

Women Write the U.S. West:  
Epistolary Identity in the Homesteading Letters of  
Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Elizabeth Corey, and Cecilia Hennel Hendricks

by

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## ABSTRACT

The early twentieth century saw changing attitudes in gender roles and the advancement of the "New Woman." Despite the decline in the availability of homesteading land in the US West, homesteading still offered a means for women to achieve or enact newfound independence, and the letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Elizabeth Corey, and Cecilia Hennel Hendricks offer a varied view of the female homesteading experience. This dissertation focuses upon the functionality of epistolary discourse from early twentieth century homesteading women within a literary and historical framework in order to establish the significance of letters as literary texts and examine the methodology involved in creating epistolary identities.

Chapter one provides background on the history of the letter in America. It also as introduces a theoretical framework regarding life writing, feminism, and epistolary discourse that inform this study, by scholars such as Phillipe LeJeune, Leigh Gilmore, Janet Altman, Julie Watson, and Sidonie Smith. Chapter two delves into the published letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart and the way in which her writing, when situated within a US western literary framework, serves as a reaction to the masculine western hero. Chapter three considers the epistolary relationships evident in the letters of Elizabeth Corey and the construction of gender identity within epistolarity. Chapter four focuses upon Cecilia Hennel Hendricks and the historical and feminist context of her letters, with a particular emphasis upon the "love letter." The conclusion examines the progression of the

letter in the twentieth century and forms of online discourse that can be directly linked to its evolution.

Far from being simply a form of communication, these letters reveal the history of a time, a place, a people, function as narrative literary texts, and aid in developing identities. For readers and scholars they tell offer a glimpse into life for women in the early twentieth century and highlight the significance of letters as a literary form.

## DEDICATION

For Nancy, Jon, and Michael.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: The Nature Of Epistolarity

The study of letters is significant to various academic disciplines. Historians have been able to partially reconstruct past roles of women and other marginalized people through letters. In a historical context letters are often used to fill in missing details in relation to historical events. They offer personal accounts of individuals who were present within a historical moment. Letters are also significant to readers because they have the power to link us to our past selves, to remind us of who we may have been at a particular moment of time, of the loves we had, the lives we led, and the experiences that made us who we are. In addition, readers, literary scholars, and creative writers will be interested in the epistolary form as a literary device. The power of letters extends beyond the personal. They connect us to ancestral pasts to meet relatives we never knew and entertain us with stories. They inform us. Letters are, in short, all about forging identities.

Autobiography is important in relation to epistolarity too, as the letter writer makes a decision to construct a self through the act of letter writing. That self may or may not be grounded within the veracity of mundane daily events that possess and convey a truth nonetheless, a truth regarding the way the writer sees the world or more importantly, sees her or himself in connection to that world. What may be even more important is that letters have the power to dispel myths that have been created and to create new ones. The letters of the female

homesteaders help to dispel the mythic image of the female homesteader and further aid historians like Glenda Riley and Dee Garceau in dispelling the mythology of the West as a masculine domain. This work will focus on the letters of homesteaders Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Elizabeth “Bess” Corey, and Cecilia Hennel Hendricks. It will examine the significance of letters in academic study and show how Stewart, Corey, and Hendricks shape their epistolary identities to reflect complex lives in the U.S. West.

### *Letters As Genre*

The classification of letters with respect to literary genre is one of the biggest obstacles facing scholars interested in the study of epistolarity. Where does one place letters within an existing genre or do letters warrant their own place independent of categories and subcategories designed to pigeonhole a particular literary form? Epistolary texts take many forms, from the epistolary novel to the familiar letter. Significant work done in exploring epistolary texts includes Janet Altman’s *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), which outlines the evolution of epistolary fiction that the author traces back to Ovid. Altman outlines key factors in being able to establish an effective epistolary work ranging from issues of confidentiality to readership. In the first chapter Altman focuses upon categorizing various types of epistolary novels such as the “seduction novel” and the “romance novel.” The discussions of the various types of novels follow the ways in which meaning is created and interpreted by the correspondents. Altman focuses heavily upon the need to create confidence

between what she deems “the confidant” and “the correspondent.” Even though Altman limits her focus to novels and other works clearly defined as fiction, some of the methodologies and complexities could apply to any form of letter writing. Altman also examines the role of the reader, which is instrumental in any epistolary analysis. Altman relies heavily upon reader-response theory and cites theorists such as Wayne Booth, Hans Jauss, Stanley Fish and Michael Riffaterre and posits that readers play more heavily in the creation of meaning of the letter than the writer. This notion of readership relates specifically to the women in this study, as well as the readership of the *Atlantic Monthly* where Stewart’s letters were originally published.

Ann Bower’s *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in Twentieth Century American Fiction and Criticism* (1997) is comprised largely of chapters devoted to the function of letters in fictional works like Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and John Updike’s *S*. However, all of the chapters provide a thorough theoretical discussion of letters beyond the scope of the works presented. Bower situates her introduction as a letter to the reader and again addresses the reader again in the form of a letter before the last chapter, thus situating the reader of the book as a recipient of public correspondence. Chapters 2 and 10 are especially useful to someone wishing to examine the epistolary form from a critical framework since they are solely theoretically based and respectively discuss the spaces that letters occupy as well as critical responses to letters. Bower’s exploration informs this study when examining the literary constructs or

fictionalizing of Elinore Pruitt Stewart's letters, as Stewart's letters were produced intentionally for public consumption.

Diane Cousineau's *Letters and Labyrinths: Women Writing/ Cultural Codes* (1997) does not discuss the letter per se, but attempts to situate issues of feminist identity by choosing various cultural artifacts and how female writers and characters operate in relation to them. The author concentrates on depicting the post office as the symbol of order around which characters like Jane Austen's Emma, concentrate their actions. The work brings about questions regarding the function of the letter in society. Cousineau's theoretical approach is useful in examining the function and stability of the letter with respect to the postal service of the American West and can be used as well as the current uncertainty facing the postal service in the twenty first century.

Unlike most books regarding epistolary form and practice, which consider Great Britain, William Merrill Decker's *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (1998) focuses strictly on the United States. The author focuses upon the letters of American writers Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Adams considered in a larger context of letters' functionality and conventionality regarding letters in American society. In addition, Decker examines how letters create relationships between addresser and addressee and establish narratology: "Letter volumes are valued and continue to be produced not only for what they allow us to construct of the past but for the capacity to tell stories (Heroic scandalous, or pathetic) of individuals, their ability

to create the illusion of individuals telling their own stories”(9). Decker notes the illusory nature of epistolarity, which lends itself to late examinations of the veracity of letter writing in conjunction with Stewart, Corey, and Hendricks. Veracity is a key component of epistolarity when one uses letters to reconstruct history. Readers of letters often expect that personal letters will hold more “truth” than other literary works (like novels,) and it is therefore necessary to consider the issue of veracity in any discussion of letter writers and writing, even if it is only to highlight the reality that “truth” is subjective in any form of writing. For the women in this study, the elements of story telling are key to maintaining familial ties, and the threshold between fictional and reality is often blurred.

In Amanda Gilroy’s and W.M. Verhoeven’s *Epistolary Histories* (2000) various scholars effectively discuss the genre of the epistolary writing as it evolved in the eighteenth century; several writers report the particular characteristics originally assigned to letters as a feminine art form. The first section contains chapters that discuss literary women and the role of the letters in writing fiction and in the lives of established writers like Emily Dickinson. In “Re-siting the Subject,” Gerald MacLean engages in a lengthy discussion regarding the nature of the audience of letters; he argues that audience can never be viewed as entirely private. According to MacLean, “Letters are inscriptions directed from a first person or persons to a second person or group of persons, but as matters of discourse they invariably entail---directly, implicitly, or by way of exclusion--the position of a third person, singular or plural”(177). This issue of



an implied third person anticipates the presence of an outside reader; one that exists beyond the addressee and is significant in addressing collections of correspondence such as the works examined in the study.

Susan M. Fitzmaurice's *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English* (2002) examines various letters written in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in England. She focuses on letters to and from specific correspondents, ranging from letters written from Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift to Charles Montagu, as well as the courtship letters of Lady Mary Pierpont and Edward Wortley. Fitzmaurice focuses heavily upon linguistic conventions, the ways in which language functions between letters, and the rhetorical context in which the correspondence occurs. As Fitzmaurice takes a critical literary approach to letter writing, she is particularly interested in the ways in which linguistic and literary conventions intersect. Fitzmaurice's theories relate to the construction of epistolary identity, which is a focus in each chapter of this work. Fitzmaurice is particularly interested in the examination of the literary constructs employed to create the "correspondeee" in the epistolary relationship. This is a key aspect of my examination of Elizabeth Corey and her depiction of the relationship with her mother, the primary "correspondee" of her letters.

Patricia A. Rosenmeyer's *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (2001) is an interesting construction of the history of the letter, as it appeared in Greek culture. Rosenmeyer begins by defining the letter and discussing how it developed in Greek society, including how the definition of the

letter was formed. Then the author moves into subsequent chapters that begin to chronicle the way in which the letter was used in history and then in fictional works. This book is useful in setting a foundation for the historical significance of the letter as well as the function of the letter in literature. This work lends itself to my study in that Elinore Pruitt Stewart's letters are examined from the perspective of constructing a literary Western heroine. Additionally, the fictional love letter is a key focus of Rosenmeyer's study and is relevant to my discussion of Cecilia Hennel Hendricks' love letters to her husband John.

Linda S. Kaufman's *Discourses of Desire: Gender and Epistolary Fictions* (2002) focuses on literary texts with an emphasis on politicized and historicized representations of women within the texts. Kaufman's intent is to focus on women's writing as a source of empowerment and challenge stereotypical representations of "male" versus "female" writing, which is significant when discussing Elizabeth Corey's identity as a "bachelor" and Stewart's construction of the Western heroine from a female perspective. Editors Carolyn Bland and Maire Cross examine the gendered and political functions of the letter in various cultures in *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing* (2004). Their work is divided into two parts: "1750-1850: Epistolary Connections in Enlightenment and Revolution" and "1850-2000: Correspondence in Times of Trouble." This book is useful because it discusses letters in the United States in addition to other countries, which is rare and focuses beyond a discussion of epistolary fiction. The concentration on the United States is key to my study in that the letters of

these female homesteaders mirror the changing sociopolitical climate in the early twentieth century United States. The subject matter of the letters reflects the shift in gender roles and the advent of political movements like women's suffrage.

Eve Bannet's *Empire of Letters* (2005) presents a study of letters in America, which notes the use of letter manuals as letters evolved to an art form during the eighteenth century. This development led to specific modes of decorum that reinforced class distinctions. A more recent publication, Margareta Jolly's *In Love and Struggle* (2008), examines the letters of women from a feminist position and emphasizes the significance of letters in establishing and maintaining the feminist movement. Like Bland and Cross and Altman, Jolly situates the act of letter writing as a tool of empowerment and places her conversation within the framework of the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. While Jolly's focus is on the later part of the twentieth century, it is particularly relevant to the letters of Cecilia Hennel Hendricks, who writes enthusiastically of her first experience of voting and details her own pursuit of political office. Beyond Hendricks's blatant discussions of feminist issues, the actions of female homesteaders like Stewart, Corey, and Hendricks can, at the very least, be viewed as proto-feminist and with regard to the foundation for the "second wave" of the feminist movement that Jolly focuses on in her discussion.

As many of the aforementioned works suggest, what is revealed in letters largely depends on to whom the letter is addressed and how the author wishes to present herself to the recipient. The ability to construct an inauthentic self or to

discern its construction as false depends on the nature of the relationship between sender and recipient. In the case of letters read by a third party, an audience not necessarily intended at the inception of the letter and often at a temporal remove, individuals who aren't privy to these corroborating, external details may be even more challenged or unable to distinguish between the real and the fictive. This arena of the unknown in determining what might be real, authentic, or fictive, coincides with the problem of assigning genre. Are letters historical documents? Are they literature? Can they be considered autobiography? I would argue that letters are simultaneously all of these things, and that the reader's role in constructing genre is crucial to deciding their relative authenticity. This is an extension of what Jacques Derrida argues in his "Law of Genre": "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging"(230). For Derrida, genre classification is problematized by the definition of belonging and instead participation in a genre extends the definition and illustrates the versatility of various texts, such as the letter. Therefore, genres like fiction, history, autobiography, diary, and memoir can be combined. Indeed, letters reflect characteristics of all of these literary genres, and therefore should not be examined with one theoretical approach.

### *Epistolary Conventions*

Letters have certain historical and autobiographical properties or characteristics that make them unique with regard to other genres of writing.

Formulaic properties that are essential to the construction of the letter include the salutation, the body of the letter, the closing, and the signature. All are crucial in formulating and defining the epistolary relationship. The salutation and closing often reveal the role of writer and recipient in ways in which the content sometimes cannot. Of these properties, the most significant may be the salutation because it helps to establish the tone from the onset and reveals the relationship between sender and recipient. Letters invariably begin with a salutatory line that can perhaps reveal the relationship of the author to the speaker. Prefacing the recipient's name with "dear" or "my darling" denotes an expression of intimacy and may at times reveal the depth of the relationship of the correspondents. In addition, writers like Bess Corey often explicitly indicate the relationship in the salutary line. In a letter to her brother Fuller dated June 8, 1914, Bess uses the salutation, "Dear Brother," which clearly establishes the relationship between writer and addressee but leaves the content of the letter and the editor's notes to determine exactly which of her brothers is being addressed. Salutations exist as overt clues to the third reader and enable him or her to recreate the relationship and extract meaning in a particular way. Complicating the genre of letters is their discursive nature, as many personal letters are meant as a dialogue between two parties. Often the external reader is only privy to one side of the dialogue.<sup>1</sup> This leaves the reader to decipher meaning and to fill in the blanks regarding what may or may not have been said.

In positioning the relationship between sender and recipient early in the

letter, the external reader may have a clearer insight into how and why a particular meaning is constructed. For example, in *Letters from a Woman Homesteader* Elinore Pruitt Stewart often signs her letters to Mrs. Coney as “your ex-washlady,” which clearly defines the writer’s relationship to the recipient and reveals that perhaps they have not yet evolved beyond the formal relationship that exists between employer and employee. Readers can view their relationship as it changes over time in the reading of later letters. This is the case when the closing evolves from “your ex-washlady,” to “Love, Elinore.” So, while the letter does not explicitly state the change in the relationship, the shift of intimacy is performed in the representation of the letter. This evolution highlights the significance of the serialization of letters. In essence, Bess Corey and Celia Hannel Hendricks perform the same function in signing their letters “your loving daughter.” Bess’s case offers a significant turn when the closing serves to proclaim a new identity via a new signature, “Bachelor Bess<sup>2</sup>.” The signature is interrelated to the salutation in regards to revealing the nature and development of the epistolary relationship as it is revealed in epistolary serial narrative. Janet Gurkin Altman examines the significance of epistolary closure in *Epistolarity: Approaches to A Form* (1982): “Most importantly, to ask how the narrative ends is to ask what makes it proceed; a close look at the dynamics of epistolary closure should reveal many of the forces that generate letter narrative in the first place” (145).

While Altman’s discussion centers around the construction of the

epistolary novel, the same formal rules and conventions apply to collections of fictive and “real” letters, letters written between live correspondents not within the confines of fictional works. And regardless of the scenario, the relationship between the correspondents is the mitigating factor in the construction of the epistolary discourse. Therefore, salutations and closings serve as signals that are essential in disseminating the meaning of the texts. As a result, they are key for both fictive and non-fictive epistolary authors.

While some authors are aware that their letters will be read by a third reader,<sup>3</sup> others still foster some awareness that their letters will likely be intercepted and read by those who are not intended to view the material. Naturally in the situations of the epistolary novel or public letters, the third reader, or external reader, is considered and addressed, albeit somewhat indirectly. Nonetheless, the author clearly had this third external reader in mind in addition to the principal reader when constructing the narrative. It is when the reader is unanticipated that the struggle to decipher meaning begins and leaves outside readers<sup>3</sup> open to misinterpretation. This is possibly one reason why letters may be problematic as an accurate representation of history. This is also why authors of epistolary novels must be intent upon constructing clear meanings for external readers while still creating a dialogue between characters that does not read as inauthentic. The addition of too many obvious details regarding the past or the development of the relationship would be unnecessary among intimate correspondents and leave the external reader to fill in the missing components.

This accessibility of the external reader is an issue that writers must consider when creating epistolary fiction.

### *The American Epistolary Novel*

The epistolary novel was one of the earliest forms of the novel written in America<sup>4</sup>. William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), widely accepted as the first published novel in what is now the United States, was an epistolary novel that many critics view as inherently flawed. W.M. Verhoven's "Early American Epistolary Fiction" observes that: "The main reason why *The Power of Sympathy* fails as an epistolary novel is that it does not even begin to deal with the seduction theme in a way that Richardson or Laclos did, both of whom have shown that seduction represents what epistolarity is all about"(131). One has to wonder if Verhoven's assessment of the epistolary novel is correct. Is the epistolary novel necessarily concomitant to the motivations of the seduction novel? Can one not exist without the other? This seems problematic in regards to lending validity to other forms of epistolary narrative, including those presented in this study. It cannot be denied that seduction does indeed play a role in the letters presented in this study; most notably in the love letters written between John and Cecilia Hendricks and in the way that both Elinore Pruitt Stewart and Elizabeth Corey try to "seduce" others to venture into the American West. Nonetheless, the prime function of epistolary texts is to connect the correspondents and even external readers, not necessarily to seduce them, as Verhoven argues when discussing the seduction novel.



The seduction novel emerged as a popular genre in the eighteenth century, propagating the image of the helpless female, seduced and abandoned by her lover and left doomed to death, public scandal, and often both. To writers like Elizabeth Hewitt, the popularity of the seduction novel in the America colonies mirrors the unease of the nation at the prospect of revolution and independence<sup>5</sup>. While there is validity regarding the link between the burgeoning country and the novel form, my concern is the manner in which epistolary texts serves to reinforce gender. Many seduction novels did take the form of epistolary texts; however, I would disagree with Verhoven's assertion that the two are inextricably linked. Certainly the seduction novel may have often taken the epistolary form. Such is true in novels like Hannah Foster's *The Coquette*, which details the downfall of a late eighteenth century woman due to her romantic dalliances. The novel is often viewed as didactic in nature, offering insights into the type of behavior that females should not engage in, namely the reading of frivolous novels, and how letters can help censure activities that are deemed unacceptable by society. However, there also appears to be a deeper message, one that for Elizabeth Hewitt, highlights the social significance of letters in early the American colonies:

In Foster's *The Coquette*, for example, Eliza is seduced not because she writes letters to the Lovelacian rake, Sanford, but because she stops writing letters to her mother and to her female friends. Only when she stops publishing her private sentiments (and therefore is no longer subject to public scrutiny) can Sanford gain access to her. (29)

Hewitt's sentiments mirror arguments constructed by theorists, such as Eve Bannet concerning the propagation of the notion of Republican motherhood. For

Bannet, as for other theorists of early America, letters serve as a clear way to assign and mandate the responsibility of gender.<sup>6</sup> Epistolary novels thus served to highlight the necessity of decorum of women while simultaneously censuring the actions of men who made them vulnerable in the first place. Some of the same tenets appear in the “real” letters of women who produced epistolarity regarding their daily lives. The issue of vulnerability in the U.S. West is recurrent in the venture Westward and in the necessity for writers to create an epistolary identity as a means to maintain control over the depiction of their own identities. Certainly, it is difficult to discern whether or not the women in this study read these early epistolary novels and were influenced by them, as there is no mention of them within the letters. Their epistolary narratives are nonetheless significant in expanding the established genre of epistolary narrative.

While the epistolary novel was popular in the eighteenth century, its popularity declined by the twentieth century. Perhaps this may be due to the association of epistolary discourse as a feminine art form or as Anne Bower suggests, perceived as a “traditional form” (11), and therefore not warranting discussion. Certainly, epistolarity may have declined in America as merely a way to frame a text. While the epistolary form may have declined by the twentieth century, this does not mean that epistolary fiction was not being produced. Most famously, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1985) helped to reignite interest in the form. Bower’s study *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Fiction and Criticism* (1997) focuses strictly on analyzing twentieth

century American epistolary novels, like Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), Upton Sinclair's *Another Pamela* (1950), and Ana Castillo's *The Mixiquahuala Letters* (1986).

Bower's primary focus is the construction of identity within the letter. While epistolary fictions are just that, fictions, there are certainly parallels between fictional texts and actual letters. In order to recreate an "authentic" writing voice the epistolary author must try to create an identity that can be believable and appealing to both the internal and the external reader. There is a specific response that the author wishes to elicit from the audience, and it is with the same type of awareness that an "authentic" letter writer creates his or her own epistolary self. It is not my belief that epistolary literature is obsolete, as is evidenced by the aforementioned texts. It is, however, the letter itself that appears to be discounted when not placed within the context of another work. Certainly the study of epistolary fiction can be viewed as interrelated to the study of historical letters. The authentic versus the inauthentic extends beyond the scope of fictional texts and becomes a paramount consideration in a historical/autobiographical context. Epistolary identity is a key factor in shaping the content of the letter and is reliant upon the audience and the message that the author wishes to convey.

### *Gender and Letters*

Gender is a dynamic crucial to the construction of the epistolary identity. The period of belles-lettres in England when letter writing was at its zenith has

largely been marked as a period when women were able to express themselves and move beyond the private sphere to communicate and establish a sense of autonomy through writing. As one may determine from viewing the epistolary writers of the early United States, this notion of letters as the realm of the feminine was a myth, for men such as Charles Brockden Brown employed the trope of epistolarity to frame novels such as *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntley* (1799).

Many important documents that helped to establish a sense of identity separate from Britain were forged in epistolary form. For example, the *Federalist Papers* were penned as public letters in order to inform the general population of the means in which to set up the government. While the letters are addressed to “the people of New York” this audience necessarily refers to people able to vote and fully partake in the newly proposed government; this naturally excluded all women and males who were not white. Serialized in *The Independent Journal* and the *New York Packet* between 1787 and 1788, the use of the epistolary form served to forge a sense of intimacy between reader and writer thus propagating the aims of the politicians wishing to garner support for the revolutionary cause. In terms of practicality, serialization of the letters enabled the founding fathers to reach a widespread audience. By addressing citizens in letters, the citizens felt that they were being directly included in developing the revolutionary government. As a result, they may have been more likely to offer support for the actions of the government, thus highlighting the significance of the epistolary format in regards to shaping the United States.

Letters could be designed to develop a feeling of intimacy, but they also evolved and reflected strict rules of protocol.<sup>7</sup> Class distinctions become significant, particularly in the case of Hendricks whose letters reveal a more elevated social standing than those in her community, as well as her fellow female homesteaders. Letter writing became a way to distinguish between the classes regarding whether or not one adhered to the rules of convention developed in the letter-writing manuals of the time. According to Bannet: “A familiar letter was not exclusively an intimate letter between well-bred friends or lovers, and all familiar letters were supposed to be polite”(43). Such rules serve to temper the spontaneity that many epistolographers find to be appealing. Because the mores of society especially extended to the epistolary form, there was likely to be censure of one’s words and attitudes.

The limitations of decorum and propriety often serve to temper women’s letters in early American society, as David Shields argues in *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (1997). This study of private communities and societies in 18<sup>th</sup> century private society argues the role of women’s epistolarity is limited to purveying gossip and providing moral guidance.<sup>8</sup> For Shields women’s gossip helps to temper the reactions of others, so that they avoid censure. One means of disseminating this gossip was through letters. In essence, this reveals the public nature of the letter, for it is understood that the letter serves as an effective medium for dispensing information on a wide scale. In this circumstance letters gave women power in a time when their power was vastly

limited.

Often the study of letters is devoted to texts written by people who played a prominent role in the development of history and society. Aside from the letters of Abigail Adams, there are few studies of female letters in early American colonies or formative years of the Republic and even her letters are discussed mostly in connection with her epistolary correspondence with her husband.<sup>9</sup> In spite of the fact that women's epistolarity is often viewed in connection with powerful men, scholars indicate that women were contributing letters that were and are still meaningful in presenting life in the early Americas by offering their views as they traveled. This is important as it presents a connection to women and New World travel.<sup>10</sup> Females were not always relegated to the realm of the domestic and many took the opportunities to venture forth from their households, and more importantly, to report what they saw and experienced. It is those letters that became catalogued and recorded by historians, in effect offering a female view of history when the clear arbitrators of history were men. This alternate view of history is one reason that later letters by female homesteaders are significant as variants on the male-dominated history of the frontier.

#### *Letters as Historical Texts*

Traditionally letters have been viewed as historical documents, enabling scholars to piece together the distant and recent past based upon the letters of those who were living and experiencing the particular time in question. Perhaps the value of letters is not quite so esoteric. Indeed, there are obvious problems

associated with confining the nature of letters to the realm of historiography. Often letters defy the parameters of historical accuracy making it difficult for even the most sapient of historians to determine what can be used to construct the history of a people or culture. This is why epistolarity is in accordance with traits of history and literature and requires consideration in both genres.

The accuracy of events and information presented in such letters may not always operate within the parameters needed to ascribe a historical value to such texts; indeed, it is important to acknowledge the often fictive nature of letters, and in doing so one may possibly diminish the value that such texts may hold in presenting a reliable view of the past, while simultaneously revealing the value as a literary text. The very diegetic nature of letters requires one to question the veracity of the narratives presented and instead look at the subtext presented therein. In *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (2005) Jeremy Popkin examines how historians use personal texts:

When historians do distinguish between autobiographies and other personal documents, they often tend to prefer letters and diaries, on the assumption that they are more reliable evidence of what their authors were thinking at the time of events than text written later, and also because they seem to be less governed by rules of genre or propriety. Neither assumption is necessarily justified. (71)

For Popkin, the acceptance of letters as historical fact is problematic when one considers the complexity of epistolary identity and the rhetorical context of the letter. As previously mentioned, what is revealed in letters is largely dependent upon to whom the letter is addressed and the manner in which the author wishes

to present him or herself to the recipient. Of course, the ability to construct an inauthentic self is largely reliant upon the nature of the relationship between sender and recipient, but the third party, the audience not necessarily intended at the inception of the letter, is neither privy to these details nor is completely able to distinguish between the real and the fictive. As Altman argues in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*: “Pushed to its logical extreme, epistolary discourse would be so relative to its I-you that it would be unintelligible to the outside reader”(120). To render the reading “unintelligible” the contents of the letters would have to contain details only understood by writer and the addressee, and would therefore, make it nearly impossible for readers to decode the message. It is, therefore, at times difficult to use letters in the reconstruction of history, but this does not diminish their narrative properties or the value of a collection of correspondence.

A shared history between correspondents makes it difficult to decipher meaning based upon one letter and often requires a collection of correspondence in order to gather full historical meaning, unless of course, the writer is creating epistolary text with publication in mind. Casual writers are not writing in consideration of the third reader, who may be absent at the time of the epistolary construct, but could be vital in determining the meaning of the letter beyond the scope of the immediate relationship. This is the case when letters are written to be shared, as I show in discussing Elinore Pruitt Stewart and her relationship with the *Atlantic Monthly*.



It is necessary upon reading letters to recognize the individuality of epistolary literary constructs and how varied experiences and background helps to shape those identities. It is, at times, difficult to resist the tendency to ascribe a universal experience to those writing the letters. For example, in this study women homesteaders from three different marital and educational backgrounds are presented. Yet, this is not intended to present a concept of universality in the female homesteading experience. While commonalities undoubtedly exist among the letter writers, individuality and individual identity is the impetus of my study. This individual can often be problematic when using letters as a means to construct history. This is not to deny the historical value of letters but simply to acknowledge the problems with viewing letters merely as historical documents instead of recognizing the literary potential of such letters. As Bland and Cross observe in *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing*: “Epistolary studies belong to the micro view of history. Like the diary form, the letter is personal and immediate; it is not fiction but it is not fact. It is an engagement by the writer with the present”(7). This “engagement” that Bland and Cross acknowledge is reliant upon the perception of the writer regarding the condition of the present and is, in fact, often tempered by the present days reader’s own biases. For while it may seem logical to ascribe a feminist label to the actions of such letter writers, it is a label that is based upon contemporary realities instead of realities presented at the time of literary construction. It is also incumbent upon the contemporary reader to become familiar with the cultural context in which the letters were

written in order to clearly have some understanding of the letters and the letter writers themselves.

One of the primary factors in determining how meaning is constructed within an epistolary text is to determine how gender is constructed. This extends beyond simply determining whether or not the author is male or female. Rather gender is involved in larger questions such as how the author constructs his or her identity within the framework of the text. The performative aspects of the letter are revealed in the way the author expresses agency within the text, which can be determined by the narration of events as they occur in real life or how the author chooses to represent him or herself within the framework of the text. For while one may not be empowered within the daily activities, the way one presents one's self upon the page gives one agency in the very act of writing.

In some aspects the very nature of letter writing is antithetical to the production of history. For it does not entirely remove the emphasis from the individual, it shifts the subject from the letter writer and places it upon the cultural/historical context in which the letter was written. As Susan Fitzmaurice notes in *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, "The spatio-temporal coordinates of any interaction are located relative to the 'here' and 'now' of the 'I' speaking, so the speaker is the center of the situation"(36). While there is always a time lapse in the process of letter writing (the recipient does not receive the letter immediately and changes may occur which may alter both the veracity and the significance of the contents), the lapse in reading letters long after both

writer and the intended recipient are dead extends beyond the allowable or acceptable time frame and detracts from the use of letters as merely historical texts. In fact, epistolary discourse is often used to create other forms of literature, such as the autobiography, memoir, and journals. Authors often turn to letters when constructing their own memoirs or autobiography, as a means of reminding them of events that have occurred in the past. The letter in this instance can fill in the spatio-temporal gaps of memory and aid writers in reconstructing the past, much in the same manner that letters can often aid historians in recreating moments in time.

### *Letters As Autobiography*

The expectation of truth is vital to autobiographical discourse<sup>11</sup>; this may be particularly the case in letters, because letters presumably occur in, or construct close relationships. The accuracy of events and information presented in such letters may not always operate within the parameters needed to ascribe a historical value to such texts; indeed, it is important to acknowledge the often fictive nature of letters. Doing so can diminish the value that such texts may hold in presenting a reliable view of the past, it is therefore necessary to examine other values of epistolary texts, such as the literary and autobiographical potential.

A most obvious aspect of the nature of letters is the problematic claim of their autobiographical status. On the one hand, the author writes them about events that take place in the author's own life. On the other hand, like all forms of autobiography there are complexities that exist in epistolarity. Indeed, letters

are often an amalgam of fact and fiction, with varied motivations that prompt the very act of writing, ranging from entertainment for the reader to a means to remain firmly connected to lives and loved ones left behind. This is especially true in the case of writers like Elinore Pruitt Stewart who wrote letters that she knew would be published in *Atlantic Monthly* or Bess Corey who understood that her letters were shared by her entire family as a source of entertainment.

The question remains as to whether or not letters can be read as autobiography. Autobiography itself can simply be defined as the written account of the life of the self. Yet, the genre is not quite as easily defined, as it can be broken into many sub-categories.

Phillip LeJeune's groundbreaking *On Autobiography* (1989) discusses the complexities of autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real life person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (LeJeune 4). While an individual certainly writes letters concerning his or her own life, elements of LeJeune's definition certainly do not apply. For one, the occasional immediacy of letters may disqualify them in terms of being retrospective. Of course, one could examine the nature of what it means to be retrospective. Writing that encompasses one's own life need not necessarily occur years down the road, but can also be retrospective in the present. Letters are certainly penned after the occurrence of the event. They may offer a level of immediacy that certain other forms of writing do not, but they are still a re-creation of that event that occurred in the past, even if it is the

immediate past. This requires some clarification on the part of LeJeune and other scholars who define autobiography in regard to how distant in the past an author must delve in his or her recounting of events in order for them to truly be consider “retrospective.” After all, writing about events that transpired a day or even an hour before the act of writing occurred could be considered retrospective.

Let’s examine LeJeune’s definition to consider the component regarding the development of one’s personality with regard to how the author reached this particular authorial moment in time. *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin* (1793), Booker T Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) are three popular autobiographies that all subscribe to LeJeune’s definition in that the authors link their past endeavors and trials to their successes or to the people they have become. Yet not all authors expressly denote the shaping of the personality. The homesteaders in this collection do not use the letters to chronicle their entire lives. The texts begin with the homesteading venture and do not explicitly examine the impact that the venture is having upon their life experience. Instead they write in the epistolary moment. It is the determination of the external readers that assigns significance. In addition, some autobiographers merely recount the events in their lives and it is up to the reader to infer how those events shaped them. This is true of Janisse Ray’s *Ecology of A Cracker Childhood* (1999) or Amy Blackmarr’s *Going to Ground* (1987), which delve primarily into the authors’ respective environmental agendas based upon their specific experiences with the natural world. It could be argued that all or

most events in one's life help to shape the personality; the specific reflection of how they are impacted is not necessary for the work to be classified as autobiographical as long as the events are "true<sup>12</sup>."

It is impossible to ignore the fact that letters are omitted from LeJeune's list of genre classifications in *On Autobiography*. If, according to LeJeune, letters cannot be classified as autobiography then letters must at least fit under the umbrella of life writing. However, in *On Autobiography* LeJeune provides a list of genres that are "close related to autobiography"(4). They are as follows: "memoirs, biography, personal novel, autobiographical poem, journal/diary, self portrait or essay"(4). Letters are excluded from the list. Yet, one would expect to find them here, as often letters are at least designated "life writing." Jeremy Popkin acknowledges that scholars have made such designations as a means of "... knocking down barriers between 'high' and 'low' literary genres and challenging a literary canon that has excluded writers from less-favored social and gender categories" (71). Popkin's observations call to the forefront two of the reasons that letters have often been overlooked in scholarly studies and perhaps reveal the reason that Lejeune does not deem them worthy of discussing in *On Autobiography*. These are issues of social, class, ethnicity, and gender.

Letter writing is available to the masses. If one can afford pen, paper, a modicum of literacy, and time to write reflectively, then one is able to write a letter. The mitigating factors that cause letters to be slighted by LeJeune and other scholars are the issues of ethnicity and gender, for letters enable everyone to

participate in this genre of writing. It is in this spirit that Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Self-Representation* (1994) challenges the patriarchal definition of autobiography; Gilmore particularly questions LeJeune's role in creating a patriarchal hegemony regarding the form:

Autobiography as a genre, however, has come to be identified less with these discourses and the act of piecing them together, than with the master narratives of conflict resolution and development--whose hero--the over-represented Western white male--identifies his perspective with a God's eye view and, from that divine height, sums up his life. Scholars of autobiography have developed this master narrative into an interpretative grid and judged as worthy those autobiographers who represent themselves within those limits. (17)

The discourses of identity that Gilmore refers to here can be forged within the construction of letters. Gilmore coins her own term "autobiographics"<sup>13</sup> in order to develop a feminist view of autobiography. The conflicts that Gilmore addresses in her discussion of "autobiographics" relate well to letters in that letters themselves are also complicated by an "incoherence of category."

Sidonie Smith also examines the development of autobiography through a feminist lens. Yet unlike Gilmore, she has little hope for the recovery of such texts: "They may write autobiographically, choosing other languages of self-writing--letters, diaries, journals, biography. Even so, their stories remain private, their story-telling culturally muted, albeit persistent"(Smith 44). Smith's discussion of the epistolary texts and of the epistolary form serves to emphasize the strength of the female voices that are found within these genres. In effect, Smith reacts to the patriarchy's negation of these representations as invalid. One

problematic point, however, is Smith's assertion that such writings cannot find a public sphere, that this type of writing, when produced by women can only remain a solitary endeavor when in fact, as the letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Elizabeth Corey, Celia Hennel Hendricks illustrate, they can find a public audience, and in essence write themselves into a twentieth century United States Western feminist history.

Another factor contributing to the underestimation of the significance of letters is that letters are often perceived as "helping texts." In essence, this refers to how letters are often used to create larger works like autobiographies; they help recover or recreate memory. As previously discussed, letters serve as both a means to reconstruct history and are instrumental in aiding authors as they develop their own autobiographies. One need only view the introductions of many autobiographies of memoirs or autobiographies to recognize the role that letters play in aiding one to reconstruct an autobiographical past. For example Hettie Jones' memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990) acknowledges Helen Dorn for "saving my letters" (Jones np). Likewise, Ben Franklin acknowledges his own use of letters in constructing his memoir, itself framed as a letter to his son. In these instances, the subordination of the placement of letters as secondary texts may contribute to their marginalization as a literary form.

The use of letters in constructing autobiographies or memoirs is not without complications, involving issues of how those letters can be used either intentionally or unintentionally to create reality. Nancy K. Miller's "Diary of A



Memoirist” discusses the complexities of using letters when constructing memoir or autobiography. Miller recounts a situation in which she attempts to use actual letters in her memoir: “Once you cut into a letter though, you distort its integrity, change its effect on the reader-for whom it was not destined in the first place. That distortion ranks above all the others”(156). The specific selection of letters, specific fragments of letters can be instrumental in changing the original meaning and supporting an image within an autobiographical text that may be antithetical to the original or intended meaning. All of these complexities add to the uniqueness of the epistolary form, which relates to almost every aspect of epistolary texts. The “external reader” may not have all of the information needed to determine the intended meaning and autobiographers may create new meaning with the use of epistolary texts.

Although letters contain both historical and autobiographical elements, they are difficult to limit with respect to within a particular genre. Letters can be viewed as an independent genre; they are historical, autobiographical, and fictive.<sup>14</sup> This complexity holds a particular fascination regarding epistolary correspondence, particularly the correspondence of women who have been long overlooked.

My study addresses what these influential theories of autobiography have overlooked, which is that letters are crucial to understanding autobiographical genres. Writers use the epistolary mode to create autobiographical texts, as evidenced by their appearing in the prefaces that present the rationale of many

autobiographies, such as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. In addition, letters and autobiographies combine both fictive and factual constructs, leaving the reader to decipher the “truth” of the text. It is within this construction of the “truth” that letters become a means of asserting a particular feminist identity within the interrelated literary and historical development of the U.S. West.

#### *Interest in the West and Homesteading*

Seminal works like Fredrick Jackson’ Turner’s *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) examine the frontier as a democratizing force, but leave the contributions of women unacknowledged. Decades later, Dee Brown’s *The Gentle Tamers Women of the Old Wild West* (1958) sought to place women within a historical framework of the US West. Brown’s work was groundbreaking in that it delved into the roles of women more than prior texts, but it was still problematic in that it still gave the majority of credit for US Western settlement to white males, while relegating the women to serving a primarily domestic function.

In the 1980s there was a strong movement to include women in the history of the U.S. West, a history in which they had long been overlooked or relegated to the realm of resistant settlers or “saint in sunbonnets.” Many historians saw the need to expand upon Brown’s work of placing women within a historiographical context and sought to explore varied experiences of women in the U.S. West. One of the key articles to expand upon Brown’s study is Joan M. Jensen’s and Darliss L. Miller’s “Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History in

the American West” (1980). Jensen and Miller argue that while Brown’s work is considered to be one of the early groundbreaking texts on women in the U.S.

West, the work offers a limited view of women’s experiences. It contends that Brown’s work perpetuates stereotypes of women in the west by categorizing them into four main groups: gentle tamers, sunbonneted helpmates, hell-raisers, and bad women (Jensen and Miller 178). The authors acknowledge a need for more study into “accurate” depiction of women’s societal and economic roles. In addition they call for studies that represent the various ethnic and cultural backgrounds of women in the U.S. West.

In *Writing the Range Race Class and Culture in the Women’s West* (1987) Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage answered the call put forth by Miller and Jensen and compiled essays on women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and experiences. This work offers a more varied and accurate experience of women who populated the west in terms of gender identity, race, and class. Jameson and Armitage emphasize the need to examine the significance of the diversity of western women instead of emphasizing only the experiences of white women.

Additionally, Dee Garceau’s *The Important Things in Life* (1997) focuses upon life for women homesteaders in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. Through interviews, letters, and various land records, Garceau presents the multiple experiences of women within this region of Wyoming and examines practices from courtship to women’s work. Garceau is particularly useful to this study in that she delves specifically into Elinore Pruitt Stewart’s homesteading venture.

Glenda Riley's *Taking Land Breaking Land* (2003) draws comparisons between the colonization of the US West and Kenya. Riley takes a transnational approach and examines the roles of women in both the North American and African continents. By studying the economic contributions, race, and gender roles, Riley ultimately concludes "the West, at least with regards to its women, was analogous to the Kenyan frontier" (293). Riley's work highlights the significant work that remains in regards to women's roles in the settlement of the U.S. West.

These historians and others devoted extensive study to ferreting out the "truths" about US Western women by examining primary source documents like diaries and letters that chronicled the experiences and offered a glimpse into the varied lives and experiences of women on the frontier of the U.S. West. This revision placed an emphasis upon the tremendous contributions that women made in order to ensure the successful expansion and colonization of the Western frontier in the United States.

Contemporary historical revisioning serves to counter mythologies established in part by frontiersman like Buffalo Bill Cody. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Buffalo Bill Cody traveled across the United States and even to Europe with his Wild West show. Replete with cowboys, Indians, and the shooting prowess of Annie Oakley, the show served to solidify the myth of the "Wild West" and came to substantiate a nationalistic identity of Americans as representative of heroic conquest and fortitude both in the United States and abroad.<sup>15</sup> Cody was so

convinced of his presentation of the west as authentic that he refused to add the word “show” to the title; in his view he was actually recreating the U.S. West for viewers, and this recreation extended beyond a mere “show.” Cody’s presentation of the his “Wild West” as reality is in keeping with Joseph Roach’s notion of “surrogation,” in which events are replicated or reproduced through performance.<sup>16</sup> The notion of “surrogation” is problematized by the agendas of those involved in the recreation and the role that such recreations play in constructing a collective social memory. For viewers of “The Wild West” and similar shows, the reality of the U.S. West becomes mythologized through recreation and the reality of the U.S. imperialism becomes secondary to the images of heroism and valor that are re/enacted.

Cody was neither the first nor the last to capitalize upon this image of wildness and contribute to the mythology of the West. In the 19th century dime novelists elevated the lives of the men, and sometimes women, in the U.S. West to elaborate statuses of celebrity through exaggerated accounts of their deeds on the western frontier. Ned Buntline, one of the most prolific dime novelists, was responsible for establishing Cody as a U.S. Western hero. In addition, Stuart Lake’s autobiography of Wyatt Earp helped to mythologize the frontier lawmen, as well as the famous gunfight at the OK Corral. This captivation of the reading public with the western evolved into a genre for film as soon as motion pictures became popular. Viewers sitting in dark theaters were mesmerized by images of the daring exploits of outlaws and lawmen and cowboys and Indians. The heroes

and villains were clearly defined on the screen and in books. The virtuous cowboy in white championed the cause for justice on the frontier, while the man in black clearly represented evil. Good always triumphed; the cowboy in white always won; cowboys and Calvary alike conquered bands of “savage Indians” and the hero rode off into the sunset in these films. These depictions are a far cry from the realities of the U.S. West in which the lines were not so clearly delineated and, as contemporary history now reveals, the indigenous people were not truly the ones with savage natures.

Yet many people in the United States grew up with the western, whose form and content came to symbolize the “can do” spirit of The United States. Movie stars like John Wayne, whose Western film persona was honest, forthright, but most of all, tough when necessary, became emblematic of what it meant to be an “American.” Stewart Udall comments upon the reification of the figures who comprise the mythology of the U.S. West:

In the process of scrutinizing the lives of the Southwest’s transcendent mythical heroes--Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and Geronimo--I have been unable to find a single thing any of these killers did to advance the cause of civilization. Yet several hundred books have been written that make these men icons for millions of Americans. Nor have I found a scintilla of evidence that anyone who remotely resembled John Wayne ever appeared in the West. (277)

While Udall and his coauthors in the 2000 issue of *The Western Historical Quarterly* take issue with the depiction of the West as a place “won” largely through violence as opposed to community, there are other issues that highlight

the inaccuracy of both print and celluloid images. These issues include the stereotypical representations of women as prostitutes, schoolmarms, and reluctant pioneers, as well as the inaccurate depictions of indigenous populations as savages. In John Ford's 1939 film *Stagecoach*, the recurring theme of the whore with the heart of gold is depicted. In the end Claire Trevor's character, the prostitute Dallas, is reformed as John Wayne's character The Ringo Kid, makes her an offer of marriage. Such images offer a limited perspective regarding the complexity of women's roles and depict women only as an impetus of fulfilling the needs of the male protagonist. According to Jane Tompkins, "repeating the patterns of domestic novels in reverse, Westerns either push out women entirely or assign them roles in which they only exist to serve the needs of men"(39). Dallas becomes a caricature to be shaped and "saved" by The Ringo Kid, thus setting the female character as a damsel in distress, which is a popular trope of the Western and the captivity narratives to which the genre can be linked.<sup>17</sup> Susan Faludi's discussion of the captivity narrative in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007) argues that colonial captivity narratives written by women, both fictional and non-fictional, helped to create strong female literary heroines and underscores the significance of the genre (244-249). The letters of the women in this study carry on the tradition of the strong female heroine, with the image of the homesteader replacing that of the female captive. Additionally the letters combine both autobiographical and fictional elements that are present in the

construction of captivity narratives.

*The Legality and Legacy of Homesteading*

Homesteading is one of the factors in the history and mythology of the American West that serves to capture the imaginations of many Americans. To be able to set off in search of one's own destiny, settle in a remote area and rely solely upon the land and one's own ingenuity and hard work seems like a dream for some and a nightmare for others.

Homesteading has had a significant influence in the shaping of both the land and lore of the United States.<sup>18</sup> This act inspired many settlers to head westward to regions whose arid climate and hot temperatures would have been unappealing were it not for the lure of "easy land." Many of those inspired settlers were women who chose to venture forth and not merely women being coerced into wagons by husbands bent on answering the call to "Go West!" These were women who were intent upon pursuing their own destinies and forging a life of independence.

Before delving into the lives of Stewart, Corey, and Hendricks, it is important to examine the origins of homesteading in the United States. The Homesteading Act of 1862 was certainly a long-awaited measure. Before examining the details of the Act, it is important to acknowledge the events that lead up to its passage. It evolved from the Preemption Act of 1841<sup>19</sup>, which granted squatters the right to purchase surveyed lands at a low price at \$1.25 an acre at a maximum of 160 acres. The stipulations were that they had to be heads



of families, widows, or single men over 21. They needed to be citizens of the United States or had already file a declaration of intention to become citizens. Settlers had 14 months to pay up on the land and were required to make improvements.

Problems arose from this because it did not extend preemption right to squatters on unsurveyed lands. Additionally those who had previously filed on smaller lots were not offered preemption. The Act also did not offer safeguards to prevent people from abandoning their claims after stripping them from resources and filing in another state. As a result of these problems, the need for land reform continued.

In 1844 George Henry Evans organized the National Land Reform Association, which advocated offering free land in the US Western states in order to encourage expansion. Horace Greeley, Editor of *The New York Tribune* became involved and was instrumental in giving the movement the attention it needed. The Reformists argued that offering free land would lure immigrants who were arriving in America and workers from the East who wanted better opportunities. There was much resistance from northern and eastern states due to concerns about the impact expansion would have upon them. Many northern factory owners were afraid they would lose the cheap labor in the factories and the Southern states were concerned about the impact the development of other states would have upon the issue of slavery. As a result, the passage of the Act was blocked three times in Congress. It wasn't until the South seceded from the

Union that the Act finally passed Congress. Lincoln signed the Homestead Act on May 20, 1862, and it became a law on January 1, 1863<sup>20</sup>.

Section I of the Act lays out the terms for who might qualify, under what conditions:

... That any person who is the head of a family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and is a citizen of the United States, or who shall have filed his declaration of intention to become such, as required by the naturalization laws of the United States, and who has never borne arms against the United States Government or given aid and comfort to its enemies, shall, from and after the first January, eighteen hundred and sixty-three, be entitled to enter one quarter section or a less quantity of unappropriated public lands, upon which said person may have filed a preemption claim, or which may, at the time the application is made, be subject to preemption at one dollar and twenty-five cents, or less, per acre; or eighty acres or less of such unappropriated lands, at two dollars and fifty cents per acre, to be located in a body, in conformity to the legal subdivisions of the public lands, and after the same shall have been surveyed: Provided, That any person owning and residing on land may, under the provisions of this act, enter other land lying contiguous to his or her said land, which shall not, with the land so already owned and occupied, exceed in the aggregate one hundred and sixty acres.

By using the terms “head of household” and “persons” in the phrasing of the Act the government clearly allowed for single women to lay claim to the lands available. Because of property reforms that had begun with the passage of the Married Women’s New York Property Law in 1848, women who filed upon claims before marriage were still able to retain their rights to their property<sup>21</sup>.

Lest one think of this as an oversight the wording of section II indicates that it was, in fact, quite deliberate that both men and women were to be eligible:

And be it further enacted, That the person applying for the benefit of this act shall, upon application to the register of the land office in which he or she is about to make such entry, make affidavit before the said register or receiver that he or she is the head of a family, or is twenty-one years or more of age,

or shall have performed service in the army or navy of the United States, and that he has never borne arms against the Government of the United States or given aid and comfort to its enemies, and that such application is made for his or her exclusive use and benefit, and that said entry is made for the purpose of actual settlement and cultivation, and not either directly or indirectly for the use or benefit of any other person or persons whomsoever; and upon filing the said affidavit with the register or receiver, and on payment of ten dollars, he or she shall thereupon be permitted to enter the quantity of land specified....

The pronouns that indicate both the male and female genders appear not just in one sentence but throughout the entire section, as the authors of the Homestead Act saw the potential benefits of specifically including women as a means to broaden the possibility that the lands would indeed be settled. Women could expand upon their husband's claims if they filed their claims before marriage. This ability for women to partake in the homesteading venture is doubly significant when women in other homesteading countries, such as Canada were not able to own land until 1930.

The government also sought to protect lands from being reclaimed by indigenous populations through homesteading by positioning them as "enemies" with the stipulation, "that he has never borne arms against the Government of the United States or given aid and comfort to its enemies." This prevented Native-Americans, Mexicans, and United States citizens who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War from claiming land as well. These stipulations ensured that the land would remain in possession of the United States of America and largely in the possession of Anglo-Americans or white Europeans who supported the Federal government.<sup>22</sup>

While there were still some issues of falsification and unethical practices, the Act did accomplish what the land reformers had intended. It succeeded in pushing back native populations and encouraged settlement and development of the western states. The significance for this study is the opportunities it afforded women, but aside from this, it became a cornerstone of land law in the United States.

### *Into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

The U.S. West did not truly close at the end of the 20th century, as women became even more involved in undertaking their own pursuits on the western frontier, such as their involvement in homesteading. This is not to say that women did not homestead prior to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the letters presented in this study nonetheless focus on women who homesteaded in order to gain their own property and to possibly gain the independence that they felt was denied to them in other settings. Homesteading was a key means for many of these women to gain land of their own. I have selected women who were homesteading in the early twentieth century. A main factor in choosing these particular subjects was the breadth of their letters. The letters examined chronicle an extensive period of time, from 1909-1936. And although all of the women selected in this study are white, it should be noted that women of varied ethnic backgrounds had a strong presence upon the U.S. Western frontier.

While many diaries and journals are available that chronicle the trials and

travails of women as they made the journey westward, I have chosen to concentrate upon letters due to their immediacy and the public nature of writing in that genre. While historians have sought to insert women's experiences into this history, letters reveal the way in which women sought to place themselves within the historical, literary, and mythological framework surrounding the U.S. West.

Such consideration raises many questions. The motivations for these women may have been political. Certainly Stewart seems to be advocating a move westward as a means for women to successfully gain independence and Hendricks' involvement in politics and engagement in dialogue about women's suffrage indicates an awareness of the significance of her actions. It is, however, more likely that each woman moved west as a fulfillment of her own desires. The common tropes reflected in their writing such as independence, nature, and community effectively respond to the mythology of the West that had already been firmly established and reflected in the writing of dime novels and western writers like Zane Grey, Owen Wister, and James Fenimore Cooper.

The women in this study seem to be responding to various motivations and present varied perspectives on life on the United States Western Frontier. This study focuses upon the letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Elizabeth Corey, and Cecilia Hennel Hendricks. All three women present similarities and differences that present a unique perspective in the realities of homesteading for women. All three have varied circumstances in regards to marital status, family background, and educational status. Elinore Pruitt Stewart begins her homesteading venture as

a divorced woman with a child, but then she quickly marries her employer. Bess Corey is a schoolteacher who comes out to South Dakota to gain land as a business venture, and Celia Hennel Hendricks, also a schoolteacher, makes the journey with her husband who has already claimed a homestead in Wyoming. Elinore Pruitt Stewart is perhaps the best known of the three women since her letters were serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* and later published in two books *Letters of A Woman Homesteader* (1914) and *Letters From An Elk Hunt* (1915). The designedly public nature of her letters offers a stark contrast between the letters of Corey and Hendricks. To what extent does the audience impact both the construction of the writer's identity and the nature of the information shared in the letters? Are Stewart's letters less candid than those of women whose only perceived audience was family members and loved ones? These are all questions that will be examined as I present a careful study of the identity that Stewart constructs in her letters.

*Elinore Pruitt Stewart*

*Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1914) and *Letters on an Elk Hunt* (1915), both about life on the Wyoming range, compile Elinore Pruitt Stewart's letters that had been previously published over a span of five years in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Since revisionist feminist scholarship created by historians like Glenda Riley, Dee Garceau, Susan Armitage, Elizabeth Jameson, and Sherry Smith has often sought to place women's voices more in a historical context, women like Elinore Pruitt Stewart have gained attention from historians in regard to their role

in settling the U.S. West.<sup>23</sup> Within the narrative persona that Stewart's letters develop, the alternative myth of the homesteader counters the myths of the cowboy as central pioneer. Scholars like Patricia Limerick Nelson and Richard Slotkin have largely overlooked how letters function in regard to both creating and debunking the mythology of the American West. Independence, which is key to that mythology, becomes a pervasive theme in Stewart's letters, as Sherry Smith, a scholar who has commented extensively on Stewart's letters, notes that they reveal "a mythological independence" (181-182). In effect, Stewart constantly positions herself as existing beyond her husband's control and as maintaining self-reliance with regards to her homesteading venture. My chapter on Stewart develops in greater detail the centrality of the notion of independence within Western mythology. As the letters of all three women show, for anyone to remain truly independent on the western frontier was a virtual impossibility. Examination of letters is crucial for showing the interdependence of all three women, which was, I argue, paradigmatic for the settling of the U.S. West. The writers of those letters aimed to encourage such settlement by recruiting other women to move to the U.S. West. They also sought to reassure the people who'd been left behind.

Stewart's letters need to be examined as literary texts that offer a uniquely feminine perspective of the U.S. West: they presented a strong cast of characters and they highlighted the nature of community between women through her narratives. When historians such as Garceau have approached the subject of

Elinore Pruitt Stewart, they have typically focused on how her letters establish the role of women homesteaders in the U.S. West. Scholars like Sherry Smith nonetheless take Stewart to task for neglecting to admit that she never “proved up” on her homestead. As Dee Garceau observes: “Stewart drew upon epistolary tradition to structure her narratives, creating fiction that linked the promise of land ownership with traditional ideals of individualism and with a kind of ‘proto-feminism’”(6).

My work will consider this and other controversies about Stewart, drawing from works that have focused specifically on Stewart. One, a valuable book-length discussion and pseudo-biography by Susan K. George entitled *The Adventures of A Woman Homesteader*, fills in the gaps left behind by the letters. I argue that the identity of Stewart as a “The Woman Homesteader,” as a literary western heroine, should supersede that of mere homesteader. In so doing I delve into Stewart’s creation of identity, to examine the characters created in the stories, and also to look at what is omitted from those letters, not just in terms of Stewart’s own life but in terms of the Western landscape as well. Stewart’s letters describe the beauty and peace of the frontier as contrasted with her former life in the city; she also conveys the solace she gets from her outdoor excursions.

Beyond the literary-historical aspect of how Stewart’s letters have not been out of print since they were first published are the historical factors surrounding or impacting the letters, such as when Stewart depicts the tension that existed between cattle and sheep ranchers on the frontier or when she depicts the



influence of immigrants in the surrounding areas.

In emphasizing the probable readership of the letters as they were published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and why they still hold literary appeal today, I would argue that much owes to the writer's evident enthusiasm for her subject matter. This enthusiasm is evident when Elinore Pruitt Stewart penned the following words in a 1913 letter, revealing her optimistic view of life as a homesteader: "...any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of the sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed, will have plenty to eat, and a home of her own in the end"(LWH 214).

In framing my discussion of Stewart, I will be asking questions such as the following: What do Stewart's narratives reveal about women in the U.S. West? How do they function as literature? How and why do letters constitute a valid literary device? A discussion of the appeal of epistolary form in literature may be useful to considering these questions. Novels such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Letters* have used such devices in order to develop intimacy with readers. That intimacy, in the case of fiction, may be related to the voyeuristic impulse that drives letters and shapes the meaning and identity created in letters and further enhances the appeal of reading the letters of presidents, literary figures and actors.

Whether we believe letters are "true" and how we might distinguish between the nature of the intentionally private vs. the public letter are further

concerns to be addressed with regard to the popularity of Stewart's letters within the context of her status as a western writer, comparable to other such writers, such as Mari Sandoz and Willa Cather. Such questions and the comparison matter because it is clear that from Elinore's past that she had attempted writing before moving to the U.S. West and that she longed to be a writer before she longed to be a homesteader. Although her stories seem to be sentimental and are differentiated from the naturalism pervasive in American writing in the late nineteenth century, the vivacious characters she creates help perpetuate the spirit of the U.S. West and create a link between land, liberty, and identity.

### *Elizabeth Corey*

In Chapter Three I consider Elizabeth "Bess" Corey, a female homesteader who left Iowa for South Dakota in 1909. Corey was homesteading during the same time as Elinore Pruitt Stewart, but her letters take on a decidedly different tone. For one, Corey did not marry. This is significant because Corey's single status seems to have been a conscious decision during a time when women were expected to marry. Unlike Stewart, who eventually married, Corey remained single throughout her life. Also unlike Stewart, Corey supported herself as a schoolteacher while she proved up on her homestead; this may have contributed to her success in proving up since she did not rely on income from the land.

My chapter on Corey represents major new work, as there is virtually no scholarship on Corey aside from Phillip Gerber's 1991 introduction to her

published letters. Corey's case provides a means for understanding "success" as a primary aspect of the Western mythology of the homesteader. I argue that Corey succeeds in part because she wrote letters that described the challenges that she faced. Her writings provide valuable insight into the prospect that the very act of writing letters and thus, building relationships through epistolarity (as opposed to the more conventional route of seeking out a husband) might have been instrumental in her succeeding against the odds. This aspect of success is key to the functionality and dialogic properties of Corey's correspondence.

Corey's letters are essential to representing the experiences of single women who went west. Susan Imbarrato's discussion of traveling women, which notes the distinctions between women who live in a region and those who travel throughout will be useful in studying Corey. Likewise, I will expand on Brigitte Georgi-Findlay's study of travel writing and the U.S. West, *The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion* since Georgi-Findlay does not use letters in her work, this dissertation expands her discussion by relating Georgi-Findlay's ideas to Corey's work as a schoolteacher, which took her from community to community, which made it difficult for her to "prove up," as she rarely got to spend time on her homestead.

Finally, Janet Altman's work is useful in examining the relationship between responder and respondent in the epistolary relationship. Altman's work on identity bears on the construction of Corey's epistolary identity, especially with regard to the tenuous relationship between Bess and her mother, as revealed

in the many letters that allude to discord between the two, such as when Bess begins one letter: “Here we are again. I suppose that before you get through reading this you will be mad at me again”(27).

For Bess, remaining single is a choice that is rare, given the ongoing societal expectations of women. Corey’s development of identity through writing and sending letters is most interesting in her letters’ celebration of her unmarried status, as in her adopting the moniker “Bachelor Bess”, in closing of her letters. Corey’s identity construction focuses on Bess’s challenges to gender identity. These challenges appear throughout the performance of her epistolary identity, which I explicate by using Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*. When Bess narrates her experiences with men, she often derides their attitudes towards marriage and their treatment of women. She awkwardly writes after rejecting a proposal: “If troubles neffer come single for why should I get married?”(203).

Where Stewart’s letters are at times humble and self-effacing, Corey is often self-congratulatory and boastful, reflecting her unique awareness that her actions as a single women were remarkable. She writes, at least in part, because she wants her family to acknowledge and understand the difficulties she is facing: “I suppose you think it is my selfishness makes me complain so, but I tell you it is hard. One girl staid here three months and her feet where actually blistered when she left”(191). She even issues a challenge to her brothers back in Iowa, in the form of a warning, asserting that they

would never be able to survive in South Dakota: “Don’t let Olney get a notion of coming out here for if he persisted in staying he wouldn’t live six months”(25). In another letter Corey advises her mother: “Now keep your boys in Iowa until they are twenty one years of age or past”(21). Corey’s brother, Fuller, accepts the challenge and does come to South Dakota. Many of his letters are also included in the collection, and they provide a different perspective on some of the same events that were being recounted for their mother. This comparison and contrast reveals the subjectivity of epistolary correspondence, the earlier issues of verifiability of evidence, and the influence of the relationship between writer and reader in determining the construction of the letter.

#### *Cecilia Hennel Hendricks*

The fourth chapter examines the letters of Cecilia Hennel Hendricks, which were written from 1914-1931, a later time period than either Stewart or Corey’s letters. Like Stewart, Hendricks homesteaded in Wyoming. Hendricks came out West expressly to join homesteader John Hendricks, whom she married on her arrival. The two subsequently formed their own business by raising bees and producing honey on their homestead. Her letters, while focusing on the land as well as the people she encountered, reveal the love story between her husband and herself, within the equal partnership of their marriage.

Hendricks’s letters are more intensely personal than either Stewart’s or Corey’s letters.

She writes with earnestness regarding her marriage, as in the following

early letter: “Everything is so fine and the prospects are so good one couldn’t help being happy. And most of all, there is John. So, I am not repining, though I may weep occasionally”(17). Even contained within the compilation are letters that the two spouses write to one another during times of separation.

Representing both sides of the correspondence establishes the love story that existed between the two and makes these letters even more interesting.

Hendricks was college educated; she had earned a master’s degree from Indiana University in 1908. Her letters reflect both her advanced education resulting in a higher social status than that of many of the women who traveled west. Her education set her apart from most other women at this time.<sup>24</sup>

Corresponding to her unusual status as a woman who had earned a graduate degree, Cecilia Hendricks’ letters show her greater self-consciousness, as she differentiates herself from her neighbors. She writes, for example, of the amazement that many expressed at her indoor plumbing: “People seem to think that kitchen sinks and washstands and bathtubs belong with city streets and sewer systems and the like. They don’t seem to realize that a sink will go wherever you put it”(42). She also feels a strong sense of community, and she celebrates her life on the Wyoming plains. Among the important questions that warrant consideration in order to appreciate the importance of these letters as literary documents with additional historical value, this chapter will explore how Hendricks’ experiences differ from those of her female counterparts in regard to her involvement in politics and business, how her marriage is depicted, the role of

the love letter as exchanged between Cecilia and her husband, and the significance of writing in Hendricks's life.

Like Corey, who left her family behind in Iowa, Hendricks' letters are addressed almost exclusively to her family, whom she left behind in Indiana. Hendricks, who is aware of the value of her letters, expressly asks that they be kept in lieu of a journal that she does not have time to write. Her request shows, again, that the letters exist as narrative constructs, and that Hendricks sees herself as a writer. This self-awareness on Hendricks's part was further borne out in her later years; after the death of her husband, John, she returned to Indiana to teach at the university and even published articles on education.

As editorial influence is a primary consideration in collected letters, each chapter will also examine the role of the editor. Editors who organize letters for the express intent of publication from the onset are less likely to be "authentic." Indeed the notion of authenticity is one of the misconceptions regarding epistolary texts, for while letters are often viewed as one of the more authentic forms of personal writing, they are less so when expressly constructed with publication in mind. This is a prime consideration in the letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart, which were originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and later anthologized by Houghton Mifflin.

Professional editors are not the only sticklers in regards to the content of a writer's letters. Often, letters are left to family members at the passing of the writer, and it falls to them to decide how to dispose of the correspondence, as is in

the case of Elizabeth Corey and Cecilia Hannel Hendricks. Editing by family members may prevent the publication of anything potentially embarrassing to the family. After all, the editor in this situation has a vested interest beyond profit.

The desire to view candid, possibly scandalous material will often entice readers of epistolarity and autobiographical narratives. The decision to publish letters also becomes a primary consideration. The appetite for candid or scandalous material is reflected in contemporary publishing where majority of published collections of correspondence are comprised of those of public figures. It could be viewed as a byproduct of a celebrity obsessed culture that people want or seek the most intimate details of politicians, sports figures, writers, celebrities, and the like. This readership reflects yet surpasses the culture in which we live, for such curiosity is not unique to our century. In fact, the illusion that letters were not intended for publication was propagated in the eighteenth century in order to garner interest in letters that were in fact, written with publication in mind.<sup>25</sup>

Another commonality between the three women represented here involves the concept of New Womanhood. Martha Patterson's *The New American Woman Revisited: A Reader* (2008) links the ideals of the New Woman to Henrik Ibsen's play "A Doll's House" (1879) in which the main character Nora begins to question her identity as a wife and mother and feels trapped within the constraints of her Victorian marriage (5). Additionally, scholars like Patterson's Sally Ledger's in *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle* (1997) situate the



first usage of the term “New Woman” in British activist, Sarah Grand’s, 1894 essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question.”<sup>26</sup> Grand makes distinctions between the types of women and in doing so the phrase “New Woman” was coined:

Both the cow woman and the scum woman are well within the range of comprehension of the of the Bawling Brother hood, but the new woman is a little above him, and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home--is—the--Woman's--Sphere, and prescribed the remedy. (271)

Grand dictated that the “New Woman” was elevated beyond men who sought to limit the roles of women and keep them confined to the domestic sphere. In *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890's* (2001), Carolyn Christensen Nelson explains the basic demands of The New Woman: “The New Woman, arguing that the separate spheres ideology was a construct of culture and society rather than a biological mandate, demanded that women be given the same choices as men”(ix). While Grand’s discussion applied to England, the concept spread to the United States as the Women’s Suffrage movement continued to gain momentum. Martha Patterson expands the complexity of the New Woman in the United States by arguing that she embodied United States imperialism during the late nineteenth centuries with acquisitions of the Spanish American War (5). Certainly imperialism is reflected in the “conquering” of the United States frontier and the removal of indigenous populations from their lands. This “conquering” made the Homestead Act in the United States possible and provided an

opportunity that some women seized upon to obtain land and strive for a life of autonomy in keeping with the spirit of the “New Woman.”

The cultural and political shifts worldwide may have laid the foundation for an opportune moment for women in the United States to seek rights denied to them previously. The New Woman was not hindered by traditional gender roles; she furthermore with respect to the larger social context of the “New Woman” sought to choose her own path, one in which marriage may or may not have played a role. While images of Charles Gibson’s, “Gibson Girl” and the 1920s flapper have been associated with the New Woman, certainly Dee Garceau’s examination of the homesteader as New Woman *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater, Wyoming, 1880-1929* (1997) presents a more realistic image to the aforementioned icons that were grounded more in presenting idealized images of female beauty than truly symbolizing the New Woman attitudes. My intent is to expand upon Garceau’s work by examining the ways Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Elizabeth Corey, and Cecilia Hennel Hendricks are all emblematic of the changing attitudes of the American Progressive era and the opportunities available to women at the turn of the century and by observing the manner in which they construct their epistolary identities in relation to those ideals of the New Woman ideology.

### *The Conclusion*

The last chapter examines the changing reliance upon the written letter as a mode of communication in US society. It establishes the evolutionary process

of the letter into various modes of online communication, such as e-mail, social networking sites, and blogs. Rather than subscribing to one genre, all of the theoretical approaches regarding life-writing, autobiography, and literature remain influential in the examination evolutionary process. Rather than being pigeonholed into one genre or discipline letters are complex texts that serve a variety of functions and remain a significant arena for scholarly study.

This dissertation addresses a gap in scholarship, considering twentieth century letters written by “common women” who describe their involvement in activities that furthered women’s rights offers a means for bringing to light the nature of letter writing in the early twentieth century United States. These letters reveal aspects of the literary and historical U.S. West that are excluded from the male-oriented world of the cowboy, trapper, scout, or soldier. An examination of letters by these three different women engaged in homesteading in the US West helps to debunk pervasive mythology regarding women’s limited role in Western settlement. My study of these three sets of letters both establishes the legitimacy of letters and offers specific models for their analysis within the context of the literature of the settlement of the U.S. West. These letters have a unique function, both with respect to autobiographical literature and as historical constructs that influenced readers. Then and now, they help us to better understand and cope with the challenges that women have faced. These writers helped to further establish a counterpart to a broadly masculinist mythology that made sense of U.S. Western settlement as a romantic venture in which women were absent or played very

limited roles as handmaidens to men and male egos. The historical and literary writings of these women reveal both the truths and the fictions of experiences of those who went out West to create communities and lay claim to that aspect of the frontier. Within an increasing concern for the environment and the growing imperialism of the United States, relating to the issues of colonialism, national identity, gender equality, and a connection to the land, the lives and writings of these women reveal concerns that were pervasive in the West and are still applicable today.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term external reader as coined by Janet Altman in her discussion of literary fiction. To Altman the external reader is the reader who intercepts letters within epistolary fiction, while the internal reader is the one to whom the letter is intended. I use these terms throughout the study. The external reader refers to those outside of the epistolary relation, those who are not initially considered as the epistolary audience. See Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*.

<sup>2</sup> I discuss this in depth in the chapter on Bess Corey.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term third reader to refer to the reader who exists outside of the text. The first reader, of course, is the writer, the second the addressee, or intended recipient(s), the third reader being the one who encounters the text either intentionally or unintentionally.

<sup>4</sup> According to Cathy N. Davidson one third of the novels published in America prior to 1820 were written in epistolary form. See Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. pp. 70-72.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the link between epistolarity and independence see: Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature*. pp. 2-10.

<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion of republican motherhood and propaganda see Bannet, *Empire of Letters*. pp. 9-53.

<sup>7</sup> For a further discussion of letter manuals and the development of letters among the gentility see Bannet, 9-53.

<sup>8</sup> For a full discussion of women's communities see Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*

<sup>9</sup> Adams, *Letters of Mrs. Adams, the Wife of John Adams*. Gelles, Edith B. "First Thoughts": *Life and Letters of Abigail Adams*.

<sup>10</sup> For a full discussion of women and traveling in colonial America see Imbarrato, *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America*.

<sup>11</sup> See LeJeune for a discussion of the "autobiographical pact," pp. 8-9 and pp. 28-32.

<sup>12</sup> I place the word true in quotation marks to note the subjective nature of the term.

<sup>13</sup> Gilmore defines autobiographics as "...those changing elements of the contradictory discourses and practices of truth and identity which represent the subject of autobiography"(13).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of letters as a separate genre see Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications*. pp. 19-21.

<sup>15</sup> See Quay. *Westward Expansion*. pp. 198-201

<sup>16</sup> See Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum Atlantic Performance*. pp. 192-204.

<sup>17</sup> See Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*. pp. 11-35, 55-80. Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*. pp. 13-15.

<sup>18</sup> The word homestead has many different connotations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it could be used to refer to ranching; indeed, a ranch was often referred to as a homestead. It was also a verb used to describe the act of claiming a homestead by filing a claim.

<sup>19</sup> See, Gates. *History of Public Land Law*. pp. 238-47.

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<sup>20</sup> See, Gates. *History of Public Land Law*. pp. 399-434.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the Married Women's Priority act see, Rabkin, Peggy. *Fathers to Daughters: The Legal Foundations of Female Emancipation*.

<sup>22</sup> African-Americans were allowed to homestead and many did head West. However, there was still rampant racism on the Western Frontier.

<sup>23</sup> See Riley, *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West*. Garceau, *The Important Things of life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater, Wyoming, 1880-1929*. Armitage and Jameson, *The Women's West*.

<sup>24</sup> According to The National Center for Educational Statistics, only 2.7% of women graduated from college and only approximately 18% of women received Master's degrees.

<sup>25</sup> See Ditz, "Formative Ventures: eighteenth century commercial letters and the circulation of experience." pp. 59-70.

<sup>26</sup> See Patterson, pp. 1-2 and Ledger, p. 2.

## CHAPTER 2

### Move Over John Wayne Elinore Pruitt Stewart And The Western Heroine

Although many women ventured out U.S. West, few left behind accounts of their experiences in so thorough a detail as did one Wyoming homesteader, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, whose published letters span 1909-1915. In 1909, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, then Elinore Rupert, had responded to the call to homestead. Like many people before her, she viewed the rural lands available in the U.S. West as an effective means to start a new life. Rupert, a widowed laundress living in Boulder, Colorado, decided to shrug off the pressures and poverty of her urban existence and seek what she perceived as a more peaceful lifestyle on the frontier<sup>1</sup>.

The origins of Stewart's prolific accounts can be related to a former preoccupation with becoming a writer and for the need to maintain contact with her former employer, Juliet Coney. She began corresponding with Coney in 1909; those letters continued until Mrs. Coney's death. In 1913, Mrs. Coney showed the letters to a friend, Ellery Sedgwick, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Although the details of the exchange between Coney and Sedgwick are not recorded, Sedgwick agreed that the letters were compelling and warranted further distribution. As a result, the letters were serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* from October 1913 to April 1914. When the parent company of *The Atlantic*, Houghton Mifflin, published the collected letters in 1914, the volume's popularity resulted in the publisher's subsequent request for another series of letters.

Houghton Mifflin subsequently published *Letters on an Elk Hunt* (1915).<sup>2</sup> With the success of the two volumes, Elinore Pruitt Stewart became arguably, the most famous “woman homesteader.” She was immortalized in the film *Heartland* (1979), and her letters have remained in print since their first publication in 1913.

Unlike many women who merely wrote home to friends and families, Elinore Pruitt Stewart was largely writing for a public audience. Her awareness of this public audience undoubtedly affected the manner in which she depicted the U.S. West, and how she positioned herself within the framework of that experience. In the freedom to roam the countryside and breathe the fresh air Stewart gained authority as a homesteader, as a woman, and most of all, as a writer. While Stewart’s letters blur the line between reality and fantasy, truth and fiction, they do offer a unique perspective on the women who headed westward to homestead. Elinore’s representations of family, community, work, and hardships provide readers with often overlooked insights into the women who sought to claim their own lives and own identities on the frontiers; most importantly, the letters reveal how one writer positioned the female homesteader as a U.S. Western heroine in keeping with the tenets of New Womanhood. The “Woman Homesteader” becomes a fictional character in Stewart’s letters, inspired and influenced by Stewart’s life but fictionalized nonetheless. As Susan George avers in her biography of Stewart: “It is difficult to separate Stewart from The Woman Homesteader, who embodied Stewart’s physical energy and unconquerable spirit. The main difference is that The Woman Homesteader never



had to stay home to mend sock, bake bread, or weed the garden” (George 209).

*Becoming a Woman Homesteader*

Even though much homesteading land was settled in the 19th century, the U.S. government passed further homestead acts in 1909 and 1912. These new acts allowed for an additional 160 acres under certain conditions, with the potential of raising the overall land up to 640 acres.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, homesteading was still prevalent during this period, even though the heyday had passed.

Many factors contributed to Elinore Rupert’s move to Burnt Fort, Wyoming. Life in the city for a single woman was difficult enough, but having a young child compounded those difficulties as she was forced to work long hours in order to provide housing and food. She was also faced with the task of finding adequate childcare and these pressures seem to have led to depression as well as health problems for both mother and daughter.<sup>4</sup> Stewart’s purported status as Henry Rupert’s widow represents a case of real life fictionalizing; Stewart was divorced. Even though divorce was not unheard of, the view that respectable women did not get divorced prevailed in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Houghton Mifflin issued a reprint of her letters in 1988, Gretel Ehrlich’s foreword continued this misleading assertion regarding her marital status. Yet when Susanne K. George began researching Stewart for her biography *The Adventures of A Woman Homesteader: The Life and Letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart* in 1992, she was unable to locate a death certificate for Henry Rupert; George discovered documents to substantiate that he did not die, and had even

remarried.<sup>5</sup> Stewart likely claimed the identity of a widow instead of a divorcee, because women who divorced were often treated as outcasts. In addition to herself, Stewart also had her daughter, Jerrine, to consider. She naturally longed to shield her daughter from any unpleasantness that could be associated with her marital status.

In April of 1909, Stewart headed to Burnt Fork, Wyoming to begin her new life as a homesteader. Rupert responded to an ad at the prompting of Father Corrigan, a priest at Sunshine Rescue mission in Boulder. Wyoming cattle rancher Clyde Stewart was looking for a housekeeper for his ranch. Accounts of what happened vary. While Elinore Pruitt Stewart positions herself as the one placing the ad, still other accounts have her responding to Clyde Stewart.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Clyde and Elinore met and decided Stewart's acceptance of the position of housekeeper would be mutually advantageous. In a letter to Mrs. Coney marked June 1913, Rupert retrospectively reveals her discontent with life in Boulder: "I was in pain and was so blue that I could hardly speak without weeping, so I told Reverend Father how tired I was of the rattle and bang, of the glare and the soot, the smells and the hurry. I told him what I longed for was the sweet, free open, and that I would like to homestead" (226). Stewart's expression of what she desires presents a romanticized view of homesteading that remains a current theme throughout her letters.

Elinore Pruitt Stewart's homesteading letters can be useful as historical documents, as long as readers recognize the fictional aspects, which extend to her

omissions of a great many of the difficulties that homesteaders faced on a daily basis. Sherry Smith's *Single Women Homesteaders: The Perplexing Case of Elinore Pruitt Stewart Letters* (1991) examines the historical aspects of Stewart's letters: "*Letters* signifies the human part of her historical experience, albeit the more subjectively rendered part, for it offers only the things she chose to reveal.

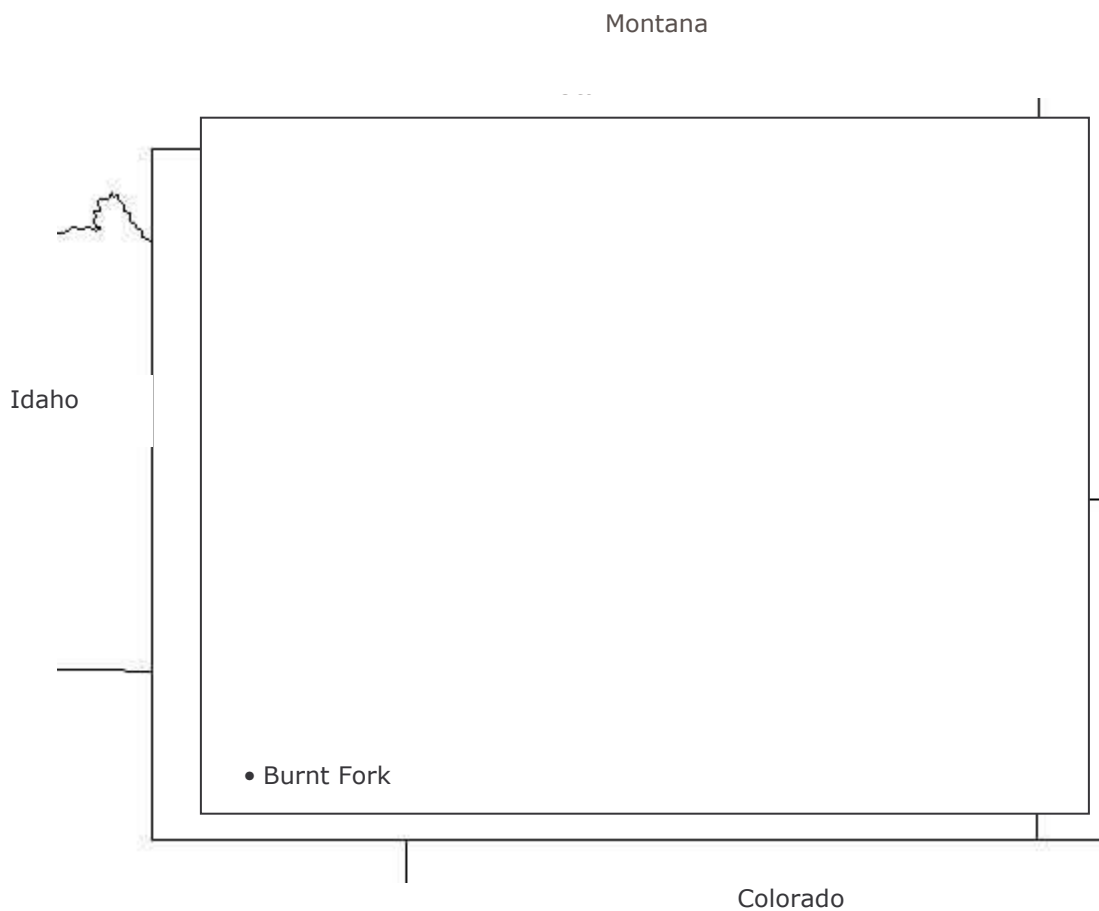


Figure 1: Burnt Fork, Wyoming  
The location of the Stewart Homestead

Her account serves as the form and structure through which she channels her experiences” (117). Since Elinore claimed she that wanted to encourage urban, working-class women to consider homesteading as an alternative to the limitations and drudgery of wage earning, a totally accurate rendition of her own experience would not have served that purpose. She therefore engaged in literary license. The problem with this is that letters, like other forms of autobiographical writing are subject to the whims of the author. They reveal the events and experiences that the author wishes to reveal, no more, no less. Much has been made of the veracity of Stewart’s letters, especially when it comes to the construction of the image of the “single woman homesteader,” as one may surmise by the change of her name from Rupert to Stewart. It’s not just that Stewart and Clyde were married; the marriage occurred eight weeks after her arrival in Burnt Fork. Dee Garceau discusses Stewart’s construction of her female heroine in “Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind” (1995):

Historians' treatments of Elinore Stewart have been a bellwether of changing perceptions about single women homesteaders. Citing "Letters," scholars initially presented single women homesteaders as exemplars of female independence, proof that the frontier experience liberalized women's roles. They read Stewart uncritically, accepting her "Letters" as the accurate account of a woman who homesteaded on her own. ...But there is more to the story. Recent research suggests the primacy of group effort rather than individual independence in accounting for the successes of single women homesteaders. (4)

Since Stewart was single at the time she filed her claim, she was legally able to

establish the land as her own, and that property did not revert to her husband upon marriage. Holding the land in her own name was extremely important to Stewart as she reveals in a letter to Mrs. Coney: “I should not have married if Clyde had not promised I would meet all my land difficulties unaided”(October 14, 1911, 134). It important to Stewart that she be able to claim the land and that she manage it without Clyde’s assistance, whether financial or otherwise (October 14, 1911, 134). It was not to be. Because Stewart and Clyde did not occupy separate homes (they added onto Clyde’s existing home in an attempt to fulfill the residential stipulations that the land be occupied by the claimant for a period of five years), Stewart was not able to “prove up” on her homestead and eventually relinquished her rights to Clyde’s mother, who sold the land to Clyde at a later date, thus increasing the Stewarts’ holdings. Stewart’s situation of homesteading to add to the family property is not unique. Many women homesteaded in order to increase family property values and were later reimbursed by their families. Yet this should not diminish the independent spirit of their endeavors; as historian Dee Garceau points out, the money obtained from such transactions gave those women the means to forge lives for themselves independent of the finances and actions of a man.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of Stewart’s negligence at revealing this inability to maintain her homestead in her letters, historians such as Sherry Smith have questioned the weight of Stewart’s letters as a representative view of homesteading<sup>8</sup>:

If working class women in Denver and elsewhere had read her book, filed on homesteads, and consequently failed in droves, Stewart could be

charged not only with deception, but worse. On this score, she is certainly less culpable than railroad companies and town promoters, who lured thousands of unsuspecting homesteaders out to the arid U.S. West. The fact is, it is highly unlikely *Letters* inspired poor women to attempt homesteading. (Smith 176)

By negating the power of her letters to incite change Smith simultaneously charges Stewart with deceit and absolves her of it. Smith nonetheless still values Stewart's letters for their insights into the homesteading process and for the changing roles of women in the early twentieth century. As Smith notes of Stewart at the end of her article: "She is that rare person who left enough information to raise significant questions about all homesteaders' motives. Her writings and her life lead to a greater appreciation of the important roles women and families played in the American homesteading experience" (183). Such arguments regarding accuracy are based on the desire to use Stewart's letters to construct exact historical account of homesteading. If used as historical fact, one would find the letters to be full of flaws. Yet Stewart cautions against this; in a letter to Mrs. Coney's daughter Florence Coney, Stewart acknowledges accusations of fictionalizing:

You say I have an unusual knack of meeting extraordinary people; Miss Harrison once told me that she didn't like a letter because she didn't like fiction. So, I had a session with myself to determine whether or not I do fictionalize or how it happens that others seem not to see what I do in those we meet in passing. I have come to the conclusion it is because most of my friends are cultured and I am not. (March 15, 1926, qtd. in George 119)

This reference to Stewart's ability to see what others do not allows readers to understand that events depicted in her letters may not be the actual occurrences

but rather Stewart's interpretation of them. By attributing this to issues of class, Stewart serves to separate herself from her readership and to justify any coarseness or inconsistencies that may appear.

Although Stewart was unable to complete her quest to homestead on her own, she succeeded in homesteading in that both she and her husband maintained a productive homestead, where they raised their children and lived until Elinore's death in 1933.<sup>9</sup> Stewart successfully carved out a life of her choosing. She did not allow herself to be reduced to the despair of life in the city. In spite of the duties associated with marriage and children, she maintained a modicum of independence that was unique for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is also important to note that although Stewart openly expressed her desire to homestead, her first aspirations were those of a writer, and that authorial instinct is evident in the constructions of the narratives that fill her letters.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Elinore Pruitt Stewart and The Atlantic Monthly*

Stewart's association with *The Atlantic Monthly* is significant in that it places her within an established literary tradition. *The Atlantic Monthly*, established in Boston in 1857, achieved a standard of literary excellence that has enabled it to thrive into the twenty-first century. The magazine reflected and continues to reflect concerns of the given time period, as DeWolfe Howe comments in *The Atlantic Monthly and Its Makers* (1919):

If *The Atlantic Monthly* were a repository; if it confined itself to the discussion of Roman Antiquities, or the sonnets of Wordsworth, or the

planting of the colony of Massachusetts Bay, no one but the specialists would concern themselves with the opinions expressed on its pages. But it happens to be particularly interested in this present world; curious about the actual conditions of politics and society, of science and commerce, of art and literature. Above all it is engrossed with the lives of the men and women who are making America what it is and what it needs to be. (97)

This preoccupation with American experience is clearly reflected in Elinore's accounts. This is a key reason Ellery Sedgwick found Stewart's letters so compelling. De Howe notes Sedgwick's influence as editor: "For the first time since the days of James T. Fields the editor was directly concerned with the publishing success of the magazine"(98). That success was directly linked to the ability to find letters and articles the readers of the magazine would find applicable and appealing to the American experience. Sedgwick himself acknowledges the significance of the role of the editor: "Editors, however, like politicians are supposed to be simultaneously leaders and surrogates for their public's values"(1). Stewart's letters reflect the interest of hard work, the roles, of women, and the U.S. West that were part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century societal landscape. Sedgwick comments on Stewart's writing in his autobiography, *The Happy Profession*: "Never a week without its adventure. Every settler had his own story to tell Mrs. Rupert, the tale would be relayed to Mrs. Coney and thence to the *Atlantic*. The Woman Homesteader never tolerated a dull day" (199). Sedgwick's reference to Elinore as "The Woman Homesteader" reinforced the image of Stewart as a character within a literary framework. When she wrote she transformed herself into "The Woman



Homesteader,” a persona created for readers, who engaged in adventures that transcended what must have been a difficult life on her Wyoming homestead. The letters appealed to values of hard work and tenacity, and Sedgwick and Houghton Mifflin easily recognized their appeal. Elinore’s creation of the woman homesteader reflected that these related to autonomy, real or imagined, fulfilled the demands of *The Atlantic Monthly* readership, as Dee Garceau discusses in pointing to the emergence of the “homesteading genre” in “Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind”:

The woman homesteading genre appeared in popular literature at a time when women's roles, at least within the culture of white America, were in transition. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the separate spheres of Victorian society had blurred, and conventional wisdom urged women toward developing personal autonomy in a heterosocial world. (12)

As opposed to later editors, Sedgwick emphasizes the authenticity of the letters. Here is his editor’s note that appears before the first publication in *The Atlantic*: “These are genuine letters written without thought of publication. ... We may add that the letters are printed as written, except for occasional omissions and the alteration of one or two names.-The Editors” (433). The details of such “omissions and the alterations” are never divulged, even as the reader is led to believe that the letters were written in a candid manner without consideration of the public audience, which naturally makes them more appealing to an audience that wants a “genuine” experience. It is fitting to note, however, that Sedgwick never attests to the veracity of the letters themselves. Susan George offers

a more complex view of the editing of Stewart's letters. In writing about the task of compiling some of Stewart's unpublished letters for the biography *The Adventures of The Woman Homesteader: The Life and Letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart*, George notes the difficulties faced by editors when confronted with the arrangement of letters, particularly in assigning chronology:

Although she religiously noted the month and day on her letters, Stewart seldom included the year. From postmarked envelopes, sometimes separated from the letter that should've been inside, from notations by Stewart's children on some of the letters themselves, and from references to national and personal events, I have to the best of my ability, assigned a year to most letters. (xii)

George, compiling the letters in 1992, sixty years after Stewart's death is confronted with obstacles that did not plague Ellery Sedgwick, as he was publishing Stewart's letters after they had been recently written and had the luxury of contacting Stewart to clarify any issues he may have had. George additionally notes problems regarding the content: "Another problem concerned paragraphing, for Stewart seldom signaled breaks in her writing and many letters and short stories consist of one long paragraph...For the ease of reading, I have broken the selections into paragraphs"(xii). Such formatting concerns may have been an issue when editing the letters for inclusion in *The Atlantic* as well. What is significant is that the editor plays a key role in the presentation and inclusion of particular selections in regards to authors and the time lapse between when a work is written and when it is edited for publication is significant in determining the

ease with which an editor may perform his or her task.

An examination of *The Atlantic Monthly* 1913-1914, when Stewart's letters were serialized, reveals Sedgwick's sagacity in choosing Stewart's work as being of viable interest to *The Atlantic* readership. Articles like Alvin Saunders Johnson's "The Case Against the Single Tax" published in the January 1914 issue illustrate the author's acknowledgement of the significance of U.S. Western lands, as he makes an argument against land taxation:

If the Single-Tax principle had been in operation from the beginning of our history, what would have been the course of U.S. Western development? With the states as universal landlord, all that the U.S. West could have promised the settler would have been the wages of his labor. ... And this means that the opening of new lands would necessarily have waited upon the time when the pressure of population in the older centres and the increasing miseries of the poor should expel some of their number on the frontier. (33)

Saunders Johnson's essay signals an interest in life on the U.S. Western frontier and the likely appeal that such an image would hold in the minds of readers. This reinforces interest in Elinore's accounts of life on the Wyoming frontier. William J. Trimble's "The Passing of Public Lands," also published in the June 1914 issue, likewise depicts concern with the changing U.S. Western landscape and reveals the romanticizing of the U.S. West: "There are no more great stretches of fertile land in the United States inviting occupation. The romance and rush of settlement are over. The real U.S. West has vanished"(756). Elinore engages in this romanticization of the U.S. West in her adventures as opposed to the hard realities of life on the homestead, which make her letters of interest to the reading public, particularly to the female reading public, and establishes her within a U.S.

Western American literary milieu.

*Feminizing the U.S. Western Hero*

Within the realm of U.S. Western literature Stewart's letters create a feminized version of the U.S. Western hero. The basic traits of the Western hero were independence, desire to defend good against evil, protection of community, prowess with a gun, physical strength, toughness, and the embrace of wildness/wilderness over civilization. These traits can be seen early in the U.S. Western literary tradition in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, which were a series of five novels written by James Fenimore Cooper: *The Prairie* (1821), *The Pioneers* (1823) *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841). In these novels, the protagonist, Natty Bumppo is white but is raised by Native-Americans. He becomes a fearless and established hunter, and the novel chronicles his mission to end the conflict between the Mohicans and the Hurons. Like the character of Bumppo, "The Woman Homesteader" possessed fearlessness and a strong spirit of adventure. In "Cattle Branding and the Traffic in Women in Early Twentieth-Century U.S. Westerns by Women" Victoria Lamont acknowledges Elinore Pruitt Stewart as developing a "feminized version of the masculine male hero" (31). Lamont does not, however, examine exactly how that identity is constructed.

In order to decipher the traits of this feminized version it is necessary to examine the iconic image of the U.S. Western hero, which often combines the image of fantasy with reality.<sup>11</sup> The nineteenth century U.S. public's imagination

was captured by images of the U.S. West, and as evidenced by the popularity of dime novels, which elevated to celebrity status the lives of frontiersman Buffalo Bill Cody, outlaw Billy the Kid, and lawman Wyatt Earp. As Kent Steckmesser has observed, this accords celebrity status to Daniel Boone who was the model of Fenimore Cooper's hero and also the first romanticized U.S. Western hero.<sup>12</sup>

This romanticization continued into the twentieth century popularity of novels like Owen Wister's *Virginian* and Western film heroes like John Wayne and Tom Mix.<sup>13</sup>

That Stewart and her comrades on the Wyoming frontier were aware of the mythology of the U.S. West is apparent in Stewart's letters as she acknowledges the literature of the U.S. West, particularly in reference to James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. In one letter she compares herself to Leatherstocking as she hunts for a meal for Jerrine and herself during an outing: "I shot one, so I felt a bit like Leather-stocking because I had killed but one when I might have gotten two"(To Mrs. Coney, September 28, 1909, 26). Stewart's reference to herself as Leatherstocking reveals her link to the U.S. Western hero and underscores her blending of fiction and non-fiction. In making such a comparison for the benefit of her readers Stewart reveals that she was very much aware of how the reading public imagined the U.S. Western hero as a male outdoorsman, and fashions her "Woman Homesteader" in a similar manner.

Stewart was not the only one enamored of Cooper's famous character. Some of her homesteading neighbors, Gavotte and Zebulon Pike, became

immersed in the character as well, so much so that the two men arranged a theme dinner centering around the mythic hero: “Long before I had lent Gavotte a set of *Leather-Stocking Tales*, which he read aloud to Zebbie. Together they planned a Leather-Stocking dinner, at which should be served as many of the viands mentioned in the tales as possible. We stayed two days and it was one long feast”(To Mrs. Coney, February 1912, 154). By feasting in honor of Leatherstocking, the group celebrates the myth of the U.S. West and specifically the literature of brawny male heroism that helped to create a mythology and literature that Stewart’s letters also helped develop but with a difference. For Stewart, the U.S. Western heroine encompasses the traits of independence, toughness, protection of community, and the embrace of wildness, which can also be found in the U.S. Western male hero. They differ, however, in the manner in which they are expressed, not with violence or toughness but with caring for her neighbors and family. In “Competing Visions The Alternate Wests of Elinore Pruitt Stewart and N.C. Wyeth,” Jason Williams observes that Stewart goes so far as to downplay the masculine traits of the character Gavotte by depicting him in a “deliberately domestic” mode, which is at odds with Illustrator, N.C. Wyeth’s, drawings of Gavotte as the conquering hunter that were included in the published collection of Stewart’s letters (371). Stewart’s deliberate suppression of the conquering male hero enables the exploits of “The Woman Homesteader” to exist at the forefront of her epistolary tales and is key to constructing her female heroine. Additionally, it serves to rewrite the male hero by presenting him with

traits less focused on those of conquest and violence and more in keeping with those normally associated with women. Stewart's version of the male heroine as domesticated may have been more in keeping with the reality of life on the Wyoming frontier, in which men would have been more likely to tangle with a pile of dirty dishes than an ornery gunslinger.

### *A Cast of Characters*

Stewart's letters and the narratives recounted at once build and debunk the pervasive myths associated with the U.S. West. They situate her within that mythology as an independent, strong, and community-minded woman on the frontier. A key trait of creating an effective literary tradition is to create a cast of supporting characters, which Stewart does in her construction of her letters. It is important to identify the cast of characters who regularly frequent her letters, for they become part of her mythology as well. There is Zebulon Pike, the southerner who came U.S. West to escape a feud; Gavotte, the Frenchman who looks after Zebulon's place, and two widows who live alone: Mrs. Louderder and Mrs. O' Shaughnessey. Susan George points out that Stewart's characters are constructed from the women around her:

Often the real women who populate Elinore's letters evolved into the characters of her fiction. The delightful "Ma' Mary Alice Gillis and her son, Dave lived near the Stewart family. Although Elinore often deliberately borrowed from several acquaintances to create a composite character, Ma Gillis alone was the basis for Mrs., O' Shaughnessey, Ma Dallas, and Mrs. Pond. (120)

That these characters are inspired helps to reinforce the literary constructs at play in her work, as Stewart uses events and people from her real life to weave

together narratives to entertain her audience.

A further fictive element is that Stewart titles her letters, which serve as chapters, and indeed all of the letters contain a story. Zebulon Pike is an interesting character to whom Stewart devotes three of her chapters: “A Charming Adventure and Zebulon Pike,” Zebulon Pike Visits His Old Home,” and “Zebbie’s stories”. Although he appears in other letters, these three are devoted specifically to him, and offer readers insight into Stewart’s literary instinct.

The letter that introduces Zebulon Pike, “A Charming Adventure and Zebulon Pike,” is the fourth letter in the collection of Stewart’s letters and reveals the importance of story-telling on the U.S. Western frontier. Aside from being a source of amusement around the campfire, stories enabled various settlers to forge common grounds and to help consecrate identities moving beyond specifically U.S. Western local or regional experience into a more broadly human experience. When Stewart encounters Zebulon Pike, who comes to her aid in a snowstorm, the two bond over shared stories as well as a common Southern heritage. As Stewart notes: “Only two Johnny Rebs could have enjoyed each other’s company as Zebulon Pike and myself did. He was so small and cheerful and so sprightly, a real southerner” (To Mrs. Coney, September 28 1909, 37). Although Pike expresses a clear longing for his home back East he admits to Stewart that he has not been able to communicate with anyone back home confessing...”I am not an educated man, although I started school”(To Mrs. Coney, September 28 1909,



39). Pike's admission of his illiteracy prompts Elinore to write home to his family for him and enables him to reconnect with his love ones.

Pike's story reads much like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. He fell in love with a girl, Pauline Gorley, even though their two families were feuding. He asked for her hand in marriage and received a very negative response from one of her brothers: "The bullet he got for his presumption kept him from going to war with his father and brother when they marched away"(To Mrs. Coney, September 1 1910, 104). Shortly after one of Pauline's brothers was attacked, the other brothers assumed that Zebulon was the culprit. Pauline appeared at his window and awakened him in the middle of the night and urged him to leave. He reluctantly fled, and although the two thought that they would see each other again, they never did.<sup>14</sup> This story adds a sense of romance to the letters.

Although Stewart does not discuss the intimate details and feelings of her own relationships she creates stories to whet the reader's appetite for such details and seemingly calls upon common literary trope of the "star-crossed couple" in order to entertain her readers. Zebulon's inclination to flee U.S. West also helps to perpetuate the notion of the U.S. West as a place to begin again for those escaping the past and sometimes the law.

In the example of Zebulon Pike, Stewart also uses letter writing to bridge the distance between the old man and his family. She writes to his sister, who responds with news from home, urging Zebulon to return for a visit. Pike eventually acquiesces and he finds that Pauline had long since died. She is able,

however, to collect the mementos she had left for him, such as a letter and a shirt she knitted for their wedding. Stewart's letter writing helps to bring the Pikes together and helps Zebulon to symbolically reconnect with Pauline Gorley even though she is dead. The letter read: "I spun and wove this cloth at Adeline's enough for me a dress and you a shirt, which I made. It is for the wedding, else to be buried in"(To Mrs. Coney, September 1 1910, 102). Stewart presents herself in this scenario both as the narrator and as the facilitator. She is the kind woman who sees another human being in need and who helps ease that pain by providing the necessary contact that will help to establish a reunion between Pike and his family.

Stewart tends to incorporate fictional elements of the U.S. Western hero into most of her accounts, such as complete self-reliance and a celebration of the hardships encountered and overcome in the U.S. West. Indeed, she often downplays the severity of situations she encounters; likely in an effort to amuse audiences who would have more interest in her ventures out into the wild than an account of her domestic drudgery. In *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* Stewart even titles a chapter in which she was caught in a snowstorm "A Charming Adventure." Few people would dare to classify this situation as "charming"; yet, Stewart does so in an attempt to present a more genial view of her experiences. Even as Stewart also celebrates her ability to perform masculine roles and her constant affirmation of her independence, the majority of her letters and her persona can be perceived as uniquely feminine. It is highly unlikely that a male

writer would have represented Zebulon's story of a lost romance or would have interfered in Zebulon's family affairs when the majority of U.S. Westerns written by men center around the theme of violence.<sup>15</sup> Stewart presents herself time and again as taking on the roles of matchmaker, dressmaker, and good Samaritan, roles not typically assigned to the hardened frontiersman.

On the one hand, it might seem easy to suggest that Stewart helped to situate herself within the pervasive mythology of the masculine U.S. West. On the other hand, it is somewhat misguided to incorporate Stewart's story, as well as the stories of women like her into a feminist ideology. Work intent upon incorporating the female experience into a male-dominated domain can sometimes run the risk of presenting such women as feminists. Instead, Sherry Smith may be more accurate in presenting Stewart as "proto-feminist" (181). Scholars of the settlement of the U.S. West such as Annette Kolodny, Glenda Riley, and Dee Garceau all acknowledge the tendency of many feminist scholars to view the U.S. Western experience as representing "feminist ideology." The U.S. West did give rise to a need for the transcendence of traditional notions of womanhood prescribed by nineteenth century Victorian ideals. The fact that suffragettes often attempted to co-opt female figures such as Sacajawea in the U.S. West emphasizes the ways in which history is almost inevitably distorted<sup>16</sup>. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that history is constantly rewritten as new generations emerge, scholarly pursuits shift, and another dimension is added to both the history and mythology of the United States.

*Humor and Caring on the U.S. Western Frontier*

In Stewart's letters, the homesteader heroine protects the community with caring, compassion, and female unity, as opposed to the use of a weapon, as found in westerns such as Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1929). Aside from the epistolary community that Stewart established for herself, the letters reveal a close network of females who, despite lengthy distances between homesteads, managed to foster a strong sense of community and were intent on supporting and aiding each other as well as others in times of need. Evidence of this support appears in accounts of key characters such as Mrs. Louderer, and Mrs. O' Shaughnessey, two widows living alone on the frontier, who are largely characterized by their German and Irish nationalities. Stewart initially describes Mrs. Louderer as being, "a dear old German woman living all alone"(To Mrs. Coney, no date, 66) and Irish Mrs. O'Shaughnessy as having "the merriest blue eyes and the quickest wit" (To Mrs. Coney, no date, 72). Stewart's tendency to note the ethnic nationalities of those who surround her provides insight into the diverse population of the U.S. West. A large number of immigrants populated the U.S. Western territories, drawn by the prospect of acquiring, as the Homesteading Acts did not exclude immigrants and made such settlement possible.<sup>17</sup> O' Shaughnessy is Irish; Mrs. Louderer is German, and Stewart's husband Clyde, is Scottish. Immigrants surround Stewart upon the frontier, and Stewart's depiction of them in her letters often makes use of local color, especially in her recreation of dialogue.

Stewart's letters are filled with color dialect and humor from her very first letter, particularly in her depictions of Clyde: "Once Mr. Stewart asked me if I did not think it a 'gey duir trip'. I told him he could call it gay if he wanted to, but it didn't seem very gay to me" (To Mrs. Coney, April, 18,1909, *LWH* 4).

Additionally, Stewart uses humor to describe Clyde's habits:

I have a very, very comfortable situation, and Mr. Stewart is absolutely no trouble, for as soon as he has his meals he retires to his room and plays his bagpipe, which he calls his 'bugpeep.' It is "The Campbells are Coming" without variations, at intervals, al day long and from seven till eleven at night. Sometimes I wish they would make haste and get here. (To Mrs. Coney, April, 18,1909, *LWH* 5).

Stewart's use of humor is a notable part of the "cowboy humor" found in much U.S. Western writing. In *Horsing Around Contemporary Cowboy Humor* (1991) Lawrence Clayton and Kenneth Davis observe: "Whatever contemporary cowboy's humor is put to, it still mirrors a way of life involving basic elements of the human condition: close contact with nature: exposure to beauty as well as stubbornness of different animals; and personal isolation"(19). The elements that mark lives of hardship suggest that humor exists as a way to cope with dangers and alleviate the stress found in daily ranch life.

For Stewart's earlier letters, humor may have been a way to both assuage her reader and herself of any fears that existed as a result of confronting a new life. While humor may be a natural part of the cowboy culture, women's use of humor helps to establish a sense of balance and serves as a means to appear less threatening. In Kristin McAndrew's *Wrangling Women: Humor and Gender in*

*the American U.S. West* (1996), the author examines how contemporary horsewomen use humor to overcome gender bias in a still largely masculine domain:

These women undeniably use language in ways that reproduce the cowboy culture they inhabit. But when instructing and leading outsiders, who usually do not know much about horses, the horsewomen often seem able to help their guests overcome their own fears even though such encouraging messages must be to some degree covert, because empathy, or even sympathy, for the tourist is unacceptable within that U.S. Western working code that sees outsiders and women as incompetent intruders into the male preserve of Nature. Joking is often the way these women resolve this opposition. (65)

In using humor, women are perceived as a less likely to disrupt the balance of a masculine world. Such de-emphasis of power has long been perceived as a common use of female humor, as Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner reveal in *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*:

Because of the constraints upon women's expression, which in most culture have included taboos against women's appropriation of sexual subject matter and language, women's humor has been described as more gentle and genteel than men's, more concerned with wit than derision, more interested in sympathy than ridicule, more focused on private than public matters. These attributes, along with women's greater reliance on verbal devices of understatement, irony, and self-deprecation have enabled women to mask or defuse the aggressive component of humor making, thereby minimizing the risks involved in challenging the status quo. (xxi)

Even as women on the frontier challenged the status quo by taking on new roles and challenging traditional Victorian gender roles, Stewart sets herself up as the butt of the joke when she recounts a joke played upon her on a camping excursion when the cook promised her "cackleberries":

I had finished my egg and steak and I told Herman I was ready for my

cackleberries. 'Listen to her now will you?' he asked. And then indignantly, 'How many cackleberries do you want? You haf and so many as I haf cooked for you.' 'Why Herman, I haven't had a single berry' I said. Then such a roar of laughter. Herman gazed at me in astonishment, and Mr. Watson gently explained to me that eggs and cackleberries were one and the same. (To Mrs. Coney, n.d., *LWH* 175)

The cackleberry story reinforces the role of humor in the U.S. West. By including the account of her own possible embarrassment Stewart acknowledges the use of humor and jokes on the frontier and serves to situate her own use of humor within her writing as non-threatening and part of the U.S. Western literary tradition. Humor served as a means to cope with often daunting situations and served to forge bonds between those of disparate backgrounds, bonds that were crucial to forge community and ensure survival.

Necessity served to overcome any division that could be caused by disparate backgrounds and strengthened the bonds of community and friendship as well. Elinore, Mrs. Louderer and Mrs. Mrs.O' Shaughnessy joined together to create a sense of unity that extended beyond the threesome as they reached out to others on the ranching frontier, particular to other women. In one letter to Mrs. Coney, Stewart relates the story of Cora Bell Edmondson, an adolescent girl orphaned shortly after birth and raised by her grandparents. As a result of the health problems and ages of the elderly couple, Cora Belle was largely responsible for the care of their property and both grandparents. As the Edmondsons struggled with intense poverty, Cora Belle was left wanting for basic necessities like shoes and clothing. Cora's plight causes Stewart, Mrs. Louderer,

Mrs. O’O’ Shaughnessy, and even Clyde to come together to provide for the poverty-stricken girl as they anticipated her arrival at the Stewarts’ home for a sewing bee. Stewart’s letters reveal the care and preparations of the group:

I had saved some sugar bags and flour bags. I knew Cora Belle needed some underwear, so I made her some little petticoats of the larger bags and some drawers of the smaller. I had a small piece of white yarn that I had no use for and of that I made a dear little sunbonnet with a narrow edging of lace around and also made a gingham bonnet for her. Two days before the time, came Mrs. Louderer, laden with bundles, and Mrs. O’ Shaughnessy, also laden. We had all been thinking of Cora Belle. (To Mrs. Coney, August, 15, 1910, *LWH* 90)

The letter depicts impromptu aid offered by the four like-minded individuals who saw a fellow occupant of their community in need. It is difficult not to be touched by the story of the young girl, as Stewart further describes her reactions to the kindness shown to her: “... she had her arms full of them and as clutching them so tightly with her work-worn little hands that we couldn’t get them. She sobbed so deeply that Grandma heard her and became alarmed” (To Mrs. Coney, October 6, 1911, *LWH* 126).

This narrative reveals Stewart’s ability to create a compelling story around sentimental subject matter, as was often was the focus of her tales. The veracity of the story does not matter; what does matter is the spirit in which it was written. Stewart’s sentimentality stresses how reality of life on the frontier mandated that people and especially women help one another. When traveling one had to rely on the kindnesses of those they encountered along the way, as water and shelter were often difficult to come by. It was natural to offer and ask assistance of strangers. In *Letters From An Elk Hunt*, Stewart’s pathetic scenario illustrates



both the need for community and the hardships faced by many women on the ranching frontier. Tenets of community dictated that families would help those in need, and women were often facilitators in reaching out to those less fortunate. As the Stewarts, Mrs. Louderer, and Mrs. O' Shaughnessey travel through the desert, Stewart reveals the stark conditions: "We saw many deserted homes. Hope's skeletons they are, with their yawning doors and windows like eyeless sockets. Some of the houses, which looked as if they were deserted, held families. "We camped near one such" (To Mrs. Coney, August, 1914, *LEH* 25). Even though the Stewart family and those around them are managing prosperous homesteads, the hardships which many encountered are apparent in the pathos of her descriptions. Stewart then reveals the plight of the Sanders family. Because they were struggling to get by, the family had no eggs available for Mrs. O' Shaughnessey and Stewart to purchase and were only able to offer poor looking vegetables, which they bought mainly out of pity for the young woman who answered the door. Yet, when Stewart expresses remorse for the poor family Mrs. O' Shaughnessey harshly responds: "Of course they are having a hard time. What of it? The very root of independence is hard times. That's the way America was founded; that is why it stands so firmly" (To Mrs. Coney, August, 1914, *LEH* 31). In this statement Stewart indicates that she views life on the frontier as quintessentially American, and she attributes it to another character in order to maintain her own image of the caring homesteader heroine.

Nonetheless, all members of the party respond to Mrs. Sanders, for

Stewart quickly notes: “The men did not bring back much game; each had left a share with Mrs. Sanders” (To Mrs. Coney, August, 1914, *LEH* 32). While both the men and the women are depicted as helpers in each of these scenarios, the bonds between women were quite necessary in order to establish communities and to maintain some sense of order of life on the frontier. The significance of these communities cannot be understated. As Elizabeth Jameson acknowledges: “Despite notions of genteel womanhood that promised respectability, despite a patriarchal family system, and despite the fact that men got more public recognition for women for their work, women created a female community, which supported them and they helped to shape the communities and politics of the U.S. West” (158). Jameson underscores the significance of the female role, of civilizing and creating an environment that enabled settlement. The isolation of the frontier called for a requirement for community and often a longing for civilization as well. This concept is the key in Annette Kolodny’s *The Land Before Her* (1984), where the metaphor of the garden represents how women played a role in domesticating the U.S. West. Stewart’s depictions of her female community emphasize the concepts that Jameson and Kolodny explore in their works; all three writers underscore the value of women’s roles on the U.S. Western frontier.

Women faced challenges living on the frontier and had to rely upon one another to help maintain tradition and celebration. In one letter Stewart describes how women were instrumental, adding a sense of “normalcy” to everyday events

in spite of limitations of living away from urban areas and an abundance of supplies. This is revealed in her description of a wedding for a young woman in the community and the celebration afterward: "... we borrowed dishes, or, that is, every women who called herself our neighbor brought what she thought we would need"(To Mrs. Coney, no date, *LWH* 58). Stewart's discussion of the community effort shows that on the frontier, being a neighbor meant more than mere proximity to another's home; it meant a willingness to aid in and celebrate or mourn the events in the lives of those within that community. Moreover, it meant security and ultimately survival.

#### *What Does Independence Mean to Women on the Frontier?*

Like the male U.S. Western hero, independence is important to Stewart's depiction of the U.S. Western heroine. Autonomy becomes a pervasive theme in Stewart's letters, as she constantly positions herself as existing beyond the control of her husband, as she maintains self-reliance in her homesteading venture. Sherry Smith notes that Stewart letters reveal "a mythological independence" (181-182). Autonomy and self-reliance becomes key, as it was virtually impossible for anyone to become or remain truly independent on the U.S. Western frontier. People had to be willing to lend and accept help in order to meet and overcome adversity. Independence is, nonetheless, a heroic virtue that Stewart adopted to her version of the U.S. Western heroine. Beyond reliance on another person, independence also extends into the realm of free thought and control over one's life. Such concerns mattered to Stewart, as evident in her resistance to

Clyde's attempts to prevent her from taking a trip that he feels would be harmful for her daughter, Jerrine: "I continued to look abused lest he gets it in his mind that he can boss me. After he had been reduced to the proper plane of humility and had explained and begged my pardon and had told me to consult only my own pleasure in the going and coming and using of his horses, why I forgave him and were friends once more"(To Mrs. Coney, September 28, 1909, *LWH* 24). This incident of quasi-serious and strategic placating occurred early in Clyde and Elinore's marriage and likely helped to establish to both Clyde and readers that marriage did not mean the relinquishing of her independence.

Despite Stewart's assertions of female independence, the pressures of white bourgeois womanhood in the early twentieth century appear throughout her experience. In an early letter to Mrs. Coney, Stewart reveals the difficulty of struggling with her corsets and stockings as she, Jerrine, and Clyde camp on the frontier on their way to Wyoming (To Mrs. Coney, May 24, 1909, *LWH* 11). When faced with life on the frontier many women had to decide whether or not to adhere to the trappings and societal mores of the past.

Hard labor and life on the plains was not conducive to corsets and such restraints imposed upon women, although some did attempt to maintain them. Although Stewart does not openly discuss her eventual discarding of the corset, her descriptions of her activities and photographs suggest that she had indeed shrugged off such trappings and embraced the freedom of life outside of the city. Perhaps it was a sense of decorum that kept her from elaborating on the subject.

Another sense of Stewart's concern for decorum lies in the perplexing situation in regards to her marital status. Her reluctance to admit that she had, in fact, married Clyde Stewart in May 1909, eight weeks after her arrival in Burnt Fork throws the veracity of Stewart's letters into doubt. She does not acknowledge the marriage until June 1910, when she writes to Mrs. Coney and confesses: "The thing I done was to go and marry Mr. Stewart. It was such an inconsistent thing to do that I was ashamed to tell you" (To Mrs. Coney, June 16, 1910, *LWH* 79). Among the possible reasons that Stewart does not tell Mrs. Coney of the wedding from the onset could be that Stewart felt that it was necessary to withhold that information until she had firmly established her persona as a single female homesteader. This is highly probable, since a main aspect of Stewart's allure to her audience was the notion that she was a female taking on homesteading, which was seen as a predominately male activity. Nonetheless, this does not seem to account for the entire reasoning behind Stewart's reticence. After all, homesteading was a popular subject for readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and Stewart maintained a readership based on her ability to create a compelling story. As Stewart's letters also do not appear in *The Atlantic Monthly* until 1913, the initial reticence of revealing her marriage, as well as her divorced status, was in direct correlation with the reaction of Mrs. Coney to her marriage to Clyde, as opposed to losing a widespread readership. Stewart likely anticipated Mrs. Coney's disapproval of her marrying Clyde so quickly, highlighting speculation that the marriage arrangement was likely made prior to

her move to Wyoming. Mrs. Coney appears to have been very important to Elinore, perhaps because Elinore had lost her own parents as a teenager and Mrs. Coney appeared as a surrogate mother. If this were the case then it would be natural that Elinore would be concerned about her approval.

Marriage does matter, as there was a notorious shortage of white women in the early U.S. West, beginning with early western expansion in the eighteenth century and into the early twentieth century. Initially the first white women to head to the U.S. West were prostitutes who, seeing an opportunity to make money, infiltrated mining camps in California. Such shortage prompted the advertisements urging women to go westward to secure husbands.<sup>18</sup> As U.S. westward expansion continued, more Anglo women arrived in the U.S. West, mostly with their families. The numbers had increased by the twentieth century, but men still significantly outnumbered women. After his first wife succumbed to cancer, Clyde may have had difficulty finding a wife on the desolate plains of Wyoming.<sup>19</sup> Since the Stewarts married so quickly after meeting, it is likely that the marriage was discussed before the two set off to Wyoming. In fact, Clyde's ad for a housekeeper may indeed have been an ad for a wife. Perhaps Stewart did not wish to be judged harshly for undertaking marriage to a virtual stranger and kept the marriage hidden. This lapse in truth also raises the questions about the overall veracity of her letters. Yet, Stewart's intentions should not be perceived as entirely fallacious. Paul John Eakin's *Living Autobiographically* (2008) examines issues of truth in relation to autobiographical writing:

Despite our illusions of autonomy and self-determination—‘I write my story, I say who I am’—we do not invent our identities out of whole cloth. Instead, we draw on the resources of the cultures we inhabit to shape them, resources that specify what it means to be a man, a woman, a worker, a person in the settings where we live our lives. It is easy to posit that we draw on models of identity as we go about the business of making our selves, whether in our lives or in writing about them; it is much more challenging, however, to specify how this process works, especially because I think our practice of self-construction is largely unconscious. (22)

In Eakin’s estimation, environmental and cultural factors play a significant role in the creation of identities. Eakin’s discussion of self-construction lends itself to my previous arguments regarding Stewart’s creation of the “woman homesteader” drawing upon the mythology and literature of the U.S. West, as well as the people and natural environment that surrounded her. Her immersion in the Wyoming frontier aided in the development of her epistolary self. If this self-construction is, as Eakin posits, “unconscious,” then Stewart is effectively presenting herself and her version of the U.S. West in a manner she perceived as “true.” In spite of any discrepancies, the letters are entertaining and offer unique insights into the life of a homesteading woman.

### *Bridging the Distance*

Stewart’s dedication to her letter writing reveals much about life for women in the U.S. West. Such women were separated from their families and friends whom they had left behind. As a result, letters became touchstones. Even though Stewart longed to leave Boulder it was important for her to maintain her friendship with Mrs. Coney and perhaps revel in her own new experiences. Her main objective was to entertain Mrs. Coney and to provide the widow with

experiences that she herself could not physically engage. She could instead live vicariously through the narratives created in Stewart's letters. Elinore's letters reveal and obviously reciprocated a strong affection for Mrs. Coney. Although readers are never privy to Mrs. Coney's letters, Elinore does refer to them as well as to gifts that Mrs. Coney had sent to both her and Jerrine. Elinore acknowledges such a token where she says of Jerrine: "The books you sent her, "Black Beauty" and "Alice in Wonderland" have given her more pleasure than anything she has ever had. She just loves them and is saving them, she says for her own little girls" (To Mrs. Coney, May 5, 1913, *LWH* 223). This gift-giving illustrates the genuine affection between the two women, as Mrs. Coney not only responds to Elinore's letters but also exhibits thoughtfulness towards Jerrine. The discussion of the children's books that Mrs. Coney sent highlights the significance of literature and reading in the relationship of the two women that extends to Stewart's child. While Stewart shares her tales of adventures with Mrs. Coney, Mrs. Coney reciprocates by sharing works of literature with Jerrine.

In response to that isolation which women homesteaders often felt, Stewart developed a network of women with whom she corresponded. Letters afforded Stewart the opportunity to "visit" with her friends when travel was not possible. Although Stewart does not speak openly of longing for her former life, it is probable that like most settlers and homesteaders, she felt the pangs of isolation as she adapted to life on the Wyoming frontier. Mrs. Coney was the main recipient of Stewart's letters, and as mentioned previously, was instrumental



in having those letters published. Later Stewart added Maria Wood, who established correspondence by writing to Stewart in response to having read her letters in *The Atlantic Monthly*. After Mrs. Coney's death Stewart established a correspondence with Mrs. Coney's daughter, Florence Allen, which continued long after Stewart's popularity as a magazine writer had waned. Stewart's enduring epistolary relationships highlights her needs, first, to write for an audience and second, to maintain connections with the world beyond the small town of Burnt Fork, and third, to the significance of writing in her life.

The exchange of letters as a means to forgo isolation is apparent in other literary works as well. In *Epistolary Responses* Anne Bower comments on how Ivy Rowe, the protagonist in Lee Smith's epistolary novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* uses narrative to construct her identity in a manner similar to Stewarts: "When Ivy relates or tells a story, she is not just passing information along--she is positioning herself as an agent of her own experience. When she writes she moves toward or away from others: she forestalls loss: declares her relationship to others, ideas, and events; situates herself in mental and physical space" (Bower 25). Like Stewart, Ivy was isolated in a rural environment, and her letters were the means by which to maintain relationships and to often create meaning of her own life. This could apply to Stewart's motivations as well. When Elinore Pruitt Stewart wrote letters she not only established a strong sense of community, she also established a sense of identity and used the letters to contend with hardships and triumphs and to inspire other women to do the same. Even prior to the

publication of Stewart's letters it is important to remember that Stewart, was in fact, writing for a public audience.

It was and still is common practice to share letters and to distribute them freely, as Rebecca Earle so aptly notes in *Epistolary Selves*: "Letter writers indicated those original passages which should not be circulated, rather than the reverse"(7). This notion of a public versus private audience is perhaps the reason that the letters contain few intimate details of Stewart's life. The concept of the private letter was not as prevalent as it is today, but one must question whether or not letters can truly ever be private. Like all forms of writing, once the author puts words on paper, they no longer belong solely to the writer. Yet this seems to be Stewart's intent; she did not mean to be the sole keeper of her thoughts and experiences; she intended for them to be shared. That Stewart relished the notion of her letters being shared is obvious in a 1913 letter to Mrs. Coney: "I have been preparing a set of indoor outings for invalids. You telling me your invalid friends enjoyed the letters suggested the idea. I thought to write of little outings I take might amuse them, but wanted to write just as I took the little trips, while the impressions were fresh; that is why I have not sent them before now"(To Mrs. Coney, June 12, 1913, *LWH* 228). Elinore's quest for an audience continued long after her publishing career ended.

That Elinore expressly wrote letters to be shared among a community of readers is evident in some of her letters, as she makes requests for her letters to be shared among a community of readers: "This letter is tiresomely long, I know but

it seems I could make it no shorter and I thought of you as I write it so I called it your letter. If you like it would you please send it to Mrs. Burlingame?" (To Florence Allen, August 20, 1925, qtd. in George 113). The request to pass on the letter extends Stewart's community and connects her correspondents to one another as they communicate with one another in the sharing of Elinore's letters.

### *Gender Roles and Domesticity*

Stewart's heroine also exhibits physical strength by taking on duties that were commonly associated with males. Homesteading was difficult work and more people were unsuccessful than they were successful.<sup>20</sup> As a result, it was necessary for all members of a family to perform their share of the duties, as the lands that were available for homesteading were often difficult to farm and maintain. There was continually work to be done and it was virtually impossible to subscribe to what had traditionally been perceived as acceptable performance of gender roles. Women often filled the void left by men when ranch hands were not available. Stewart recounts a particular episode in which Clyde needed help with mowing; Stewart performed the task while he was out searching for male help:

I had enough cut before he got back to show him I knew how, and as he came back manless, he was delighted as well as surprised. When you see me again you will think I am wearing a feather duster, but it is only because I have been said to have as much sense as a 'mon' and that is an honor I never aspired to me in my wildest dreams. (To Mrs. Coney September 11, 1909, *LWH* 17)

In this passage Stewart repeats how Clyde directly compares her ingenuity to a man's. While Clyde exhibits what may, from a contemporary view, be revealed

as sexism, to Clyde this comment is a compliment. Not only did Stewart redefine gender roles in terms of work distribution; she also sought to define them by asserting a position of power within the family.

Stewart's accounts reveal how women's roles had to extend beyond the realm of the domestic in order to ensure survival for themselves and their families in the U.S. West. Instead of merely being confined to the household, women were often expected to perform outside tasks as well, thus doubling their workloads. Stewart describes performing domestic duties and ranching duties: "I have done most of my cooking at night, have milked several cows by day, and have done all the hay-cutting, so you can see I have been working. But I have found time to put up thirty pints of jelly and the same amount of jam for myself" (*LWH* 17). Ironically, isolation on the frontier also meant that it was difficult to obtain services that were often necessary for survival. As a result, women had to rely upon home remedies in order to treat various illnesses. This added to the roles that they performed. "Out here where we get no physician we have to dope ourselves, so that I had to be housekeeper, nurse, doctor, and general overseer. That explains my long silence"(213). Considering the amount of work that had to be done it is amazing that Stewart found time to write. Stewart's revelations about work in these letters are rare. For the majority of the letters, she concentrates upon the positive aspects of homesteading, the beauty of the land, and her "adventures" with Jerrine.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of any hardship that Stewart may describe in her venture, she

remains firm that homesteading is a positive means of alleviating poverty and of providing independence for women. Elinore Pruitt Stewart penned the following words to present an optimistic view of life as a homesteader: "...any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of the sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed, will have plenty to eat, and a home of her own in the end"(To Mrs. Coney, January 23, 1913, *LWH* 214). Stewart's assertions regarding homesteading as an instrument for female independence is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's call for women to have a "room of their own." For both Stewart and Woolf, the ability to establish independence and autonomy are linked to isolation and some degree of providing for one's self. For many people in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, homesteading offered opportunities to transcend to some extent roles prescribed by class and gender status. Stewart seemed to remember life back in Boulder and even when faced with the drudgery of life on the frontier seemed to favor the life that she had chosen over the life that she had left behind. Her letters reveal a strong advocacy for homesteading, so much so that her letters could be seen as an advertisement for life on the Wyoming frontier. In a letter to Mrs. Coney, dated 1913, four years after her homesteading venture began Stewart clearly expresses the hope that she has in homesteading as an answer to the disenfranchised:

When I read of the hard times among the Denver poor, I feel like urging them every one to get out and file on land. I am very enthusiastic about women's homesteading. It really requires less strength and labor to raise plenty to satisfy a large family than it does to go out and wash, with the satisfaction of knowing that their job will not be lost to them if they care to keep it. ...

Whatever is raised is the homesteader's own, and there is no house rent to pay. (*LWH* 214)

While homesteading offered certain economic advantages, one still required money to make the necessary improvements to “prove up” and to pay the ten-dollar processing fee. There was also the dilemma of being able to stock the ranch and obtain the provisions needed to begin the quest of creating land that offered sufficient sustenance. Despite Elinore Pruitt Stewart's assertions to the contrary, it would be naïve to suppose that Clyde provided no such assistance to Stewart. Assistance or not, Stewart reiterates the message of independence, whether real or imagined, in letters that serve as an anthem of female empowerment.

#### *Communing With Nature*

Like the male U.S. Western hero, Stewart emphasizes the role of nature, showing how she finds solace and strength from the land around her instead of striving to conquer it. In spite of her busy schedule she made time to set off on excursions out into nature, often alone or with Jerrine. She evinces no fear of the unknown and seems to revel in the hardships that they may encounter along the way. In her first letter from Wyoming, Stewart comments on the beauty of the land around her as she observes a sunset from their camp: “It seemed we were driving through a golden haze. The violet shadows were creeping up between the hills, while away back of us the snow-capped peaks were catching the sun's last rays” (To Mrs. Coney, May 24, 1909, *LWH* 10). Stewart's ability and willingness to embrace the natural world around her is very much contrary to early life on

the homesteading frontier, whereas Kolodny observes that women were relegated to the household while men enjoyed the freedom of riding free along the prairie: “...few women were actually able to enjoy the new landscape in the way the promotionalists had promised. As on every previous frontier, it was men who reaped the pleasure of the garden”(Kolodny 9). Clyde’s acquiescence and offering his horses to Stewart provides her a means to escape ranch life drudgery. Life seems most hectic when Stewart seeks the freedom of the outdoors to sustain her soul and to recharge her energy. Stewart responds positively to the wildness” of the world around her and within herself, a concept that Clarissa Pinkola Estes explores in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992). By calling for the need for contemporary women to “resurrect the wild woman.”<sup>22</sup> Estes hearkens back to those women who sought to replace the “cult of domesticity” with a more independent concept of “new womanhood.” The U.S. West became a place to exert the ideology of new womanhood, which called for independence and entrance into the public sphere. While men were traditionally the “masters” of the land, Stewart’s appreciation for the beauty and spirit of the outdoors broadens the scope of women’s experience as dictated by the New Woman ideal. Elinore Pruitt Stewart’s zest for excitement and her penchant for scouring the frontier unarmed and without a male to guide her reveals that wild spirit, that primal connection to nature and to all things wild: “If there is anything to open the heart to then world it is a long ride in these hills these golden September days” (To Mrs. Allen, May 15, 1928, cited in George 136). The land, often feminized by males as a realm to

be conquered, becomes a place of health, strength, and freedom as Stewart ventures out on her own, away from the realm of the domestic. Stewart is not alone in her unwavering respect and awe for the land; many frontier women shared the same view. It was traditionally women on the U.S. Western frontier who recognized misuse of land and who spoke out about the depletion of resources, areas that a man often overlooked until it was too late.<sup>23</sup> While Stewart does not speak out about any such misuse within her letters, her account of the ventures of her husband Clyde focuses largely on his hunting expeditions and trips for supplies. The writer appears to garner power and strength from the land. Unlike monetary or violent power often associated with men, Stewart seems to gain spiritual solace from the beauty around her. In a 1915 letter to Maria Wood she celebrates the natural world: “Should you like to sleep on a bed of pine boughs? I just rejoice that I can. The very thought is health inspiring to me. I cannot understand why people go to resorts for their outings when a whole beautiful world is theirs for the taking” (qtd. in George 36). This quote further illustrates the simple enjoyment and peace that Elinore found in nature. While Stewart does undoubtedly find peace in the natural world, it is impossible to deny that her depictions of nature have been romanticized. As previously discussed, she does not even acknowledge the dangers presented to her at being caught in a blizzard. This romanticizing is further evidence of Stewart’s engagement of literary license, and enables her to further develop her heroine.



*U.S. Western Women Writers*

Stewart's presentation of the female homesteader as a heroine draws from some of the principles of the male U.S. Western hero, such as independence and bravery. Her depictions compare to other female U.S. Western writers who were writing about female homesteaders during the same time period. B.M. Bower's *Lonesome Land* (1912), Mari Sandoz's *Slogum House* (1937), and Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918) all focus on the topic of homesteading and depict female protagonists who represent various incarnations of the U.S. Western female heroine.

In *Lonesome Land*, Bower describes how Valeria (Val), travels to Montana to be reunited with and marry Manley, her former beau, who has established his homestead on the Montana plains. Unlike Stewart's successful union with Clyde Stewart, Val encounters difficulties with her alcoholic husband that cannot be overcome. That Val's image of life in the U.S. West is romanticized is clear when her husband's friend, Kent, comes to meet her train in Manley's stead: "She had always heard that cowboys were chivalrous, brave, and fascinating in their picturesque dare-deviltry, but from the lone specimen which she had met she could not see that they possessed any of these qualities"(11). Val's preconceived image of the cowboy reveals the power of U.S. Western mythology.

Instead of an adventurous life in the U.S. West, Val endures poor domestic conditions, prairie fires, and abuse at the hands of her alcoholic horse-thief

husband, who is eventually murdered by the sheriff. In the end of the novel Val is taken from the homestead and into town and her future remains uncertain, for as Kent observes: “There’s been misery enough for her out here to kill a dozen women”(Bower 322). Such a statement reveals the harsh life out in the U.S. West that many people, male or female, were not equipped to endure. Unlike Stewart’s depiction of the independent homesteader who finds happiness in her frontier life, Valeria’s experience reveals the potential dangers encountered by women who traveled from the east with naive and often romanticized ideals regarding life in the U.S. West.

Where Bower portrays the female homesteader as defenseless and at the mercy of the prairie and unscrupulous men, Mari Sandoz’s protagonist, Gulla Slogum, offers quite a different depiction in the novel *Slogum House*. Gulla becomes ruthlessly driven to acquire land. Her lust to increase her land holdings is so great that she prostitutes her daughters, becomes a madam, and forces those within her employ to falsify homesteading claims in order to increase her land holdings. Sandoz’s exaggerated depiction reveals the dangers of life in the U.S. West in regards to gender. In her quest for power Gulla Slogum displaces her husband as head of household, who moves out of the home. While Stewart’s homesteading experience seeks to balance the realms of the masculine and feminine, Gulla renounces all traditionally female roles and becomes power-driven and (in essence), masculine. On the one hand, the novel can be viewed as didactic in nature, intending to warn against the tenets of “New Womanhood,”

which would broaden the scope of women's roles to enable them to become corrupted. On the other hand, it disrupts the image of the domestic angel in the house and exemplifies the reality that women are as corruptible as men. The novel's events also present concerns as to the changing gender roles and depicts problems associated with those who attempted to illegally obtain land, which was a reality of homesteading.

In contrast to both Val and Gulla, Cather's heroine in *My Antonia* comes somewhat closer to Stewart's own construction of the female homesteader. Antonia belongs to an immigrant family that settles on a homestead in Nebraska. After her father's death, Antonia's hard work and perseverance maintains her family's ranch. Like Stewart's stint in Colorado, Antonia also ventures into "town." She soon learns, however, that she prefers life on the homestead and returns to raise her family. Cather's character has commonalities with Stewart herself who rejected life in Denver and chose a family and rural life in Wyoming. While Stewart's "female homesteader" is constructed in a feminine voice through Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Cather's "Antonia" is depicted through the voice of a male character, Jim. This enables Antonia to be depicted in a more celebratory nature, as the admiration of her strength is evidenced in Jim's description of her, whereas Elinore Pruitt Stewart's presentation of "the Female Homesteader" is tempered by the need for modesty, as she is allegedly depicting her own life. In spite of all the differences in literary construction, what Bower, Sandoz, Cather, and Stewart all reveal is that the female homesteader played a role in the literature of the

American U.S. West, even though her character was often overshadowed by the more heroic and mythical image of the cowboy and frontiersman.

Stewart's letters deserve consideration as texts that belong to the literature of women and of the U.S. West as she constructed an epistolary identity as a response to the U.S. Western literary tradition and to the social climate created by New Womanhood. Stewart's letters offer clear insights into the gender roles and the hardships and possibilities associated with homesteading. A closer look at her narrative construction reveals that above all, Stewart's primary contribution is that of a writer. Her epistolary texts can be read as short stories that transform the traditional male U.S. Western hero into that of the U.S. Western female heroine. Her work serves to integrate the image of women more positively into the U.S. Western literary tradition and highlights the significance of letters as a literary genre.

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<sup>1</sup> In actuality, Stewart was not widowed but divorced. See George, *The Adventures of the Woman Homesteader*, pp. 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Stewart's association with *The Atlantic Monthly*, see George, pp. 18-20. Also see Sedgwick, *The Happy Profession*.

<sup>3</sup>For more information regarding the homestead Acts of 1909 and 1917 please see Allen, "Homesteading and Property Rights: or, 'How the U.S. West Was Really Won.'"

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed account for the early events of Stewart's life and the events that influenced her decision to homestead see George, pp. 10-11.

<sup>5</sup>For more information regarding the marriage of Stewart and Henry Rupert as well as the information that substantiates that Henry was in fact, still living, see George, pp. 4-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Garceau, "Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Place in the Mind." pp 1-5.

<sup>8</sup> See Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders: The Perplexing Case of Elinore Pruitt Stewart." pp. 163-183.

<sup>9</sup> Clyde remained until 1940, but was unable to maintain the ranch. He leased it in 1940. He died in Montana in 1948 at the age of 80. George, pp. 195-196.

<sup>10</sup> Elinore actually published articles in the *Kansas City Star* and engaged in short story writing as well. See George, 5-8.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Western hero based on real figures.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the development of the U.S. Western hero, see Steckmesser, *The U.S. Western Hero in History and Legend*. 3-12.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the popularity of the U.S. Western see. Nichols, "U.S. Western Attractions: European and American." Spurgeon, *Exploding the U.S. Western*. Tompkins. *U.S. West of Everything*.

<sup>14</sup>For the complete story see: George, pp. 100- 115.

<sup>15</sup> See Spurgeon, *Exploding the U.S. Western*. Tompkins, Janet. *U.S. West of Everything*. Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of The American Superhero*.

<sup>16</sup> See Heferrnan and Medlicot, "A Feminine Atlas? Sacagewea, the Suffragettes and the Commemorative Landscape in the American U.S. West, 1904–1910." pp. 109-31.

<sup>17</sup>According to census report Immigrant made up 40.8 % of Wyoming's population in 1900. Clyde Stewart was also Scottish. See Luebke, *European Immigrants in the American U.S. West*. pp. vii-xvii.

<sup>18</sup> See Riley, *The Female Frontier*, pp. 14-41

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<sup>19</sup> Clyde was married to Cynthia Hurst from 1895 until she died from cancer in 1907. For more information see: George, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> See Garceau, *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater, Wyoming, 1880-1929*.

<sup>21</sup> This is what prompted Susan K George to title her biography of Stewart *The Adventures of The Woman Homesteader*.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion of this resurrection and explanation of the archetype see: Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. pp. 23-37.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the connection between women and the land see Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the America Frontiers, 1630-1860*. pp. 5-18.

## CHAPTER 3

### From Elizabeth Corey To Bachelor Bess: An Epistolary Transformation

In June of 1909, twenty-one year old Elizabeth “Bess” Corey, a schoolteacher from Marne, Iowa, traveled to Fort Pierre, South Dakota, to stake a homestead. For Bess and many women like her, homesteading appeared to be a means to develop financial independence through property ownership. From 1909 to 1919, Bess lived in South Dakota where she supported herself as a schoolteacher and labored to “prove up” on her claim. In letters that she primarily addressed to her mother, Margaret Corey, who remained in Iowa, Bess Corey reveals the difficulties unique to single women on the U.S. Western frontier. These letters provide insights into the modes of self-representation prevalent in the epistolary genre, particularly in regards to issues of gender. For Bess letters naturally serve as a means to connect to her family. They transcend this aspect, and her epistolary representations become inextricably linked to the construction of her gender identity and her quest for independence.

#### *The Role of the Editor*

Phillip Gerber, an English professor at SUNY at Brockport, compiled Bess’ letters for publication in 1909. According to Gerber, John Borst, a curator of manuscripts at the South Dakota historical society first brought the manuscripts to Gerber’s attention when Gerber was visiting Pierre, South Dakota. Paul Corey, Bess’s younger brother had donated the letters to the historical society. Gerber describes his instant fascination with Bess’s letters once he and his wife began perusing the content of the box that Borst had presented to him: “I skimmed the

letter my wife handed me. Then another. By the time I had tasted a third, selected somewhat at random, I was hooked. This was a writer, no question about it”(xxi). Gerber’s exploration of Bess’s life and his interest in her letters led him to contact Bess’ youngest brother, the then eighty-three year old Paul Corey, who was instrumental in effectively recreating Bess’s life from her letters.

Gerber’s need to contact Paul Corey highlights some of the obstacles that many editors face when piecing together events through the sole use of letters. Gerber, like any modern editor, notes challenges that he addressed when making Bess’s handwritten letters accessible to contemporary readers. He indicates any changes that he made to the text to promote clarity, even though he sought to maintain the original integrity of Bess’s correspondence by leaving the majority of the writing intact, including the frequent misspellings. Gerber clearly explains instances when he interjected his own hand into Bess’s letters:

I have used bracketed additions in other instances as well: to correct obvious omission of letters or words; to call attention to errors of fact or intention; to clarify misspellings that will create problems for the reader if not dealt with; to complete pairs of dashes; to make further identification of persons for whom only initials are provided; and to regularize certain lapses in punctuation that raise questions of intent. (xxvi)

Gerber’s admission emphasizes the significance of the editor’s role in presenting material. Not only is it the editor’s discretion to determine what to include or omit, but the editor may have a hand in further altering the material as well. The editor may make changes without revealing them to the reader, although such changes seems to present ethical dilemmas and violate the trust of the reader.

William Decker discusses the role of the editor in the twentieth century in



*Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before the Age of*

*Telecommunications*: “Committed to disciplined inquiry, and avoiding too warm an homage to the author (although publication itself is an homage) letter volumes of our century tend to avoid the idealized memorials of many nineteenth century volumes—the heavily edited eulogistic section, the heroic life and letters” (8). In the name of editorial objectivity, Decker stresses a need to avoid presenting an idealized image of the writer. This idealization might occur if the editor were related to the author or had a personal stake in presenting the author in a favorable light. It is unlikely that Bess’s letters contained anything of a scandalous nature, but if they had, Paul Corey probably would have removed such material before donating the letters to the Historical Society.

Gerber’s unbiased depiction enables him to correct any errors, such as the grammatical ones that he addressed in the editor’s note. The following quote from Bess’ letters illustrates the type of corrections that Gerber makes throughout the collection: “He took me across the country t [w] o afternoons [;] once we drove ten or twelve miles one afternoon and about twenty another (To Margaret Corey, June 22, 1909, p. 9). The brackets clearly indicate that Gerber has changed Bess’s previous spelling of “to” to the corrected “two.” Additionally, his addition of a semi-colon enables the sentence to be read more effectively. As one can see, these types of changes do not interfere with Bess’s intended meaning, and Gerber establishes trust between himself and reader because he acknowledges these minor corrections in the introduction to the text.

### *Single Women Homesteaders*

In the mid-nineteenth century many single women viewed the West as an ideal place for single women to procure a husband, given the disproportionate ratio of men to women. There were also women who homesteaded with their husbands.<sup>1</sup> Against this background of husband hunting, Bess Corey represents the women who looked to the West as a place of possible self-improvement and self-reliance, *without* the bonds of marriage. While advertisers and magazines sought to romanticize the appeal of homesteading, the reality of homesteading made failure more probable than success.<sup>2</sup> Bess's venture was remarkable in that she eventually succeeded in attaining her goal of property ownership, despite the steep legal requirements of homesteading. It is important to note, however, that while Bess did achieve her goal of owning land, she was never actually able to support herself from that land. Instead, it was her career as a schoolteacher and odd jobs as cook or housekeeper during the summer months when school was not in session that allowed her to sustain herself. Her need to procure outside employment highlights the problems associated with homesteading and the difficulty of making a living from the land. Teaching was a common choice of occupation for many women who needed to support themselves. According to the 1910 U.S. Census, in South Dakota teaching was listed as the second most common occupation for women; by 1920 it had become the first<sup>3</sup>.

### *Elizabeth Corey as Teacher*

Teaching is represented within her letters as a key aspect of Elizabeth's Corey's identity. In the tradition of prairie teachers, Elizabeth Corey stayed with

various families throughout the different school semesters. Teaching jobs were not constant and teachers often had to move from one school to the next, as contracts were negotiated on a yearly and sometimes semesterly basis. These moves and varying forms of lodging supplied Corey with a constant stream of characters that she introduced to her readers in her letters. The first family that Elizabeth boarded with was the Stones. This was a positive experience, and Bess reveals a genuine affection for the Stones and their four children whom she humorously referred to as “the pebbles.” Bess’s experience living with families enabled her to gain firsthand insight into the harsh realities of life on the South Dakota frontier and exhibit the gratitude she felt at having a steady income:

The Stones are wretchedly poor. You can’t buy things on time here and Mrs. S. admitted today that she couldn’t send for what she needed yesterday because they were at the end of their rope. When folks here get land broke and raise their living they live fat but poor people who haven’t got much breaking done have to scratch. I’m a lucky dog though--I have an eight month school instead of six and may get \$45 instead of \$40 so you don’t need to bother about me at all. I’ll not have to suffer as lots do in this new country. (To Margaret Corey, August 21, 1909, 26)

Corey’s view of her financial situation is overly optimistic given that she had not yet begun to encounter the financial difficulties of maintaining her homestead and meeting her expenses on her salary.

When Bess had a positive living situation it was easier to endure the difficulties of trying to prove up while trying to earn a living through teaching. Bess Corey’s letters also reveal the difficulties that teachers encountered when moving to new areas. She expresses her reservations of returning to an unpleasant teaching situation in one letter: “I just don’t know whether to come back here

next year or not. Its 'the limit.' I never saw such a neighborhood. Your hair would raise on end if I should tell you some things"(To Margaret Corey, March 22, 1915, 278). In spite of the difficulties she encountered, Elizabeth Corey relates events to her family that indicate she was successful in her role as an educator, as she related in her discussion of the praise she received at a teaching convention "At first--Oh! You can't imagine the satisfaction of feeling that these years of hard work had really counted. That I'd 'Risen from the Ranks' in my profession. That I'd won the respect and friendship of those 'higher up [.]'"

While Bess did encounter difficulties and was often discouraged at being unable to live on her homestead full--time, her letters reveal that she gained a strong sense of satisfaction and belonging in her position as a teacher. Bess's epistolary discourse also emphasizes the struggle to maintain the homestead, in descriptions of the jobs that she has to perform in order to support herself financially and improve her land. The editor of her letters, Phillip Gerber comments on her constant work, "She traveled west quite relying upon her ability to get a teaching job which would bring in those dollars so essential for hiring the heavy work to be done in making her claim habitable: building a shack, breaking the sod, dredging a dam, fencing the garden"(xxix). Her teaching career enabled her earn money without completely relying on either agriculture or ranching, ventures that required a substantial amount of investment money and placed her at the mercy of nature. Her letters incorporate both the difficulty of homesteading and being a teacher on the frontier. Teaching became a life-long occupation for Bess, and in 1926 Bess returned to high school, so that she could continue in her profession.

Many teachers, like Corey, were forced to return to school in order to maintain teaching licensure after professional requirements had changed, and teachers were no longer to maintain their status with merely an eighth grade education. Bess Corey exhibited her characteristic tenacity; she earned her diploma in 1927 from Fort Pierre High School when she was nearly forty years old.

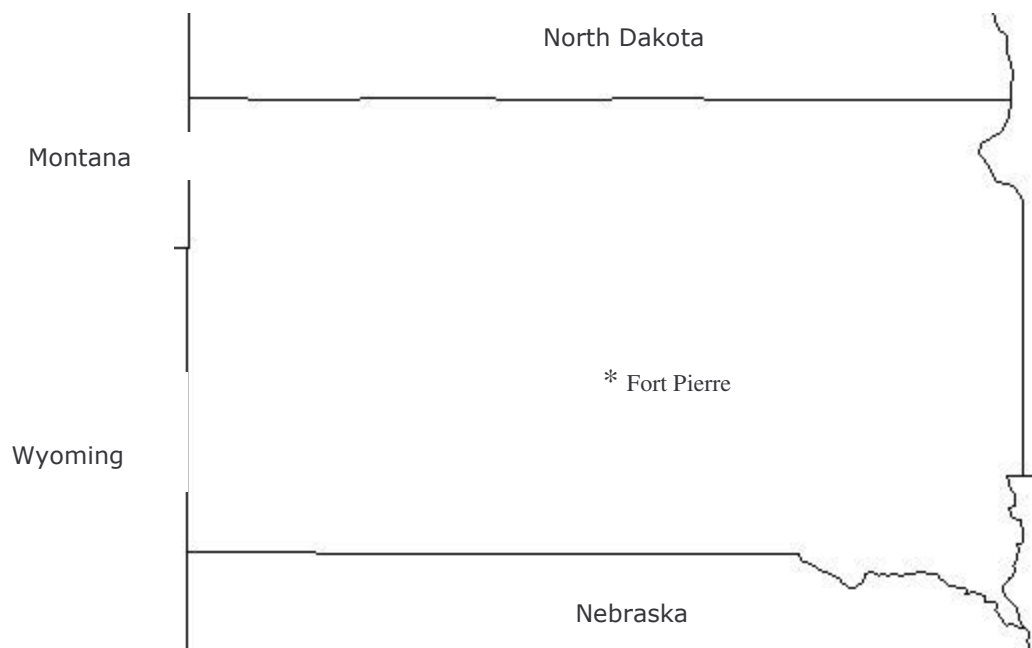


Figure 2: Fort Pierre, South Dakota  
The closest town to Bess Corey's homestead

### *The Epistolary Relationship*

Writing letters helped Bess and other emigrants to bridge the gap between themselves and the friends and family that they had left behind. As Bess wrote letters regularly, she related the most mundane and the most significant aspects of her daily life. Some letters include accounts of daily chores: “I started bread Friday evening. I suppose you wonder how I kept my yeast from freezing”(52). Others letters include accounts of special events, which were a welcome interruption from the monotony of work: “Last evening (Monday) I attended a party down the line five or six miles. Never had such a howling good time in my life”(78). Writing letters helped her to fend off homesickness, maintain familial relationships, and recount local gossip and activities. If letters were a lifeline for Bess, they were a source of entertainment for her family back in Iowa. For contemporary readers they similarly offer chronicles of life on the Dakota plains. In the introduction to Bess’s collected letters, Paul Corey recounts the significance of Bess’ letters in the daily lives of the Corey family:

... the arrival of one of Bess’s letters became a high point in relieving the monotony of farm life. The envelope was always addressed to ‘Mrs. M.R. Corey.’ Mother never opened it immediately. It lay on the table where she sat at mealtime and was opened and read only after all the family was present and had finished eating the midday meal (dinner) or the evening meal (supper). (xviii)

Paul Corey’s description of the ceremony surrounding Bess’ letters illustrates the importance of letters in the daily lives of Bess and the Corey family. The sight of the unopened letter created anticipation and served to reinforce the reading of the

letter as an event. Through the sharing of the letter, it is evident that privacy was not an expectation of either Bess or her family. Where, in the twenty first century one generally expects, perhaps erroneously, that correspondence will be read only by the addressee, Bess's family viewed correspondence as something to be shared and celebrated. While the addressee may have been Bess' mother, it was understood that the entire Corey family would be privy to Bess' words and thoughts. All in all, Bess's letters transcended mere communication and acted as entertainment, read orally the way one may read a story aloud at bedtime. As Bess' letters became part of a tradition, a means for Bess to speak and be present even in her absence, her writing bridged distance in the same way that telephones did in the second half of the twentieth century and that e-mail and text messaging has in the late twentieth and the twenty first century. Additionally, letters helped to create bonds between the Corey family members, as they took interest in Bess who helped add to the history of the Corey clan through her shared experiences.

The sharing of Bess's letters also helped to establish Margaret Corey's power as the arbitrator of Bess's correspondence. As a result, Margaret determined what was meant to be shared with the family and what would remain between Bess and herself. Paul Corey explains the omissions in his foreword to the collected letters:

From time to time Mother would start reading a sentence, hesitate, stop, and then go on, obviously skipping a passage. No one in the family ever dared ask what had been left out. It wasn't until many years later, when I read those letters myself and came upon parts I knew had been omitted in the family reading, that I realized the reason. Those passages concerned things that Victorian custom said only women should hear about. (xx)

While Paul Corey does not elaborate upon the subject matter that was excluded, there could have been many topics that Bess discussed that Margaret Corey would have likely deemed inappropriate for her children: the building of the outhouse, shared news of pregnant neighbors, and the occasional mention of Bess's menstrual cycle would have all been taboo subjects by late Victorian standards. What Paul Corey's observation reveals is the role that Margaret Corey played in editing her daughter's letters, at least in an oral capacity. By censoring what she considered to be inappropriate, Margaret was able to at once construct Bess's experience and reinforce her own role as the arbiter of family standards and social customs.

Even as the family members shared letters, the primary epistolary relationship between Bess and her mother become apparent, as one letter seems to carry on from the next, revealing hidden dialogic properties and the complexities of the somewhat contentious relationship between Bess and her mother. Family arguments and petty squabbles may even grow larger even in absentia, as Bess seems to express animosity regarding her mother's treatment of her, both in the past and in the epistolary present. Perhaps this discontent is related to Bess's own rebellion against ascribed gender norms. Bess nonetheless seems intent in trying to obtain her mother's approval, something she never fully seems to achieve. She appears to bear resentment for what she likely perceived as her mother's ill-treatment of her, since she was basically asked to leave the family home and make her own way, as revealed in an early letter:



Yes I suppose I did have a chance to work for my board at home but you said you could get along better without me than with me and there wasn't room for us all at home and that I could make out better given the circumstances I think it behooves me better to stick it out here even if I do skip a few meals and work for my board sometimes than be a burden on some one else. (To Margaret Corey, July 5, 1909, 14).

Bess's letters are often marked by such assertions in which she anticipates, articulates, and counters criticism in an unspoken dialogue with her reader: "It seems I always have to give up what I want but I suppose this is just my selfishness you are always roasting me about" (190). Although readers are not privy to her Margaret Corey's version of events, Bess's defensiveness seems to stem from what she perceived as her mother's lack of concern. Prickly resentment marks the tone of many of Bess's letters, particularly the early ones, where she rarely seems to miss an opportunity to remind her mother of the difficulties she is facing. In some instances, she even seems to compete with her mother in regards how difficult each is facing, particularly reference to financial problems: "I don't want you to pinch yourself to send me money--guess a little hardship won't hurt me as you've seen plenty of it though not like this"(To Margaret Corey, Nov. 6, 1909, 47). While at first Bess concedes that her mother has experienced hardship, she immediately qualifies her admission by indicating that her situation is far more dire than the elder Margaret Corey can possibly understand.

That the two women, distanced as they were, would engage in such dialogue seems perplexing. The two never seem to resolve the tensions between them, for epistolary conventions call for a strong lapse in the dialogue and cannot be

tempered by the tone of one's voice or the softening effect that face-to-face conversation may have. This absence of a softening tone or gesture is exemplified in Bess's offer to be available if her mother needed her:

I've been in hot water ever since I received your letter. I feel as if I packed my suitcase and left for Iowa at once that before I had been under your rough twenty-four hours someone would be saying that I came without being asked just to see if I couldn't squeeze a little more money out of you and if I didn't go [to Iowa] the chances are that you would always feel hard toward me for not coming when you needed me. You are bound to misunderstand me any way--you always do. If you want me, just wire and I'll come on the next train. (To Margaret Corey, June 15, 1911, 145)

Bess attempts to offer daughterly support, but the tone of the letter makes the offer seem more like one more conflict between the two women. As Susan Fitzmaurice observes in *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*:

The deictic organization of epistolary worlds is different from that of the canonical face-to-face conversation in one critical respect. Whereas the canonical situation of utterance straightforwardly assumes that the moment of utterance (or coding time) and the moment of reception (or receiving time) are simultaneous, the temporal relation of the production and reception of a letter denies this assumption absolutely. In the case of exchange of letters as utterance, coding time is not identical with receiving time. The second person pronoun 'you' in the personal letter may allow the illusion of the face-to-face interaction typical of conversation but unlike conversation, the practical business of letter writing does not allow the reader to experience the writer's language at the precise moment of utterance or composition. Indeed there is necessarily a gap in time as well as in space between the writing and reading of a letter. (39)

Such delay in the "coding time" and the "response time" allows for the continuation of antagonistic letters, such as the ones Bess sent to her mother. The time lag between the reading and the writing of the letters may have allowed for a more structured response. Instead of time assuaging any tempers, the time lapse may have had the opposite effect of allowing the anger between the two to grow.

This does not mean to imply that Bess and her mother lacked affection for one another. After all, Margaret Corey did save Bess's letters, and the two maintained a prolific correspondence until Margaret Corey's death. It is, however, perplexing to the contemporary reader that with the spatio-temporal distance between them, that they may have been able to resolve the issues instead of fixating upon them within the frame of the epistolary texts.

This type of bickering and passive aggressive behavior marks the majority of the correspondence that Bess offers up to her mother and directly impacts the way Bess depicts herself in her letters to her mother. Theorist Margaret Jolly's examination of the mother-daughter epistolary relationship in her work *In Love and Struggle* (2008) offers insights into the significance of epistolary exchange between women: "Letters have long expressed the idea that mothers have a particular legacy to give to their daughters, that daughters have a particular duty to their mothers, and that this exchange must be maintained even when daughters leave home" (100). It seems that Bess and her mother had clear ideas of the sense of "duty" and "legacy" that each owed the other but neither seems to have had the ability to articulate her needs to the other. In the context of a lifelong relationship the letters express their mutual discontent with one another, which is expressed in Elizabeth Corey's descriptions of her actions and the manner in which the Fort Pierre community perceives her.

Bess alternates between a self-effacing attitude and blatantly bold pride in her accomplishments. At times she praises herself by relating what those around her have said: "Everybody makes such a toot about my nerve, pluck, push, grit, and

so on till it most makes my feet warm for so far it hasn't been half as hard as they seem to think it is still they'd most break their necks to do something for "Miss Corey." I was never so popular before and it makes me feel queer" (To Margaret Corey, Nov. 16, 1909, 53). By acknowledging that that such praise makes her uncomfortable, Bess is able to somewhat brag about her fortitude and even mandate that her mother and family reflect upon the success of her accomplishments. Her aim in relaying the compliments of strangers might be motivated by the hope that her mother will compliment or admire her in a similar manner. This is also in keeping with the social dictums of feminine modesty. On the one hand, Bess attempts to diminish her achievements, but on the other, she highlights them, such as when she issues an indirect challenge to her brothers by demanding of her mother: "Now keep your boys in Iowa till they are twenty one years of age or past" (To Margaret Corey, Aug. 14, 1909, 21). The age of twenty-one is significant in that it is the age that one could file for a homestead and is the same age when Bess left home. In her challenge to her brothers, Bess is intent upon asserting that she, a female, can accomplish what they cannot. She even directly challenges her brother, Olney, by stating: "Don't let Olney get a notion of coming out here for if he persisted in staying he wouldn't last six months"(To Fuller Corey, Aug. 18, 1909, Corey 24). This could be insulting to her brothers, who were privy to the information in the letters through the Corey's nightly readings. It is likely, however, that Bess did, in fact, want her brothers to come out and join her. Bess's later letters suggest that she had fanciful ideas about having family members homestead on the adjoining property to her homestead

and that her brother Fuller took Bess up on her challenge and filed on a homestead. But Bess's encouragement of a westward move seems to have been done with the knowledge that she will be able to best her brothers and succeed where they will inevitably fail. In essence, Bess is determined to be "the man" of the Corey family. This illustrates her struggle with gender-based entitlement of privilege and position and how the privilege and position associated with masculinity was likely one reason that Bess challenged her brothers.

The issuing of a challenge also serves as a means of enticement. Like the ads and pamphlets that urged homesteaders to move U.S. West, Bess engages in propaganda by presenting the availability of land.<sup>4</sup> While such motivation may not have been overt in her early letters, her desire to have family members join her becomes overt in later ones, as she attempts to extend the invitation to those beyond her siblings, and she enlists Margaret Corey's aid: "Say ma you know there is eighty acres east of me and a hundred twenty east of Fuller. Do you suppose Aunt Hat and Aunt Rate would care to file? They always seemed to kind of want to live on a farm again and I think they could live on it and prove up for \$200 each. Its good for hay and pasture" (To Margaret Corey, Jan. 28, 1912, 174). Bess's presentation of the available land makes the prospect of acquiring the homestead seem quite easy and overlooks all of the obstacles that she has faced in attempting to prove up on her own. There seems to be more than the desire to offer her aunts a chance at "easy land". By establishing family on land adjacent to both Fuller and herself, Bess would have some control in determining who would be her neighbors and possibly gain access to the land if her aunts

decided not to remain. Having family members on adjoining land would also provide her with a means of social and perhaps financial support in that she would no longer be struggling alone on the South Dakota frontier.

When Fuller comes out to South Dakota, the family squabbles seem to increase, as Fuller and Bess have some disagreements, primarily about money. Each of them separately wrote to their mother to describe their trials. As might be expected from Bess's depiction in the letters, her mother seems to have favored Fuller. Even more frustrating, Bess had to fend off her mother's apparent accusations that she, Bess, was somehow responsible for Fuller's financial difficulties: "Fuller turned down all kinds of chances to work because he wants to 'live steady on his claim and prove up' Don't you suppose I ever wanted to 'live steady on my claim and prove up'? I can't because I've got to earn my way" (To Margaret Corey, Sept. 23, 1911, 158). Bess reminds her mother that she is facing the same sort of difficulties as Fuller, but that she is forging ahead while recognizing that the need to work will make it more difficult for her to 'prove up' in a timely fashion. Bess resents accusations that she is responsible for Fuller's situation and points to past letters to support her defense: "You say I talked Fuller into the notion of filing up here. Your off your base again. I didn't and Fuller will tell you so himself. You've got a letter from me somewhere in which I said if Fuller didn't think he'd like it out here he better not come"(To Margaret Corey, Oct 7, 1911, 160). Of course, one may not be able to glean the true spirit in which in such letter was written. Again, by warning Fuller to remain in Iowa, Bess

could have been attempting to cast aspersions on Fuller's ability, and once again, hold herself up as "the man" of the Corey family.

The value of epistolary texts as recorders of history appears as Bess acknowledges the powers of having a written record. Because Bess does not keep a diary or journal, which would serve much the same function of recalling the past, the letters provide insights into what has occurred. An oral dialogue, such as the one that Bess alludes to in this letter, would rely entirely upon memory in regards to a "he said/she said" dispute. In order to vindicate herself, Bess can point her mother in the direction of the letters as a written account of what has occurred. Even though Bess does not ask her mother to keep her letters, she is very aware that they are being preserved, and self-consciously refers to that fact in her letters.

The tendency for letter writers to consider the destiny or the end result of their epistolarium is commonplace. This becomes evident in directives regarding either the destruction or the preservation of their letters or in references to past letters, as Bess illustrates above. Bess's collected letters serve as a historical/autobiographical text through which the external reader is able to glean the realities of a particular time period, individual life, or as in the case of the Corey letters, both. These details of daily life in epistolary texts and other forms of life writing can flesh out the "truth" or to add suspense to the epistolary series and as such, illustrates both the complexity of the genre and the relationships that exist between the Corey family, both in Iowa and South Dakota.

Bess' constant diatribe with her mother furthermore serves the purpose of forging an identity both for herself and her mother. Bess establishes Margaret Corey as a difficult person within the epistolary framework, at least in relation to her interaction with Bess. Thus Bess constantly refers to what she calls "digs" that her mother makes towards her: "I wish you would quit digging into me all the time--I don't expect you to write two or three times a week when you're so busy and have so much to think about and if I've got to write a whole chapter on every separate thing I might as well give it up to begin with"

(To Margaret Corey, Oct. 17, 1909, 43). Bess' exhibits her frustration, and she attempts to position herself as the victim in the dialogue. Because the reader is not privy to Margaret Corey's side of the correspondence, he or she must rely on Bess' assessment of the situation or look for clues that illuminate the realities and provide insights into Bess's character and role in the unrest between the two women. While Margaret Corey saved Bess's letters it is unclear whether or not Bess retained Margaret Corey's. None are added to the collection, and their absence may be telling in regards to Bess's affection regarding her mother, given Bess's accusations of her mother's criticism she may not have wanted to preserve them. It seems, after all, that Bess herself is not above taking a few "digs" at her mother as well. In a letter, written to confirm that her brother, Olney had received a birthday gift and whether or not he liked it, Bess makes the following comment: "He is like his Ma it is so hard to get a present that will come within a gun shot of pleasing him"(To Margaret Corey, April 4, 1910, 80). Bess's observations of her



mother's preference for her sons could have influenced Bess to take a more masculine approach in the construction of her letters.

*"With Love, Bachelor Bess"*<sup>5</sup>

Corey's decision to adopt the moniker "Bachelor Bess" in the signing of her letters has many possible origins relating to stressing her unmarried status, her independence, her emerging identity as a "New Woman," and struggle with sexuality. The word "bachelor" would have likely would have been more favorable than words traditionally used to describe older unmarried women, words like "spinster" and "old maid."<sup>6</sup> Such disparaging terminology suggests that a woman who has failed to attract a husband was undesirable or even unfulfilled. Bess's self-proclamation as a "bachelor" is offered in a celebratory manner, and intercepts any attempt by others to refer to her in a differing manner. As many of her letters reveal, she had her share of suitors.<sup>7</sup>

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* the etymology of the term "bachelor" is uncertain but is most likely related to the term, *baccalaria*, which refers to a tract of land. Additionally, the *OED* notes that bachelor is connected to the adjective "Baccalarius-aria, applied in 8<sup>th</sup> c. to rustics male and female who worked for the colonus or tenant of a manus." While, this is interesting, it is unlikely that Bess chose "bachelor" as part of her moniker based upon the origin. It is doubtful that with her limited education she would have been familiar with the etymology of the term. The *OED* indicates that the use of bachelor as an unmarried man dates back to Chaucer (1386). It is more likely that Bess was using the masculine term in the context of the single men who

homesteaded in the U.S. West. It even became a verb, “baching,” to describe the lifestyle of single men, as Dee Garceau explains this in *The Important Things In Life*: “In Sweetwater County ‘baching’ living alone or with single peers-was widely accepted for single men, but not for single women”(57). While residents of South Dakota may or may not have shared the same view about single women living alone, she had some modicum of supervision. Bess would have likely overcome any stigma due to her position as a schoolteacher and the fact that she primarily boarded with families. Garceau’s explanation reinforces the way in which the term “bachelor” or its derivative “bachin” was commonly associated with males. The term “bachelor girl” was also applied to women, and Bess may have been celebrating her unmarried status as a “New Woman” with her name being used interchangeably with the word “girl.” In fact, “Bess” would have been preferable to “girl,” which could be considered derogatory when referring to a grown woman.

The use of language is significant in claiming power within correspondence, and Bess uses it to establish herself as the writer of her own history and experience within an epistolary framework. According to Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*: “Psychoanalysis posits a crucial relationship between language and desire such that language structures desire and expresses therefore both the fullness and futility of human desire--full because we always desire, futile because we are never satisfied”(8). For Bess, her desires can never be fulfilled completely in that she cannot remain on the homestead and prove up. She is not physically able to maintain her land on her own and must rely on men

like her brother to help maintain her property.<sup>8</sup> Her frustration with these gender-dictated limitations manifests itself more vividly when Bess is confronted with the differences between Fuller's situation and her own, as he has the opportunity to remain on his homestead and therefore prove up more rapidly, unlike Bess who must maintain her job as a teacher. Bess desires property of her own, independence, and life without the strictures of marriage and motherhood; she also resents her mother's recognition and legitimization of Fuller's desires over her own. She uses language as means to rename herself, to shake the yoke of conformity and to proclaim her own identity with the title of "Bachelor." Her use of language in this manner empowers her. More than a mere method of reminding readers of her marital status, renaming herself on a symbolic level a rejection of the feminine roles prescribed to her by society. If Judith Butler is correct in her assertion that gender is "culturally constructed" and therefore, unfixed,<sup>9</sup> then Bess's use of language in the construction of her epistolary identity serves to undo the expectations of her family, in particularly her mother. She rejects societal gender roles in presenting her herself first as a disobedient daughter and secondly as a woman who recasts her decision not to marry as a positive choice.

Traditional perceptions of gender roles often dictate some expectation that women will bear and care for offspring and that men will be the breadwinners and protectors. With the advent of the "New Woman" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women were defining and redefining what it meant to "a woman". In essence, the notion of gender was being de/reconstructed. Women like Bess Corey played a crucial role in that process by complicating issues of

gender by embracing both masculine and feminine identities. Judith Butler argues: “Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established”(7). Without disputing the notion of gender as not necessarily fixed, there are limitations to Butler’s argument in that the differences, either biological or physiological, that arise between the sexes inevitably make it difficult to completely overcome all stereotypes and all pre-assigned gender roles.

The determination of Corey’s success in her attempt to redefine herself as more than a wife or dependent female would be based wholly in her letters, as readers do not have access to the other missing side of the correspondence, which would establish her family’s response to the change. The nature of Bess’s epistolarity requires an examination of the term masculinity, particular in regards to how it is defined by society. Judith Halberstam’s observations are useful here:

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into the patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequence of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege. (2)

Relative to wealth distribution and social privilege in the above quote, Bess saw land ownership as a means of gaining some amount of power for herself. She likely felt that acquiring a home and land of her own would prevent her from ever again being forced from her home. Further, by owning such property as an unmarried woman meant that she would have complete control over her domain.

Also, her relationship with her mother and the perceived favoritism that Margaret Corey showed towards her sons may have been an impetus in desiring masculinity. Margaret Corey's observances of Fuller's desires over Bess in connection with their disagreements regarding money and in what Bess observed as her unfair ousting from the Corey farm, would likely have led her to associate preferential treatment with masculinity and would have aided in her securing the approval of her mother as a consequence of Bess having shifted the focus to her traditionally masculine traits.

The question as to whether Bess's desire for masculine privilege make her unfeminine is relevant to what Simone De Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex* (1949): "To be feminine is to be weak, and futile, and docile"(336). These characteristics ascribed to womanhood are ones that Bess resisted in her life in South Dakota. Certainly DeBeauvoir's discussion of femininity refers not to actual femininity but rather to the perception and social expectations of what it means to be female. DeBeauvoir's assertion that: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), relates to Bess and other "New Women" who sought to change the acceptable notions of what type of woman one could become. If DeBeauvoir in 1949 and Butler in 1990 are correct to regard culture as the defining force of gender, void of epistemological tenets, then Bess's rejection of her roles as wife and mother and the creation of her "bachelor" persona can, within the framework of the early twentieth century, be construed as both "masculine" and "feminine." The masculine association of privilege with the word "Bachelor" and the feminized name, Bess, combine to reveal both genders

as present in Bess, in an attempt to defy gender assignments both in her actions as a homesteader and in her epistolary constructs. In claiming and renaming herself as “Bachelor Bess” Elizabeth Corey is reborn and asserts her power as a “New Woman.”

*On Firearms and Female Sharpshooters*

The use of firearms marks a Victorian anxiety about femininity in the U.S. West when women were often placed in situations where they had to carry and shoot firearms<sup>10</sup>. An example of this is the way women were depicted when carrying and shooting firearms. This skill was necessary both to provide food and for self-protection. Bess quickly recognizes her need to have a gun and writes home indicating her desire to “get me a gun.” “I really must beg, borrow or steal money enough to get me a gun and licence for there isn’t a tree or telephone pole to climb here “(To Margaret Corey, Dec. 8, 1909, 57).

While Bess may not have been alone on her homestead often, when she was alone she was exposed to potential physical threats by animals or criminal elements. While the days of extreme violence had passed in South Dakota and other U.S. Western states, life on the frontier was not without its dangers. Bess seems well aware of her vulnerability as a lone female in an isolated area and does not attempt to sugarcoat any of the incidents that occurred which raise concerns:

These darn cow boys go through every thing you’ve got and if you don’t like it you can lump it. One night shortly after I moved, one of them roped the ‘little mansion’ out north here and pulled it up by the roots-... The worst of it is they carry skelton keys[.] I told you didn’t I about coming home one night after dark and finding my door unlocked? Gee I wish I had some kind of gun

that wasn't too heavy to carry, they wouldn't bother me then as they've been convinced that I'm a good marksman or soon would be. (To Margaret Corey, Dec. 28, 1909, 62)

Despite of the logical need for women to arm themselves on the Western frontier, there was, at one point, a certain societal stigma associated with a woman shooting a gun.<sup>11</sup> On the Western frontier use of a gun was often a necessity in order to provide food. Despite taboos on women's use of firearms, the weapon became a symbol of the pioneer woman, who was often depicted in artwork holding a rifle.

A key example of this is the pioneer women model contest that occurred in 1926. Ernest Whitmore Marland, an oil tycoon and former governor of Oklahoma, decided to pay homage to the spirit of pioneer women by erecting a statue in Ponca City, Oklahoma. In order to find a sculptor, Marland decided to commission twelve statues, which traveled to twelve cities in The United States where people cast votes on their favorite models to determine which model would serve as the final choice to be erected in the town. Of the twelve sculptures, five of them depicted women holding rifles: Heroic, by Mario Korbel, Maurice Sterne's "Determined", A. Sterling Calder's "Self-Reliant", John Gregory's "Protection" and James C. Fraser's "Affectionate."



**Figure 3: “Heroic” by Mario Korbel**





**Figure 4: “Determined” by Maurice Sterne**



**Figure 5: “Self-Reliant” by A. Stirling Calder**



**Figure 6: “Affectionate” by James E. Fraser**



**Figure 7: "Protective" by John Gregory**



**Figure 8: “Confident” by  
Bryant Baker**





**Figure 9: “Madonna of the Trail” by August Leimbach**

The winning model did not depict the pioneer woman with a rifle, but as *Time* magazine noted, John Gregory’s “Protective” did come in second behind the winning sculpture, Bryant Baker’s “Confident,” in which the pioneer woman clutches a Bible in one hand and a child’s hand in the other. While Americans may have preferred the image of a woman with a Bible over that with a gun, the sheer number of entries that incorporated the rifle in their depictions illustrates the association of the rifle as emblematic of the strength of the female pioneer. This image of the woman with a rifle was triumphant when in 1928, the Daughters of

the American Revolution decided to erect 12 identical monuments to pioneer women entitled “Madonna of the Trail” along the National Old Trails Road, which stretched from Maryland to California.

For historians like Laura Browder, and as many of the statues from the Marland competition and “The Madonna of the Trail” illustrate, the image of white pioneer woman with a gun became an accepted symbol of the western movement.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this acceptance, in the late nineteenth century women many women began to engage in sport shooting and women so that a greater acceptance of women and weapons moved into the public sphere.

In addition to artistic imagery, real-life female sharp shooters would have likely been an inspiration for Bess as well. As females’ use of weapons gained more acceptance, the perceived masculine nature of the sport became evident in the depiction of Annie Oakley, the popular star of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Oakley’s femininity was highlighted in contrast to other female shooters, like Lillian Smith, whose Native-American status and “vulgar” behavior categorized her as unfeminine.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on white middle-class femininity enabled the audience to overlook the fact that she was engaging in the masculine sport of sharp shooting. Female sharpshooters like Annie Oakley, who traveled with Bill Cody’s Wild West in the late nineteenth century would have been familiar to Eastern and Midwestern audiences. It seems likely that both Bess and her family were familiar with the images of the gun-toting western woman. In Ann McGrath’s article “Being Annie Oakley,” the author examine the impact that Annie Oakley had as a symbol of female empowerment: “Annie Oakley was a

woman who bore arms rather than babies. Although paradoxically based upon a woman from a Quaker background that eschewed violence, Annie symbolized the military power of a woman armed with a gun.” McGrath’s examination posits that Annie Oakley’s influence existed beyond her association and popularity in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, and lasted into the 1950s and 1960s, thus reinforcing the U.S. Western tradition of the armed woman, a tradition that Bess Corey becomes part of through her gun ownership.

Bess does not seem to experience concerns that her desire for and proficiency with a firearm would be perceived in a negative light by her audience. She delights in making her skill with a firearm known. “Last night I saw a rabbit in the garden. He seemed doubtful about staying. I had to give him a little persuasive gun talk to get him to stay for dinner. He was very good” ( To Margaret Corey, May 14, 1911, 141). Perhaps Bess’s use of humor serves to mitigate any concerns that her readers may have had with her behavior. There is no indication from the letters that any of her family members were offended by her proficiency with a weapon. But of course, she did not use her skill as a means of making a living. In fact, Bess’s position as a schoolteacher and domestic servant serve to place her in traditional female roles, which may be one reason Bess seems anxious to embrace her bachelor persona. In doing so, she is able to rebel against the roles to which she had been assigned and claim her own gender identity. Undoubtedly, the gun itself can be viewed as a phallic symbol, for Lacan a signifier of power and female “lack”.<sup>14</sup> Such an association with masculinity and power is in accordance with the image Bess attempts to create.



Also significant is the respect or power the gun affords the one who wields it.

This may be one reason Bess relishes her prowess with a firearm.

Bess seems to waver, on the one hand, between wanting to please her mother and on the other hand, rebelling against those who would find fault with how she structures her epistolary identity. This ambivalence is revealed in a postscript from a letter dated October 1922: “P.S. A certain person said he did wish Miss Corey wouldn’t sign her letters Bachelor Bess”(To Margaret Corey, Oct. 13, 1912, 203). Of course, readers are never privy to whom this refers, so it’s not clear if it that “certain person” was someone close to Bess, although it would have likely been a family member. Bess’s inclusion of this point in a letter highlights the fact that she did not intend to modify her behavior based on the opinions of others. In fact, she almost appears to be boasting that she is ostensibly offending part of her correspondents. This posturing and use of language is emblematic of the image creation that epistolary writers engage in when constructing identity. The epistolary text affords Bess to engage in dialogue that would not be acceptable in a face-to face exchange.

Bess’s penchant for railing against criticism is apparent when she recounts her grandmother’s chastisement of her behavior. Bess’s grandmother made it known that she was offended by or disapproved of either by Bess’s accounts of her activities or her language: “Grandma did accuse me of ‘getting wild’ though, and the way I let out in the next letter was something fierce”(To Margaret Corey, Feb. 6, 1911, 120). Bess’s Grandmother is disturbed that Bess is communicating in an unfeminine fashion, and within the confines of epistolary discourse,

communication is tantamount to behavior. Readers do not visually see Bess performing gender, but her descriptions and self-depictions and the events she chooses to relate are crucial to her creating an identity that may have been at odds with what her readers may have perceived as appropriate feminine behavior, such as her decision to remain unmarried and childless. Bachelor Bess's reporting her Grandmother's concern over her language illustrates the difference between acceptable behavior in Iowa and the U.S. West. To Bess's family, her use of "inappropriate language" comes as a result of her living unchecked by the presence of family and "civilized" society.

*Bess on Marriage: "If troubles neffer come single for why should I get married?"<sup>15</sup>*

The choice to remain single did not have the negative connotation for men that it had for women. While men were in position to forge lives that centered on careers, adventure, or other pursuits, the prime emphasis for women remained the domestic sphere. For Bess and other women like her, the ability to file on homesteads created the potential for financial independence through the Homestead Act. New possibilities of independence developed.

Bess does not delve into her reasons for remaining unmarried. Comments in her letters suggest that this decision may have been based, in part, upon what she observed of the lives of the married women in whose homes she boarded and of the behaviors of the men and women around her. In one letter, Bess Corey recounts the desperation of one man to marry and provide a mother for his children: "Oh say, did I tell you about [George] Jones? He proposed to three

girls in one day. Said he ‘wanted a mother for his (seven) children and one thing or another[.]’ Talk about a proposal of marriage being an honor. Suppose it might be for some but some have formed the habit and that’s different”(To Margaret Corey, Nov. 2, 1911, 164). Bess seems to have clear ideas on why one should marry, and a marriage for male convenience is one that she openly disdains. Of course, marrying a man with seven children would hardly be considered a “convenience” but her diatribe concerning Jones does indicate her views regarding marriage and in effect, motherhood. This negativity is likely because she witnessed the work and the conditions that many married women experienced as the result of childbirth or being brought into a ready-made family, which seem to be typical of the offers she received: “A while back I was feeling blue and said I’d marry the first man that was fool enough to ask me just to get out of teaching school but I tell you I caved in when Jones hove in sight. I guess I don’t want to be a stepmother to seven kids-not when they are Jones anyway” (Dec. 24, 1910, 112). The issue of marriage and proposal would later lead Bess to consider the issue of Women’s’ Suffrage:

I’ve changed my politics. I’m going to work for ‘Woman’s Suffrage’ tooth and nail and then I’m going to have them make a law that all proposals of marriage *must be verbal*. The other two tried it that way and never got it all said but this last one went home like a big ‘It’ and wrote. And when they write they just say everything and you can’t stop them. Of course he is nice and old and honest and honorable and wealthy and all that but as I’m not yet twenty five and hardly old enough yet to consider matrimony I wrote and politely but firmly refused to consider it. *So that’s settled*. (To Margaret Corey, Nov. 10, 1912, 205)

Despite the humorous tone to this assertion, Bess did become concerned with women's rights when she realized that she was unable to vote on issues like property taxes that affected her.

While Bess often complained of enduring hardships, she likely preferred to move about with the sort of freedom denied to many women, whom she saw as weighed down by the drudgery of mandatory domesticity and motherhood. Although she was in domestic service at times, she made her own choices and traveled freely. She reveals her preferences for a life of hard work combined with the independence that such work brought: "I'm tired of this working around and taking care of other folks kids and I've heard that it is better to be 'an old man's darling than a young man's slave [.]' I believe I'd prefer being a darnd old maid to being either" (To Margaret Corey, July 28, 1912, 195). In one of the few points where Bess refers to the negative perceptions of being an unmarried woman, she clearly indicates that she is choosing her "bachelorhood" as a lifestyle, despite certain obvious financial advantages to being married.

Bess always struggled with finances, often borrowing from her family in order to make ends meet.<sup>16</sup> She constantly had to find employment, working when school was not in session, and she was often plagued with health problems. At times, she clearly longed for an easier life: "My how I wish I could stay out on the claim this summer-this working out feeling the way I do is like sandpapering ones fingers clear to the bone"(To Margaret Corey, May 14, 1911, 142). She is not unaware that marriage might have enabled her to have more financial security, perhaps even allowing her the time to stay on her beloved claim, as she reveals in

one letter: “I’ll have to teach next year or get married” (To Margaret Corey, March 4, 1913, 217). While this simple statement shows that she realizes that marriage might afford her an alternative to her hard work and constant struggle, however, she does not change her mind about remaining single.

There are multiple possibilities for why Bess choose to remain unmarried. It is possible that Bess was lesbian, transgendered, or bisexual and not interested in the trappings of heterosexual monogamy. She was likely simply been the byproduct of the “New Woman” mentality that indicated women did not have to marry. Of course, it is difficult to come to any solid conclusions about a person’s sexuality without having any substantial information regarding the topic. Estelle Freedman’s exploration of the sexual identity of prison reformer Miriam Van Waters is relevant to the situation of Bess, as Freedman confronts questions of lesbianism and examines the difficulty of pinpointing the nature of said identity:

The very category of sexual identity often rests upon concepts of a unified self and often describes the consciousness of the bourgeois (male) historical actor for whom the taken-for granted privileges of gender, class, and frequently race permit the foregrounding of sexual subjectivity. For many women, class, race, or ethnicity may be more salient than sexuality in the formation of modern identities. (183)

That Bess may have been a lesbian and bisexual seems possible in some of her more enigmatic expressions, such as when she is wavering between an enjoyment of male company, and then at others, when she expresses open disdain for men, as she reveals in an early letter written shortly after her arrival in South Dakota:

“Lidia filed but when I came to file on the second choice I found that one of those long legged evil eyed monsters called men had beat me to the land office and got

my claim so I was up against it”(To Margaret Corey June 22, 1909, 8). The reference to men as “monsters” may certainly be tongue-in-cheek, but it does lend some insights into Bess’s true feelings. The clear animosity that exists between Bess and the male gender could stem from her feelings regarding her sexuality and it could be based upon the disparity that she witnessed in relation to gender roles, as well as her own feminist ideals, as she embraced the concepts of “New Womanhood.”

#### *Bess as a “New Woman”*

Bess was most likely simply pursuing the tenets of “New Womanhood” in her decision to remain single. Certainly Bess’s decisions to pursue an independent life, procure land, maintain a career, and remain unmarried all are in keeping with the principles embraced by New Womanhood. The “New Woman” was the name given to represent the change in gender roles that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Lyn Pykett, “The New Woman was the embodiment of a complex of social tendencies. The title named a beacon of progress or beast of regression, depending upon who was doing the naming” (139). There were a variety of ways in which this new movement lent itself to the progress of feminism:

The New Woman challenged traditional gender boundaries in paradoxical ways. The mannish New Woman threatened such boundaries from one direction by quitting the sphere of the proper feminine, aping masculinity and becoming a new intermediate sex. On the other hand, these boundaries were also eroded by the New Woman’s hyperfemininity (Pykett 141).

The “mannish” New Woman would have appeared to be much more of a threat to males. While it is not clear how Bess fits in with this description, her brothers may have been threatened by what they may have likely perceived as her masculine behavior. Bess’s ability to maintain a homestead and support herself through teaching would have been antithetical to concepts of the fragile female and would have altered the roles of husband and wife as defined by traditional marriage. These characteristics of her personality certainly could have depicted her as “mannish” (despite her appearance), as Bess’s letters are encoded with her desire to assert herself. By claiming her identity and continually reinforcing her beliefs regarding gender roles, Bess strives to assert her power and profess her political ideology, even if from a distance. It is also possible that Bess’s independence was off-putting to potential suitors, thus preventing anyone whom she may have deemed as desirable from seeking out a union with her: “It is New Woman figures in novels of the period by men who are pathological as sexual inverts, and this fact reveals one of the main sources provoked by the New Woman: there was a very real fear that she may not be at all interested in men, and could manage quite well without them”(Ledger). Perhaps this fear prompts Bess to feign interest in men at times. In order to avoid criticism and scrutiny Bess does not completely castigate men or male company and explained her reluctance at finding as a case of having high standards: “Yes I’m getting quite particular--if I can’t go out with the best fellow in a community I won’t go out with any”(To Margaret Corey, Aug. 29, 1909, 30). Bess’s assertion that she wants to go out with only the best man does not deny interest in men, but

insinuates that she is selective in her choosing. She does however seem to have some admiration for men in the community, and at times writes of various suitors. She discusses a dance in which a Mr. C.E. Conye escorted both Lidia and herself after their arrival in South Dakota: “He is a Deputy sheriff of this county, a real estate man, a notary public and is considered the finest young man in the county. He is medium height, well built, very handsome, I never saw a nicer appearing gentleman or received more polite attention”(To Margaret Corey, June 6, 1909, 5). Bess’ physical description of her escort indicates that in addition to finding appeal in his social status, she found him physically attractive, which indicates that she found men to be appealing.

#### *The Power of Humor*

Humor is commonplace in Bess’s correspondence. It often seems to be an attempt to help soften the tone of some of her other more serious letters that often describe the harshness of her life in South Dakota. She seems intent upon adding a good-natured spirit to her identity and wants her readers to accept that she is, despite the animosity between her mother and herself, positive in her outlook about her situation. To reinforce this image of herself she includes a motto that she strives to live by in one of her letters: “I tell you pioneer life didn’t end in the long ago- it’s a fright the was some poor wretches have to live. I am very fortunate and can live up to my motto ‘Do all the good you can to al the folks you can in all the ways you can and smile, darn you, smile’”(To Margaret Corey, Dec., 11, 1909, 58). It is, however, impossible to ignore the fact that this positive affirmation is prefaced by a complaint about conditions on the frontier. This



duality is commonplace throughout Bess's letters, in her relationship with her mother, and in her seemingly feigned attempts at modesty. To ensure that she is, in fact, good-natured, she includes a compliment from an outside source: "Miss Appleby said that no matter what the weather or how things went I always seemed so cheerful and happy and always had a smile ready--that it seemed I just radiated happiness wherever I went and was a perfect inspiration to her"(To Margaret Corey, August 14, 1912, 197). This approach is similar to her assertions regarding the recognition of her "pluck and nerve" that appear in other letters. By including observations of those around her, Bess strives to have her family recognize these traits in her as well.

Bess's humor most frequently appears in her descriptions of social events or in her dealings with men. In describing the parting at the end of the school year with landlords who had been unpleasant, Bess observes that: "None of us shed any tears at parting--I would have, only I forgot to put the onion in my pocket"(To Margaret Corey, April 28, 1911, 135). Such statements enable Bess to convey her true feelings without overt complaint, which likely would have been more entertaining to her readers. Additionally, Bess strives to include her family in pranks played on her. This is the situation when she describes her experience at a Native American pow-wow. Her anecdote involves a detailed description of the dancing and festivities, but Bess interjects humor when she describes dinner: "I ate supper with them--of course--the dog sausage was delicious--beats all your beef and pork to pieces" (To Margaret Corey, Dec. 26, 1910, 114). It is likely that Bess herself was the butt of the original joke at the

pow-wow and was told that she was eating dog when she was not. Instead of simply narrating the incident as it occurred, Bess decides to continue the joke by inferring to her family that she had, in fact, partaken of dog sausage. Freud describes the motivations of joke telling in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*:

So it would seem that telling a joke to someone serves several purposes: first it gives to me objective reassurance that the joke work has been successful; second to supplement my own pleasure when the effect of the joke of this other person rebounds on me; and third--when I repeat a joke that is not my own--to remedy the loss of pleasure when the joke ceases to be a novelty. (149)

Bess herself must have been amused with her own experience and decides to maintain the joke by inferring that it actually occurred, which is similar to her experience of being led to believe she was eating dog. Working with Freud's interpretation in which the experience of continuing the joke likely served the purpose of prolonged pleasure, in telling about the joke Bess enlists her family as unsuspecting participants. That Bess gained great pleasure from her anecdote is evidenced by her allusion to it in a subsequent letter: "'Tell Ethel that a 'wennie' would taste good for a change tho I am partial to dog'"(To Margaret Corey, Feb. 8, 1911, 120). Bess's continuation of the dog sausage motif helps to convey that she was entertained by her humor, even if her readers were not, which helps reinforce Freud's arguments that elements of joke-telling and humor serve to fulfill needs of the joke teller as much of the audience.

In a more serious aspect, Bess's humor serves to highlight the changing views of female expression and subvert patriarchal nineteenth century stereotypes

that women lacked a sense of humor. Daniel Wickberg discusses the gendered use of humor in *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*.

We might even say that for many men (and even some women) the image of the person without a sense of humor was codified in the image of woman. The man *without* a sense of humor was an anomaly; the woman *with* a sense of humor was the anomaly; the *woman* without a sense of humor on the other hand was typical of her gender. Just as the sense of humor was defined by the imputation of its lack, it came to figure in an important way in drawing gender distinctions in nineteenth-century America. It is clear for instance that the claim of some class of persons--in this case, women--lacked a sense of humor was a way of categorically excluding those persons from the social benefits that came to those who possessed the valued attribute. To lack a sense of humor, was, and still is--to be outside the social circle where the decisions are made, to miss out on the informal sociability that provides the basis for social solidarity and social privilege, to be cast at a lower level by being socially inadequate. (91)

In actively presenting herself as witty and humorous, Bess insinuates herself in a position of power, exhibiting a command of social situations and making herself an active part of them. Bess' use of humor emerges as a source of empowerment, as she engages with a situation for her readers, even when presenting uncomfortable situations. This is key when discussing her interaction with men. "Guess I'll smile at the butcher--might solve the 'high cost of living' problem. That would be something. They say he 'has a girl' but--"(To Margaret Corey, Jan. 19, 1913, 210). Readers know that Bess is not serious about engaging in a flirtation with the butcher simply to acquire free meat; however, her joking encompasses two elements that were a source of contention for Bess and her family: the state of her finances and her unmarried status. The butcher anecdote helps to illustrate that Bess is comfortable with her status as an unmarried woman and is coping with her financial issues. This may help ward off and comments

referring to either in a reply letter from Margaret Corey. Bess also uses humor in her depictions of women as well, as is evidenced in a letter where she describes her summer working in Pierre: “Miss Kempton, when on her claim lives all alone with her grey cat. I declared that she was so used to talking to her cat that she sometimes forgot herself and went around saying ‘Nice kitty’ to me (To Margaret Corey, July 21, 1910, 88). While this anecdote is humorous, beneath it lays the reality of lonesome life on the frontier; perhaps Miss Kempton’s actions of relating more to her cat than a human being struck a nerve with Bess, who often faced feelings of loneliness and isolation. Humor was a means to help assuage those concerns and fears of becoming out of sync with those around her. She effectively situates herself in her community with her humor and good-nature.

#### *Gender and Epistolary Identity*

The letter became a means by which women writers addressed specific issues unique to the female experience Elizabeth Corey continued this tradition of using epistolary discourse to frame the concerns related to her own experience as a single woman homesteader. Those concerns include: marriage, the struggle to maintain her existence without the financial assistance of a man, to overcome her mother’s complicity with a system of male privilege and the issues affecting women during the early twentieth century, such as Women’s Suffrage. Bess’s engagement with epistolary discourse highlights the need for her to express herself, to reveal the changes she encounters and the woman she becomes as a result of her journey westward. Carolyn Steedman’s examines the image of the female letter writer in her essay “A Woman Writing A Letter”:

The epistemological status of the woman writing a letter is complex. She and her letter are matter for historical inquiry because of the force and pressure of theories, structures of explanation, and mythologies that have emerged across a number of academic fields. As a figure, she has come to offer a new originary narrative: she accounts for the emergence of modern subjects and modern social structures; of gender relations, and perhaps even the notion of gender itself of literary, cultural, and feminist theory. (119)

Bess's subject matter, homesteading, marriage, and the need for autonomy, is relevant to many of the themes that Steedman acknowledges. Her adoption of the moniker "Bachelor Bess" combines both masculine and female identities. The subject matter of Bess's battle to resist marriage and maintain her land offers insights into historical and cultural struggles. In *Epistolary Responses* Anne Bower discusses the role that letters have historically played in relation to women. "Traditionally associated with women and with the "private" as opposed to the "public" sphere, the letter engages many feminist issues"(3). This notion of public versus private highlights the emergence of women from the domestic realm, as they occupied spaces within the public world. The creation of the epistolary persona depends upon the audience to whom the epistolary author writes and the image she wishes to convey, as Bess creates a feminist persona that transcends the private in the creation of letters that will be read by family members in Iowa and the modern readers who read them as a posthumous collection. Letters afforded Bess a forum to express her desires and concerns, a forum that she would have otherwise been denied without the epistolary construct.

Although Bess Corey's letters uniquely chronicle a lone female homesteader's struggles and triumphs to secure her own property, they reveal more than the quest for land. They offer clear insights into the changing gender

roles of the time and the complexities for those who might choose not to marry. In addition, they reveal how epistolary correspondence can be a means of either proclaiming a new self or refusing an acceptance of an assigned identity. For Bess letters were power, power over her life, her identity, and even her family. Whether or not Bess held that power outside of the epistolary realm remains unclear, but she certainly asserted it when she became “Bachelor Bess.”

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- <sup>1</sup> For a thorough discussion of the shortage of women, see Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*. pp. 212-
- <sup>2</sup> For more on the hardships of homesteading, see: Garceau, *The Important Things in Life*.
- <sup>3</sup> In the census of 1910 4,638 women listed teaching as their occupations, with domestic service numbering 6,055. By 1920, the number had increased to 6,467 teachers in contrast to 3,858 women listing domestic service.
- <sup>4</sup> For discussion of homesteading propaganda see, Quay, *Westward Expansion*, pp. 45-66.
- <sup>5</sup> Bess first signs her name this way in a 1910 postcard. See Corey, pp. 102-103.
- <sup>6</sup> According to the US Census Bureau, the average age of women marrying in the US was twenty-two in the first few decades of the twentieth century.
- <sup>7</sup> This especially appears to be the case in the early letters. *Ibid.* pp. 85-150.
- <sup>8</sup> Bess reveals her frustration regarding Fuller's reluctance in helping Bess build a barn, see Corey, pp. 157-658.
- <sup>9</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble*. pp. 1-21.
- <sup>10</sup> For a discussion of gender roles and work see Garceau, "Nomads, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work," pp.14-168.
- <sup>11</sup> For an overview of attitudes towards women and guns in America see Browder, *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America*, pp. 1-22.
- <sup>12</sup> See Browder, pp. 75-79.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* pp 90-93.
- <sup>14</sup> See Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud," *Ecrits*. pp.146-159.
- <sup>15</sup> From a 1912 letter to her mother, see Corey, p. 203.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pp 131-32.

## CHAPTER 4

### Cecilia Hennel Hendricks And A Homesteading Love Story

In January of 1914, Cecilia Hennel moved from her parent's home in Bloomington, Indiana to marry John Hendricks, whom she had only seen three times prior to her wedding. It was quite a risk for a young woman who was college educated and had close family ties. Nevertheless, Cecilia, the oldest of the three Hennel daughters, left her family for the unknown possibilities of Garland, Wyoming. Throughout her subsequent life in Wyoming, Cecilia corresponded with her family regarding life on the homestead called Honey Hill. Cecilia's letters reflect the concepts of new womanhood, as she constructs an epistolary identity that represents her multiple roles of wife, mother, businesswoman, politician, writer, and as she reveals the intimacy of a marriage based upon principles of equality and love that undoubtedly can be linked to her venture west. *In Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era*, Charlotte Rich offers what she deems to be a "composite sketch" of the "New Woman." The traits that Rich prescribes are as follows: a college education, political activism, the pursuit of occupations traditionally held by men, the right to vote, economic autonomy, desire for an equal marriage or singlehood, prioritizing the intellectual or artistic above the domestic and sexual freedom (1). While it is nearly impossible for one woman to embody all of these traits, one can argue that Cecilia Hennel Hendricks is, according to Rich's criteria, more representative of the "New Woman" than any of the other woman presented



in this study. First, she is college educated with a Master's degree. Second, she pursues multiple professions that were inconsistent with Victorian ideals of female domesticity: professor, beekeeper, politician, and writer. Third, she advocates for Woman's Suffrage. Fourth, she becomes involved in politics. Fifth, she has economic autonomy in that she can sufficiently support her family both before and after the death of her husband. Additionally, she aspired to an equal marriage and seemingly attained it. The only two criterion not clearly met are, one that she does not seem to value other pursuits over her family, although she is certainly separated from them at times when campaigning or teaching at the university in Indiana, and two, the issue sexual freedom does not seem to enter into a conversation regarding Hendricks in that she appears to be in a monogamous marriage, although this could be viewed as sexual freedom as well.

#### *Editing as a Family Affair*

It is important to confront the relationship of the editor and the author before delving into a close examination of the collected epistolarium, the editor ultimately decides the selection, arrangement and presentation of the letters. The editor of Cecilia's letters, Cecilia Hendricks Wahl, is the daughter and namesake of the author. Hendricks Wahl had access to both the letters and the author's diary, which proved instrumental in helping flesh out missing elements of Cecilia's life and correspondence. At the beginning of the collection, Wahl inserts a few diary entries in order to fully establish the development of her parents' relationship. These inclusions provide crucial information about Cecilia's

eventual move West. In this instance the relationship of author and editor helps to bolster the accessibility of the material, while simultaneously affecting the perceived authenticity of the collection. This is not to suggest the inclusion of anything that may be untrue; however, readers must bear in mind, that Wahl had sole discretion in deciding which letters to choose. She created what she calls a “selective narrative”(Hendricks ix). Unlike the editors, who arranged the letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart and Elizabeth Corey, Hendricks Wahl’s status as a family member gives her a personal stake in the presentation of the life of her mother. Paul John Eakin examines the tenuous relationships between writers and family secrets in *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004): “Families, in particular, are often locations of deeply buried secrets, sometimes passed on for generations; every family, one suspects has a skeleton in its closet somewhere, not to be exposed to prying public view” (104). While Eakin’s discussion centers upon memoir-writers, it is applicable to editors with family ties as well. Due to her status as a family member and her admission of selectivity, it is impossible to avoid questioning which letters the editor omitted in the compilation of the text. Wahl might have omitted sensitive material that may have revealed anything negative about either John and Cecilia and their lives together. Such concerns reveal how the notion of a family member as editor can be problematic in that a family member would be more likely than an impartial editor to make changes to a text. Editors with familial ties to their subjects can help to gain the trust of readers by clearly explaining the motivations behind omitted works, as well as

any changes made to the text. Nonetheless, as with all editors, it is impossible to determine the true motivations behind any changes to a text. A strong family link highlights the significance of a relationship between editor and author so that in/authenticity that can become involved in the depiction of a life. Cecilia's life is constructed for readers first in the decisions that the editor has made about what to include and exclude and then again in her own words.

The editor arranged the letters by both theme and chronology with four parts of the text labeled: "The Beginning," "Family and Home," "Politics and Community," and "Critical Times." These themes are all appropriate to the narrative and help to guide readers who may be particularly interested in a specific time period or event. Wahl Hendricks admits that some letters had to be excluded due to the volume of correspondence. In spite of the minimal amount of influence an editor claims to wield, the reality is that the presence of the editor is not far removed from the text. According to Janet Altman, "Whatever the editorial style, what always distinguishes epistolary fictions from nonfictional letters is the space of structured interplay they leave between letters"(183). For Altman, the "structural interplay" allows the epistolary novelist to structure and influence the plot of the novel by either filling in gaps or moving steadily from one letter to another. This is not unique to the novel, for the editor of collected letters serves to construct a narrative in much the same manner as the novelist and may choose to interject notes and supplementary matter in order to effectively construct the life narrative of the writer, as in the case of Susanne George's

arrangement of Elinore Pruitt Stewart's previously unpublished letters and in Phillip Gerber's organization of Corey's letters.

Compared to either George or Gerber, Hendricks Wahl appears to interject less of an influence in that she does not use notes to explain any material that is not easily understood within the context of the letter. Curiously, the salutations have been omitted from the letters in most instances, which makes it difficult for readers to determine to whom Hendricks is writing, and there is no mention of this in Wahl's introduction. This is likely because the letters were intended to be read and shared by all of her family members in Indiana. As a result, in my analysis I have refrained from attempting to indicate the addressee, given that much of the correspondence seems to have been directed to her entire family. I indicate the recipient only when the addressee is clearly expressed by salutation or within the body of the letter. The lack of such supplementary information indicates that Wahl's influence upon the text has largely focused on what to include and exclude, and one must consider whether or not the lack of supplementary information is intended to downplay Wahl's role in the organization of the text. If this was Wahl's intent, it seems to have the opposite affect, as the reader is left to decipher recipients and cannot help but consider why the editor would not have addressed such a significant detail.

There is also the possibility that some of the letters not included may have been destroyed. William Decker Merrill addresses this practice in *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications*: "As

participants in our own century's disclosure of the epistolary past, we assert contested prerogatives as possessors of texts not in the first instance addressed to us, text that are inscribed 'Burn after reading,' whose publication would have mortified the parties in the exchange"(9). In Decker's estimation there is a moral imperative involved in the decision to burn (or not to burn letters at the sender's request and to publish them thereafter), thus making what was once meant so clearly to be private, very public. One such letter exists in the collection of Cecilia Hennel Hendricks. It is addressed to her sister, Cora, and in the words "Read and Burn" are noted in parentheses after the salutation (To Cora Hennel, March 1, 1931, 658). It appears that Cecilia and John had been having marital problems while Cecilia was in Indiana teaching, and that Cecilia addressed the resolution of the matter upon her return to Wyoming: "I told you before I left that where there is real love between two people, misunderstandings clear away as soon as there is a chance for talking things over. And of course that is what has happened" (To Cora Hennel, March 1, 1931, 659). The message is someone cryptic, but there is no need for Cecilia to elaborate since Cora had been privy to the details of the situation before the epistolary exchange. It does reveal, however, that Cecilia was concerned for her privacy and that she did not wish to have evidence of the event or her feelings about it preserved. Cora's negligence in burning the letter indicates the level of trust that must exist between correspondents. If Cecilia felt so strongly about the privacy of the subject matter, it is unlikely that she would have written the letters if she did not truly feel that

Cora would comply with her request. The command “burn after reading” indicates the potential for lost correspondence when readers actually do comply with the writer’s request in addition to immediately piquing the interest of both the intended and external reader who cannot help but wonder what scandalous details a letter must contain in order to warrant such a command.

*Moving to Wyoming: “We feel today for the first time as if we were really beginning to live.”<sup>1</sup>*

Cecilia Hennel Hendricks’s life as a homesteader began, appropriately enough, with a 1911 letter from John Hendricks, an old friend of her uncle, whom she had met when she was fifteen years old. John Hendricks had settled on a homestead in Garland, Wyoming after having been wounded by a gunshot on his first and only day of combat in the Spanish American War. Wahl explains the injury: “John suffered a gunshot wound that grazed the sciatic nerve in his groin, left him permanently in need of a crutch to support the leg, and affected his health for the rest of his life”(4). It was during one of his numerous stints at a Veteran’s hospital in Washington that he met and befriended Cecilia’s uncle, Will Thurman, which led to him eventually meeting Cecilia. Cecilia’s 1911 diary entry (included in the compilation of her letters) reveals her confusion regarding John’s identity and her reluctance to take his proposal seriously.

I got a letter today from someone who signed himself John Hendricks, asking me if I would consider a proposal of marriage from him. The letter came from Garland Wyoming. I don’t know who the person is; he is, as far as I know, ‘A puffed strangeh to me.’ So far as I am concerned he’ll probably remain so (Hendricks 6).

In April of 1912, she learned that John was her uncle's friend. In a diary entry she notes that she written to him, "declining his invitation"(Hendricks 7). John would not be deterred however, and he continued to write Cecilia, gradually eroding her resistance. On May 26, 1912, another diary entry notes the true beginning of their correspondence:

I received another letter from Wyoming. Poor man. He is dreadfully lonesome. The letter was surprising to me. He said he had loved me for years, but how could one in a position such as mine think of a man like him. If he is the man Aunt Lena says he is, position matters nought. I never had a letter that made my heart ache so. I answered it in a couple of days asking how he knew me, and suggesting he loved an ideal rather than a real person. (Hendricks 7)

Cecilia's diary entry reveals the then-private thoughts that she entertained in regards to John Hendricks, perhaps before she had dared openly to admit to family members that she was intrigued by his proposal. One of the key elements of consideration in Cecilia's initial approach to John Hendricks appears to have been class distinctions. Although the finances of the Hennel family are not discussed in Wahl's introduction, the fact that all three Hennel daughters, Cecilia, Cora, and Edith all received advanced college degrees indicates that there may have been educational and perhaps financial differences between John and herself. Cecilia uses her aunt's knowledge of John to make the determination that "position matters nought." In spite of Cecilia's initial reluctance gave way as she became intrigued enough about John to maintain a correspondence with him; one that would eventually culminate in their marriage and Cecilia's move from Indiana to Wyoming in 1914.

Readers are not privy to the letters that John and Cecilia exchanged during their courtship. The editor indicates that these letters were missing from the family correspondence, and it is likely that Cecilia would have kept these separate from letters written while she and John lived in Wyoming, even though this is not clearly addressed in the editor's note. One can only surmise that these omitted letters were of a personal nature and she did not want them to be viewed by the family. Perhaps they were not preserved or Wahl deemed them too personal to include in the collection. All that exists is a single paragraph from one of John's letters that according to Cecilia Hendricks Wahl is copied in Cecilia's own hand.<sup>2</sup> This letter, though incomplete, is extremely important in illuminating the nature of Cecilia and John's relationship and offers glimpses into what Cecilia found appealing about a man whom she did not know. Wahl describes the following as a "determining point in their relationship"(10):

In getting a companion there are two things that I have always wanted: first, that my wedding day should mark the real beginning of my lovemaking, and not the beginning of the end of it as it so often seems to be the case; and second that such a companion should be an independent Christian character, one whose devotion to him should be second to her devotion to Him who overcometh all things. Likewise, I want my devotion to my companion to be patterned after Him whose influence has kept environment from forming my character. It seems to me that if two persons are trying to build a home would first enthrone Christ in their home they could not fail to build a home where peace and contentment would reign; where the burdens of life would not weigh heavily; where the destroying spirit would not enter, and where sorrow would never outweigh joy. I want to be the ruling spirit in my home, but prefer to follow a more wise leader. (10)

The letter from John to Cecilia focuses his expectations, which he hopes will be concomitant with Cecilia's with respect to marriage. Unlike either Elizabeth



Pruitt Stewart's or Bess Corey's letters, John Hendricks appears to offer a more personal glimpse into his wants and desires by opening up to Cecilia regarding matters of a personal nature because he focuses on feelings, which is rare in the letters of previous writers. In this first love letter that he pens to Cecilia, John constructs an image of the beloved. On the one hand, this construct can serve a didactic purpose intended to create an image of the ideal Victorian wife, virginal and religious, a model to which Cecilia should aspire. On the other hand, the image is one that John feels to be mimetic of Cecilia; nonetheless, John's openness places Cecilia in the position of power from the onset of the relationship, as in determination of a future rests in her hands.

#### *Education and Background*

Hendricks differs from most of the women who ventured west, and even in the country; she was highly educated, holding a Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in English from Indiana University. One has to wonder what would make a woman with such clearly defined goals and career prospects in Indiana choose a life of uncertainty in the West. Naturally, many were surprised at Cecilia's acceptance of John's proposal, particularly given her educational background. In 1914, she wrote to an unnamed college friend defending her decision:

During all this long fourteen years he had gone without one word of encouragement from her who was his goal, in order that he might spare her the suspense of waiting and the sorrow of disappointment should the struggle be in

vain. Not until success was assured, till health was gained, till what he considered to be a suitable home was provided did he tell. Then he came to her with the story. That was two years ago. Answer me, now you scoffer. Wouldn't you have listened? And wouldn't you have loosened your heart strings just a little, just enough to peep over the bars into that new country that lay before you? Honest, wouldn't you? (Hendricks 9)

The depiction of the friend as a "scoffer" signifies possible concerns from friends and family regarding Cecilia's decision; she may have felt compelled to defend her decision. Again, the issue of social position or status appears as Cecilia mentions a "suitable home." This illustrates that John was aware that he needed to achieve a certain status by improving upon his property before seeking Cecilia's hand in marriage. In addressing this issue in her letter, she defends John's status and simultaneously addresses any doubts that she may be experiencing regarding her decision. After all, she was not fully aware of what type of home she would be encountering or the exact nature of John Hendricks' financial situation. She was only privy to what John had told her, and her decision to trust him was a calculated risk.

Like many men and women migrants before her, Hendricks was lured by the possibilities associated with a life different from one she had known. The West offered new and exciting opportunities for many people. Wyoming in particular would have been appealing for an independent-minded woman like Cecilia. Wyoming was the first place to grant women the right to vote, passing

the Woman-suffrage bill in December, 1869, (just two months Utah granted women the same rights). This would have appealed to Cecilia. Even though Wyoming became known as the equality state, two main mitigating factors that prompted the passing of the legislation: the shortage of women in Wyoming and the publicity that could attract settlers (Larson 79-85). Wyoming afforded opportunities for equality that Cecilia did not have access to in Illinois, despite her education.

As alluring as the prospect of equality may have been, it appears that the ultimate attraction for Cecilia was John. In the same letter to the unnamed friend she writes of their relationship:

Together we are not less individual, but more so, since each of us has gained so much from the other. Above all, we can work together without friction, at the same or at different tasks, in the same or in different fields, always with interest in and sympathy for what the other is doing. And that is what counts: That, I take it, is what love means. (Hendricks 9)

Cecilia's definition of love is an early preview of a recurrent theme throughout many of her letters. For Cecilia it is based less upon romantic ideals and more upon practicality and friendship. Their love is the focus of her early letters to her family in Illinois, as she attempts to create a portrait of her life with John. "I knew before I came out here that John is good. How good and dear he is I am just beginning to find out. I think it will take me all my life long to fully understand"(Jan 18, 1914, Hendricks 21). Cecilia's family undoubtedly had concerns about the abrupt shift in her plans to become a college professor at Indiana University and venture to Wyoming instead. Perhaps one of the reasons

that Cecilia's early letters focus on providing her readers with a clear portrait of their relationship may be the writer's need or desire to address any family concerns regarding her new marriage and lifestyle. Cecilia reveals that John shares these concerns as well: "John asked me this morning if I wouldn't rather be starting it with a big new lot of nice freshmen. I told him the freshmen were nice all right, but as for me, give me this little house and Wyoming. No, I wouldn't change for anything and start in again today teaching after being here these nine months"(September 29, 1914, Hendricks 74). Cecilia's inclusion of John's question lets Cecilia show her consciousness of her own family's potential concerns about John and Cecilia's relationship, without placing them in the awkward position of directly questioning her. This account also serves to validate Cecilia's decision to move to Wyoming while maintaining contact with her family by providing them with a sense of the type of relationship that she and John shared. In small details her letters manifest the affection and love the two have for one another, as in a letter regarding their handholding as perceived by their hired hand Mr. Roach: "John and I have always gone about hand and hand, when we go over the farm anywhere or walk anywhere, or walk to the bee house or bee yard. He has always teased me about what Mr. Roach would say if he noticed us, and I always answered we were setting him a good example"(March 11, 1915, 109). This seemingly quotidian piece of information is significant because her family cannot actually view the interactions between the married couple, but

through Cecilia's recounting they can visualize the two walking hand and hand, as they survey the property or engage in daily activities.

*An Epistolary Record*

As Cecilia is aware that she will not have time to write her own diary, she recognizes the potential for preserving a record of her life in Wyoming through her epistolary correspondence. As a result, she requests that her mother preserve and maintain her letters. In essence, the desire for continuing familial relationships without a physical presence is compounded with the desire to record and preserve her life.

If it isn't too much trouble, I wish you would save my letters for future reference. I haven't time to keep a diary since I am running a dairy and a house, but I would like to have some record of what we are doing. If you could put the sheets in one of those manila files (the fifteen cent kind they have at Bowles) they could be easily kept. Maybe Pater could find time to stick letters in after they have been read. I'd be much obliged if you could. (42)

Cecilia is very specific as to how her family should preserve her correspondence. The significance of her venture west, the opportunities that lay in Wyoming for women who were seeking independence underlay the need for a family record to preserve such experiences. All of these factors culminate as influences on Cecilia's detailed request. The epistolary text essentially becomes Cecilia's life instead of a mere representation of it once it is categorized and preserved in accordance to her instructions. This duality of the letter helps to present the complexity of the genre and highlights the significance of epistolarity in Cecilia's

life, as well as in the lives of her family. The epistolary gesture acts as immediate communication and as the future basis of family history.

The relationship between Cecilia and her text does not end once she sends it in the mail. Instead, the text is transformed into an artifact to be excavated at a later date as a means to preserve memory. Perhaps the notion of recording guided the content of Cecilia's letters because few seem to be dependent upon a reply from the addressee, and the external reader has no difficulty in deciphering meaning or intention. Cecilia's letters contain few dialogic properties, particularly in contrast with Bess Corey's letters, and instead exist as self-contained texts that reveal the thoughts, actions, and emotions, of the writer at a given time, independent of the receiver's reply. Cecilia's early letters are created with the same purpose as many of the letters of those displaced from loved ones, to stave off homesickness and maintain family ties. She unabashedly admits this as she makes a heartfelt request in one of her early letters on January 13, 1914: "Write often to us for a little while, for your letters keep me from getting homesick. After a while, you won't need to write so often"(Hendricks 18). Here the notion that the time will come when she will no longer be as reliant upon the letters for comfort affirms her decision in making both the move Westward and in her marriage to John. Nonetheless the spatio-temporal reality is ever present in spite of the efforts to mitigate distance with letters. This awareness may have had an influence upon what Cecilia wished to reveal within her letters, as she knew that they were being

preserved; as a result, she may have chosen to construct an image of life in Wyoming that emphasized the positive aspects instead of including any hardships.

Cecilia often indicates that letters are a poor substitute for having her siblings and parents nearby. She laments the distance that separates them as she describes her house, the neighbors, and the trappings of Wyoming life. There are clear limitations in reproducing the present. On August 13 1916, she writes: “There are so many things I want to talk over that it can’t be told letters, even if we do write everyday”(Hendricks 184). It is likely that at times Cecilia longs for face-to-face communication that requires immediate response, perhaps involving incidents that resolve themselves before she has time to write about them in a letter or that she finds to be too personal to discuss within a letter, particularly given the knowledge that these letters are being shared with the entire Hennel family and being preserved at her request.

Cecilia recognizes the significance and power that letters possess in terms of preserving memories. While she uses the letters to make John and her marriage real to her family, a shift occurs after her first child (and namesake), Cecilia, is born. She often writes to her mother about the baby. Her sister Cora’s visit finally assuages her concerns that her family will not truly be able to know her child, however, she explains her feeling that her epistolary rendering cannot truly capture the experience of becoming a mother: “Now that Cora has learned to know the baby, she can tell the rest of you about her. Until some of you had really seen her I couldn’t make you know her”(242). In relation to her infant, the

spatio-temporal distance lessens the reality of her child. As the child changes daily, and Cecilia is aware of these changes that she feels ill-equipped to capture in the epistolary moment. Once her family receives a letter, baby Cecilia likely will have undergone drastic changes and the letter will no longer be an accurate representation. While one may be able to convey feelings and relay events through epistolary texts, her child cannot truly be “known” until there is physical interaction between her and another family member. Cecilia’s perception of temporal distance as problematic, as it relates to her child seems to be in disaccord with her earlier experience of epistolary courtship in which absence seemed to strengthen the relationship between herself and John. They did, after all, seemingly fall in love and develop a relationship through letters. It may be explained though by the fact that the development of Cecilia and John’s love was a personal act involving the two of them, whereas the birth of baby Cecilia is a family affair. She is the first grandchild, and as a new mother, Cecilia naturally wants her family to be able to see her and welcome her into the family.

While Cecilia may express concern over not being able to share her daughter with her family in person, Anna Hannel recognizes that memory fades but that the letters, which would not need to be written if the family were together, record the baby’s growth and development that would not exist otherwise. Cecilia’s mother laments the lack of a record of her own children and indicates as much in a rare inclusion of a letter addressed to Cecilia: “I would give a lot if I could have kept a record of what you children did some of the things



were so cute and as we are filing all the letters it will be a surprise even to you in a year to read them over”(249). Such recognition of the significance of the letters prompts the Hendricks family to acquiesce to Cecilia’s request so that the preservation of life at Honey Hill becomes a family affair.

*“My Precious Sweetheart:”<sup>3</sup> The Love Letter*

The most intense letters in the collection are those written between John and Cecilia when the two were apart, mostly when Cecilia periodically returned to Indiana to visit her family. In these instances, the letter becomes tangible proof of the love between the two substitutes for the touch of the absent lover. These letters contain the same tropes as many other love letters: acknowledgement of distance between the two lovers, imagining what they would do if together, and longing for a reunion. Perhaps more than any other subset of the familiar letter, the love letter is able to bridge spatio-temporal reality because it serves as a replacement. The letter held in one’s hand is the embodiment of the lover and becomes equivalent to holding the lover within one’s arms. It serves as tangible proof of affection and must be read and reread until the distance seemingly does not exist. The letter becomes all until the arrival of the next letter. And the act of responding continues the affair and solidifies the connection. For example, one reason that letters are often perfumed is to remind the reader of the smell of the absent lover. In addition, letters are often preserved with a ribbon and carried around, so that there is a continual physical presence, even in absentia. As a result, the love letter becomes fetishized more than any other written work with

the possible exception of poetry. Cecilia herself appears to perceive the letter as a representation of John, when she writes of sleeping with it under her pillow. John cannot physically be with her in her bed, so the letter must serve in his stead. The touch of the letter under the pillow represents the arm that is usually placed beneath her head as they slumber together at night. What is even more apparent in the letters is the type of relationship the two have with one another. It affirms that their marriage was growing stronger with the passage of time; it speaks to the trials they both endure in order to maintain both a strong marriage and a successful business partnership.

Love letters, or to use Linda Kaufman's term, "amorous epistolary discourse,"<sup>4</sup> offer characteristics that lend them selves to the discursive epistolary relationship in a manner distinct from other forms of the personal or familiar letter. The "seduction letter" is one variant of the love letter that is often the catalyst in the plot of epistolary novels. Janet Altman posits in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*: "An entire plot tradition, the novel of seduction through letters is built around the letter's power to suggest both presence and absence, to decrease and increase distance"(15). For writers like Kaufman, Bower, and Altman, epistolary texts reveal the nature of the power dynamic within the relationships presented within fictive epistolary texts, like epistolary novels present. Yet less is written about love letters that exist outside the realm of the wholly fictional texts like novels, where the love letter serves to develop or tell the entire story. These texts stand in opposition to authentic letters (letters written

to an actual person) that may be somewhat fictionalized for affect but offer a basis in reality and serve to provide insight into a relationship instead of marking the entire development as a plot device.

While the love letter exists as a significant aspect of the romantic relationship, such letters are difficult to obtain due to the nature of the subject matter. Indeed, like other collected correspondence, the preponderance of romantic missives that exist are those of high profile, often historical or literary lovers<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps this is because of the copious amounts of correspondence such people often produced. In addition, all of the letters of a figure like F. Scott Fitzgerald warrant attention; therefore it is logical that the love letters of such a figure would be detected amidst the other correspondence. The rarity of encountering such personal letters among those outside of the public eye is evidenced in the letters of Cecilia and John as well. After all, as previously stated, the courtship correspondence of John and Cecilia is missing. Among the one thousand or so extant letters from Cecilia, only a few are love letters, although many of the letters that Cecilia writes to her mother focus largely on her marriage and her love for John. In essence these letters help to construct the love story and reveal the ease with which Cecilia navigated her multifaceted existence. These exist as a type of a love letter, though not addressed directly to her beloved. Rather, they focus on many of the intimate details that exist within the marriage.

While absence likely prompts much epistolary correspondence, the love letter needs no direct purpose other than as an expression of feeling for the

beloved and proof of an unwavering affection. Rosemeyer's *Ancient Epistolary Discourse* examines the role of epistolarity in Greek culture and determines when the letter is used as a mode of contact within modern culture: "The situation calls for a letter either because the addressee is absent and could not have been communicated with otherwise, or because the writer prefers the medium of writing for communicating matters of secrecy, formality, or emotional delicacy"(20). Yet the amorous epistle differs from other letters in that there may not be any direct news to impart of any specific subject that needs to be addressed. For example, the collected love letters of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas are comprised of notes that the two composed for one another and left in various places throughout their home<sup>6</sup>. The love letter is not dependent upon the need to be written only in absentia but rather to further convey or to solidify the feeling that exists between writer and reader. It is true, however, that John and Cecilia's letters are most often exchanged in absentia, most often when the two are physically distant from one another.

Cecilia and John fully express the depth of their emotions, leaving the external reader to feel very much like a voyeur, having walked in upon an intimate moment between two people. This level of intimacy heightens the interest of the reader and illustrates many of the tropes that often appear in romantic literature, such as desire, love, and longing. As Bower observes: "At times letters can be so private as to appear almost indistinguishable from

diaries”(5). This is certainly the case in the letter Cecilia writes to John recalling their wedding night during their first absence from one another. She writes:

I stayed in Aunt Lena’s, in the room we stayed in the first night we were married. Naturally, dearest, I lived that evening and night over again, and I wanted you so I couldn’t keep the tears back. I thought of all that happened that night, after we had gone into the room, just we two, and closed the door--a time every girl looks forward to with much happiness and much fear. I soon lost very vestige of fear and naught remained and still remains. (To John Hennel, November 25, 1915, 148)

The recollection of their lovemaking is significant for several reasons. First of all, it highlights the private nature of such correspondence. Second of all, Cecilia’s resurrection of the memory obviously incited strong feelings in her towards John: longing, desire, and love are apparent in the recollection. Her reproduction of the memory for John reveals a great deal about her feelings regarding their relationship. The process of looking back to the first night of their marriage enables her to convey her enthusiasm as she looks forward to her life with John when she returns to Wyoming. According to Janet Altman: “If the present of epistolary discourse is charged with anticipation and speculation about the future, it is no less oriented toward the past. Janus-like epistolary language is grounded in a present that looks out towards past and future”(127). Altman’s use of the term “looking out” may seem contradictory when referring to the past. As Altman intimates, however, Cecilia’s recounting of the beginning of their marriage offers a means of affirming the current relationship, of celebrating the past, and of looking forward to the future when the two are reunited. In addition, Cecilia’s recounting of the past serves to elicit the same type of longing that she

experiences in the remembrance and illustrates that Cecilia is aware of her power as a writer and as a woman. By recreating the memory of their wedding night for John, Cecilia attempts to incite the same type of passionate emotion in him that she feels in his absence. This is, after all, one of the functions of epistolary discourse: to produce response. In the construction of romantic correspondence, the aim is twofold, to inspire a feeling that mirrors that of the sender and to elicit a reply from the beloved, as Susan Foley observes in “Your Letter Is Divine, Irresistible, Infernally Seductive:” Léon Gambetta, Léonie Léon, and Nineteenth-Century Epistolary Culture:” “Explicitly or implicitly, the writer seeks reciprocation of the gesture. The love letter, in particular, exposes the self and seeks an expression of love in return”(239). Expressions of fear and longing in the recounting of their wedding night render Cecilia’s vulnerability apparent and possibly inspire tenderness as a reciprocal response from John. The etiquette of letter writing indicates that a return response is expected from the sender. In the case of the love letter, urgency exists that may not be present in other types of correspondence, as the writer impatiently waits for a letter as a token of affection. In addition to recalling the wedding night, Cecilia also reminds John of the moment when she first knew she was in love with him:

I have often told you that the time I felt the first real love for you was when you wrote me the letter telling your ideal of a home. It was one, you said, in which you did not wish to be master, but wished to partner with someone else, who hand in hand with you would look to the master of us all as head of the house. It was your saying this that made me say ‘There is a Man.’ I knew when I read that letter that the man who wrote it was saying what I had always held as my deepest religion. (To John Hennel, November 25, 1915, 148)

This comment alludes to the paragraph cited earlier in this analysis, to the excerpt from John's letter as copied by Cecilia, who pinpoints this moment as the culmination of her feelings for John. Wahl's decision to include the diary entry within the correspondence serves a similar purpose as recalling the wedding night. Recalling the birth of their romance further solidifies the current status of their current relationship instead of merely inciting feelings of desire, for as James J. Ponzetti Jr. writes: "Courtship stories provide an opportunity for each partner to create, both individually and collectively, an account that defines them as a couple"(133). The memory of earlier letters reminds John and Cecilia of the emotional state they both experienced when they were written. Recounting the words, or some vestige of them, reminds them of new love and of how far they have evolved as a couple. Cecilia also highlights the power of the epistolary text in constructing identity by solidifying those written words as the apex of their relationship. It is not the physical presence of John that causes Cecilia to fall in love with him, but her written construct of his ideals regarding marriage and love, words that may have not been uttered had the two been able to interact face-to-face.

#### *Gender Roles and Amorous Discourse*

The romantic epistle transcends merely reflecting the status of the relationship by revealing the gender dynamics and the power structure emphasized within the relationship. Susan Foley discusses the significance of the love letter as representation of self:

The language of the love letter reflects the conventions of the epistolary culture of the day. But since women and men adopt gendered poses to make themselves intelligible in their culture, the epistolary selves they create are shaped according to sexual conventions as well as literary conventions. An exchange of letters—as a “pact” between two people—demands particular representations of the self, then, but gender norms influence how a couple enter that pact and express themselves in the epistolary exchange. (263)

Gender certainly appears to bear significantly on John’s construction of his identity when he writes to Cecilia. Typically, Cecilia is the partner who is absent, while John is the one waiting. According to Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, this reverses the gender norms within the relationship. “Historically the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so ...”(Barthes 14). Barthes’ discussion of the role of woman as the one who waits presents the male female dichotomy in traditional, albeit sexist terms. For Cecilia and John, Cecilia is the one who is typically mobile, visiting relatives, traveling for the potential elections, and eventually moving to Indiana during part of the year to work as an English professor at Indiana University in 1931 when the two struggle to maintain Honey Hill during the Depression. This role reversal places Cecilia in the masculine role, as she exerts her autonomy in working outside the home. While John is at home in Wyoming waiting for Cecilia’s return, he fills what Barthes describes as the feminine role.

It is, however, more than the situation of who may be left waiting and who may be traveling that reveals the dynamic of the relationship. John often positions



himself within his letters as a child, with Cecilia in the role of mother. This is revealed in the playful poem he writes to her during her first trip to Indiana to visit her family:

My sweet Mahme:  
That dishwashing was not so bad.  
Gee!  
My mahme has gone to the city.  
She is having a grand, good time;  
Going out every evening at ten o' clock to dine.  
But I'm left behind.  
Eating raw oats and calling them fine.  
Sure I'm having one Terry-ble Time.

From your boy, Johnny (Hendricks 142)

The poem, while clearly a playful attempt to convey to Cecilia that she is missed, also serves to reinforce the notion of John as a child and Cecilia in the role of mother. This dynamic extended beyond the epistolary construct. In an earlier letter to her mother Cecilia discussed the terms of affection that the two used for one another: "It looks really funny to see myself call him John in letters. I hardly call him that once a week. I usually call him Johnny or some other youngster name. He usually calls me by some queer pronunciation of mamma, something like mah'me"(Hendricks 56). In this letter Cecilia distinguishes between "John," the identity by which others view her husband and the more intimate "Johnny." Susan Foley's analysis of the letters of Leon Gambetta and Leonie Leon uncovered a similar dynamic:

But while Gambetta frequently addressed Léon as his "child," she never adopted an infantilizing tone in return. It was left to Gambetta himself to describe Léon as his "little mother," an image that positioned him as the vulnerable child. Such epistolary practices suggest a lingering element of hierarchy in the relationship, and one shaped by gender conventions. (263)

Unlike Leon, Cecilia engages in the same type of banter as John with seemingly expressions of endearment, their epistolary practice also reveals a certain element regarding the power structure of their relationship. Within Barthes' lover-beloved relationship, the letter serves to feminize John: "It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized"(Barthes 14).

Problematic in Barthes' assertion is the implication that only females can express feelings of love or the sting of separation, and the implied negative connotation of the "feminine" as a stigma when applied to males.

Yet another point is that Barthes' conception is antithetical to notions of equality within Cecilia and John's relationship and to the changing scope of gender roles in early twentieth century America. Barthes informs the reading of the letters by providing insight into the perceptions regarding the traditional husband/wife roles, particularly in regards to the manner in which those roles are manifested during absence. The letters suggest that John has no problems in placing Cecilia in the role of mother or in regarding her as the power figure within the relationship. It is also a frequent practice for married couples to often refer to one another as mother or father once they have children to reinforce the roles that they take within the family. Cecilia, in fact does this in later letters to John once they have children of their own. Perhaps John's early use of the word "mahme" anticipates the family they would eventually have. Cecilia reciprocates by address in John as "daddy" in later letters, beginning often with Dearest Daddy, as

the salutation. This, however, does not occur until after they have children. Prior to that Cecilia seems to place John in the role of the child as well and makes a distinction between her naming of him in their daily interaction versus her discussion of him in her letters. In addition to signaling the literal roles of mother and child, the terms also suggest intimacy and are often used as expressions of endearment in intimate situation. Cecilia's recognition of John as child acts as a sign of playful intimacy between the two, but it also signals a power dynamic; one in which Cecilia is the adult.

#### *Creation of a Marriage*

While the marriage dynamic shifted at the turn of the century, as women were less confined to the domestic sphere, it is not always apparent that both partners sought equality within a marriage. Many women were often forced to take on the tasks associated with men, such as manual labor in the fields, in addition to their domestic responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> While living in the West did broaden the scope of women's responsibilities, they did not necessarily *transcend* the gender roles ascribed to them. Men often resisted domestic chores unless bachelorhood necessitated such responsibilities. Cecilia and John did not conform to these expectations, however, and the two begin their business together.

As there was little chance of sustaining crops on the arid Wyoming land, most people used their homesteads for ranching, despite the limited success of cattle ranches (due to land limitations). Clover was one crop that successfully

grew in the inhospitable environment, so that Cecilia and John's business venture centered around honey production and beekeeping, which led to their homestead's name, "Honey Hill." Cecilia's letters show her enthusiasm for their business venture and her thankfulness that they can make a living from their homestead:

When I see the way most folk around us are living and the kind of houses they are living in, and the way they are working to pay for their farms and build up their dairy herds and implements, I feel that we are more well off, which indeed we are. Very few people out here have a business such as we have. If things do not go wrong from now on, it is possible for us to get returns of more than two thousand dollars on this season's crop. (71)

Cecilia's discussion of their business venture reveals her enthusiasm for their prospects; she also acknowledged the difficulties that many Wyoming homesteaders faced in maintaining their homestead, given the often-limited expanses of irrigated land.<sup>8</sup> While Cecilia initially attempts to maintain the domestic chores and help with the bees, she cannot manage both effectively. John's belief that Cecilia is more valuable as a business partner than as a housewife leads him to request that she hire someone to cook and care for the house while she helps him with collecting the honey: "John insists that when we get busy again I have got to have a hired girl to look after housework"(138). As a result of being relieved of her domestic chores, Cecilia becomes involved in all aspects of the business venture, from managing the finances through bookkeeping, to actively participating in bee keeping and honey production. This act of hiring a housekeeper has a significance that is twofold. First, it signals the financial success of the Hendricks in that they can afford to hire someone to do household chores. Second, while John does not offer to take on the housework,

his recognition of Cecilia's value beyond the home signals a change in marriage/gender roles and markedly signals Cecilia as a "New Woman." John recognizes that his wife's talents, and more inherently, that her desires lay beyond the confines of their home; therefore reflecting the changing attitudes of the early twentieth century and the tenants of new womanhood.

*Suffrage and Politics: "I am really politicking this week."*<sup>9</sup>

Cecilia clearly had feminist ideals that impacted her view of her roles as a woman and her expectations in a husband. While John encouraged Cecilia, it is doubtful that she would have consented to marry him were he not like-minded in regards to her philosophical and political ideals for the equality of the sexes. As a result of their mutual concern for equality, many of the letters center upon Cecilia's own pursuit of political office and John's encouragement of that pursuit. In fact, the two become involved in politics and seemingly revel in the separate opportunities simultaneously afforded one another and their shared experiences.<sup>10</sup> The two must find a balance between the domestic and the political, a balance that they maintain together, as opposed to placing all of the responsibility for one aspect, such as childcare, on the other.

The expression of equality in their marriage and John's encouragement of Cecilia also appears in her promotion of her political ideals and her concerns with pertinent issues of the day. In a November 12, 1914 letter she discusses the situation of women's suffrage in the nation: "We have been celebrating over the fact that two more states--Montana and Nevada, have joined the suffrage ranks

and that four more--Oregon, Washington, Arizona, and Colorado, have become prohibition. Things aren't as bad as they sometimes look, are they?"(79). The "we" presumably refers to herself and John, which underscores the shared interest that they had in political affairs and reifies a relationship built upon mutual understanding and equality.

She relishes her experience as a voter, as is evident in a letter dated October 17, 1916 where she describes her first experience with voting: "I had my first experience yesterday getting ready to vote. I registered. I don't know whether I'll get to vote or not but thought it would be a shame to lose my vote for lack of trying"(Hendricks 191). She also expresses an enthusiasm that she and many of the community share: "We went to the school election yesterday and exercised our right of suffrage. People talk about objecting to women suffrage because it takes the women out of their homes, where they belong. Why, voting here is a regular family affair where both men and women vote"(Hendricks 226). Cecilia's discussion of the community's attitude towards suffrage underscores the different tack that Wyoming had taken in relation to the rest of the country regarding the voting issue. She celebrates the fact that she lives in a state in which so many people seem to be like-minded. It is, however, likely of more significance to her that John shared in her political view.

Cecilia's educational status had the potential to separate her from the rest of the community, as her early letters detailing the community's initial preconceived notions of her reveal:

When the people found out John was to marry a schoolteacher they all went about saying, 'Poor Mr. Hendricks.' To bring a school teacher out here on a farm, and especially to bring a college teacher. That was even worse. They all new he was bad enough off living by himself, but they thought this would be even worse. Sympathy for him was fairly running down the roads and through the ditches. (January 4, 1915, 97)

This idea of Cecilia was quickly transformed once those in the community realized that she was capable of domestic chores, although her education was not forgotten and helped to provide her status within the community. Cecilia's education was, in fact, instrumental in establishing her place within the community. The Non-Partisan League urged her to run for the position of State Superintendent of Public Education in 1922.<sup>11</sup> While both Cecilia and John were excited about the idea, Cecilia's younger sister, Edith, also living in Wyoming at this time, had a differing view on the situation, as is clear from a postscript of a letter that Edith wrote to Cora on the subject of Cecilia's candidacy. Edith observes:

Really, I think it is the most ridiculous thing that John has yet struck upon. Mrs. Morton who now has the job, is a peach, and I would certainly think that Cecil would have sense enough not to be pushed into a job that she could not handle. Just what she would do with a baby, having to travel a lot of the time is beyond me. It would not be so bad if Ce were not the Non-Partisan League candidate, but John has the biggest bunch of fool radical ideas, that I would hate to see Ce get the job, for John would put them all in force. (To Cora Hennel, July 21, 1922, 374)

Edith's comment offers an interesting outside view into Cecilia and John's relationship and differs from Cecilia's letters that reveal a supportive and encouraging John. Edith seems to imply a self-serving motivation behind his support of Cecilia's political career. Yet Cecilia's letters are filled with political

subjects throughout her first foray as a candidate for public office in 1915, when she was surprisingly nominated for the school board: “I didn’t in the least object to being a member of the school board but I decided on one thing; I wouldn’t run unless I was practically certain of election, not so much just because it was I, but because I felt that when a woman, any woman actually made the race, she must be elected for the sake of principle”(May 4, 1915, Hendricks 120). As this letter reveals, Cecilia is aware of the implications of a woman running for any type of office and the significance of such action in 1915 when women still had not achieved national suffrage. The letter also anticipates her 1922 campaign, when her seriousness regarding the issue of political office had not lessened. When a Mrs. F.E. Schilling offered to support her candidacy, Cecilia wrote a letter that reveals what both she and John understood about the ramifications of her running for office:

But when we thought about the matter, we remembered that if there was one thing I learned more than another in Indiana University it was that when one received an education it was for the use of society at large and not a private possession to be used for personal ends. If I can be of service to the people and particularly the children of this state by putting my education and training to work for them, I ought to do so, even at a personal sacrifice. For this reason I decided to be a candidate. (September 1922, 372)

This seems to contradict Edith’s assertions that Cecilia was being “pushed into” running for office, or that she and John had not considered the burden that this would place on their family. John’s support of Cecilia seems instead to echo a pledge he made to her in a letter written on May 30, 1922: “All my life and abilities are devoted to you whom I love. May I be able to give you and them full



opportunity to develop and use all your full powers!” (To Cecilia Hennel, May 30, 1922, 371). His assertions once again recognize Cecilia’s abilities and encourage Cecilia to achieve any of her goals including her ability to balance her roles as wife and mother with aspirations beyond their life on the farm. Cecilia acknowledges her ability to maintain such a balance in a letter to Cora: “Are you getting tired of politics? Just say the word, and I’ll talk about more domestic matters such as cherries that won’t stay canned and rhubarb that must be canned”(To Cora Hennel, July 28, 1922, 79). Cecilia’s addressing both politics and domestic matters reveals her ability to manage her outside interest in politics, as well as tend to domestic matters.

#### *On Writing and Wyoming*

Cecilia’s role as a writer extends beyond the epistolary accounts that she sent to her family. She also published articles and poetry, much of which is inspired by her life and her love for Wyoming. Her letters are full of descriptions of the beauty of her natural surroundings. She marvels at the sky, “You ought to see the view from here. In the daytime it is gorgeous. The mountains have the loveliest color. And the night! I never knew what moonlight was till tonight. I never saw such stars as we have out here. The strange thing is that they are the same stars I’ve always seen”(January 12, 1914 Hendricks 16). In another letter she expresses the beauty of the snow: “I wish you could be here tonight and see what Wyoming moonlight and snow can do for the scenery. You would be sure it was daylight and not moonlight” (January 7, 1919, 206). Like Elinore Pruitt

Stewart before her, the beauty of nature inspires her to share it with the readers of her letters. Wyoming and her life on the homestead inspired Cecilia to write poetry as well. In one of her poems entitled “A Wyoming Sunset”, published in *The Lyric West* Cecilia celebrates the same scenery she describes in her letters:

On Bear Toothed range each snow –enamelled fang  
Is rimmed with glowing edge of virgin gold;  
Soft velvet patches, purple pansy dyed,  
Float wanton through the periwinkle blue  
That artist with skill enough to paint  
That western sky should win eternal fame. (10-15, April 11, 1922, 364).

Cecilia’s poetry reflects the beauty she had describes in her letters. It is a means to share Wyoming with people beyond her family and illustrates how moved she is by nature. There is no indication that Cecilia wrote for publication or that she wrote poetry before moving to Wyoming. Perhaps Wyoming provided her with the inspiration that she needed to create.

In Cecilia’s poem, homesteading appears to be a significant topic as well and the collection of letters ends with a poem by Cecilia entitled “Homesteading.”

The first stanzas reveal the love and labor of homesteading:

I have watched fields grow where there were no fields,  
Fields that I laid out myself.  
I have built irrigation ditches for life-giving water  
Through desert of sagebrush and cactus.  
I planted wheat and alfalfa and oats.  
I watered and tended them,  
They grew.  
Now my tilled fields lie before me  
Squares in a living checkerboard.  
They are food for man and stock.  
They are satisfaction through achievement.  
They are a constant challenge,  
My fields. (1-10, 690)

While the speaker in the poem may specifically be Cecilia, it could also be any of the many homesteaders who faced the challenges of homesteading on the arid Wyoming plains. The reference to irrigation emphasizes the water shortage that many homesteaders had to face. It is obvious; nonetheless, that the speaker takes great pride in successfully producing crops from the land. The “tilled fields” represent more than the actual land; “stretched out before her.” They represent life and the endless possibilities and obstacles that lay ahead waiting to be overcome.

In addition to such creative endeavors, Cecilia’s daily life around the farm inspired her to write articles containing helpful hints. She notes that several were published in *Farmstead*. She explain her choice in subject matter to Cora in one letter: “The other article is on the no less important but much less pleasant subject of slop pails and the necessity of using lids on all house vessels. I was driven to write it by several experiences recently where otherwise clean and careful housekeepers never used lids on their chambers at night”(175). Cecilia’s helpful hints articles act as further service to her community, service that did not involve the rigors of politics. By offering insights into matters of daily domestic living that applied mostly to women, she extended the scope of her community to include women to whom she was not related or did not encounter on a daily basis. Magazines gave her a forum to express her feminist ideals, as she reveals in a letter to Edith when she discuss writing a reply to a previously published article in *The Woman’s Home Companion* that argued that women in cities were unable to maintain both jobs and have families: “When I got to thinking over the situation I

came to the conclusion, rather surprising I believe that in smaller towns it is possible for a woman to run a house, do the equivalent of office work, and have children too. ... So, I am going to write an article to state that it can be done and is done, in smaller towns” (March 1, 1927). The reason for the distinction made between the ability to achieve these multiple roles in smaller towns is unclear. Cecilia might be responding to the original article or is perhaps relying upon her own experience in the small town of Garland. While Cecilia is concerned with the message of her writing, she also reveals that a prime motivation is money, as she explains why she has moved onto larger topics than helpful home tips: “I have come to the conclusion one might as well try big things as well as little. Why spend time writing little 50 cent articles? Why not try \$50 ones? (To Edith, March 1, 1927, 533). In another letter she details the money earned from her writing:

I go my monthly news checks the other day, and as usual the one from the Casper paper was \$12.50. I was much pleased to find that the one from the Billings *Gazette* was \$40.50, so you see my salary last month was \$53. Not so bad, eh? I bought myself some bloomers and a pair of shoes on the strength of the extra amount, as well as shoes for Cecilia and Anne and trousers for John ... (To Edith, May 14, 1928, 569)

Cecilia’s account of her earnings, and how she spent them highlights her pride in being able to provide for her family. Being a writer is a significant part of her identity. It provides her with a means of self-expression and financial gain and simultaneously enables her to maintain her autonomy. Cecilia’s practicality and experiences in Wyoming clearly served to shape and expand her horizons beyond

Indiana. They provided her with fodder for articles, the will to run for office, and to establish and maintain a home and family.

### *Conclusion*

Upon John's death in 1936, Cecilia Hennel Hendricks moved back to Indiana and returned to her job as a professor at Indiana University. This would have likely been her chosen life had she never ventured from home and to Wyoming in 1914. In a sense she came full circle, but it is doubtful that her experiences would have been as varied had she never taken a chance on a man she barely knew and a region that was unfamiliar to her.

Cecilia Hennel Hendricks' letters are significant in that they reveal an early twentieth century woman assuming roles and responsibilities reflective of a twenty-first century ideology when women attempt and are indeed, expected to endeavor to pursue domestic, professional, and creative pursuits full force. Because of her education, blatant feminist expression, and the ability to pursue and maintain multiple roles, she, more than any of the other writers in this study, represents the possibilities open to the "New Woman in the twentieth century, as Cecilia Hennel Hendricks was a teacher, writer, businesswomen, politician, feminist, wife, and mother. One lesson readers and scholars can continue to learn from Cecilia's letters is the significance of letters in revealing and shaping a life and (more importantly), the need to preserve and recognize such records study both from literary and historical perspective. Cecilia recognized this significance

when she first wrote to her family requesting that they preserve her letters.

Readers can be thankful that the family members obliged.

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<sup>1</sup>See Hendricks, *Letters From Honey Hill: A Woman's View of Homesteading 1914-1931*. From a letter dated January 18, 1914, p 19.

2. See Hendricks, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> See Hendricks, salutation for a love letter from Cecelia to John, p. 369.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the characteristics of “amorous epistolary discourse”, see Kaufman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender and Epistolary Fictions*. pp. 20-27.

<sup>5</sup> See. Fitzgerald, *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: the Love Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*.

<sup>6</sup> See Stein, *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*.

<sup>7</sup> For more discussion of the expansion of woman's roles on the homesteads, see Garceau, 89-111.

<sup>8</sup> This prompted the proposal of a 1913 homestead law expanding grazing lands to 1280 acres. In 1916 grazing homesteads were given a 6400 acre limit, but this still proved to be quite small in terms of maintaining a ranch. See Larson, *A History of Wyoming*. Pp.346-385.

<sup>9</sup> See Hendricks, from a letter dated October 22, 1926, p. 515.

<sup>10</sup> John was a member of the State Agricultural board and was urged to become a representative in the Legislature. Neither he nor Cecelia were ever elected to public office, but they maintained involvement on community boards and committees.

<sup>11</sup> This was a group comprised primarily of farmers and rural workers who helped promote certain candidates whom they felt shared their interests. See Larson, pp. 454-55.

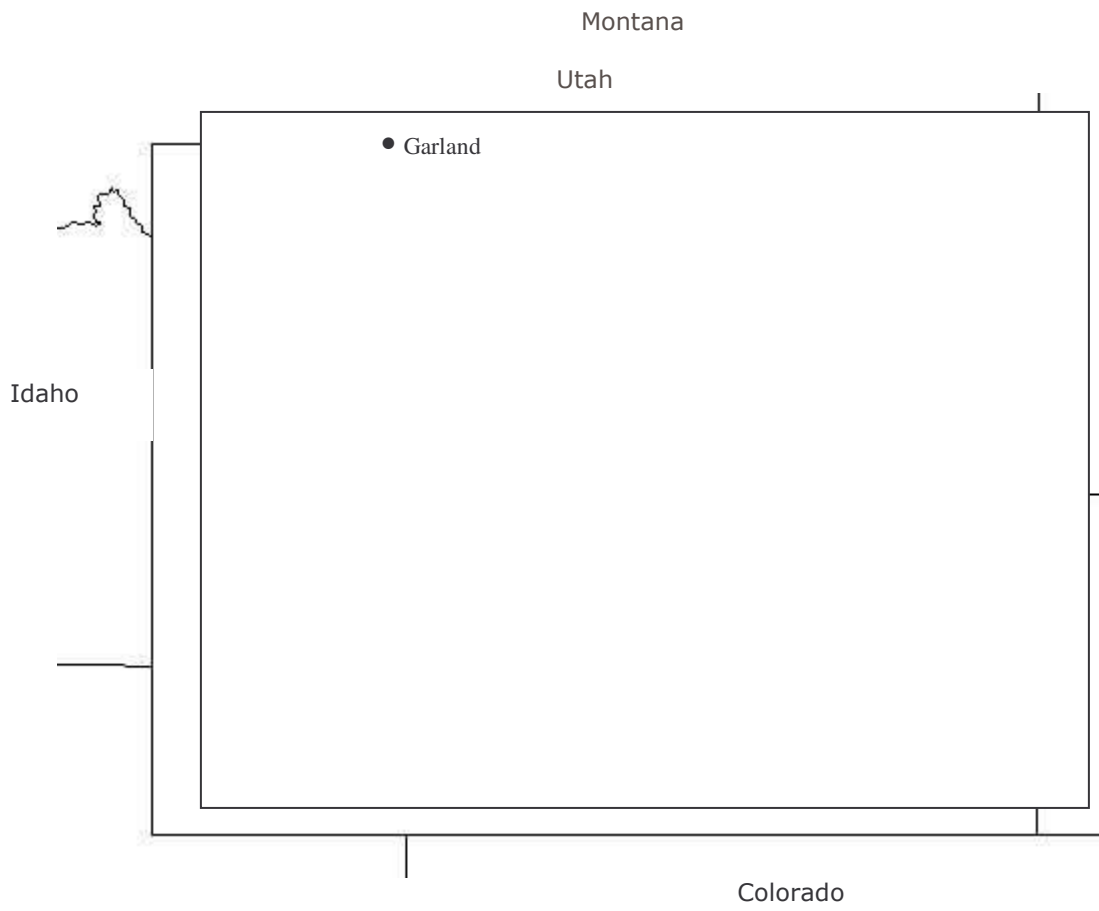


Figure 12: Garland, Wyoming  
The location of Cecilia and John Hendricks' Honey Hill



## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion: Epistolary Correspondence In The 21st Century

While these three women had different motivations and outcomes in their experiences, there are commonalities expressed within their letters, such as the significance of family, community, strong work ethics, and a connection to land. Most important is the role that letters played in each of their lives. In the twenty first century, the U.S. Postal Service has become so commonplace and reliable in our everyday lives that we may seldom think about the process or route of our correspondence once it is mailed. The prevalence of the telephone and e-mail correspondence makes contacting someone across the country, indeed across the world, possible with limited effort. It is easy to forget that in the early twentieth century, when Stewart, Corey, and Hennel were homesteading communication was of the utmost importance and that letters were the main means of communication across distances, with the remote locations of many homesteaders. As a result of reliance upon epistolary relationships, the process of letter delivery was a significant aspect of concern for the writers in this study. Cecilia Hennel Hendricks demonstrates this in one of her early letters. Having been separated from her family by a great distance for the first time, she is accurately aware of the impact of that separation, as she explains:

To send a letter takes four days from you to us. That is, it gets here to the house by rural delivery the fourth day from the day you mail it in Bloomington. From us to you, if we put the letter in our box takes five days, as mail goes out from Powell on the train before the rural delivery man gets back in the evening. If we take mail to Powell or to Garland the

time is only four days, the same as you to here. The rural delivery man waits till the train comes into Powell each day before he starts out. He does not leave the office till twelve o' clock. Now in case you should need to reach us in a hurry, a telegram sent to Powell to get there before twelve o' clock noon would reach us the same afternoon at about three o' clock or shortly thereafter. A night letter sent from Bloomington ought to reach us the next afternoon. It would be wise to mention in sending the telegram or night letter that is delivered on a rural route, Powell No. 2. A message that arrives in Powell after twelve o' clock would not reach us till the next day in the afternoon. (To Anna Hendricks, January 18, 1914, 19)

Cecilia's first main venture away from home made her acutely aware of the distance between herself and her family in Indiana. In accounting the route that the letter would travel, Cecilia marks the spatio-temporal distance. The travel of the letters is akin to the travel that Cecilia herself would have to make in order to reach her parents. Just as in the instance of the love letter, the letter itself becomes the embodiment of Cecilia. The route of Cecilia's letter highlights the time constraints of the mail. It was virtually impossible to remain abreast of events as they were occurring. Telegrams were the only means of doing this in the early twentieth century. Modes of communication has have since evolved into various methods of online correspondence and communication and enable users to have nearly instantaneous updates on events as they occur.

### *Online Communication*

In the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century communicating via the Internet has all but replaced traditional modes of epistolary communication. Rapid progress has been made in the years since the telephone and even since the availability of the Internet in the 1980s made connecting through e-mail correspondence

possible. Letters like those of Stewart, Corey, and Hendricks are significant in that they represent what many would determine to be a dying art; the art of epistolary correspondence. It would, however, perhaps be more fitting to view the advent of online communication as an evolutionary stage in the development of the letter instead of the death of the genre. In Bolter and Grusin's *Remediations* (2000), the two authors explore the means by which older forms of media like letters have repositioned or "repurposed" themselves as digital media: "Older electronic and print media are seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture as digital media"(5). Newspapers and magazines have transformed themselves into online publications, and the numerous online social networking sites reflect the remediation that Bolter and Gursin discuss. Indeed online correspondence possesses some of the same types of conventions and etiquette requirements that written letters possess because online correspondence has *remediated* from those earlier modes. Just as in handwritten epistolary discourse, social networking sites, blogs, and e-mail communication confront the same types of issues regarding motivations for writing, construction of identity, epistolary relationships, and veracity.

While the forms of communication may have changed, the reality is that letters, either written or digital, currently shape our lives in ways that may have only seemed unimaginable before the Internet became so prevalent. The evolution of communication places value upon the written word to help provide

insight into the way in which our communicative histories have been established. In *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980) Jacques Derrida lamented, “The end of a postal epoch is also the end of literature”(104). While one may not fully be able to argue that the “postal epoch,” which presents the hand-written letter as the prevalent communication form is at an end, it is certainly at a severe decline. Instead of signaling the “end of literature” as Derrida prophesied, however, the rise in online communication is yet another stage of development of the letters.

Like letter-writing, blogging and social networking are available to the literate masses that have access to the Internet. Sites like blogger.com and myblogspot.com offer free blog creation and step-by-step video instructions that make it easy for anyone with Internet access and some modicum of computer literacy to create a blog. Even if one cannot afford a computer or Internet connection, public libraries offer free Internet access with a library card. This availability is somewhat democratizing in the same way that letter writing was for the literate masses as well. In Elizabeth Corey’s letters readers can see that in spite of any financial hardships or struggles, she still found a way to finance her epistolary habit. Paul Gerber acknowledges the expense of Corey’s letter-writing in his editor’s notes: “By the end of her ninth month on Bad River she had spent nearly five dollars on stamps alone”(lxxiii). Similarly to those who would not have been able to afford stamps and writing utensils, online communications does exclude people who do not have access to the Internet, and it is important to recognize that much of that access is determined by where one lives and economic status.

*Why Write? The Purpose of Online Communication*

As a result of the propensity for communication online, writing has, in fact, become the dominant form of communication. While letter writers of the past communicated in this manner due to necessity, today online and electronic writing (e-mail, social networking sites, blogs, and texting) are the communication modes of choice for many people due to the both the convenience and entertainment potential they offer. Online communication is motivated by many of the same factors as handwritten correspondence, primarily as a means to convey information to others about one's life, maintain relationships, and entertain. All of these purposes can be accomplished through any of the mediums found online: e-mail, blogs, and social networking sites are all multi-faceted in regards to the purposes they serve. While texting may be the most common form of communication off of the Internet, e-mail remains one of the most common forms of online written communication; it plays a significant role in both the professional and personal lives of those in the United States and in other countries as well. Jacques Derrida predicted the significance of technology and the impact that it will have upon communication: "The day will come thanks to the 'telepost,' the fundamentals will be transmitted by wire starting from the user's computer going to receiving organs of the post office nearest [all the same] the residence of the addressee, [...]"(105). Originally in written in 1980, before the mass popularity of e-mail, Derrida correctly predicted the commonplace uses of e-

mail. While e-mail has largely replaced the traditional hand-written letter, it offers a remediated of epistolary discourse.

E-mail possesses many of the same characteristics as the hand-written letter. The salutation, the body, and the closing are all present in the e-mail form when one takes time to properly construct an e-mail. Unlike written letters, however, e-mails are often brief, particularly in professional settings, and because of the immediacy of the electronic form, responses are expected quickly. William Decker expresses reservations about e-mail, but indicates that it does have social value that may not yet be completely determined, “As a social genre, however, it should be judged: by the complexity and satisfaction of contact, by its power to organize and cultivate relations, and by the space it provides for imagining the ways in which one may exist in reciprocity with others”(Decker 241). The characteristics that Decker ascribes to how the success of a form of communication should be judged all relate to the function of epistolary discourse within this study. All three women use letters to “cultivate relations” and reciprocate within those relations in unique ways. Certainly if one argues that the value of the genre is defined in terms of reciprocity as Decker suggests, then it is difficult to argue against the notion that the development of e-mail lends itself to the advancement of communication and helps to narrow the sphere of distance in regards to communication. Additionally, in “E-mail in the Global Age: Ethical Stories of Women on the Net,” Margaretta Jolly argues that, “e-mail is a

symptomatic form of life-writing in the context of a network society” (153). For Jolly e-mail offers ways in which like-minded individuals, like feminists, can bridge the gaps and share their stories via e-mail communication. This is similar to Ceceilia Hennel Hendricks use of letters as means to express her feminist ideals but e-mail is not the only online mode in which information can be shared.

One of the key aspects of online communication is the development of blogs. Short for weblogs, blogs are websites maintained by individuals that contain online posts usually offering insights into certain issues or describing daily events. This means of using online communication as a way to keep readers abreast of daily events is in accordance with the way that Stewart, Corey, and Hennel use letters as a means to describe the daily events in their lives to their reading audience. Instead of minute to minute updates, however, their updates were naturally not as frequent due to the delay of the postal service.

Websites that have a blog format embedded within their site content, like CNN.com or the Yahoo homepage allow viewers to post comments on daily stories. Additionally, blogging is an aspect of other social networking sites like Facebook, My Space, and Twitter. Blogs allows for a broader community of Internet users who can share ideas and comment upon respond to each other’s posts. In Jill Walker Rettberg’s *Blogging* (2008) the author outlines and defines primary types of blogs: personal blogs, filter blogs, and topic blogs. Personal blogs offer a diary-like format in which people record aspects of their daily lives.

Filter blogs allow people to record their experience on the Internet, such as linking an interesting website. Topic driven blogs are blogs about specific topics where readers can post comments and respond to one another (9). The types of blogs that would be most obviously linked to letters are the personal blog, due to their autobiographical nature. The diary-like nature of the personal blog operates similarly to a journal and allows readers to post their daily activities and personal thoughts.

This brings into question why someone would want to share his or her personal experiences and intimate thoughts. Karen Mc Cullagh's "Blogging: Self Presentation and Privacy" presents the author's survey of bloggers. In response to the question of why they blog, 62.5% cited the need to document experiences and share them with others as the prime motivation for blogging (9). Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic further examine the motivation of bloggers in their article "*The Psychology of Blogging: You, Me, and Everyone in Between*":

Unlike personal Web presentations, structured around "the essence of me," blogs are structured around "the process of me." Unlike chatting, pointed toward "hear me out at this moment," blogging is pointed toward "hear me out throughout time." Blogging, thus, is a twofold communicative event. On one hand, it is the event of "writing oneself" through continuous recording of past and present experiences, just as in the case of traditional diaries. On the other hand, blogging is the event of "rewriting oneself" through interaction with the audience. Unlike writing a traditional diary, blogging *is* a process of linking two or more individuals. (65)

The authors' analysis of blogs links the form to the letter as well, as the diary and highlights it as a significant form of life-writing. The connective quality that



Gurak and Antonijevic discuss is akin to the epistolary relationship and the dialogic properties of epistolary correspondence, while the diary-like form is related to memoirs or published diaries. This dual functionality is in accordance with Cecilia Hennel Hendricks' quest to both preserve and share her experiences in Wyoming; one can only imagine that had blogging been available in the early twentieth century it would have been an ideal way for her to share her experiences with her family back in Indiana. She would have been able to post her daily experiences and in return receive responses from them instantaneously without the spatio-temporal lag. Additionally, blogs would have given writers like Elinore Pruitt Stewart a forum to continue sharing her stories to an expansive community beyond the ones who passed her letters along to one another.

Twitter is the most recent blogging phenomenon. Released to the public in 2007, it is a social networking site that is considered to be a "microblog" because there are limitations placed upon the number of characters that can be entered. Like other social networking sites and blogs service Twitter is free, but it is limited to 140 characters, which are called "tweets." Twitter users can set up their own micro blog and follow other bloggers on the site. Users can upload images, create profiles, and follow other users on Twitter. The site also has applications that send alerts when posts regarding certain topics of interest or users are updated. Additionally, other social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook have enabled their users to link to Twitter; thus enabling them to

compete more effectively with the new social networking site and increase their users as well. Twitter also enables its users to meet together in chat rooms, which help to expand the sense of community.

According to Paul Farhi's "The Twitter Explosion," Twitter offers benefits for reporters and media enthusiasts by offering minute by minute, updates, but the limitations include the dissemination of incorrect information that could be reported on other networking sites, as a result of erroneous reports. The other limitation is the time it takes to scroll through the mass of mundane tweets that simply relay the daily activities of its users. Regardless of its limitations, it does seem that Twitter is the new craze in social networking. The fact that yet another site can emerge and gain such immense popularity highlights the significance of online communication in that so many sites are able to sustain themselves with a large following of users and underscores the particular interest in blogs as a means of online communication and offers a remediated form of letters in that they entertain, inform, and connects writers with their audiences.

#### *Who Am I? Who Are You: Constructing Online Identities*

More than face- to-face communication or handwritten communication, online communication allows anonymity for those who desire it. People are able to create profiles online that either inaccurately depict gender or do not refer to it at all. This is similar To Elizabeth Corey's construction of her Bachelor Bess persona in that she creates an image for herself that is not necessarily in keeping

with the prescribed notions of femininity, certainly not the ones that her mother attempts to impose upon her. Similarly this online ambiguity allows people to enter chatrooms or engage in dialogue on blogs without the normal constraints that exist in other face-to-face or handwritten letters in which correspondents have some knowledge of one another before epistolary discourse begins.

The anonymity of the Internet enables users to interact with one another and construct identities that are not necessarily subject to the social constraints that are like gender or race that may challenge or hinder discussion in the real world. Additionally, as Sherry Turkle argues, the Internet becomes a real place in which to engage in behaviors or perhaps even express personality characteristics that are not acted out in the “real world”:

Cyberspace, like all complex phenomena has a range of psychological effects. For some people, it is a place to "act out" unresolved conflicts to play and replay characterological difficulties on a new and exotic stage. For others, it provides an opportunity to "work through" significant personal issues, to use the new materials of cybersociality to reach for new resolution. (Turkle 644)

Turkle’s assertions apply in large part to her examination of chatrooms and online gaming where people take part in activities that allow them to construct online personas that may be antithetical to the way they would present themselves in real life; they can create new names, new backgrounds, and new genders. In this way, the Internet provides a means to act out one’s fantasies, but it also offers a mode by which to engage in dialogue in a community without adhering to certain conventions that may govern or limit the bounds of discourse where anonymity

and even misrepresentation were not an option. One of the most obvious of these conventions is in the construction of gender. Users are able to either choose an alternate gender; males could present themselves as female and vice versa on online networking sites like MySpace and Facebook where user profiles or to try to create a web persona that does not subscribe to either. This may alter the manner in which other users engage in dialogue with them and offer new experiences beyond those that they may experience in the “real world.”

Additionally, the perceived anonymity of the Internet may also allow for a more open discussion of one’s views and beliefs. As Vivienne Serfaty observes in *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of Online Diaries and Blog* (2004) the computer screen offers a sense of anonymity for writers who feel “veiled” by the lack of face-to-face interaction (12-15). As a result of this perceived anonymity, bloggers or social networking participants may feel free to express views that may not be accepted in daily interactions. For example, atheists may feel freer to express non-religious views when online because outside the confines of cyberspace they may be persecuted for such beliefs that are not in line with the majority of the population who believes in some form of a spiritual deity. Essentially, internet communities enable writers to challenge issues that exist in the “real” or “non-cyber world.”

#### *Privacy Online*

In spite of the sense of anonymity that can be inspired by creating an

online persona, there are some real dangers in relation to privacy online.

McCallagh discusses the different types of privacy and the significance it plays in our daily lives:

Therefore, the disclosure of personal information by bloggers appears to pose very unique privacy threats as expressive privacy plays a fundamental role in our lives. It enables us to choose and dictate the way that we will live, it promotes the creation of our self-identity, and it allows us to enjoy a wide variety of social relationships and roles, including intimate relationships. Expressive privacy sets the stage for social interaction to occur and additionally enables the creation of one's identity by preventing other people's social overreaching throughout this interaction. Informational privacy centres on the notion of control over one's information. Informational privacy considers the arguments that much information about oneself 'need not be available for public perusal'.  
(5)

While users of Facebook have recently expressed concerns over informational privacy when it was learned that hackers had access to personal information, expressive privacy remains the main concern of most online bloggers. Many bloggers create expressive privacy by not revealing their names or the names of people whom they may blog about. The issue of privacy is an enduring one, as Elinore Pruitt Stewart addresses this need for privacy in a public forum in her published letters by using several neighbors to create a single epistolary character like Mrs. O'Shaughnessey or Mrs. Louderer. Privacy becomes an issue in that posters do not know who will be viewing their blogs or social networking sites, and self-presentation on the Internet may conflict with professional personas. Many employers use the Internet as a means to obtain information about potential

employees. As a result, it is important to be aware of what one posts on the Internet and how one presents one's self on social-networking sites. Once something is published on the Internet privacy may often be limited. Online writers do not have editors who can censor material in the same way that the Stewart, Corey and Hendricks did in their collected letters.

### *Epistolary Relationships Online*

While social networking sites, blogs, and e-mail may have seemed to displace the genre of letters, there is much in common between the new online technology and handwritten forms of communication. One of the key commonalities is that all epistolary relationships, either online or handwritten, require a commitment on the part of the corresponsor and the correspondee. Whether on Twitter or in e-mail correspondence, those who engage in communication must act with reciprocity in order to both gain and maintain the interest of their counterparts. Elizabeth Corey's letter reflect a keen understanding of the responsibilities involved in an epistolary relationship: I received your letter a long while ago and ma's just a few days ago-Have had several letters-one from Mr. Hastings and one from Uncle J.D.-nothing like having relatives know your business"(To Olney Corey, August 29, 1909, 29). Corey keeps track of the correspondence in noting who has written to her, primarily so that she can return the correspondence. Bess Corey spent quite a bit of time and money in order to maintain her epistolary relationships: "Aunt Thettie

would sure feel bad if Uncle Walter used stamps the way I do. It is upward five dollars worth since starting for S.D. (To Margaret Corey, January 28 1910, 70). Bess notes the reciprocal nature of the epistolary relationship when she expresses concern over not receiving a letter from her mother: “I haven’t had a letter from you in about a month or so and only one card since then. What is the matter? I answered your last letter, Im sure, and have been writing to the kidlets since, trying to get theirs paid off” (To Margaret Corey, March 15, 1910, 76). The phrase “paid off” in reference to the correspondence situates the letter as payment for a debt, signaling that if one sends a letter, an answer is expected in a timely manner. Rebecca Earle’s *Epistolary Responses* notes significant aspects of the personal letter that can apply to online relationships as well:

Personal letters, particularly those written with no apparent thought to publication, have often been read as windows into the soul of the author. The ancient trope that views the letter as merely a conversation in writing lent particular force to this idea, whereby the letter becomes as unmediated and unmeditated as a casual conversation. (Earle 5)

Certainly the dialogic properties that Earle addresses manifest themselves more clearly in online communication. The ability to respond with immediacy allows for less of a time lag and can provide a stronger sense of immediacy, which allows for a more “authentic conversation” than one that occurs over a period of weeks through the postal service. Imagine the implications of Elizabeth and Margaret Corey being able to immediately express and respond to the conflicts that they experienced. Perhaps it would have allowed them to resolve their issues

more quickly, as tensions would not have had time to build from one letter to the next.

The protocol for letters is that one will respond to a letter in a timely fashion once one is sent. It is in this method of exchange that the epistolary relationship is both established and maintained. Standards of protocol regarding social networking sites are concomitant to those governing written epistolary exchange. Kristina Devoe's "Constructing Who We Are Online: One Word, One Friend at a Time" examines the need for frequency in regards to social networking sites. Like epistolary relationships, Devoe argues that there needs to be continual contact in order to maintain the relationship:

To build presence, user-posted content must be frequent, authentic, and engaging. Be aware that perceptions of frequency can vary across social networking sites. For instance, although one or two postings a week to your delicious.com account might be sufficient, the same to your Twitter account could lead your friends to forget about you or, worse, think you are not active and thus not interesting. (420)

Just as writers in written relationships must sustain interesting conversation and continual contact, those involved in online correspondence, either direct through e-mail or indirect through social networking, must maintain the epistolary relationship as well. In fact, with the myriad of communication choices that the Internet provides, maintenance of communicative relationships may even be more important in the electronic age in order to maintain a dialogue. There are many more forums to use, and the immediacy of online communication necessitates more attention to correspondence. Instead of having a week's delay or more in



correspondence, online communicators often have minutes before a response is in order.

Online communication offers a means for writers to reach a broad audience at once. An interesting example exists in Damien Echols, a convicted killer on death row who has gained much media attention as being part of the “West Memphis Three, “ a trio of young men whom many feel were wrongfully convicted of murdering three boys in West Memphis, Arkansas in 1993. The case has garnered much attention due to the controversy surrounding the conviction, as well as activism by celebrities like Johnny Depp and Henry Rollins who are among a large number of supporters who feel the three were wrongfully convicted. As a result of the attention, Echols and his cohorts receive many letters. Because he was unable to respond to such a large amount of correspondence, Echols decided upon an online forum to be posted by an intermediary on the website *Free West Memphis Three* to address his growing correspondents. In a section titled “Letters From Damien,” Echols responds to questions posed in letters and creates blog entries dealing with various aspects of his life. He explains the purpose on the website:

There's simply no way that I can correspond with everyone, it's not physically possible. It takes me an average of four hours to write a single letter, if it's to contain anything of meaning or value. If I did nothing but dedicate every waking moment to writing letters I'd still only be able to complete three a day. I don't want people to think their letters to me are wasted time, or that I don't appreciate them, because that is not the case. I love receiving your letters. I look forward to them every single day. So, my idea is this - what if I were to respond this way? You could ask questions, propose topics, or tell me stories, and I could respond through

Brent. We could make it an on-going project.

The “Letters” section operates like a blog with dated entries. The limitation is that Echols cannot post the entries himself because he does not have computer access. Instead he must use an intermediary, who acts as an editor in compiling the entries. In spite of this limitation, the significance of this “project” is twofold. First, it underscores the ability of online communication in responding to large groups of people simultaneously, thus enabling those with a large number of correspondents to maintain the epistolary relationship. Second, it illustrates the democratizing power of the Internet in that even marginalized members of society, like death row inmates have the ability to establish large communities beyond prison walls. What is evident is that both traditional hand-written correspondence and the various forms of online correspondence require commitment on behalf of both corresponsder and corresponsdee in order to maintain a successful online relationship.

#### *Veracity on the Net*

In the vein of traditional life narratives like autobiography the ability to determine veracity in regards to online exchanges remains a concern, just as it does in regards to traditional autobiography and in letters. As discussed in Chapter One, Phillip LeJeune’s notion of an “autobiographical pact” establishes the need for trust between writers and readers and contends that writers will create narratives that are “true.” In spite of the ability to create anonymity, bloggers and

other online communicators beholden to standards of truth as well and are subject to criticism and accountability from their audiences if they engage in intentional fictionalizing. John Jordan's article "A Virtual Death and a Real Dilemma: Identity, Trust and Community in Cyberspace" examines the aftereffects of deceit on online communities. The author focuses upon the case of Debbie Swenson, who created a blog using the fictionalized persona of "Kaycee," a nineteen-year old girl suffering from leukemia. Swenson perpetuated this lie for 2 and a half years, eventually creating her own blog as Kaycee's mother where she eventually posted news of Kaycee's death. This news generated sympathy and emotional responses from the blogging community, who had followed Kaycee's blog and had engaged in dialogue with her. Many members of this blogging community grew suspicious after they were unable to obtain any details of where to send condolences or attend the funeral. Ultimately, Debbie Swenson admitted that the whole blog was a hoax; Kaycee had never existed. This revelation created an uproar among the online community and led to media scrutiny regarding creation of online identities. Jordan discusses the significance of the reaction:

Dialogic tensions between self/other and persona/community drive online community interactions and establish the trust that binds members together. They also reveal the extent of the dilemma faced by community members when they suspect one of their own of being a hoaxter. If their suspicions are confirmed, they face the potential loss of not just an individual community member, but of the foundation of the community itself. If identity is dialogic, then a hoax implicates *all* community members, even if only marginally, as it was their mutual acceptance of the fraudulent persona that allowed the hoax to succeed. (205)

In the vein of traditional life narratives like autobiography the ability to determine veracity in regards to narrative construction remains a concern, just as it does in regards to traditional autobiography and in letters. While Elinore Pruitt Stewart's letters, have, as discussed in Chapter Two, been scrutinized for fabrication, readers generally accept that as a whole they are truthful. Any minor embellishments are forgivable through the Stewart's intent to entertain her audience. While bloggers and other online life writers may have similar intents regarding entertainment and literary expression, the construction of an entirely fictional character is problematic in that the members of the blogging community perceived Kaycee as real and became emotionally invested in her life, as many readers tend to do when reading life narratives. The ability to dialogue with the writer through blog entries only heightened the emotional relationship, and underscores the commonalities between online communication and handwritten communication. This deceit highlights the responsibility of readers to use critical thinking to determine the motive and reliability of the writer.

### *Archiving and Editing*

While the letters of the women in this study, and the majority of published letters have the benefit of editors, online communication does not generally have such forms of editing. Blog entries may be reviewed to avoid the posting of profanity and bloggers have the ability to report abuse from other bloggers on most sites. This, however, is ultimately where the editing ends, and it is often

difficult to preserve online communication without an editor. The one possible benefit of the removal of the editor is that it also removes the editorial influence that may shape or reshape the author's intent.

The presentation of online material generally begins in the present, whereas, the compiled letters of the writers in this study and the majority of life writing begins with early entries and proceeds forward in a chronological order. As Rettberg observes, blogs are rooted in the present and are entries are arranged in order of the most recent posts (65). Older entries, generally those more than six months old are often archived into another section of the blog, thus highlighting one problem evident with blogs, as with all forms of online communication, the issue of permanence. Whereas, family members preserved the letters of Stewart, Corey, and Hennel, the immateriality of online writing makes such storage difficult. Even with archiving available within the blog site, once the writer ceases to maintain the blog the information will not be available. This limitation diminishes the value of blogging as a means to establish a viable historical record like the one that Hendricks is able to create and preserve in regards through her family. E-mail can be archived by creating folders to store - mail within one's e-mail account. This is subject to the memory size of the account and of course, would only be available for the amount of time one maintains the account. Additionally, one could always undertake the arduous task of printing out any online materials for further preservation. Of course, paper is

not permanent either and is vulnerable to elements like fire and decay if they are not preserved with care. One option, as with all online documents is to save the information to another disc or flash drive. Thus archivists and historians have been extremely concerned for many years about how to archive online communication, and there does not seem to be an easy answer to assuage these concerns; however, it does seem logical that online archives could be created. In fact, archives like the U.S. National Archives have currently digitized many documents like land deeds and census records, so that internet users have access to them. It seems logical, therefore, that the archiving of online material would be best conducted online.

#### *The Romanticization of the Letter*

In spite of the availability of e-mail and the predominance that it hold in the majority of our lives, there is still a certain value attached to the letter. This assignation of value is likely because the writing of letters has become a rarity in today's electronic age. Anne Bower discusses the value of letters in *Epistolary*

#### *Responses:*

Nowadays, telephones and electronic mail systems make letter writing a choice rather than a necessity in our communications, although one's income does influence such choices. The conditions of our social organizations frequently set up barriers to relationships, whether barriers of location, time, language, socioeconomic differences, prejudice, or personal history. We tended to see those in our society who suffer such alienation as victims; I like the way the letter form positions the subject—whether fictional character or literary scholar—as one who, no matter how alienated and isolated, has found a toll with which to reclaim herself or himself as active respondent to and shaper of his or her past, present, and future. (Bower 9)

Bower seems to romanticize letter writing by ignoring that the various types of internet communications that have been addressed previously allow for the same type of construction of identity and experiences. Nonetheless, there is a certain value that must be placed upon taking the picking out stationary taking, buying the stamps, taking time to sit down and write a letter, sealing the envelope, and mailing a letter. The amount of care associated with this process cannot be duplicated in an instantaneous e-mail or post. The written letter, while it can be imitated in the online form, cannot entirely be duplicated: “The letter is unique precisely because it does tend to define itself in terms of polarities such as portrait/mask, presence/absence, bridge/barriers”(Altman 186). Altman notes the limitations and benefits through binaries often associated with handwritten epistolary discourse. The benefits of online communication, however, lie in the fact that theoretical barriers and bridges are overcome with the click of the button.

Regardless, of the immediate online connection, certain letters, such as the love letters written between John and Cecilia Hendricks, seem to be more suited for hand-written expression in their connections to the body and the beloved. Helene Cixous’s *Love Itself in the Letterbox* (2005) further establishes the connection between letter and body, as she reflects upon her lover’s correspondence: “First of all, they are not paper-letters, except in appearing to be so, they are your flesh and my blood”(91). The connection between body and letter and blood and ink presents the letter as a tangible relic of love and

underscores the continued relevance of the hand-written letter's ability to connect some senders and recipients in ways that online communication cannot.

### *Conclusion*

Writers like Stewart, Corey, and Hendricks wrote to help ease the sense of isolation they felt as the result of being miles away from neighbors and loved ones. Online communication serves much the same purpose, instantly connecting people whether they are isolated physically from others or not. It also provides spaces for feminist discourse and offers opportunities to construct identities. Whether the hand-written letter will survive remains to be seen, but online communication offers new and exciting possibilities for the realms of epistolarity and life-writing, and in that spirit, letters, online and otherwise, continue to offer an interesting arena of study for scholars.



## AFTERWORD

During the years of the Great Depression, which had a significant toll on much of the United States, homesteads in the west were not immune to the financial strain that gripped much of the country. To maintain a homestead was particularly difficult for families like the Stewarts and the Hendricks, who were relying on the land for the majority of their income. Elinore Pruitt Stewart faced health problems as a result of a mowing accident. She had divided time between the homestead and Wyoming and Boulder, Colorado, so that the Stewart children would have access to better school systems than what was offered to them in Burnt Fork. This need to obtain assistance from a more urban environment accents the problems that many people encountered then and now due to the isolation of rural homesteads. The dynamic highlighted the significance of family, as it took an entire family to maintain a homestead. In an interview with Dee Garceau, Elinore Pruitt Stewart's daughter, Jerrine Wire reveals the sacrifices that she made in order to aid her parents:

While attending the University of Colorado on an art scholarship during the late 1920's, Jerrine had fallen in love with a fellow art student. He too, came from a ranching family. Just about the time they were considering marriage, his elderly parents requested his help on their ranch. If Jerrine married him, she needed her help as well, particularly since her mother was slowly recovering from a serious mowing accident. Times were hard in rural Wyoming, and the Stewart ranch was struggling. (102)

Despite all of her family's efforts, Elinore eventually succumbed to illness and died in 1933. Clyde was unable to maintain the homestead, even with aid from the children. The homestead was eventually sold and Clyde moved in with one of their children in Whitefish, Montana where he lived until his death in 1938.

Elizabeth Corey similarly was also unable to maintain her homestead. Financial difficulties and poor health forced her to eventually she sell her "ranch," as she had come to call her homestead, and she purchased a home in 1946 from another single woman. As Bess continued teaching, renewing her teaching certificate every year until 1946, she never really had the opportunity to enjoy the homestead that she had worked so hard to own. Her teaching career, her only means of support, kept her away from her homestead, even resulting in the need to turn it over to caretakers in years preceding the eventual sale so that she could further her education and maintain her teaching certificate.

It seems that the experience of working for and achieving the goal of acquiring the homestead was more important than the actual homestead itself. In the afterword to Bess's letters, Wayne Franklin suggests that Bess may have been more successful had she devoted all of her time to the homesteading venture and attempted to live off of the land instead of relying so heavily upon her teaching career (395). It is just as likely that such an attempt to live off of the land would have resulted in her failure to prove up; such failure did not seem to be an option for Bess, whose main goal appears to have been to attain land in an attempt to

prove to her family, and especially to her mother, that she was capable of achieving her goal. Teaching helped to ensure that she could achieve that goal, even if it meant she would never actually be able to live upon her land for any length of time. In 1954, Bess died from cancer and was buried in a plot in Iowa located in a church cemetery where she and her family had attended church as a young girl. Her mother had willed her the plot upon her death, showing that even with their contentious relationship she had genuine affection and concern for her daughter.

As previously discussed, Cecelia Hennel Hendricks's homesteading venture came to an end with the death of her husband, John, in 1936. Having already been forced to split time between the homestead in Wyoming and Indiana, Cecelia chose to return to Indiana where she had security both in her job as a professor at Indiana University and in the support of her sister, Cora. Cecelia's devotion to education would be her main focus until the end of her life in 1969. She never remarried even though she was only fifty-three when she became a widow.

All of the women in this study have their own unique homesteading experience and their own motivations for undertaking such a venture. For both Elinore Pruitt Stewart and Elizabeth Corey, the prime motivation seemed to have been the potential of improving their own situations and finding opportunities that would have been unavailable to them otherwise. Elinore Pruitt Stewart sought to

escape a life in the city and possibly gain adventure that would give her a fertile subject matter to develop as a writer. Additionally, marriage also seemed to be a prime motivation for the move. For Elizabeth Corey, the motivation seemed to be a bit more complex, rooted in the tenuous relationship with her mother and Bess's desire to prove her own worth.

For Cecelia Hennel Hendricks the prime motivation for her move to Wyoming was her marriage to John. She had a career in Indiana as a professor, and given her return to Indiana University after John's death, it is obvious that her life in Indiana was not unappealing to her. She just preferred life with the man she loved in a state that afforded her more rights as a woman than she would have been granted had she chosen to live in a state besides Wyoming. Cecelia's educational background and her business venture with John and her foray into politics were opportunities that she would have not had been given had she never taken a chance.

While these three women had different motivations and outcomes in their experiences, there are commonalities expressed within their letters, such as the significance of family, community, strong work ethics, and a connection to land. Most important is the role that letters played in each of their lives.

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