary analysis, this source relates Cather's experiences to the formation of her American characters.

Jewell, Andrew. "Willa Cather and Rape." Message to the author. 10 Jan. 2014. Email.

Dr. Jewell provided me with information about Willa Cather and whether or not she or someone she knew was raped or sexually assaulted. Dr. Jewell also provided me with some information about Mathew R. Bentley, the prototype for Wick Cutter. Wick Cutter is the rapist in *My Ántonia*. Dr. Jewell also recommended a few works and individuals who could help me find more information on this topic.

Morgenstern, Naomi E. "Love Is Home-Sickness: Nostalgia and Lesbian Desire in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*." *A Forum on Fiction*. 29.2 (1996): 184-205. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Oct. 2013.

Although the reasoning in this source is a little far-fetched, there are some valid points and interesting claims that I use in my research. The author of this source argues that the novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is gothic in nature and is marked by the sexual orientation of the characters.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.

I use this source to analyze *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* from Morrison's perspective. Morrison is critical of the themes in the novel, especially those concerning gender, race, and slavery. Morrison also summarizes the text and provides her own opinions of Cather's work.

Salas, Angela M. "Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: Extending the Boundaries of the Body." *College Literature*. 24.2 (1997): 97-108. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Oct. 2013.

The author analyzes Sapphira in this article. The author of this article reviews the relationships that Sapphira has with other characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In addition, Salas assesses the creation of characters and the implementation of themes in

the novel. I use this source to examine characters in the novel and further understand Willa Cather's construction of these characters.

Scala, J. Gabriel. "At the Center of Her Mystery: Sexual Trauma and Willa Cather." *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*. Eds. Joseph R. Urgo and Merrill Maguire Skaggs. Madison: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2007. 137-148. Print.

I use this source to support my claims that Willa Cather was a victim of rape. The source argues explicitly about Cather's childhood experiences with sexual abuse. The author of this source examines the psychology surrounding sexual trauma in addition to citing evidence in Cather's published works.

Schroeter, James, ed. *Willa Cather and Her Critics*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1967. Print.

This source describes specific portions of text from *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Schroeter also examines Cather's own life in relation to her works. The author examines many of Cather's works explicitly in this source; however, I use this source for its interpretation of *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

Steinbeck, Elaine. "'John Believed in Man': An Interview with Mrs. John Steinbeck." *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute*. Ed. Stephen K. George. Westport: Praeger, 2002. 19-24. Print.

This source provides Elaine's insight into Steinbeck's shyness, mumbling, and overall personality. Elaine was Steinbeck's third wife, and her personal insight is significant when examining Steinbeck's overall character and personality.

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. New York: Penguin, 1965. Print.

The characters within Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* are the focus for a large portion of this paper. This novel is critical for examining the characters, themes, and events that shape Steinbeck's definition and determination of an unconventional American character. I include several quotes from the novel in this paper.

Steinbeck, Thom. "My Father, John Steinbeck." *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute*. Ed. Stephen K. George. Westport: Praeger, 2002. 3-12. Print.

Thom Steinbeck describes his father as very shy and a "quiet-spoken man." Thom also describes Steinbeck's love for being an American. This source includes insight into Steinbeck's friendship with Lyndon Johnson. The source is essential to this paper because Steinbeck critiques American society with *Of Mice and Men*, but he is not an anti-American by any means.

Stouck, David. "Willa Cather's Last Four Books." *A Forum on Fiction*. 7.1 (1973): 41-53. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Sep. 2013.

This source explores Willa Cather's written works that were produced late in her career. The events in her life are related to the tone, characters, and construction of the last four books that she wrote. I use this source to compare and contrast *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, published in 1940, with *My Ántonia*, published in 1918.

Tucker, Tracy. "Willa Cather and Rape." Message to the author. 9 Jan. 2014. Email.

I contacted Dr. Tucker through The Willa Cather Foundation website. She provided me with some information concerning Willa Cather writing about rape. She also provided me with a few works that discuss the symbolism of Cather's written rape scenes.

"Willa Cather's Biography." *The Willa Cather Foundation*. Web. 16 April 2015.

This website includes the year and cause of Cather's death, and I include this information in my paper.

Wilhite, Keith. "Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Studies in the Novel*. 42.3 (2010): 269-286. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Oct. 2013.

This author explores the connection between Jim and Ántonia in this source. The author connects the immigration of Ántonia and her family with Jim's migration to the West. Wilhite examines gender, character, and the setting in detail. This source is especially useful and relevant to my research and thesis.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Time and Memory in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: Sex, Abuse, and Art." *The Willa Cather Archive*. (2013): 1-16. Web. 10 Sep. 2013.

The author of this source confronts lesbianism directly. She relates Cather's sexual orientation and background as an author to some of Cather's works. I use this source to provide background information about Cather's life and works in addition to describing the correlation between events in Cather's own life and the characterization of Ántonia and Nancy.