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HOW CONTEXT DETERMINES FACT: HISTORICISM IN WILLA CATHER'S *A LOST LADY*

Joseph R. Urgo*

Willia Cather's *A Lost Lady* is a deceptive work that can be mistakenly read as a lament for a more glorious past, a kind of ode to the pioneer era in western American history. However, the novel itself does not represent a longing for a singular, objective past. Rather, it explores the process by which selective events are historicized, the process by which an era, for example, may become either historically known or escape understanding through ahistorical methods of narration. In Cather's novel, an understanding of the past is achieved once events and narratives are contextualized. The problem lies in the fact that there are a number of potential contexts through which past events are communicated, not all of which are historical. History is represented in Cather's narrative in stories about the past told by her characters and in the figure and fate of Marian Forrester. In all three categories of representation, historical understanding competes with mythic images, or tableaux, from the past that capture the imaginations of characters and narrators and stand in the way of historical knowledge. Cather's title suggests this strategy perfectly. *A Lost Lady* shows that much of what actually occurred in the pioneer era has been lost in the context of mythic accounts generated by pioneers and their admirers. Specifically, one admirer, Niel Herbert, fails to see Marian Forrester in her own historical and biographical context and insists upon seeing her as a "lost" ideal. Idealized (and idolized) images—ladies and histories—are generated at the expense of historical knowledge. It is not the past that is lamented in Cather's novel, a past which is shown to be far from heroic or exceptional. Rather, *A Lost Lady* presents the problematics of historical representation. In particular, Cather's novel portrays the way in which the past is dehistoricized and turned into, as she puts it, "pleasant memory."

A good deal of Cather criticism argues that Willa Cather saw the present as a falling off from the past, a great decline from the heroic pioneer era when men and women settled, colonized, and personified historical foundation. *A Lost Lady* is read through this lens, and conclusions about the novel reinforce critical visions of Cather's romantic, historical nostalgia. Susan J. Rosowski concludes that the regrettable inability to maintain "a pioneer spirit of the land" gives *A Lost Lady* its tragic theme and that "hope for the future lies with the ability of men and women to translate this spirit

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into life.¹¹ More recently, Rosowski has reinforced her view of the novel as tragedy, with Ivy Peters playing the role of villain, and the land itself acting as victim.¹² Rosowski's reading is echoed frequently. Ann Douglas sees Marian Forrester as "an emblem of a fading vision of a special order" in history.¹³ John J. Murphy, in an intertextual study, concurs, and he recognizes a pattern employed by Cather to "frame the story of a downfall of the heroine."¹⁴

Criticism of *A Lost Lady* centers largely on Cather's view of the past, her historical consciousness.¹⁵ The novel, however, poses difficulties in getting at Cather's view of a particular historical era because it depicts the making of history, or the understanding of the past, as an ideological struggle among contending interests in the present. There is less concern in *A Lost Lady* with presenting a definitive portrait of the past than there is in depicting a present in which many minds compete for historical authority. Involved in this historicist struggle are complexities and alignments arising from social class, gender, age, and relative powers of imagination, articulation, and comprehension. One thing, though, is clear. In *A Lost Lady* the past is depicted as anything but definitive or static. The novel makes it reductively simplistic, and actually ahistorical, to state that "this happened this way and I understand it." What Cather does is to demonstrate with monumental subtlety the falsity of final judgment, the misleading quality of settled issues.

A Lost Lady shows how context determines the color of fact: historical contexts, narrative contexts, textual contexts are employed to demonstrate that no fact or event exists prior to contextual interpretation. The various readings of Cather's novel all bring critical contexts, such as the lost pioneer era, the image of woman, the intertextual, and emerge with readings largely determined by the critical frame employed. But the novel itself is *about* context and how contextualization, including historicism, aestheticism, and nostalgia, determines fact and, to a large extent, character. Missing in most Cather criticism is a rigorous examination of Willa Cather's ideological program. Readings that have considered *A Lost Lady* essentially nostalgic, or that have seen Cather as writing in awe of a "lost" era of pioneer foundation, have engaged in the same kind of historical representation that the novel depicts as naive. What has been missing, or "lost," in critical studies of *A Lost Lady* is a rigorous examination of what the novel depicts as the inextricable links between historical representation and ideological positioning.

Cather's references to Indians provide a good starting place for a discussion of contextualization in *A Lost Lady*. Any reader with a twentieth-century sensibility must condemn Ivy Peters for the way in which he acquires "splendid land from the Indians some way, [paying them] next to nothing," as Marian Forrester says, and must share in her disgust for "people who cheat Indians" (pp. 123-24).¹⁶ This does not stop Marian from letting Ivy

invest her money, of course, but it does add to the general view of Ivy as "swindler" or "shyster," to quote two terms applied to him frequently by Cather readers. In direct contrast to Ivy Peters stands Captain Daniel Forrester, a man of the previous generation, one of the heroic pioneers and road-builders. Nonetheless, the Captain's relations with Indians were not qualitatively different from Ivy Peters': "Once, when [Captain Forrester] was driven out of the trail by a wash-out, he rode south on his horse to explore, and found an Indian encampment near the Sweet Water, on this very hill where his house now stood," Cather narrates. "He was, he said, 'greatly taken with the location,' and made up his mind that he would one day have a house there." And so he drove a willow stake "into the ground to mark the spot where he wished to build" (pp. 52-53). A number of questions are unanswered here concerning the Captain's exploration and land-claim in this passage. The novel does not indicate what sort of "encampment" he found, for example, whether it was the campground of a transient hunting party or the more permanent encampment of a tribe of plains Indians. To fully understand and assess the Captain's actions one would want to know more about this particular "spot," such as who owned it or whether there was a treaty in force regarding the area in general. Finally, the Indians themselves are curiously silent, or historically muted, in this account. Presumably, a white man on horseback galloped into their midst, cut down a tree, claimed ownership, and rode away. Cather's narrative fails to give the Indians a participatory role in this historical drama. Instead, the Indians remain passive observers, objects rather than subjects in Captain Forrester's act of discovery and foundation. Cather concludes the brief narrative of the Captain's "heroic" action by saying only that "he went away and did not come back for many years; he was helping to lay the first railroad across the plains" (p. 53). The point is that Captain Forrester is just too busy making history to ask or answer these questions; he is too busy building the railroad and dispossessing the Indians to address questions about his right to do so. Cather's omission here, and the Captain's selective presentation of his history, is epochal.

Marian may not admire Ivy for cheating Indians, but she is married to a man who, either directly or as part of the general historical push West by the United States, made his living through such means. Nonetheless, Ivy is condemned and Captain Forrester is granted an apotheosis, but his apotheosis is the result of the context in which his history is told. His heroic stature is the result of what is *unsaid*, or left out, of his history, and by what is selected as significant, worthy of narration, and expressed in language. The reader knows Ivy Peters is a swindler. All that is known of the Captain, on the other hand, is that he drove a willow stake into the ground and called it home. Also made clear in the novel is that the Captain paid off the bank's depositors out of his own pocket and that he did so out of old-fashioned "honour" (p. 91). However, the novel is not clear

on how the Captain became a bank officer (nor is it clear on how he became a military officer). Neither does the novel explain the basis for his superior status in the town itself, the sort of behavior or accomplishments that resulted in his powerful position in Sweet Water. Cather delineates "two distinct social strata" in Sweet Water at the outset of the novel, "homesteaders and hand-workers who were there to make a living, and the bankers and gentleman ranchers who came from the Atlantic seaboard to invest money and to 'develop our great West,' as they used to tell us" (pp. 9-10). The irony of the last phrase is made clear by the general failure of the Sweet Water corporation, and the "us" of Cather's narrative places her sympathies with the other strata, the "hand-workers." Captain Forrester may have paid his depositors out of his own pocket (a particularly paternalistic response to an economic crisis), but his pocket is not deep enough to replace the jobs and farms inevitably lost when banks fail. When the Captain acts honorably, he saves little more than his own conscience. This incident, and other incidents in *A Lost Lady*, leave much to the imagination as one attempts to understand Captain Forrester historically. One can only wonder, but one can never know, what else the Captain has chosen not to relate.

Richard Slotkin has explained what happens "when historical narration is used for ideological purposes." According to Slotkin, "the account of the plot is always rendered in such a way that it justifies the political and social arrangements of the present, and predicts the fulfillment of the society's program for the future."⁷ The Captain tells nothing that would diminish or call into question "the political and social arrangements" that provide the context for his dominance, wealth, and authority in the town of Sweet Water. But the facts selected as significant, the context created by the medium of communication, and the pattern in which both are arranged signal the ideological subtext of the narrative. When Marian Forrester tells the story of how she and the Captain met, for example, she does not begin at what Niel knows is "the beginning of the story." Instead, she suppresses the scandal of her first engagement and begins the story with her injury and rescue by Forrester. Instead of beginning at the beginning, any beginning for that matter, Marian opens with "'Once upon a time,' a clear signal of the mythic nature of her narrative (p. 164). In her story there is no philandering, murdered fiancé, no explanation of *why* she would go mountain climbing alone with "young Fred Harney," and good reason to "wonder" why she would marry her rescuer without hesitation. Her narrative does explain the political and social arrangement of her marriage and of her new status as widow and survivor, but it does so in the context with which she frames her story. The Captain and Marian, patriarch and lady, did not come into being historically (as Ivy Peters is shown emerging), but, on Marian's terms, the Forresters come into being *mythically*, as if ordained by God or the brothers Grimm: "The boys were genuinely moved," as boys would be, by her narrative (p. 166).

Cather's novel as a whole shares in the ideological qualities of Marian's narrative of origins. *A Lost Lady* opens with a series of tableaux, frozen in unspecified time, "thirty or forty years" in the past. The Forrester's house is "ugly" but made pleasant by "the people who lived there" and by the railroad prosperity it represents. The Captain is wealthy enough to afford the luxury of an uncultivated marsh "because it looked beautiful to him" and "he could afford to humour his fancies." Mrs. Forrester defines what is "lady-like" by whatever she does, which is to say her actions create their own context, and there is no imagining "her in any dress or situation in which she would not be charming" (pp. 9-13). What is missing in each of these images is history, despite the fact that the narrative describes a point chronologically thirty or forty years "ago."⁸ Historically significant information is not supplied in these opening pages. Someone had to have built the house and some historical or social circumstances must account for the transformation of an ugly house, in a remote countryside, into a pleasant home. Furthermore, there are no doubt significant reasons why the house is so forbidding to the townspeople, reasons that would also account for the resentment expressed so vehemently when the Captain has his second, and fatal, stroke. The fate of the Indian encampment is not mentioned, nor do signs of it apparently exist on this spot. The novel also does not tell of the sources of the Captain's great wealth, nor does it make it clear what it means when it says that the Captain "built" the railroad. Perhaps his methods of foundation and accumulation of wealth have something to do with the way the townspeople, the "hand-workers" who have also built things, look upon him, his house, and his corpse. To these people, at least, all this did not happen so long ago.

The only specific time given in the first chapter is that Mrs. Forrester is exactly "twenty-five years younger than her husband." The temporal setting of the novel is presented mythically, but the age difference in the couple is presented historically. Their peculiar sexual relationship is signaled by the story Captain Forrester tells of when Marian was "chased by the new bull in the pasture." The Captain "had never seen her look more captivating" than that day when she was running, laughing, and "stubbornly clinging to the crimson parasol that had made all the trouble" (p. 13). The house, the marsh, and Marian are all accoutrements and signs of Captain Forrester's accomplishments, and these signs stand in place of his, or Cather's, need to explain or narrate his origins. The house is pleasant, the marsh is beautiful, the young wife is captivating—the world is good, ever since "once upon a time thirty or forty years ago" when it all became so. But Cather's narrative raises questions about these tableaux and their ideological implications by insisting upon the ugliness of the house (with its "hideous" pillars), the unproductive nature of the marsh (which will prove the Forresters' downfall), and by making it clear that Marian holds her fate with the bull in her own hands. On the other hand, the novel portrays and in itself represents the power of narrative to dehistoricize. In

Chapter Two the narrative proper begins: "But we will begin this story with a summer morning long ago," once upon a time.

If the past is informed by a "spirit" that is absent "today"—pioneer spirit in this case—it is only because it is solicited, or conjured, by the act of narration and by the seemingly incontrovertible fact that the past exists. However, Cather's novel puts forth the position that the past *does not* exist until it is contextualized and that events and images lack substance until they are historicized. Events may exist mythically—Marian's rescue by Captain Forrester, the "pleasant" Forrester house, the Indian encampment—but this is not the same thing as providing these events and tableaux with historical significance. When Marian tells of how she was rescued by the Captain, she provides an ahistorical, romantic context, moving formalistically from "once upon a time" to the salvational marriage proposal. Historically and biographically, however, the event of her rescue must be contextualized within a series of quasi- and direct sexual encounters. Placed in a biographical context that would include the gaudy millionaire, the Captain, the young men of Colorado and California, Frank Ellinger, Ivy Peters, and Henry Collins, Marian's "rescue" is understood to be of a piece with her more general enjoyment of (and, perhaps, reliance upon) males. In the company of women, by contrast, Marian is truly "lost," or perhaps besieged, as when the townswomen overrun her home when the Captain is dying. Only by historicizing the mountainside rescue within Marian's biography, and within her social and economic condition, does one not have to "wonder" why she marries the Captain without thinking twice.

Niel Herbert is the chief consciousness of the novel, and it is largely through his eyes that the narration proceeds. He is, however, naive to the workings of history. Due to this ignorance, he provides the novel its surface aura of ahistoricism. Niel would like to become an architect, a visionary mover, but in the novel he is consigned the role of observer and narrator. He would like to rescue Marian himself, for example, but he has no idea where to take her: "if only he could rescue her and carry her off like this,—off the earth of sad, inevitable periods, away from age, weariness, adverse fortune!" (p. 110). In other words, he would like to carry her out of history. The men who do rescue Marian all carry her into history, into the next "inevitable period" of her life. Captain Forrester takes her to her role as mistress of the railroader's big house; Frank Ellinger reconfirms her sexuality; Ivy Peters secures her financial solvency; and Henry Collins provides her renewed wealth based upon post-frontier colonialism. But Niel wants her to remain the same; she is his "aesthetic ideal" (p. 87), his "most finished artifice" (p. 110), a frozen image which recalls the tableau of her in seductive dishabille at the beginning of the novel. Despite the fact that Marian tells Niel she has "such a power to live" and that she feels "held back" in Sweet Water (p. 125), and despite the fact that Niel knows and "rather liked the stories, even the spiteful ones, about the gay life she led in Colorado, and

the young men she kept dangling about her every winter" (pp. 78–79), Niel never quite comprehends the successive contexts in which Marian engages and expresses her character. This is because Niel has no sense of historical time, no sense of historical (or in the personal case of Marian, biographical) context.

Niel knows that the people and the country are changing, but he considers this phenomenon of change to be an aberration in the order of things. In Niel's mind, it is clear that

he had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer. He had come upon it when already its glory was nearly spent. So in the buffalo times a traveller used to come upon the embers of a hunter's fire on the prairie, after the hunter was up and gone; the coals would be trampled out, but the ground was warm, and the flattened grass where he had slept and where his pony had grazed, told the story (p. 168).

It is not self-evident what "story" is being told here. The coals, the warm ground, and "the flattened grass" are evidence of a human being having camped on the spot, but this is not a story. The story would involve the person's place of origin and destination, his backers, or suppliers, and their interests, his prospective customers (if he be a hunter), his thoughts and ideals, his intentions, his values—the "story" would involve a great deal more than the tableau of flattened grass and dying embers. But, as Cather's image makes clear, this is the way in which Niel knows "the era" he mourns, this is the extent to which he understands the era of "the road-making West." Cather's language intensifies as this passage continues. The pioneers are all getting old and dying off, as far as Niel can see. It is, for Niel, as if

it was already gone, that age; nothing could ever bring it back. The taste and smell and song of it, the visions those men had seen in the air and followed,—these he had caught in a kind of afterglow in their own faces,—and this would always be his (p. 169).

"And this would always be his": the frozen image, the tableau of the pioneer spirit as if it existed or could be represented in a photograph, out of context, without origins or historical consequences, as if a century of imperialism, genocide, and warfare, of homesteading, mining, and road-building, could be reified into something Niel could possess like a memory. This is not historical consciousness but a crippling intellectual inertia.

It is worse than inertia, however, because Niel would like to act, or transform the world, in accordance with his historical blindness. Niel, like Ivy Peters, is of the new generation. And where Ivy acts historically, carrying on the pioneer tradition of land acquisition, Niel is carrying on the pioneer tradition of transposing history into myth. These are young men of power and influence, and they will continue the path forged by the men who flattened the grass. Again, Niel's treatment of Marian demonstrates this point. The source of his "contempt" for Mrs. Forrester is "that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged" (p. 169). If Niel

were a supreme architect, he would put Marian out of her misery, just as he attempted to put the blind woodpecker out of its misery (p. 25). This time, however, he has broken something less easily mended than a young boy's arm. Through her depiction of Niel Herbert, Cather demonstrates the real potential for cruelty—a cruelty far worse, and with far greater consequence, than Ivy Peters' childish act against the woodpecker—inherent in Niel's delusive historical consciousness. His ignorance concerning the historical context and consequences of the "pioneer spirit," and his view of historical change as contemptible, lead to his imaginative preference of death for Marian Forrester. If she were dead, he could honor her memory. Alive, she poses problems to his vision of a static, glorious past. It is not only Captain Forrester whose memories and voice resemble "the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians" (p. 55). In Niel's eyes, the only "good" Marian Forrester is a dead Marian Forrester. In fact, "eventually, after she had drifted out of his ken, when he did not know if Daniel Forrester's widow was living or dead, Daniel Forrester's wife returned to him, a bright, impersonal memory" (p. 171). Although Marian would not immolate herself in order to protect his ideological priorities, Niel succeeds in immolating her in order to privilege Daniel Forrester's historical significance.

Niel has had numerous stories told to him, and has witnessed enough events, to have come to a clearer understanding of Marian long before he finds her in Ivy's arms at the end of the novel. Similarly, the townspeople of Sweet Water, and the "us" of Cather's narrative, have heard enough stories and know enough history to question the validity of Captain Forrester's historical narrative and of the tableau of the heroic pioneer in general. The Captain's "philosophy" of life and history, that you will get what you want in life "unless you are one of the people who get nothing in this world" (p. 54), is exemplary of the "ideological purposes" Richard Slotkin says inform historical narrative. The Captain, and Niel Herbert, assume a kind of historical necessity in which the "losers" in history—the Indians, "Black Tom" (Judge Pommeroy's servant), and, finally, Marian—are "immolated" with their era and are edited out of the historical narrative. According to this logic, the nature of the Indian encampment is irrelevant; Niel can cut the phone cord and "save" Marian from further speech; and Black Tom can be "borrowed" by Mrs. Forrester when a more "formal" servant than the Forresters' own is called for (pp. 36, 50). Not even his own father's financial ruin can awaken Niel Herbert to history, to the social and economic context of the pioneer era. His father "was one of the first failures to be crowded to the wall" as a result of speculative practices of the investors who, like Daniel Forrester, came to "develop our great West." When Mr. Herbert leaves Sweet Water, Niel stays behind to read law and to continue his resolution "to remain a bachelor" (pp. 32–33). Historical evidence, community knowledge, and even personal experience are not enough to

change Niel's predisposition to honor the Captain's memory and disparage, or suppress, Marian's. In the logic of the novel, his vow to remain a bachelor is a vow to remain outside the dynamics of history. When his father leaves town, Niel goes on to live alone, "with monastic cleanliness and severity," safe from the unclean world of history, and safe from the disorderly world where lost ladies continue to find their way.

Niel equates a "kind of cowardice" with "the fear of losing a pleasant memory, . . . a dread of something that would throw a disenchanting light upon the past" as he contemplates Mr. Ogden's decision to abandon Marian (p. 152). The definition serves the novel as a whole. It is a "kind of cowardice" that manifests itself in a refusal to historicize, to refuse to recognize the historical context in which images, tableaux, or myths of the past are produced. It is much more "pleasant" to imagine heroic hunters and pioneers, trampled coals and flattened grass, abandoned or vacated Indian encampments, and lost ladies, than it is to imagine violent contests for land and natural resources, dispossessed Indians, and men and women who do not "immolate" themselves in the name of anyone's ideology but go on demanding that "things turn out well for them," to paraphrase Marian Forrester Collins' last message to Niel (p. 179). Pleasant memories are nourished at the cost of continued historical suppressions, and at the prospect of continued historical oppressions, as minds like Niel Herbert's emerge as powerful interpreters of past events. As interpreter and narrator, Niel becomes the "architect" of his youthful ambitions: he is the architect of historical understanding, defining values and identifying heroes who will come to inform and personify historical tradition. Niel is relieved to find that Marian "was well cared for, to the very end" but not that her story might supersede the Captain's narrative as authoritative history. Such a view would recognize Marian's resurfacing in "Buenos Ayres" as the survival of the American "pioneer spirit" in South America, internationalized now and still having "everything." Marian's marriage to Henry Collins is the lost lady's San Juan Hill: the American pioneer spirit has moved off the continent and into international politics, wed to "a rich, cranky old" English imperialism (p. 173). This sort of contextual recognition, of course, is impossible for Niel. In his mind, Marian's survival is an image more akin to that of a twentieth-century Indian reservation, a curious relic of an era considered long ended, for people who refuse to immolate (or assimilate) themselves "and die with the pioneer period." It is a curious and dangerous sense of history which Cather locates in Niel Herbert. To Cather, it is a form of intellectual cowardice that consigns to death and historical obscurity visions and events in the past that counter or challenge the particular arrangements accepted as the inevitable present.

Notes

¹Susan J. Rosowski, "Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*: The Paradoxes of Change," *Novel*, 11 (1977), 62.

²Susan J. Rosowski, "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: O *Pioneers!*, My *Antonia* and *A Lost Lady*," in William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds., *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 91-92.

³Ann Douglas, "Willa Cather: A Problematic Ideal," in Kenneth W. Wheeler and Virginia Lee Lussier, eds., *Women, the Arts, and the 1920s in Paris and New York* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1982), p. 15.

⁴John J. Murphy, "Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Cather's *A Lost Lady*," *AL*, 53 (1981), 73.

⁵A second area of critical interest in *A Lost Lady* centers on Cather's depiction of Marian Forrester and is concerned with Cather's feminist consciousness. See, for example, Patricia Lee Yongue, "Marian Forrester and Moll Flanders: Fortunes and Misfortunes," in Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski, eds., *Women in Western American Literature* (Troy: Whitson Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 194-211; Nancy Morrow, "Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* and the Nineteenth-century Novel of Adultery," *WS*, 11 (1984), 287-304; Diane Cousineau, "Division and Difference in *A Lost Lady*," *WS*, 11 (1984), 305-22. Assessing either Cather's historical or feminist consciousness cannot proceed without attention paid to the role of Niel Herbert, of course. A recent study draws firm boundaries between his mind and Cather's and addresses his (and not Cather's) lack of sensitivity to historical change. See Kathleen L. Nichols, "The Celibate Male in *A Lost Lady*: The Unreliable Center of Consciousness," in John J. Murphy, ed., *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 186-97. Some critics have argued that the novel is about Niel's intellectual development and have discussed his various initiations into adult maturity. See, for example, David Strouck's discussion of the novel in *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 59-68.

⁶Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972). All citations are to this edition. The novel was originally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1923.

⁷Richard Slotkin, "Myth and the Production of History," in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), p. 79.

⁸Susan J. Rosowski has contrasted the narrative's sense of movement, which is "objective, factual, settled," and "the stillness at *A Lost Lady*'s center," which is "subjective, imaginative, and expanding." Rosowski maintains that Cather "celebrates the constantly expanding possibilities of romantic symbolic art even as she laments the closed frontier of history." However, the novel portrays something else: selective representation of historical acts (and actors) by the generic confines of a narrator's romanticism, among other ideologies. See Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 126, 129.

NOTES

THE SQUATTER'S CIRCLE IN
THE GRAPES OF WRATH

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In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the indomitable Ma Joad emerges as a hero and the leader of, in her words, "the family of man." In so doing, however, she also displaces Pa Joad from his traditional position of authority in the family. While several critical studies have examined those qualities of Ma Joad that direct her leadership—qualities of humor, a steadfast vision, and a resilient ability to bend and adapt to new situations without breaking—Pa Joad has disappeared from critical scrutiny as if of no account. In fact, Steinbeck very carefully directs the reversal of leadership roles through the use of the "squatter's circle" motif.

That the migrant family of the 1930s was strongly patriarchal has been demonstrated by Tom Collins' detailed reports on California migrant camps during the late 1930s. Collins was the manager of the Kern County Migrant Camp and was also Steinbeck's most profitable source of information about migrant traditions. He personally escorted Steinbeck through both the established government camps and the squatters' camps. More importantly, Steinbeck took back with him to Los Gatos hundreds of pages of Collins' reports and assessments of migrant families. These reports figured directly into Steinbeck's composition of his novel.¹

Collins' weekly reports from Kern County's Arvin Camp, prototype for the Weedpatch Camp in *The Grapes of Wrath*, testify that these migrant families, while traditionally patriarchal, were experiencing a revolution of matriarchal uprising. As the men foundered in the bewildering tides of joblessness, indirection, and poverty, the women assumed dominant authority in the family.

One of the most revealing parts of Collins' reports in this matter of family authority appears in his weekly entry entitled "Bits of Migrant Wisdom." Here Collins diverges from his statistical information, his detailed accounts of camp activities, and his necessarily objective analysis to satisfy the governmental bureaucracy, to probe intimately the nature of migrant lives. Frequently such musings and probings focus upon marital relationships. After recounting at some length in his report for June 6, 1936, one protracted and often violent lover's quarrel, Collins observes: "We just let her cry. In fact we encouraged her to cry and bawl to her hearts [sic] content. That's what she wanted to do. Migrant women are that way."² But he does not leave the portrait with this traditional depiction of the weakly