“A Peephole into that World”: The Narrator in *A Lost Lady*

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ABSTRACT

The novel of female adultery arrived to its zenith in 1857 with the publication of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and during the next half of the century a collection of great novels, such as Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Clarin's *La Regenta* (1884), and Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895), built up a long literary tradition. The novel of female adultery also emerged in North America leaving novels like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) or Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) as important and great examples.

In *A Lost Lady*, Marian Forrester is the fallen woman who is unfaithful to her husband; and although the love affairs follow the typical pattern of the novel of female adultery (an old husband, a young and beautiful wife, and young and interesting lovers) the novel does not exactly fit in this tradition. The way in which the story is narrated, for instance, makes the novel be different from *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* or *La Regenta*. In *A Lost Lady* Cather uses a male character's (who at the beginning of the novel is twelve years old but gradually grows up until he is a young adult) point of view in a way that all what happens in the novel is seen through the eyes of an unreliable narrator, Niel. But why does she use this narrative technique?

The aim of this project is to find the answer to this question, and to do so four possible hypotheses will be explored. The first one is that Cather might not want to show her personal opinion about adultery and uses Niel to distance herself from the text. The second interpretation is that she wants to show how society (Niel) still sees adultery as a failure and a negative behaviour in women. Another one would be the fact that she wants to "mask" her lesbian feelings behind a male character. Finally, the fourth one is that Cather just wants to break with traditional narrative techniques as well as being original and innovative.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, a kind of novel centred on "wifely adultery" flourished in Continental Europe (Overton, 1996: 3), and arrived to its zenith in 1857 when Gustave Flaubert published *Madame Bovary*. The theme attracted many writers during the next half of the century and a collection of great novels, such as Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Clarin's *La Regenta* (1884), and Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895), built up a long literary tradition. The novel of female adultery also emerged in North America leaving novels like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* (1904), or Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) as great examples. However, these novels did not necessarily follow the pattern that characterised the European tradition aforesaid, as we will discuss in the following sections.

When *The Awakening* was first published in 1899, Cather immediately wrote an essay on that novel criticising Chopin for having dealt with a "so trite and sordid theme". She also claimed that "there was, indeed, no need that a second *Madame Bovary* should be written" (Cather, 1992a:910). These statements are confusing as well as contradictory since twenty-four years later Cather herself wrote *A Lost Lady*, which explains the story of an adulterous woman. The fact that contemporary reviews (1923) did not draw much attention on the adultery theme is also interesting, considering that this topic seems to be one of the main concerns for later and more recent literary criticism. Nancy Morrow (1984), for example, studies adultery in Cather's novel and compares it to the traditional pattern to be found in the nineteenth century novel of adultery. In addition, *A Lost Lady* has often been compared to other specific novels belonging to this novelistic tradition. Linda M. Lewis, for instance, argues in her essay "Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: Re-envisioning Romanticism" (1989) that "remarkable similarities exist between Cather's Marian Forrester and

Flaubert's Emma Bovary" (Lewis, 1989: 31) as well as between their respective husbands. She also points out that both novels involve two love affairs and economic difficulties, among other things. Others have compared and found many similarities between *A Lost Lady* and *The Awakening*. This could be the case of Ann Elizabeth Elz, who, in her article "*The Awakening* and *A Lost Lady*: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers" (2003), studied the fact that both Chopin's and Cather's novel "employ birds as a metaphor for the entrapment the protagonists experience" (Elz, 2003:14). Therefore, there seems to be a number of similarities between *A Lost Lady* and these great examples of the novel of adultery.

Nevertheless, we must take into account that even though the love affairs in *A Lost Lady* follow the typical pattern of the novel of female adultery (an old husband, a young and beautiful wife, and young and interesting lovers), Cather's novel does not exactly fit in this tradition. One clear aspect in which the novel differs from this tradition and that is relevant for our purposes is the way in which the story is narrated. In *A Lost Lady* Cather uses a male character's point of view (at the beginning of the novel Niel is twelve years old but he grows up until he is a young adult) in a way that all what happens in the novel is seen through the eyes of an unreliable narrator. But why does she use this narrative technique? Why is the story of Marian Forrester seen from a child's perspective?

In the essays "On the Art of Fiction" (1920) and "The Novel Démeublé" (1922), Willa Cather explains her theory on the art of writing. According to her, scenes and facts should be presented by suggestion rather than by enumeration. She claims that "a novel crowded with physical sensations is no less a catalogue that one crowded with furniture", and imagines "how wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning

physical sensations". Therefore, "it is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named that gives high quality to the novel" (Cather, 1992c:837) and this is exactly what she does in *A Lost Lady*. A child is not aware of what happens in the real world and does not understand things as adults do. Hence, at the beginning of the novel, when Niel is a child, he explains what he sees without knowing or understanding the reality that lies underneath the facts. Later on, notwithstanding Niel's growth, his point of view is, again, altered by his infatuation towards Marian Forrester. The reader is aware of that and this is the reason why we, readers, must build up our own opinions and take our own conclusions. As we will discuss in section 3, using this particular unreliable "narrator" or point of view might make the task of "suggesting rather than enumerating" (Cather, 1992c) easier to develop.

However, there is still one question left without an answer: Why does Cather use this narrative technique in *A Lost Lady*? Has this something to do with the topic of the novel? The aim of this project is to find the answer to this question, and to do so four possible hypotheses will be explored. The first one is that Cather might not want to show her personal opinion about adultery and, therefore, uses Niel to distance herself from the text. It has also been thought that she just wants to show how society (represented by Niel) still sees adultery as a failure and a negative behaviour in women. A third interpretation would be that the writer uses a male character as a point of view to hide her homosexual feelings. Last but not least, the fourth hypothesis that is going to be explored is that Cather, like many other modernists, just wants to break with traditional narrative techniques as well as being original and innovative.

2. ADULTERY

2.1. The Novel of Female Adultery: Context, Features, and Key Works.

> During the second two-thirds of the nineteenth century a distinct type of novel, dealing with female adultery, was widely produced and widely read in Continental Europe. The leading features of novels of this type are strikingly similar. With minor variations, each is based on a plot in which a married woman from the middle or upper classes is seduced by an unmarried man and comes to grief. […] The type is further characterized by an impersonal narrative voice, and by male authorship. (Overton, 1996: vi).

This is how Bill Overton begins his preface to *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction, 1830-1900* (1996) and describes what we understand today as the tradition of the nineteenth-century novel of adultery. As Overton claims in this book, even though the most famous example of this tradition appeared in 1857 with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the novel of female adultery had already been born two or three decades ago and the theme was, by then, hackneyed.

By the 1830s, society, economy and technology had undergone many important changes in France that inevitably affected literature, culture and art. Years of Revolution, Empire and Restoration had produced vast social changes, including improvements in the position of women; the bourgeoisie had achieved more social power and influence in France than anywhere else in Europe; economic, social and technological developments also eased the circulation of printed writings; and the libertine literature[1] of the previous century had already established an acceptance of writing about sex. All these aspects strongly contributed to the development and standardisation of the novel of adultery, theme that attracted so many other Continental writers during the next half of the century. However, Overton (1996) argues that the

[1] 18th century literature derived from the French libertine tradition. The main themes and topics were anti-clericalism, anti-establishment and eroticism. The genre ended with the French Revolution.

social tensions concerning the role of women in marriage, motherhood and the family[2], also had a huge influence on the development of this "genre".

Notwithstanding all these changes, the development of the novel of adultery could not be understood without taking into account some of Balzac's works. *A Woman of Thirty* (1834-42) and *The Muse of the Department* (1843), for instance, not only dealt with marriage, women and adultery, but also marked an important step in the formation of the nineteenth-century adultery novel. These novels presented some of the features that were going to be shared by the most famous examples of female adultery novels (such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Alas Clarín's *La Regenta* (1884-5), Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895), among others). One of these characteristics is that the female character, for whom the reader feels pity and sympathy, is an unhappy wife trapped in a marriage deprived of love and passion. However, even though these works of Balzac come closer to the novel of female adultery, marriage "does not carry the same consequence as in later, canonical, examples of the genre." In both novels *A Woman of Thirty* and *The Muse of Department* "the husband is aware of and prepared to tolerate his wife's affair. […] In the full-fledged novel of female adultery, the wife's liaison is intolerable – whether to her husband, the society around her, or both" (Overton, 1996:66).

Obviously, what best characterises a novel of female adultery is the wife's adulterous affair. Still, the theme by itself has not enough power to let a work be considered a novel of female adultery as we understand it. To begin with, and as

[2] Napoleonic Code of 1804: "because of Napoleon's determination to protect his notion of family, the most serious prohibitions fell upon married women. Without her husband's permission, a wife could not maintain a separate residence, attend school, or hold a job; her husband had unconditional control over family property. […] In cases of adultery, an erring wife was liable to imprisonment for three months to two years, while a guilty husband was subject only to a fine". (Overton, 1996:18)

Overton explains, the social and historical context of the novel of female adultery is principally centred on the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie of Continental Europe. "In those societies, as in some others at different times and in different places, marriage is linked very closely to the transmission of property, to the idea of family, and to the role of motherhood." (Overton, 1996:4). Women were supposed to marry at an early age, to serve their husbands and take care of the house and the family. However, for those who belonged to upper-middle social classes and the bourgeoisie, and had servants and housemaids, this life was quite hard since most of them could find neither entertainment nor distraction. In *La Mujer Insatisfecha: el adulterio en la novela realista* (1984) Ciplijauskaité carries out a comparative study concerning the theme of adultery in the novel of the nineteenth century. She claims that what unites the four protagonists [Emma, Anna, Ana and Effi] is their desire to evade the boredom and the monotony of their everyday routine, and also their yearning to escape from strict social conventions and rules. (Ciplijauskaité, 1984:47). That is to say, wives in this kind of novels tend to feel depressed and sad, suffering weariness and boredom every day. Moreover, their husbands seem neither to have time for them nor to include them in their social activities. In *La Regenta*, Ana Ozores tries to get closer to her husband but Victor seems to be too busy hunting and meeting people. His love towards his wife seems to be that of a father for his daughter, who takes care of her when she is ill, but does not satisfy her sexual necessities. In *Madame Bovary*, this aspect may present some varieties, but the essence remains the same: Emma feels bored, with nothing to do. Her husband loves her and treats her just as a wife was supposed to be treated, but she is so tired of her life that she refuses everybody and everything, even her own child. This feeling and attitude towards life is what leads these women to commit adultery. Some of them have just one

lover and others might have more than one, but in any case the affairs bring emotion and passion to their lives.

Another important characteristic of the novels of female adultery is the way they end. Although the protagonists are treated with some sympathy, their fate can only be death or some other kind of punishment. This might be linked to the fact that "none of the authors presents the society of his time with love or admiration. Their objective is to criticise it"[3] (Ciplijauskaité, 1984:65), and this is the reason why the adulteresses must die, to show how society and its conventions destroy these women and reduce them to nothing: Emma and Anna commit suicide, the former by ingesting arsenic and the latter by throwing herself on the train's track; Effi spends her last days ill and alone without the support of her family, and eventually dies. Ana Ozores, however, does not die. As Cipijauskaité (1984) explains, Clarín is the only one who does not "kill" his adulteress. Actually, what he does is worse: Ana must live completely alone (without neither her husband nor her lover) poor, and marginalised by those who loved her in the past.

Finally, what all these novels have in common is that the narrator is an omniscient third person who knows not only how the wives feel at any time, but also what is going to happen throughout the novel. It is also important to have in mind that the authors of these great examples are all male writers. Some female writers dealt with adultery and the condition of women but their novels did not present the features that define the novel of female adultery. According to Overton, George Sand and Emilia Pardo Bazán were probably the two best-known Continental European women novelists of the nineteenth century and "it is significant that Pardo Bazán never produced a novel of female adultery; and that even Sand wrote only one novel which may be placed within the tradition (although it does not fit there easily)" (Overton, 1996:10).

[3] [my translation]

The theme of the adultery, though, has not only been treated in Europe. Many American writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899), Henry James in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and Willa Cather in *A Lost Lady* (1923), among others, wrote about it too. The problem is that, like in Sand's case, all these novels do not fit within the tradition easily. In Hawthorne's novel, for instance, even though the sin is that of adultery, the focus is on its impact and consequences upon the individual and society, rather than on the act itself. The novel sets the act of adultery in the past and, in this way, "*The Scarlet Letter* is a novel not of adultery but of post-adultery, half historical, half allegorical, dealing with spiritual crime and punishment" (Overton, 1996:9).

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) also deals with adultery and the fight of a woman against the social conventions of her time. It has often been compared with *Madame Bovary* for the similarities they share, and this has complicated the task of considering whether Edna Pontellier is one of the traditional adulterous wives of the nineteenth century or not. The most evident contrast with the novel of female adultery is that *The Awakening* was written by a woman. Another relevant difference is the fact that Edna Pontellier dies at the end of the novel not as much as a punishment but as liberation:

> For the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. […] How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. […] The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. She went on and on […] thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child. (Chopin, 1899:176)

We see this liberation when she thinks of the "blue-grass meadow", which reminds her of the freedom that she had when she was a child. In this sense we could say that Edna, in contrast with Emma, Anna, Effi and Ana, wins over the oppressive conventions of her society. However, not everybody sees Edna's suicidal swim as liberation. Suzanne

Wolkenfeld interprets the suicide as a "defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate … to the limitations of reality" (Wolkenfeld, cited in Gilbert, 2003:31). In contrast, critics like Sandra M. Gilbert argue that "it is possible to speculate that Edna's last swim is not a true suicide – that's is, a death – at all, or, if it is a death, it is a death that points toward a resurrection", so Edna swims not into death but "back into her own life, back into her own vision, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood" (Gilbert, 2003:31). Therefore, this is difficult whether to consider *The Awakening* a novel of female adultery as we understand it or not. In any case, we must take into account that the real importance of this novel resides not on adultery itself but on Edna's awakening. Of course, the adulterous affairs are important since they are some of the many aspects that help Edna on her process of awareness, rebellion and, eventually, liberation.

2.2. Adultery in *A Lost Lady*: Similarities and Differences with the Tradition

Marian Forrester is a charming lady who is married to an elderly railroad pioneer. They love each other but love is not enough for this passionate woman, who seeks emotion, passion and entertainment somewhere else, or rather, in someone else. They live in a quiet place in Sweet Water, enjoying the company of a young boy, Niel, that visits them very often. Niel is in love with Marian but he will never have the maturity or the courage to recognize so.

Similarly to *The Awakening*, *A Lost Lady* has, sometimes, been considered a novel of female adultery by some critics. While Nancy Morrow affirms that "*A Lost Lady* belongs within a genre or tradition, especially prevalent in the nineteenth century, of 'adultery novels'" (Morrow, 1984:290), other critics, such as Overton, just do not include the novel in the list of works belonging to this genre.

It is true that *A Lost Lady* shares many characteristics with *Madame Bovary* or *La Regenta*, but it also has some other features that make it differ from the tradition. If we compare Marian Forrester to Emma Bovary, for instance, we can see how both of them are presented as "alluring, sexual and magnetic women" (Lee, 2008:185). In addition, both marry much older men and they do so, in part, and as Morrow says, "for a chance at a new and different life" (Morrow, 1984:289). However, we find many differences in their personalities. As Nancy Morrow argues, Marian Forrester is not a tragic or suppressed character as Emma is: "unlike Emma, rendered passive by her romantic fantasies, Marian Forrester always acts spontaneously, rushing to meet her husband's friends, or impulsively bringing cookies to little boys fishing in her marsh" (Morrow, 1984:288-9). This could also be contrasted with Ana Ozores, who, like Emma, loves reading romantic novels and spends her days bored at home. Marian also gets bored sometimes, but she always finds something to do in order to fight boredom:

> "'Come,' she whispered, 'Mr Forrester is asleep. Let's run down the hill, there's no one to stop us. I'll slip on my rubber boots. No objections!' she put her fingers on his lips. 'Not a word! I can't stand this house a moment longer.'" (70).

In this passage we can also see how young and adventurous Marian's spirit is; just the contrary of that of his husband, which is quite and subdued. Therefore, considering that Captain Forrester is not going to "run down the hill" with her, it is just understandable that Marian chooses another young companion for her vigorous adventures. Dalma H. Brunauer says of Marian Forrester the following: "Apparently their marriage has always been largely sexless, so it is not too surprising that a woman of her temperament should have accepted sexual satisfaction in an affair with a bachelor friend of theirs. Frank Ellinger" (Brunauer, 1975:48). To a certain degree we can also see Ana Ozores reflected in this passage, however, the difference between the two ladies resides in the fact that Ana feels bad and ashamed of it, whereas Marian seems to deal with the affairs with certain experience and without any remorse.

In addition, in the traditional novels of female adultery, a husband –and the society in general– cannot tolerate a wife's extramarital love affair. When Victor Quintanar, for instance, discovers that Ana Ozores has been unfaithful to him, he wants to duel with his wife's lover: "Si mi mujer me faltase… le daba una sangría suelta. […] Y en cuanto a su cómplice… ¡Oh! Por de pronto yo manejo la espada y la pistola como un maestro"[4] (560). Another example can be found in *Madame Bovary*: when Charles reads Emma's letters, in which it is evident that she has had an affair, and he sees Rodolphe's pictures, he falls into depression and eventually dies. In *A Lost Lady*, however, the husband's acceptance of the affair is completely different: "Just as Marian Forrester's transgression seems not to threaten her own marriage, neither does it seem to threaten the 'social order' of the novel" (Morrow, 1984:296). The only one who seems to feel embarrassed and disappointed by Marian's affair is Niel. There is a chapter in which Captain Forrester gives Niel a letter written by Marian and addressed to Frank Ellinger. The Captain looks at the name on the envelope, pointing out how beautiful is Marian's hand writing. Right after that, "Niel had often wondered just how much the Captain knew. Now, as he went down the hill, he felt sure that he knew everything; more than anyone else; all there was to know about Marian Forrester." (109). Later in the novel, when Daniel Forrester is about to die, Niel thinks again about all this: "The longer Niel was with Captain Forrester in those peaceful closing days of his life, the more he felt that the Captain knew his wife better even than she knew herself; and that, knowing her, he, -- to use one of his expressions, -- valuated her"(136). Therefore, not only did the husband know about his wife's affairs but he also accepted them (something that would never happen in *Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina* or *La Regenta*).

[4] "If my wife were unfaithful to me, I would kill her. And concerning her accomplice… I manipulate the sword and the gun as if I were a master" [My translation]

Motherhood is another important subject in the novel of female adultery. Albeit with some varieties, all the novels we have mentioned so far have some connection to this topic. Ana Ozores desires with fervour to have a baby; she thinks a child would fill her life with love and affection: "¡Un hijo, un hijo hubiera puesto fin a tanta angustia!"[5] (766). Emma Bovary, on the other hand, does have a baby, but she does not want the little girl, and it is difficult for the woman to even love her. Anna Karenina has two children, one by her husband and the other by her lover. *The Awakening* goes a little bit further; Edna Pontellier loves her children but does not want them to clip her "wings": "Edna would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one" (97). Even in the last scene Edna "thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (176). In *A Lost Lady*, though, motherhood is simply not an issue. Marian does not have children and we do not know if she wants to have them or not. Some critics have argued that the relationship of Marian and Niel is the one of a mother and her son. Ronald Butler even claims in his article "Sexual Imagery in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*" (1989) that the name *Marian* has traditionally suggested maternity and that she seems to take on this maternal role.

The way the novels end is also a relevant difference. As previously said, it is typical for the female protagonists of the novel of adultery to die at the end of the book. We have already discussed how Bovary and Karenina commit suicide. Effi Briest dies because of an illness, but she dies alone without the support of anybody. Ana Ozores's case is a bit peculiar, but the message would be similar to that of the prior novels. What these authors wanted to show was how society at that time oppressed women and reduced them to be housewives or, even worse, objects that not only "decorated" the

[5] "A son, a son would have put an end to the anguish" [my translation]

house, but also belonged to their husbands. As Ciplijauskaité (1984) suggests, if the ladies would not have died or received some sort of punishment, the criticism towards social conventions would not have had the same powerful effect, since their deaths mean a defeat in their fight against the social conventions of their times.

Willa Cather, on the other hand, does not have as main objective that of criticising her society. It is true that there is certain nostalgia for the past ages seen through Niel's eyes:

> As Captain Forrester and his generation of dreamer entrepreneurs who opened the West die off, younger businessmen [like Ivy Peters] move in like parasites to cash in on the work of their predecessors, carve up states, and defraud the naive with their shyster tactics. Niel Herbert […] admires the Captain and his empire-building companions […] and rejects the go-getting materialism of his own generation for the beauty of the past age represented by the Forresters. (Lewis, 1989:31).

This nostalgia, however, cannot be compared to the criticism that we detect in *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *La Regenta* or *Effi Briest*. Therefore, there is no need for Marian Forrester to die. Yet what happens is rather the contrary: "She pulled herself up and triumphed. She married a rich Englishman and lived in comfort in Buenos Aires. She did not lose her love of life and her ability to make others happy" (Brunauer, 1975: 51). Actually, Marian herself confesses to Ed Elliot that "things have turned out well for me. Mr Collins is the kindest of husbands'" (166) and then on the very last page of the novel Niel says "So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end […] Thank God for that!" (167).

The last aspect that we are going to take into account now, but that we will discuss in depth in chapter 3, is the way the novel is narrated. It is evident that the narrative technique used in *A Lost Lady* is very different from the one used in *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest* or *La Regenta*; because while these novels present an omniscient third person narrator, Cather's story is seen through a young man's eyes. This implies that the ideas, or images, that the reader gets not only about what happens

in the novel, but also about the characters that appear in it are completely subjective. As we have previously mentioned, readers of *A Lost Lady* know that they cannot rely on Niel's opinions because, first, he is a twelve-year-old child who does not know much about life and, second, because when he grows up his opinion continues being affected by his infatuation towards Marian. Moreover, –and in contrast with the traditional female adultery novels– the fact that the person who is telling the story is not an all-knowing narrator entails that readers do not get to know the woman's feelings. This was exactly Cather's main purpose, as she explains in her essay "The Novel Démeublé". She did not want her novel to look like a "catalogue" crowded with physical sensations and emotions; she just wanted to suggest. And all this is the reason why I believe Morrow is right when she states that "perhaps the best insight into *A Lost Lady* arises from the way that Cather *changes*, or reworks, the narrative pattern of the earlier adultery novels" (Morrow, 1984:294).

3. THE NARRATOR

3.1. Context: The Narrator in Modern Literature[6]

> The novel has always been modern – always concerned mainly with contemporary life, and, as the name suggests, always after the new thing. But some time around 1900 (or 1910, or 1922), to be modern meant something more, because suddenly modernity meant everything. (Matz, 2004:1)

The modern novel begins in Modernism, but when this beginning took place is not very clear. It has been said that it began in 1857 with the publication of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*; others have affirmed that it started the year Queen Victoria died, 1901; and many others have argued that it began with the break of the World War I. In any case, it is clear that Modernism was at

[6] Section based on Jesse Matz's *The Modern Novel* (2004).

its apogee by 1922, when Joyce's *Ulysses* ("encyclopedia of modernist forms", as Matz (2004) calls it) was published.

World War I meant chaos, during and afterwards the war. Things changed radically and it became clear to writers that a changing world demanded a new kind of fiction. In other words, "modern novelists started with the belief that modernization had changed the very nature of reality" (Matz, 2004:6) and, hence, fiction also had to change in order to survive. Writers began to question themselves "What is reality? And who are the judges of reality?" (Woolf, cited in Matz, 2004:32). Then, they realized that what they needed were new questions, new subjects, new perceptions and new forms to remake fiction. Virginia Woolf was one of the first writers that tried to explain how novels and other literary genres might capture and project modern realities on their pages; but she was not the only one; other writers, such as Joyce, Toomer, James and Stein, also joined her in this enterprise. So "they took the novel and sped up its pace, or made it ebb and flow like real life; they made its sentences as slippery as the movements of the human mind; they let plot go random, told their stories from changing points of view, and began or ended them abruptly" (Matz, 2004:9). Nevertheless, not all modern writers thought modernity should be based on confusion and disorder. Albeit for the most part to be modern meant to be difficult[7], for Willa Cather, for example, Modernism was seen as an opportunity to "defurnish" fiction, that is to say, to simplify.

Difficult or simple, the "modern novel meant fiction that tried for something new" (Matz, 2004:7) and everything began when writers saw reality had changed, and therefore, fiction had to change as well, but "What is 'reality', exactly – and how do we know it? And how do we go about providing a full and authentic report of it?" (Woolf, cited in Matz, 2004:32). They began by getting rid of the kind of hero used in the past.

[7] Faulkner's *The Sound of the Fury* (1929) is a great example and important model of modern difficulty.

Modern writers did not want the typical epic hero anymore; they rather preferred the anti-hero, who is weak, disaffected, and passive. Characters, in general, became more isolated, alienated, and detached from society. Plots also changed, especially that of the Bildungsroman, which is a story of a protagonist's growth from youth to adulthood. The difference is that in the past, individuals used to grow up and become part of the society, which was considered to be a happy ending, whereas in modern novels characters tend to grow from conformity to rebellion with a quite an unhappy ending. To sum up:

> Perfect heroes, artificial plots, false endings, and excessive detail were banished from the modern novel, but there was one thing many modern writers were even more eager to rule out: the omniscient narrator. For years the typical narrator had been a detached third-person voice, all-knowing and all seeing, able to tell a perfect story. But in a world of subjective realities, skeptical questions, and false appearances, who could really know everything? (Matz, 2004:51)

An objective narrator might get the whole truth but modern writers were not interested in that: Truth did not exist anymore or, at least, the way to get to the truth (and the truth itself) had changed for them. Nobody could possess a unique truth because it did not exist anymore; for modernists truth is made of many different perspectives and points of view, and this is the reason why they emphasized perspective; "they limited their stories to some haphazard, incomplete, mistaken, or limited point of view" (Matz, 2004:51). In real life everybody has his/her own opinion and a particular way of seeing things, there is not a unique truth, and that is what writers wanted to transmit. Events, to be plausible, must be told from a subjective point of view. Perspective could even be multiple; writers could use more than one point of view to show how something can be different depending on the person who sees it because opinion is always affected by experience, beliefs, feelings, personality, and many other factors might have an influence on the individual.

However, perspective was not the only novelty. As modern writers were very concerned with and interested in psychology and brain functioning, they started to explore the depths of the human mind and tried to transmit it to their fiction. They created what eventually would be the most characteristic narrative style of modern fiction: the stream of consciousness, a technique to let the human mind speak for itself, i.e. a narrative method that tries to imitate the constant flow of thoughts, usually disorganized, going back and forward, and with plenty of repetitions; because that is how the mind works. Joyce's *Ulysses* has many passages in which this technique is used:

> I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red res and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breast all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes (Joyce, 1984:704)

Molly Bloom's thoughts are mixed and repeated over and over. Joyce did not use punctuation when using the stream of consciousness' technique to show how there is a constant flow of thoughts in our minds.

Modernists, in addition, tried to combine many perspectives and narrative methods at the same time. We might find, therefore, combinations of interior monologue with exterior monologue; a first-person narrator, a third-person narrator, or even a combination of the two (as we will see in section 3.3); we can also find narrators who address the reader; and many other techniques that were considered new and original at that time.

3.2. Cather on Writing: Suggestion, Subjectivity, Simplicity

> Cather was not a theorist of fiction on the scale of James or Woolf or Lawrence, and once she started reserving her energies for writing novels, her views have to be gleaned from letters and interviews and a few important essays. But through these remarks a philosophy of writing emerges which illuminates the 'middle period' novels very clearly, and which puts her into a closer, more vital relationship with modernism than might have been expected. […] She could see that new art forms were needed for the new conditions. (Lee, 2008: 177)

Willa Cather saw, indeed, that new forms of art were needed, and not only did she make use of an innovative style of writing, but she also talked and wrote about it in contemporary reviews, personal letters, and essays. Actually, her style and narrative techniques seemed to fit so well the contemporary "taste" for literature that great authors, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald or William Faulkner, read her works and imitated her style.

The early and mid-1920s seem to have been a time of personal frustration and depression for Cather. She was ill and had to move from one place to another looking for environments were her health could recover or, at least, improve. She spent some time in a sanatorium in Pennsylvania; after that, she moved to Grand Manan, where she spent part of the summer writing *A Lost Lady*; then she went to Red Cloud in order to stay with her parents during the winter; and the following year she moved to France. These few years were hard for Cather, since she was not only physically but also emotionally downcast. However, in spite of these difficulties, critics have affirmed that this has been "the period of three of her very best novels, *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926)" (Lee, 2008:175), aside from many short stories and essays that she had also written around the early 1920s.

Cather's ideas about writing – and art in general – are set forth in "On the Art of Fiction" (1920) and "The Novel Démeublé" (1922), two of her most well-known essays. The ideas are virtually the same in both articles though a little bit more

developed in the last one. Cather begins her essay (1922c) by stating that "the novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished", and finishes it by exclaiming "how wonderful it would be if we could throw away all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations" (Cather, 1992c:834). Cather was not a very good friend of detail; rather the contrary, she defended simplicity when creating art. In "On the Art of Fiction" she uses Millet's painting "The Sower" as an analogy for the kind of writing she admires:

> Millet had done hundreds of sketches of peasants sowing grain, some of them very complicated and interesting, but when he came to paint the spirit of them all into one picture, "The Sower", the composition is so simple that it seems inevitable. All the discarded sketches that went before made the picture what it finally became, and the process was all the time one of simplifying. (Cather, 1992b:939)

All seems to be about simplifying. This is, according to her, the highest artistic process: to find what details can be omitted and yet preserve the spirit of the whole, in a way that all that has been cut away is still there in the reader's consciousness as if it had been on the page. In other words, "whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there – that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named […] that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself" (Cather, 1992c:837).

A part from simplicity, Cather also thought suggestion to be essential for the creation of a good novel. She affirms that things must be presented "by suggestion rather than by enumeration" (Cather, 1992c:836), and this might be the reason why she admired authors like Tolstoy or Hawthorne; because, according to Lee (2008), they are models for great suggestive writing. Lee's hypothesis is confirmed when we read from Cather herself that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is "one of the very earliest American romances that might well serve as a suggestion to later writers" (Cather, 1992c:836). Suggestion inevitably implies the involvement of the reader, for when things are

suggested, it is the reader's job to match all the little hints and pieces of information in order to deduce what is going on in the novel.

As it has been discussed in the previous chapter, one of the main features that characterize modern novels is the fact that writers, rather than being objective, emphasized perspective. They "limited their stories to some haphazard, incomplete, mistaken, or limited point of view. They did so in order to get at experiential truth. An objective narrator […] might get the whole truth, but the truth could not feel real, because no real person ever gets the whole truth". This is the reason why they liked using narrators which told the story from within the story. Moreover, as we have previously commented, perspective can be multiple; we can have as many perspectives as narrators the writer includes. In other words, perspective "can combine individual experience with something like the fuller knowledge of omniscience, by presenting the perspective of many different characters" (Matz, 2004:51).

Cather used this kind of perspective aforesaid in some of her works. In *My Ántonia* (1918), for instance, she uses a first-person narrator who tells the succession of events from within the story. Jim Burden, the first-person narrator of this novel, is not an all-knowing person who tells a perfect and unquestionable story; he is a young man explaining a story of his childhood and youth. What he explains, therefore, is a subjective truth since it is conditioned by what he felt or thought at that time. In *A Lost Lady* (1923), perspective is also used, though in a different way. To put it briefly[8], Cather presents a combination of a first-person and a third-person narrator. That is to say, the third-person narrator explains the story through the feelings and thoughts of one of the characters in the novel, Niel.

[8] The narrative technique used in *A Lost Lady* is going to be analysed in depth in the following chapter.

"This multiplicity of perspective" – claims Trevitte – "suggests the significance of [Cather's] work within the context of literary modernism" (Trevitte, 2007:202). In fact, although she has never been given the importance that other modern authors have, she has inspired and influenced many of them. The most noticeable case has been that of Fitzgerald, since he had been accused of plagiarism by contemporary reviews as well as by more recent critics (Kundu, 1998). He himself realised of the similarities that the two novels, *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925), shared, so he decided to send Cather a letter expressing his admiration for her work as well as the fear that she could think he had imitated some aspects from her novel in much detail. To demonstrate that he had not plagiarised from her work, he sent her some pages of his first draft of the novel, which had been written before *A Lost Lady* was published. (Cather, 2013) To that letter Cather answered:

> My dear Mr. Fitzgerald:
> I had read and hugely enjoyed your book before I got your letter, and I honestly had not thought of *A Lost Lady* when I read the passage to which you now call my attention. […] (Cather, 2013:370)

However, recent criticism has noticed that *The Great Gatsby* not only resembles *A Lost Lady* for its description of Daisy Buchanan (which is very similar to the description of Marian Forrester), but also for its manipulation of point of view. Kundu, in his essay "Inadvertent Echoes or 'an Instance of Apparent Plagiarism'? Cather's *My Ántonia, A Lost Lady* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*" (1998), explains and illustrates with examples many points of contact and resemblances between these three novels. One of them is the first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, who, like in *My Ántonia*, tells a story that happened to him in the past; and as in Jim Burden or Niel Herbert's case, Nick's narration is conditioned and affected by his own experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

To sum up, just like Hawthorne, Flaubert, or James influenced Cather, she and her writing had an influence over other writers' works, which means not only that

Cather's theories about writing fitted in the expectations of what art had to be, but also that she had been (and is still considered) an important author of American modernism.

3.3. The Narrator in *A Lost Lady*

In *A Lost Lady*, as Stout (2000) argues, Cather exemplifies the principles of concentration, simplification and suggestion that she had previously (one year before the publication of this novel) enunciated in her article "The Novel Démeublé". To do so, she makes use of new and original narrative techniques that were appreciated among other writers and critics.

Many scholars have been interested in the fact that Cather started writing the novel in third-person narrator, then she changed it to Niel's first-person narration, but eventually she came back again to her first idea. Edith Lewis, a good friend of Cather explains, in a biography that she wrote about her, that "when [Cather] had written perhaps one-third of the story, she decided to change and write it all in the first person. […] Cather came then to the conclusion that her first method was right. She discarded the chapters she had written in the first person" (Lewis, 2000:125). Trevitte goes a little bit beyond Lewis' comment on the narrator in *A Lost Lady* by stating the following: "Having planned initially to write *A Lost Lady* in Niel's first-person voice, Cather subsequently decided to adopt a double perspective using both Niel's point of view and that of a third-person narrator. […] Cather situates the reader between these two angles of vision" (Trevitte, 2007:188). This is what Jesse Matz (2004) calls *free indirect discourse*. He explains that sometimes, in modern novels, we get what sounds like a third-person narration, but which is especially connected to some particular character's thoughts and feelings, i.e. the third-person narrator "speaks with the emotional rhythms of the thoughts and feelings of the person he or she describes" (Matz, 2004:57). Niel is

not the narrator in *A Lost Lady*; however, it is through Niel's thoughts that the story is told. In other words, there is a third-person narrator who knows everything about Niel, and who narrates the story including this character's thoughts, emotions and feelings. Therefore, readers see Marian, not as the narrator sees her, but as Niel does:

> Where Mrs Forrester was, dullness was impossible, Niel believed. The charm of her conversation was not so much in what she said, though she was often witty, but in the quick recognition of her eyes, in the living quality of her voice itself. One could talk with her about the most trivial things, and go away with a sense of elation. The secret of it, he supposed, was that she couldn't help being interested in people. (64)

The use of sentences like "Niel believed", "he thought", or "he supposed" clarifies the fact that it is Niel the one who sees Marian this way, not the narrator.

Niel first appears in chapter 2 accompanied with some friends who want to fish and have a picnic around the Forrester's marsh. Niel is twelve years old by then, but in the following chapter he will have grown up seven years: "Niel was now nineteen, a tall, straight, deliberate boy. His features were clear-cut, his grey eyes, so dark that they looked black under his long lashes, were rather moody and challenging" (29). The fact that Niel is in love with Marian is evident, and many critics have considered the possibility for this love to be a filial one (Butler 1989; Nichols, 1978), others have also thought it to be a mixture of maternal love and sexual desire. Travitte suggests that "having suffered the loss of his mother as a child, Niel perceives Marian as a surrogate mother as well as a forbidden object of desire" (Travitte, 2007:189). We might see Travitte's hypothesis confirmed when we read chapter 2; Niel has fallen from a tree and broken his arm, so he has been taken to Marian's room to rest and be assisted:

> He was in pain, but he felt weak and contented. The room was cool and dusky and quiet. […] What soft fingers Mrs Forrester had, and what a lovely lady was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white throat rising and falling so quickly. […] The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again. […] Mrs Forrester ran her fingers through his black hair and lightly kissed him on the forehead. Oh, how sweet, how sweet she smelled! (24).

Marian takes the role of a mother when the little boy has been injured; she says sweet and nice things, and caresses and kisses him on the forehead. It is not that clear, though, whether Niel feels a sexual desire towards her. Nevertheless, it is also true that corporal smell and delicate caresses can be usually associated to sexuality. Moreover, the fact that Niel observes her white neck through the lace ruffle of her dress can also give some hints of a hidden or unknown desire. As Niel grows older, however, his view of Marian may suggest that of "the faithful courtier", as Trivette calls it: "compared to her, other women were heavy and lifeless, -- they had not that something in their glance that made one's blood tingle" (36). It is through such responses that "Niel's sense of Marian suggests conflict between his erotic desire and filial love" (Trevitte, 2007:189).

Another aspect is clear: whatever kind of love it is, Niel is too proud to acknowledge it. He never says that or openly demonstrates his love to Marian, but the reader knows it through his idealization of Mrs Forrester and his reactions when seeing Marian with other men.

Niel is some years younger than Marian, but he is still profoundly affected by her. For him, as Lee points out, "a chivalric desire to idealize is cruelly subverted by his object of admiration" (Lee, 2008:187) and the young boy cannot accept it. Niel cannot accept Marian's adultery not only for the fact that she is cheating on Daniel Forrester, who is also very loved by Niel, but also because he is in love with her. His reactions when discovering her affairs, therefore, are those of a jealous man:

> Niel found himself at the foot of the hill on the wooden bridge, his face hot, his temples beating, his eyes blind with anger. In his hand he still carried the prickly bunch of wild roses. He threw them over the wire fence into a mudhole […]. In that instant he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. […] This day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence. He could never recapture it. It was gone, like the morning freshness of the flowers. (79)

From this moment onwards Niel is going to, little by little, "abandon" Marian. She does not fit in Niel's idealised image of her anymore, and so he decides to distance himself. Only at the end of the novel he realises what he has lost:

> He came to be very glad that he had known her, and that she had had a hand in breaking him in to life. He has known pretty women and clever ones since then – but never one like her, as she was in her best days. Her eyes, when they laughed for a moment into one's own seemed to promise a wild delight that he had not found in life. […] She had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring. (164).

Some critics have had trouble identifying the real novel's protagonist. According to Morrow (1984), some critics have thought that the portrait of Marian Forrester is the centre of the novel, while others have claimed that the novel focuses more on Niel's development. From my point of view, both are protagonists of this novel, since Marian is essential for the developing of the adultery theme and Niel is indispensable for the creation of free indirect speech. Although Cather said

> […]Neither is Niel a character study. In fact, he isn't a character at all; he is just a peephole into that world. I am amused when people tell me he is a lovely character, when in reality he is only a point of view. (Cather, 1925, cited in Bohlke, 1986:77)

Niel seems to be a very complex persona, indeed. Even if his vital mission is that of being a "peephole", he is still a character. We first meet him when he is twelve years old and we see him grow up and mature, which demonstrates that he is not a plain character but a very realistic one. Readers not only know what he thinks and feels but also see how he deals with things and how he reacts in front of specific situations. Even if Marian seems a perfect woman to us, we still feel closer to Niel. This is the result of the kind of perspective employed by Cather in this novel: the narrator shows us all about Niel, but we never get to know how Marian feels and thinks, or why she does what she does. This is interesting since, until then, all novels about adultery had described the adulteress's feelings; they were what Cather called a "catalogue" plenty of

useless "furniture", or physical sensations. This leads us to what will be discussed in the following section: why does Cather use this narrative technique in *A Lost Lady*?

3.4. Discussion

The narrative technique employed in *A Lost Lady* has been analysed and studied by many critics over the years, and this novel has even been considered by some as Cather's best work. Nevertheless, the reason why Cather uses this narrator in this specific novel still remains in the dark or, at least, there is not a single perception on the issue. Some believe (Lewis, 1989) it has to do with the fact that Cather wanted to hide her personal opinion about the theme of the novel; by the same token, others (O'Brien, 1984; Lee, 2008) think she wanted to cover up her homosexuality. It has also been said (Brunauer, 1975) that Cather wanted to criticize how society still saw adultery as a crime; and last but not least, others (Stegner, 1965; Rosowsky, 1977) have chosen to believe that Cather was just using an innovative narrative technique.

We have seen in previous sections how libertine literature established an acceptance of writing about sex during the 18th century. Around the 1830s and 1840s, Balzac wrote some novels[9] dealing with the theme of adultery which gave way to the development of the nineteenth-century novel adultery in Continental Europe. Hence, by 1923 (year in which *A Lost Lady* was published) many writers had already written about extramarital sexual affairs. However, there still exists the possibility that Cather did not want to show her personal opinion on that topic and, accordingly, used Niel to distance herself from the text. This first hypothesis might be possible if we do not follow to the letter some of Cather's comments, which seem to indicate the contrary. Cather explains in an interview (1925) that

[9] *A Woman of Thirty* (1834-42) and *The Muse of the Department* (1843).

> *A Lost Lady* was a woman I loved very much in my childhood. Now the problem was to get her, not like a standardized heroine in fiction, bus as she really was, and not to care about anything else in the story except that one character. And there is nothing but that portrait. Everything else is subordinate. (Cather, 1925, cited in Bolhke, 1986:77)

According to Cather, the theme of adultery was not her main concern in *A Lost Lady*; she just wanted to describe Marian Forrester in a way that her portrait felt real, and everything else, including Niel, was "subordinate". It is along these lines that the following statement should be understood: "Niel isn't a character at all; he is just a peephole into that world," (Cather, 1925, cited in Bolhke, 1986:77) Marian's world. Of course Cather might have felt embarrassed or inhibited for what people could think of her, or perhaps she just wanted to play safe and not give too much information about her opinions and thoughts, and this may be the reason why she says that her main objective in *A Lost Lady* was to create a "portrait". Some critics have adopted Cather's stance on this matter. Morrow, for instance, supports Cather's statements when she says that "if some of her contemporaries in 1896 feared the 'immorality' of European fiction, Cather not only admired[10] novels where adultery is a central issue but also drew lessons from them for her own fiction" (Morrow, 1984:291).

Brunauer (1975) has been working on a different hypothesis. She argues that Niel is used not as much as a tool for hiding the writer's opinion but rather the contrary, for criticism. She explains that Martha Duffy, a critic, considered Cather to be a prude for the fact that from the moment Marian commits adultery onwards her image is degraded. Brunauer attempts to refute Duffy's belief by analysing some passages of the novel directly related to Niel and Daniel Forrester. She begins by highlighting that "Niel Herbert is not a mouthpiece of the author" and that "Willa Cather, an accomplished

[10] I do not agree with Morrow when she claims that Cather admired novels of adultery. We have seen how Cather criticised Kate Chopin for dealing with a "so trite and sordid theme" in *The Awakening*. What Cather liked of novels like *Madame Bovary*, *The Scarlet Letter*, or *Anna Karenina* was the way the authors wrote, as she has explained in her essays.

master of the techniques of fiction, knew exactly the effect she wished to create and how to create it" (Brunauer, 1975:47). Afterwards, she compares Captain Forrester's reaction towards his wife's adultery with that of Niel's. The Captain knew and forgave but Niel's attitude was very different: he was crushed, he could neither understand nor accept it; he would eventually abandon Marian forever. The reader is shocked by Niel's harshness and callousness towards Mrs Forrester. Besides all this, "*Niel* comes from a root meaning *scorn*" (Brunauer, 1975:50). What Brunauer tries to demonstrate is that Willa Cather's sympathies lie with Daniel Forrester and not with Niel; that is to say, she tries to criticise Niel's "prude" or conservative attitude towards the theme of adultery. However, this second hypothesis may, once again, be rejected by Cather own ideas about criticism and morality. The writer argued more than once in her essays that "an artist should have no moral purpose in mind than just his art" (Cather, cited in Morrow, 1984:297). This means that even if she deals with the theme of adultery, she does not attempt to criticize it. This idea could be related to the fact that Marian does not die at the end of the novel, as it tends to happen in the traditional novels of female adultery of the nineteenth century. Morrow argues that

> Because of the novel's concern not with morality but with art, *A Lost Lady* dissociates itself from the traditional concerns of the narrative pattern that it assumes. This suspension of moral judgement may explain why Cather's heroine "survives", not only literally, but in Niel's memory of her. Whereas the heroine in the nineteenth century faces degeneration and self-destruction, Marian Forrester leaves Sweet Water, and in California meets and marries an old, rich, cranky Englishman. (Morrow, 1984:299)

Once again, Cather's statements seem to be in contradiction with what some critics have attempted to demonstrate. However, to what extent could Cather's statements be a "shield" to protect herself from public opinion and harsh criticism?

Cather explained that "*A Lost Lady* was a woman that [she] loved very much" (Cather, 1925, cited in Bolhke, 1986:77), but what kind of love was she talking about?

The woman was Lydia Garber, the wife of Silas Garber, who like Daniel Forrester was an old pioneer. His fortune collapsed when his bank failed with the depression of the 1890s, just like the Captain in the novel, and he had an accident which led him to death. Lydia Garber stood by him and took care of her husband until he died, and when that happened she moved away and remarried. Cather admired her, and it has been said that, in *A Lost Lady,* she projects her own feelings for Lydia (in the novel, Marian) through Niel (Lee, 2008). This leads us to our third hypothesis: the fact that Cather used Niel to hide her homosexual[11] feelings. Cather was criticized by contemporary "lesbian-feminist critics for masking her own homoerotic desires through heterosexual male characters" (Travitte, 2007:202). She was even criticized by her literary mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett, for adopting a man's point of view in her fiction; Jewett called it a "masquerade" (Russ, 1986). Cather, however, never following Jewett's literary advice, "continued her masquerade: her lovers remained heterosexual, her narrators – enraptured by sensual and maternal women – male" (O'Brien, 1984:594).

To sum up, those who see Cather's lesbianism as the central inspiration of her works "will want to read 'the presence of the thing not named' as sexual, 'the unnameable emotional source of her fiction' that she is forced to disguise or conceal" and this interpretation seems plausible since Cather's theory of suggestion is "so closely linked in her mind with the portrait of magnetic, enchanting women". (Lee, 2008:184).

[11] O'Brien (1984) explains that Cather never acknowledged her homosexuality in public, but this does not mean that she did not acknowledge it to herself. She asked her friends to burn all her personal letters when she died, and most of them did what she asked them to do. However, some letters have been gathered together and published in compilations like *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* (2013) by Jewell and Stout (editors). Cather's letters to close friends (such as Elizabeth Sergeant, Zoe Akins, and Dorothy Canfield) have revealed an emotional intensity towards her women-friends, but there was nothing erotic to be found there. However, correspondence with a fellow student of hers (Louise Pound) has served as evidence to establish her sexual identity. Therefore, "that Willa Cather was a lesbian writer should not be an unexamined assumption, however, but a conclusion reached after considering questions of definition, evidence, and interpretation." (O'Brien, 1984:577)

There is, however, one last hypothesis left: the viewpoint that Cather uses Niel only to develop a modern narrative technique based on the use of perspective (previously used by writers like Henry James) as well as to put into practice what she had presented in "The Novel Démeublé" one year before the publication of *A Lost Lady* (1923). As it has been discussed in sections 3.2 and 3.3, Cather defended the idea that art should be based on simplicity and suggestion rather than extremely detailed narration and enumeration of events. The writer – or artist, in general – should learn to discern what is really necessary and what is not, and omit that information that is not essential. By using a young boy's perspective for the narration, Cather achieves the highest degree of suggestion and subjectivity. Niel sees things in a different way than the reader does because of the effect that people and events have over him.

All these hypotheses have some aspects that make them sound plausible. It could be true that Cather did not want to be in trouble so she tried to distance herself from the text and hide her opinions and feelings; and it could also be possible that she wanted to portray the society of that time highlighting its evident prudery regarding sexuality. In my opinion, albeit I like to think that there is a little bit of truth in every hypothesis, I consider the last one to be the most suitable, not only because that is what Cather wanted us to think, but also because she talked and wrote so many times about the way art should be created, and eventually she put her theories into practice in works like *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*. What is doubtlessly true though, is that for critics and readers there is just speculation left.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Willa Cather had left constancy in essays and letters that her main purpose when using Niel in *A Lost Lady* was that of putting into practice her theories about writing; she affirmed that the young boy was not a character but just a point of view. Just like her, other modern writers felt that in a changeable world, fiction had to evolve as well in order to survive. Therefore, they began changing forms and developing new narrative techniques, most of them based on subjectivity and suggestion.

This paper has attempted to discover which was the main reason for the use of this point of view in this particular novel, in which adultery is the central theme. To do so, a background to the novel of female adultery and to the use of the narrator in modern literature has been provided, and many contemporary reviews and critical articles have been analysed, as well as Cather's personal letters and interviews. Four hypotheses regarding the issue in question have been gathered together and explored. Many believe that Cather could have felt inhibited for what people would think of her when dealing with that theme, but critics like Morrow (1984) have affirmed that the writer did not fear talking about this kind of "immoral" topics. Others critics, such as Brunauer (1975), argue that Cather used Niel to criticize how the society of her time was a "prudish" and still had very conservative beliefs regarding sexual desire and adultery. However, Brunauer's hypothesis can be contradicted by Cather's belief that a writer should not have a moral purpose when creating art. Contemporary lesbian-feminists critics, on the other hand, criticized Cather for hiding her feelings and sexual desire towards another woman by using a male character as point of view. The last hypothesis seems to be the most important or, at least, the most plausible, since we have a large number of evidence which corroborates it. Cather wrote many essays about how fiction should be written; she also talked about that in interviews and letters; and we have been able to

identify these characteristics in some of her novels, especially in *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*.

Cather seems to me a contradictory person. Not only because she criticized Chopin for writing about adultery and some years afterwards she dealt with that same topic, but for many other aspects in which showed to have changing and even contradictory opinions. It must be taken into account, though, that the narrative technique used in *A Lost Lady* (1923) is faithful to her ideas presented in "On the Art of Fiction" (1920) and "The Novel Démeublé" (1922) a few years before. Therefore, even if there is a little bit of truth in every hypothesis, it might be right to think that the main reason for using Niel is to fulfil what she considered to be essential in order to create a good piece of art: suggestion, subjectivity and simplicity.

By using this narrative technique, Cather has shown to have not only the capacity for writing unforgettable novels, but also the magnificent talent of a great writer; features that allow us to place her among the most respected writers of American Modernism.

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