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DISRUPTED CONVENTIONS:
GENDER ROLES IN MILDRED WALKER'S
THE CURLEW'S CRY AND *WINTER WHEAT*

By

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B.A., University of Washington, 2000

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in English

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

Spring 2007

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English

Disrupted Conventions: Gender Roles in Mildred Walker's *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat*

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In this thesis, I discuss the significance of gender in Mildred Walker's novels *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat*. Walker wrote and situates both narratives in Montana, supporting my argument that literature of the American West remains a productive area for examining gender roles. *The Curlew's Cry* is set at the closing of the American frontier in the early 20th century, while *Winter Wheat* is set during the settled agricultural era of the 1940s. I argue that instead of re-enforcing gender stereotypes commonly found in novels set in the American West during and after the white settlement of the plains, Walker introduces a modern and arguably feminist critique of the prescriptive roles found throughout the genre of the "Western." Walker's narratives portray her characters, both female and male, as unsatisfied with their too-narrowly defined gender roles. My reading of her texts suggests that neither the "cowboy" masculine West, nor the "settled" feminine West are adequate models to encapsulate the experiences and desires of those who chose to live on the last American frontier.

In my analysis, I employ a feminist perspective on gender. My theoretical framework synthesizes literary criticism and historical criticism that focuses on the American West. Drawing from my studies of feminist criticism, I first explain my interpretation of what it means to offer a feminist reading of Walker's work. In chapter one, I contextualize the theoretical basis of gender studies by outlining a simple review of the key ideas and scholars in the field. I also situate Mildred Walker as a woman, wife, mother and author in relation to her novels and the time within which she wrote. In my final two chapters, I examine the texts of *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat*, working to show the ways in which the narratives reveal a critique of the gender conventions typically found in the "Western" literary genre. In conclusion, I suggest Walker's character Ellen serves as a model of "hybridity," in that she disrupts the limitations of binary thinking through her acceptance of all her lines of inheritance.

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FEMINIST RESISTANCE

Introduction

Mildred Walker was not a feminist. Although nearly every main character she created was a woman, Walker resisted the label and rejected feminist interpretations of her work. In her introduction to Walker's novel *The Curlew's Cry*, Mary Clearman Blew recounts how the author chastised her for describing (in a 1987 essay) the heroines of Walker's narratives as "thwarted by conventions." Blew writes that Walker made clear she "did not intend to stress the West...as a man's brutal world in which women have no place, or to characterize men and women as separate human beings who are basically opposed to each other's worlds"(5). Yet when I read her novels, a whole generation after Blew's analysis, I too find Walker's female characters severely "thwarted by conventions." But instead of despairing at the lack of opportunities available to women, Walker's strongest female characters, found in *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat*, face their challenges and disrupt the gender conventions they experience as women in the twentieth century American West. The men of the novels, likewise, appear dissatisfied in their roles as fathers, husbands and workers. Walker's texts can be interpreted as providing a feminist perspective on the Western literary genre inasmuch as she depicts the traditional masculine and feminine narratives as rendering both male and female characters as unable to find satisfaction in their lives –as "thwarted by conventions." The texts explode narrowly defined gender roles by exposing how characters marked by conventional gender roles limit behavior and curtail individual fulfillment. Walker's narratives in this way disrupt conventional portrayals of gender. Thus, the novels written by an author who disavowed feminism are prime for a feminist re-reading.

In preparing this thesis I was asked what it means to offer a feminist reading of Walker's work. As a feminist I attempt to seek out the ways in which her narratives—even texts that Walker doesn't purport to be feminist—can be read as critiquing the limitations of gender. Through careful scrutiny I seek to understand the ways her literature disrupts gender roles that limit access to equality or happiness for either female or male characters. A feminist reading entails paying attention to the small details that can reveal to the reader the ways gender is performed. Examining the hidden, or implied, relationship between a character and her (or his) gender exposes cultural values embedded in the work. I find the concerns of current feminist scholarship reflected in Walker's work in that she focuses her narratives on characters who are not quite satisfied with their expected gender roles. In particular, the female protagonists of *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat* resist society's expectations by not conforming to conventional feminine gender roles, but in the process must compromise some of their dreams and desires. The disruption of the traditional feminine gender roles in these novels helps to dislodge the category of "woman" from its domestic associations. I suggest Mildred Walker's narratives can be interpreted as feminist because she depicts a world in which her characters are thwarted by their assigned gender roles in their efforts to achieve their goals, and also because, ultimately, the characters disrupt the gender conventions that hinder them.

Class and race considerations come into my analysis of Walker's narratives as well. In the texts, I find class considerations further dislodge gender as a stable signifier. Focusing on the fallacy of sex-as-gender serves to break down the binary relations inherent in talking about gender. There is always a dominant category in the description

of male/female (even the way I subconsciously write the binary set “male” and “female,” privileges the male as above/slash female). As a feminist reader and critic, I work to dismantle sets of oppositions by challenging gender binaries. Race does not play a significant role in the novels here, but I argue that by its omission we can identify race as a means of figuring another “Other.” The co-factors of race and class further dislocate gendered thinking by displacing “feminine” and “masculine” as defining qualities. Society is easily divided into reductive binary relations: rich/poor, black/white, male/female. By focusing on the ways in which literature breaks down these binaries, we can begin to dismantle them in our own thinking about society today. In the next section, I outline a brief summary of the theoretical framework I employ in my analysis of Walker’s texts.

Gender Theory: Woman as “Other” and Into the West

I shall begin contextualizing gender by highlighting the significance of the concept of “woman” to feminist thinking. Simone de Beauvoir proposed the idea of the category of “woman” as a social construction in her groundbreaking text *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir argues, “one is not born, rather becomes a woman” (295). Her theory draws from Sartre’s existentialist concept of the “Other,” in which the “gaze” of society limits the behavior of those who lack power. In her book *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, Josephine Donovan summarizes:

Sartre sees the Other as a kind of hypostasized public opinion: it projects a powerful “gaze” that can fix one in an inauthentic pose, that does not allow one to exist as an authentic separate consciousness. The gaze or opinion of the Other can thus be internalized...One thus comes eventually to see the Other as having all the negative qualities that one wishes not to have oneself. (134-135)

The category of “Other” becomes a place where society places all its negative or undesired qualities. From Sartre’s theory, de Beauvoir concludes that women in patriarchal society are socially programmed to see themselves as “Other” to men. De Beauvoir argues that woman is “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute –she is the Other (xvi). De Beauvoir’s theory of woman as “Other,” and as a social construction, laid the groundwork for the later development of gender studies.

Drawing from de Beauvoir’s concept of gender as a social construction, the academic study of gender came out of the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s-1970s. Feminist scholars began asking how biological sex differences related to the social construction of gender, and most importantly, what was at stake in the demarcation of “masculine” and “feminine.” The theorists concluded that “the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to ‘domestic’ roles” (Pilcher and Whelehan 56). Feminist scholars argued that women were defined by their sex as primarily reproducers of children, and were consequently kept out of the workforce, which prevented them from achieving economic independence. Ann Oakley wrote a key text on the significance of gender titled *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) arguing that social construction of gender and economic dependence on men restricts women’s roles to that of housewife and mother.

Out of the theory of gender as a social construction, scholars of history and literature began examining their respective academic fields to discover how gendered

thinking manifested in the historical record and the literary canon. In her 1980 essay, “Dancing through the Minefield,” Annette Kolodny describes feminist literary criticism as “an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance” (185). Of particular interest to many feminist scholars, including Kolodny, is the significance of gender in the history and literature of the white settlement of the western United States. In her 1984 book, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, Kolodny explores the female experience of the frontier through the written words of women who lived there. She argues:

In the process of projecting resonant symbolic contents into otherwise unknown terrains –a process [she] designates here as fantasy –women made those terrains their own. Fantasy [...] allowed women to enact relational paradigms on strange and sometimes forbidding landscapes. And fantasy, shaped as much by personal psychology as by social context and changing geography, gave rise to a progression of popular texts in which women expressed their unique sense of the frontier’s significance. (xii)

Kolodny suggests that women’s perception of the frontier differs from men’s. Her project works to recover the female experience of the frontier that has somehow been forgotten in our collective mythology/remembrance of the settlement of the West. Historian Glenda Riley also points to the omission of women in the history of the settlement of the American West in her 1988 publication *The Female Frontier*. Riley explains, “until the mid 1970s, frontierswomen appeared in histories of the American West only as one dimensional stereotypes or not at all” (1). In her essay titled “Fredrick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies,” Riley claims the reason for women’s absence from the history of the West was due to narrow-sighted historians who saw the West as a male space.

Much critical attention has focused on Turner's frontier thesis and its omission of female experience of the West. In *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), historian Patricia Limerick writes:

The problem stemmed from the excess of respect given to the ideas of the field's founder, Frederick Jackson Turner, ideas presented in Turner's famous 1893 address, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History.' Turner was a scholar with intellectual courage, an innovative spirit, and a forceful writing style. But respect for the individual flowed over into excessive deference to the individual's ideas. To many American historians, the Turner thesis was Western history. (20)

Historians and feminist critics contended that the patriarchal systems of power –as embodied by historians and literary critics who “forgot the women” –were still at work to keep women narrowly defined as “feminine” and therefore unable to cope with the challenges presented in settling the West. However, in the rush to recover the women whom Turner and his followers “forgot,” according to some scholars, women were simply tacked onto the existing historical narrative of the West. In *Westering Women*, historian Sandra Myers writes: “by isolating women from the cultural milieu in which they lived, such studies distorted the role of women on the frontier and often replaced old myths and stereotypes with new ones” (xv). Myers's note of caution speaks to second wave feminist scholars, who, intent on recovering lost women's stories from the traditionally male discourse, rushed to conclusions about women's roles in the West that did not reflect the reality of the women's experience of the frontier. In her 1979 introduction to *Frontier Women*, Historian Julie Roy Jeffrey describes her experience researching frontier women:

During the course of doing the research for this book and writing it, my attitude toward my subject shifted, and I think it is important to explain this shift. My original perspective was feminist; I hoped to find that pioneer women used the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from

stereotypes and behaviors which I found constricting and sexist. I discovered that they did not. (xv-xvi)

Jeffrey's experience reflects the concern Myers voiced, that feminist ideology can influence the scholar to look for signs of feminist resistance where there is none.

However, in the larger picture, Jeffrey's interest in pursuing the women's stories omitted from the historical record stemmed from her feminist approach. In that regard, feminist interest in women's roles in the West has proven fruitful.

Once the initial excitement over the "recovery" of women in the West had settled, literary critics such as Jane Tompkins and Susan Lee Johnson carefully examined gender roles in the western context. In her book *West of Everything* (1992), Tompkins writes that, "what is most interesting about Westerns at this moment in history is their relation to gender" (17). I argue that fifteen years after Tompkins's assertion, Western literature remains a productive site for critical examinations of gender. One reason for the continuing relevance of western literature to gender studies is the persistence of limiting gender roles in the West. In her essay "'A Memory Sweet to Soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the 'American West,'" Johnson argues that traditional male/female gender roles were challenged in the historical West. Johnson describes the American West as "a place where customary gender relations were disrupted for many years by unusual sex ratios" (495). However, despite the "disrupted" gender roles of the historical West, it remains imagined (and recorded) by scholars and historians as a predominantly male space. Evidence that our culture today still holds on to the notion of the West as a masculine space can be found in books such as William Bevis's first edition of *Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West* (1990), which features only one female author, Nannie Alderson. It is worth noting that even the use of the word "tough"

in Bevis' title reveals a gendered bias towards a masculinized imagining of the West. A new edition, published in 2003, acknowledges the significance of the many different women writers from the West.¹ In her 1996 introduction to Walker's fifth novel *Unless the Wind Turns* (1941), Deirdre McNamer theorizes why Walker has not been lauded as a major writer of the West. She writes:

Walker's four Montana books should have established her as a major voice of the region. How strange, then, that the massive *A Literary History of the American West*, the standard reference to the region's writers, doesn't so much as mention her in its thirteen hundred-plus pages. Dale Evans and Elizabeth (Mrs. George Armstrong) Custer get index listings, but not Mildred Walker—who wrote nine novels during her twenty-two years in Montana and who was nominated for the National Book Award in 1960...Perhaps the clue lies in something that happened after *Winter Wheat* was published. A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, published in 1947, gave American readers another, earlier version of Montana: The Montana of the 1830s. Guthrie wrote it, he said, without any intention of romanticizing his characters, especially the mutely tragic mountain man, Boone Caudill. But the fact that he set his drama a century earlier, and that one of its driving themes is the contamination of the wilderness by the hand of man, makes it, *ipso facto*, a romance of a sort. *The Way West*, a sequel to *The Big Sky*, won Guthrie the Pulitzer Prize in 1950. In the 1940s and far beyond—arguably to this day—the version of Montana that entranced most readers was not Mildred Walker's vision of modern Americans working out their relationships with others and with a place. It was Guthrie's vision of an Edenic Montana, always long gone. (xii)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s writers such as James Welch and Mary Clearman Blew brought Walker's work back to critical attention, encouraging Bison Books to get her

¹ In fairness to Bevis, Walker's books were out of print at the time of his first edition. Bison Books, of the University of Nebraska Press, began reprinting Walker's books in 1992, and has since re-issued her entire catalogue, including the posthumously published novel *The Orange Tree* released in 2007.

novels back into print. Their recovery of her work coincided with literary and history scholars' new critical approach to the American West.²

Based on the continuing “re-discovery” of western women authors and their work, the study of gender remains a productive project for both literary theorists and feminist academics. Johnson points to the study of gender as potentially empowering for anyone thwarted by conventions. She writes:

Gender is a relation of difference and domination constructed such that it appears “natural” in day-to-day life. The West is historically a place of disrupted gender relations and stunning racial and ethnic diversity, a diversity structured by inequality and injustice. So studying gender in the West holds promise for the project of denaturalizing gender and dislodging it from its comfortable moorings in other relation of domination –from small town racism to worldwide imperialism. In short, we need to ask what studying gender can do for the history of the West, *and* what studying the West can do for the politics of gender. (499)

The goal of “denaturalizing gender” and “dislodging it from its comfortable moorings” speaks to feminist concerns about the implicit binaries found in our culture. In her 2002 essay “Pedagogy of the Opaque,” Sally Robinson describes how binary thinking also limits available gender roles to men. She writes:

The oppressor/oppressed paradigm limits what can be learned about masculinity because it sets up a binary relation between the empowered and the disempowered that reproduces the same narrative regardless of historical or cultural context. (142)

Seeking new gender paradigms will work to expand understanding of both women and men's roles and the limitations of strict categorization.

Coming full circle to where I began this chapter, the category of “woman” remains at the center of the feminist gender debate. In her 1988 essay, “Cultural

² Critics such as Jane Tompkins and Annette Kolodny, and historians Patricia Limerick and Julie Roy Jeffrey were all significant contributors to the new critical approach to the literature and history of the American West.

Feminism³ Versus Post-Structuralism⁴: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” Linda Alcoff describes how “woman:”

As a concept is radically problematic precisely for feminists because it is crowded with the overdeterminations of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting Other, or mediated self-reflection of a culture built on the control of females (405).

Alcoff’s argument seeks to resist the patriarchal ideology that she identifies as underlying cultural feminism. But she also finds the post-structuralist response to do away with all gender categorizations destabilizing. Alcoff identifies the difficulty in liberating the definition of woman from the binary structure of gender. She explains, “if we define the subject in terms of gender, articulating female subjectivity in a space clearly distinct from male subjectivity, then we become caught up in an oppositional dichotomy controlled by a misogynist discourse” (423). Alcoff proposes developing a new conceptualization of “woman.” She argues for recognizing the fluidity of the concept of “woman” as something that can be interpreted relatively, that is, “woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are ‘objectively identifiable’” (435). My interpretation of Walker’s characters points to how they are not “objectively identifiable” by their gender. I focus on the female characters both because they are the protagonists of the narratives and because the study of women in western narratives offers a point of disruption from the traditional masculine discourse about the West. In “History, Gender, and the Origins of the ‘Classic’ Western,” Victoria Lamont

³ Cultural feminism is the ideology that embraces a gendered essentialist view of women (and men). The theory seeks to re-appropriate femininity as a quality embodied by all women, and revalidate female attributes undervalued by society.

⁴ Post-Structuralist feminism rejects the notion of an essential self—male or female—and seeks to dismantle the binary (and oppositional) approach to thinking as found in language.

describes that the “work of women writers requires we conceptualize gender as the very contested terrain on which the genre is constituted rather than as a boundary defining what does and does not count as a western” (172). While not all books written and set in the west are “westerns,” Walker’s Montana narratives intersect with the genre in that she portrays characters resisting traditional gender roles found in Western literature.

The dominant gendered representation of the American West can be found in Owen Wister’s classic western *The Virginian*. The nameless (or eponymous) cowboy of Wister’s tale embodies all the classic traits of western masculinity: He is tall, dark, and handsome. He is a stoic and noble cowboy. Like A.B. Guthrie’s Boone Caudill, he comes to the West from the East as a loner. He works as the foreman on a large Wyoming ranch, where he shows loyalty to his boss by turning in (and even hanging) the cattle rustlers who try to steal unbranded calves. The Virginian is not afraid to use violence, something his eastern sweetheart Molly abhors. But after a climactic gun battle, in which the Virginian is victorious over the nefarious rustler Trampas, Molly embraces his prowess and renounces her prior discouragement of violence. The narrative highlights the masculine qualities (such as strength, courage, honor, and violence) of the main character, in contrast to his ultra-feminine and plucky sweetheart from the east. Thus, from a 1902 narrative that captured the imagination of generations, the myth of the Western hero was codified, right alongside the myth of the dependent, submissive, and feminine woman.

As Krista Comer notes in her introduction to *Landscapes of the New West* (1999), while the “early regionalist discourse is generally open and searching about questions of racial and gendered identity,” the literary and theoretical imaginings of the West have

often relied on stereotyped depictions of gender in which the “masculinized West” represents the entire West (5). Comer describes her task as a feminist to propose:

Paradigms, mappings, structures, conceptual systems, and theories that permit the entry of women into discourses that have been formed explicitly and foundationally by excluding women or marginalizing that which is female. (14)

Comer works to open a dialogue within the critical scholarship on the West that actively questions the omission of the feminine. She offers a strategy for other feminist critics who likewise seek to participate in a re-evaluation of women’s roles in the West. But a feminist critique is not limited to women’s concerns. I argue that a feminist reading also reveals the limitations of men’s roles in western narratives. A close examination of literature that comes out of the West, especially narratives from a woman’s perspective, such as Mildred Walker’s *The Curlew’s Cry* and *Winter Wheat*, serves as a path of exploration into how gender roles are imagined, reified and sometimes disrupted. Equally importantly, it brings another woman’s voice into the study of gender and the West. In the next section, I offer a brief biographical sketch of Walker’s life and situate her professional career in relation to her married life.

Mildred Walker Biographical Sketch

Mildred Walker was born in Philadelphia in 1905, to a Baptist minister and his schoolteacher wife. The family of five, including one older sister and one younger brother, moved often throughout the greater Philadelphia area due to her father’s employment with the church. They spent summers in Vermont at the Walker family home –a place Walker always remembered as the location of her fondest childhood memories, and arguably the idealized home of Ben Webb in *Winter Wheat*. Her father’s

sermons served as inspiration to young Walker, who began imitating her father at a young age. In the biography about her mother, *Writing for her Life*, Ripley Hugo writes that in her later years, “Mother said that her father was her greatest influence on her writing” (9). By age eight, Walker already knew she would be a writer and sent manuscripts to magazines throughout her youth. After high school, Walker enrolled in Wells College on a scholarship provided to children of ministers. The Walker family was not well-to-do, but they had expectations that all their children, both male and female, would attend college. At Wells, Walker focused on her writing and developed her voice as an author.

A college essay titled “Gargoyles,” written about the local townsfolk who worked at Wells, got Walker into trouble. Walker described some of the workers as resembling the gargoyles that decorated the school buildings. After the essay appeared in the college newspaper, the university was sued for defamation by some of the workers who did not appreciate being compared to gargoyles.⁵ This brush with infamy did not deter Walker, who continued writing and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1926.

While still at Wells, Walker met her future husband: Ferdinand Ripley Schemm, a young doctor visiting from his last year in residency at the University of Michigan. A long-distance romance ensued through correspondence. By 1927, the couple married. The newlyweds relocated to Big Bay, Michigan, a lumber town in the Upper Peninsula, where Dr. Schemm set up his practice, administering to the lumbermen and their families. After moving to Ann Arbor in 1930, Hugo writes, “my father enrolled Mother at the

⁵ I read the offending essay at the American Heritage Center in Laramie, Wyoming where it is a part of the Walker collection. I’d say the townsfolk missed the loving tone Walker used in her characterization of them. The University paid the fine with no penalty to Walker.

university where she studied for a master's degree in literature with an emphasis in creative writing" (61). Hugo does not elucidate why it was her father who enrolled Walker in graduate school, but perhaps it was a gesture of his endorsement of her desire to write. By this time Walker had two young children. While Hugo does not register that her mother is a writer until much later, she recalls that her mother explained how she managed to write when the children were small:

Mother juggled classes and studies with caring for two children. She hired students during the day, she told me; after a year, at my father's insistence, she hired full-time help. By the time my brother and I were one-and-a-half and three years old, Mother devised a method of putting us behind her in the large seat of a wing chair, so she could go on typing in front of us. She was writing the novel *Fireweed* at the time. (61)

The time Walker had lived in Big Bay became the inspiration for her first novel, *Fireweed*, which won the Avery Hopwood Award and was published by Harcourt.⁶ Hugo explains that the earnings from the novel financed the family's move from Michigan to Great Falls, Montana, where Dr. Schemm wanted to set up his new practice.⁷ Later, *Winter Wheat's* tremendous success allowed the family to purchase an idyllic home outside Great Falls on the banks of the Missouri River.

Walker continued to live and write in Montana until after her husband died in 1955. Within three months of his death, Walker sold the house and left Montana. Ripley comments that her mother and father were so close "that to continue there [in Montana] without him would have seemed 'quite pointless'" to her mother (184). Walker went on to teach at Wells and lecture in Japan. She also continued to write until her death in

⁶ Harcourt went on to publish all twelve of Walker's adult novels, from 1934 to 1970.

⁷ The biography doesn't discuss how her husband received Walker's financial contributions to the family, but I would imagine the income was appreciated following the lean depression years they lived through.

1998. During her lifetime, she published twelve novels for adults and one juvenile novel. In 2007, Bison Books posthumously published Walker's final novel, *The Orange Tree*. Carmen Pearson, the editor of that final work, recently completed a dissertation titled *Modernism and Mildred Walker*. Pearson's study will be published in 2008 through the University of Nebraska Press as the first full-length critical analysis of Walker's work. The American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie holds a comprehensive collection of the author's manuscripts, journals, and correspondence. Visiting that library, and viewing Walker's writings in her own hand, inspired me to write this thesis. In the next section I explore Walker's identity as an author, a wife and a mother.

Walker's Authorship: Hidden Identity

My project offers a feminist interpretation of the novels of an author who resisted identifying herself, or her work, as feminist. In her biography of her mother, Hugo writes she "never heard [Walker] discuss feminism in the 1960s and 1970s and never in terms of her own novels" (73). Clearly, from Walker's response to Blew's feminist analysis of *The Curlew's Cry*, and Hugo's recollections of her mother as un-swayed by the second wave feminist movement, Walker did not self-identify as a feminist.⁸ But readers of her work, including daughter Hugo, critic Blew, and I, find traces of feminist rhetoric that suggest otherwise. Hugo explains that her mother "was a feminist in a personal sense" (75). One way Walker manifested her feminism was to insist, prior to marrying, that domestic duties would not interfere with her writing. Hugo describes how at the time of

⁸ In her book *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Nancy Cott describes the 1920s backlash against feminism, which coincided with Walker's time at Wells. It is arguable Walker was influenced by negative attitudes towards feminism at this time. However, I find no clues in Walker's biography of her taking sides in the earlier feminist debate.

her engagement, “Mother first exacted certain stipulations. She wanted to continue writing...further, she would not do the washing” (52).⁹ Even before marriage and children, Walker recognized the limitations domesticity placed on women’s lives. Luckily, through her earnings as an author and her marriage to Dr. Ferdinand Ripley Schemm, Walker belonged to a socio-economic class that could afford to hire domestic help.

Although Walker argued against a “reductive” feminist reading of her work, her texts speak volumes of what may be unconscious criticism of gender roles. It is likely that the author experienced similar feelings of being “thwarted by conventions” as do the characters she writes about in her novels. Walker kept her writing secret from her own children. Daughter Hugo describes discovering her mother wrote as a chance encounter. She explains:

I first became aware that my mother was a writer one hot summer afternoon when I was about eight years old. My brother and I, with neighborhood friends, careened around our backyard waging a water fight. To escape a stream of water from the garden hose, I scrambled up the side of the house to an unscreened window and leapt down into the cool darkness of the room. I landed with bare, wet, muddy feet on five clean piles of typewritten paper carefully stacked on the floor under the window. I heard my mother’s agonized and furious exclamation. Horrified at what I had ruined, I saw too clearly the scattered pages stretching across the floor right to Mother’s feet, her dark, cherry stained desk with the typewriter looming behind her. Each familiar object in the room accused me. When I dared to look up at her face, I saw her large brown eyes staring at me in angry disbelief. (xiii)

Hugo’s intrusion into her mother’s study signified more than just a disruption of her manuscript (although the thought of those ruined, freshly typed pages, in the age before

⁹ Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own,” came out in 1928, a year after Walker refused to do the washing.

word processors, does make me shudder as well).¹⁰ The discovery of her mother's secret profession as writer broke through the careful delineation Walker created between her professional life and her domestic one. But to the outside world, Walker maintained her image of domesticity. Hugo recalls her mother's emphasis on propriety and appearances. She describes Walker as:

A mother who insisted in her role (in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s) of a doctor's wife in a Montana town of about 25,000 people [Great Falls]; a mother whose merriment or pleasure in shared moments seemed reserved for an occasion; a mother who insisted on decorum, performance of correctness in front of those outside the family; a mother who dressed and held herself exactly as other children's mother's we knew, giving afternoon teas, selling tickets to the Junior League, conducting dinner parties at which we could overhear her entertaining guests with vivid, humorous descriptions of our latest escapades. (xiii)

Interestingly, Walker tells her guests stories about her children but refrains from sharing that she is a writer. Walker's discomfort at exposing her craft may reflect her hesitation at openly defying gender roles of her era. Hugo's description suggests Walker actively – even consciously—performed (in a literal sense) her gender roles as doctor's wife, dedicated mother, and middle-class housewife. Meanwhile, she kept her active writing career hidden. It is worth noting that Walker wrote and published under her maiden name, instead of her married name, Schemm. From Hugo's characterization of her mother, I interpret Walker as a woman who struggled to keep her domestic life as separate as possible from her creative/professional life. I argue Walker gave voice to her frustrations over limiting gender roles through her writing.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Walker was privileged enough to have “a room of her own” to write in. Even if she wasn't a proponent of Virginia Woolf's feminist theories, she reaped the rewards of them in practice.

The novels I examine in this paper were written in 1944 (*Winter Wheat*) and 1955 (*The Curlew's Cry*), were changing times for women in American society. In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May describes the how the earlier depression forced “prevailing familial ideology” to change, when “women and men adapted to hard times by shifting their responsibilities” (51). May explains that WWII offered women a chance to break out of domestic roles however she writes, “the war underscored women’s tasks as homemakers, consumers, and mothers just as powerfully as it expanded their paid jobs (75). Walker’s gender and social status (as a white, married, middle class woman) required Walker to prioritize her roles as wife and mother over her craft of writing, at least in the public perception. This relationship between domesticity and authorship (as a form of agency) plays out in the narratives Walker chose to write. In many of her books she tells the story of women who struggle to find their own path in a culture that expects them to conform to marriage and a domestic life.¹¹ First, I will examine *The Curlew's Cry* working to show how the narrative describes its protagonist as resistant to traditional feminine gender roles. Next, I will show how *Winter Wheat* reveals the limitations of gender conventions. Gaze operates in both narratives as a powerful enforcer of gender roles.

¹¹ In *Fireweed*, Walker’s first novel, Celie Henderson dreams of leaving her small lumber town in the north woods of Michigan, but gives up her dreams after having two children. In *Light From Arcturus*, Walker’s second novel, Julia Hauser uproots her family from Nebraska to take them to live in Chicago for the yearlong World’s Fair.

THE CULEW'S CRY

In the biography of her mother, Hugo describes how she perceives Walker's own anxieties reflected in her writing, particularly in her portrayal of the protagonist of *The Curlew's Cry*. She writes: "In my sense of Mother's social discomforts, I read many similarities to Pamela's, each imagining herself under constant, sometimes judgmental scrutiny" (190). According to her daughter, Walker projects her feelings of being judged by society for not conforming to social norms onto Pamela's character.¹² Society's powerful gaze worked on Walker, forcing her to prioritize her appearance of domesticity over her identity as a writer. I argue Walker resists the power of gaze in her writing. In this chapter I will show how Walker's narrative *The Curlew's Cry* can be read as a critique of the limitations of gender roles.

The Curlew's Cry tells the story of a Montana schoolgirl from the fictional town Brandon Rapids coming of age during the early 1900s. The novel opens at the high school graduation of Pamela Lacey, a third generation Montanan descended from pioneers and the daughter of a ranching father and stay-in-town mother. Charlie Lacey, Pamela's father, represents the hardworking man of traditional western mythology who struggles alone against the fierce natural environment that constantly threatens his livelihood. But instead of succeeding on his own, Mr. Lacey relies on investors from the East who hold the deed to his property. His partnership with the businessmen from the East reflects the end of the frontier's imagined economic independence from the East.¹³ As the West became more economically interdependent on the East, outside investors

¹² The idea of social scrutiny and gaze as limiting behavior are themes that play out in the novels, especially in the cases of Pamela Lacey and Alan in *The Curlew's Cry*, and Ellen Webb in *Winter Wheat*.

¹³ It is arguable the West of white settlers was always dependent of Eastern capital.

could speculate on business ventures popping up in the West. Cowboys raised cattle with little interest from investors, until the trains arrived to take the cows to eastern markets.

As a cattle man, Charlie Lacey represents a dying breed of men who find their frontier lifestyle being squeezed out by the physical and economic settlement of the West.

Maybelle Lacey, Pamela's mother, stands in contrast to her husband's rough frontier personality by preferring town life to living on the ranch. Throughout the novel

Maybelle appears only within the parameters of her home and dressed in finery. Pamela admires her mother's beauty, wishing she looked more like her. She observes her mother:

Dark hair was gathered up in wide waves to the crown of puffs on top and a comb with pearls shone against it. She wore her pearl earrings tonight, and the coral brooch surrounded by pearls that had been her mother's before she ever came to Montana fastened the lace at the neck of her black velvet dress. Pamela wished that she were dark like her mother. (20)

Instead of taking after her mother, Pamela more closely resembles her father in both her physical appearance and her preference for ranch life. Maybelle constantly reminds her daughter of the refinement and "civilization" of the eastern United States, contrasting the dusty harsh reality of where the Laceys live with the imagined civility of the East. When her mother talks about "The East" and "civilization" Pamela feels "disloyal to the West" and resents her mother's criticism because she identifies herself with the land (21).

However, after Pamela's high school sweetheart marries another girl, she ends up going East after marrying Alan, the son of one of her father's bosses. The marriage is an unhappy one, and after several years Pamela returns to her hometown seeking a new start. Having first chosen to leave Brandon Rapids, Montana, Pamela returns as an outsider to her former community. Being a divorcée makes her even more foreign, for hers was "the

first divorce among their kind of people in Brandon Rapids” (252). Upon her return to her hometown, Pamela faces the difficult task of finding a place for herself in a society that does not accommodate a divorced woman. She ends up running a “dude” ranch on her father’s failed cattle ranch. The novel charts Pamela’s coming of age through her departure from, and return to, the West, and her eventual reclamation of the lifestyle and work her father was forced to give up, all the while showing the sadness and loneliness Pamela experiences while forging her own path through life. Walker challenges the typical Western narrative in that she focuses on a female experience in a traditionally male gendered space.

The locus of the West as a place for “men only” persists in our society today, maintained through our history, literature and popular culture. Susan Johnson puts it bluntly: “white male gender, in all its anxious self-absorption, remains the unspoken but obstreperous subject of the history of the ‘American West’” (500). In her essay “O Beautiful for Spacious Guys,” Melody Graulich argues against the male gendered focus of the Western frontier myth, warning that because our society values the western heroes and the “American Dream,” the frontier myths “have often been elevated to megamyth, becoming the framework through which critics come to understand American culture” (186). She suggests the relationship depicted in the “archetypal” American Western story “is an opposition of values symbolized by gender conflict,” namely, that the West is epitomized by: “‘male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and tamed’” (Wallace Stegner qtd. in Graulich 187). In Walker’s *The Curlew’s Cry* this gendered view of the West plays out through the separation of life on the ranch from domesticated life found in

town. Charlie Lacey describes the separate spheres for men and women in the West. Having come into town from the ranch at midday, he sits at the bar waiting to return home. He thinks to himself:

The house in the middle of the day was too full of women's doings. By suppertime it was all right, and a man could expect the peace of his study to be uninterrupted. But, as a matter of fact the house in town seemed, and it did in legal deed, to belong to Maybelle; the old place on the ranch was his. (67)

The undomesticated spaces of the ranch and open range appeal to the masculine cowboy characters, while the settled and domestic realm of Brandon Rapids appeals to the homemakers, housewives, and effete men. Walker explores the concept of “separate spheres” for women and men in her narrative. In her article “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” historian Linda Kerber details the significance of the idea of gendered spaces to our understanding of women’s roles. She writes:

As we discuss the concept of separate spheres we are tiptoeing on the boundary between politics and ideology, between sociology and rhetoric...our task—insofar as it involves the analysis and demystification of a series of binary opposites—is essentially one of deconstruction. (39)

Walker disrupts the concept of separate spheres by portraying her characters as limited by their adherence to gendered spaces. She then introduces a character who challenges traditional roles.

Pamela comes to break with what her gender dictates, namely, that she should undertake a life of domesticity like her mother. Instead, Pamela favors the masculine coded space of the plains, choosing to leave many of the trappings of her gender behind in search of a life in the traditionally male world of ranching. But Pamela does not completely forsake her domestic role, as she keeps her ranch hospitable to others by

hosting wealthy Easterners, who pay to come stay in her version of a “dude” ranch. In some ways she “domesticates” the Western experience, therefore making it more acceptable to those who come from the East to have a simulated encounter with the “old West.” Walker creates a heroine who challenges the frontier myth as a strictly binary gendered space.

Walker situates her narrative at the opening of the twentieth century, a time when women living on the western frontier were well established and playing vital roles in the continuing westward migration of white settlers from the East. As Glenda Riley describes in her book, *The Female Frontier*: “women did play a highly significant and multifaceted role in the development of the American West...[for] numerous women worked in fields, helped with cattle roundups and drives, and aided in running inns and other family businesses” (2-3). Despite women’s presence, historians and writers generally focused on the male experience of the settlement of the West. One critic points out that “Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontiers were devoid of women. His pioneers were explorers, fur trappers, miners, ranchers, farmers, all of them male” (Myers 8). In his pivotal essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner describes the westward movement as a predominantly male endeavor. Turner argues that American social development continually renews itself through our connection to the idea of the frontier. He argues that the “perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (19). Contact with “primitive society” and the “undeveloped land” created a type of person highly valued in American culture, so highly valued, in fact, that he and Turner’s

archetypal male settler, became mythologized in the history and fiction of the American West. Turner describes the characteristics of the frontier as influencing those who settled there:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom — these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the frontier. (40)

Qualities of coarseness, strength, and dominant individualism are attributes describing the stereotypically masculinized character lauded in Western fiction. The character that Turner describes may be only an ideal, but it is a trope that appears throughout literature from and about the American West. A prime example can be found in A.B. Guthrie Jr.'s novel *The Big Sky*, where one of Western fiction's most infamous characters, Boone Caudill, comes to the West in search of adventure and becomes transformed by the wild environment into a "masculine man" of mythic proportions.¹⁴ Trapping, exploring, fighting, and guiding are all favored activities of Guthrie's character who, as Amazon.com puts it, gets "caught up in the freedom and savagery of the wilderness... [and] becomes an untamed mountain man, whom only the beautiful daughter of a Blackfoot chief dares to love." Other Western writers, such as James Fenimore Cooper,¹⁵ Zane Grey, Jack Schaefer¹⁶ and Louis L'Amour¹⁷ also make use of hyper-masculinized

¹⁴ "Masculine men" comes from historian Susan L. Johnson's essay "'A Memory Sweet to Soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the 'American West.'"

¹⁵ See Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*

¹⁶ See Schaefer's *Shane*

¹⁷ See L'Amour's Sackett novels

characters in their narratives, further entrenching the idea of the West as a man's place.¹⁸

Walker references the idea of a gendered West in her text when she describes an

Easterner's response to the western town featured in the novel:

“The remarkable thing about this town [Brandon Rapids] is that it is a Man's town. A young man's town. And when I say that I mean no discourtesy to the fair ladies present. Rather I mean to say I have seldom seen such masculine vigor in a comparatively small city.” (238)

By placing this idea of a masculinized West in her narrative, Walker denatures the ideology that goes into effect when writing about the American West. Studying the significance of the role gender plays in our imagining of the American West reveals the entrenched gender values held by our culture.

The Curlew's Cry problematizes the idea of the idealized Western male through the character of Pamela's father, Charlie Lacey. A rancher who spends more time on the plains with his cattle than in town with his wife and daughter, he represents a dying breed of Western men. Walker describes Mr. Lacey in contrast to the Eastern investors who come visit him in Montana: “He wore his ranch clothes and his heavy boots were muddy along the soles. None of the company gentlemen were as tall as he and they looked pale beside him. His skin never lost the heavy sunburn it got each summer, or else the wind burned it in winter” (23). Charlie Lacey represents the Western man who is more in touch with the land than the pale-faced Eastern investors. But Mr. Lacey has a hard time adjusting to the reality of the closing frontier. When he comes to town from the ranch, Charlie's first stop is the town saloon, where others see him as a representative of a still wild frontier: “He stood six feet two and the clothes he wore and the color of his skin

¹⁸ One could argue these authors critique the limitations of the archetype of the hyper-masculine western man through their narratives, but their focus remains on the male experience of the American West.

brought the open spaces from the other side of King Butte into the room” (69-70). His darkened skin signals his connection to the “primitive society” of the Native Americans who originally lived on the plains. Although Native Americans receive only passing mention in the novel, the glorification of Mr. Lacey’s cowboy persona suggest their implied presence as once being a part of the “wild West.” He also represents the pioneer spirit of the West through his physical form and quality of character. One man describes Charlie Lacey as:

The real Montana article...Keen as they come, strong enough to lift a yearling or a wagon out of the mud, and yet gentle as a woman and easygoing as a piece of good leather. His people were the pioneers, the real ones out here, not the riffraff that came out because they didn’t have anything to lose back home; the ones that set up justice and saw to it that it worked. (71)

Lacey’s authenticity as a “real” Montanan is judged by his physical prowess, easygoing nature, and ability to enforce justice in the newly settled (by whites) land.¹⁹ Just as Turner described in his essay, the qualities that symbolize the character of the pioneer settler are exaggerated masculine qualities of physical strength. But Walker inserts into the glorification of Mr. Lacey the idea of his being as “gentle as a woman.” This characterization problematizes the idea of the gruff Western cowboy by associating a man with the feminine quality of gentleness. However, instead of presenting gentleness as a gender-neutral quality, the text re-enforces the idea of it as a feminine quality by associating it with women.

Mr. Lacey’s masculine qualities make him most interesting to the “civilized” men from the East, who exchange heroic tales about Charlie Lacey, thus elevating his status as

¹⁹ The “ability to enforce justice” suggests a latent violence found in the characterization of Western men that I explore when I discuss the high school parade float.

a conqueror of the West.²⁰ One of the Eastern bankers tells the other men that “this man [Charlie Lacey] thinks nothing of riding horseback in the rain twenty, thirty miles, and then lying down with his saddle blanket over him and his head on his saddle for the night” (23). We never actually see Mr. Lacey ride in the rain (casting doubt on the reality of the story), but the Eastern men mythologize Lacey’s image as tough western man because he embodies the desired (and disappearing) qualities of the “masculine male.” Susan Johnson explains how “the construction of a masculine West was part and parcel of a larger late nineteenth-century ‘crisis of manliness’ on the United States—a crisis in which older definitions of white, middle-class manhood that emphasized restraint and respectability (‘manly men’) gave way to newer meanings that focused on vigor and raw virility (‘masculine men’)” (Johnson 497). It was in part Turner’s description of the western “man of action” that entrenched the idea of “masculine men” residing and dominating the landscape of the frontier. However, in Walker’s narrative, instead of the hyperbolized masculine strength sustaining Mr. Lacey, we see him struggle to keep his ranch. Lacey eventually loses his ranch, not because he does not work hard, but due to his inability to think like the Eastern businessmen. His failure to succeed casts doubt on the supremacy of the traditional frontier man archetype and shows that the changing West no longer supports the type of lifestyle he represents. Walker questions Turner’s thesis of the frontier spirit of individualism, coarseness and strength as undefeatable qualities through the flawed character of Charlie Lacey. Meanwhile, Walker enables a female

²⁰ In an ironic twist, the eastern investors eventually make it financially impossible for Charlie Lacey to maintain his ranch in effect conquering him and the “cowboy” lifestyle they celebrate.

character to be associated with the frontier spirit in ways that differ from the limited hyper-masculine roles of male characters in Western fiction.

Since the beginning of the gender debate, feminist historians have underscored the forgotten significance women played in the American expansion into the frontier. In her essay “Fredrick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies,” Riley points to a legacy of “tunnel vision” that Jackson’s followers created in which women’s roles are ignored. She explains, “none of the Turnerian commentators considered the effects of wilderness and space on women” (217).²¹ In seeming response to the neglected women’s perspectives on the West, Walker describes her goal in writing *The Curlew’s Cry* as addressing the question of how women were (and are) affected by the Western landscape. In a 1987 letter included in Blew’s introduction to the novel, Walker writes: “The concept of the Wilderness grew and grew for me as I wrote and kept changing...In *The Curlew’s Cry* it meant loneliness, being unloved and finally loving no man. I wanted to get a certain atmosphere into that novel so I wrote these paragraphs, that I am taking the liberty of enclosing, to keep it before me.” She writes:

Women in the early West often heard the curlew’s cry...in the lonely places where the wind blows the prairie grass and weighs it with the dust. Cry of the curlew...or cry of the loneliness those women feared...sharp as the edge of a green grass blade, piercing the stillness like a woman-scream, freezing the blood with an instant of fear, and making the blood contract [crossed out] congeal.

²¹ Riley’s “Turner bashing” occurred in the early 1990s, after the groundbreaking work in the 1980s by Annette Kolodny. In “Dancing Through the Minefield” Kolodny warns “an acute attentiveness to the ways in which certain power relations—usually those in which males wield various forms of influence over females—are inscribed in the texts (both literary and critical), that we have inherited, not merely as subject matter, but as the unquestioned, often unacknowledged given of the culture” (173). The process of dismantling the dominant social discourse in which women were omitted has been a long process, and I would argue continues today.

But once the towns were built out west, and tied together by twin lines of steel, women lived on the streets, with neighbors, and counted themselves safe from the lonely curlew's cry. They filled their lives with love and hate, and talk and busyness... as women always, everywhere.

Yet out beyond the Western towns, where the prairie grass still grows, and down by the rivers edge, the curlews walk stiff legged, long billed, and curious. And a woman may still hear that cry, that harsh curlee-li-li flung back on the wind from the bird's swift flight down the sky...sharp as the edge of a green blade of grass, piercing the stillness like a woman-scream, lingering on the brain longer than the wire-thin whistle of the midnight train. (5)

Walker's focus on female experiences of loneliness belies her claim that her work doesn't reveal a women centered interpretation of the West. Her association of the mournful cry of the curlew with a piercing "woman-scream" creates a visceral depiction of the power and profundity of the feeling of isolation experienced by women settlers. She describes the emergent small Western towns as oases of comfort for women, protecting them from the expanses of loneliness surrounding them on the prairies. The division of the frontier into settled domestic space versus open frontier creates a gendered association of the women with the towns. While no overt mention of men appears, Walker writes with the internalized image of a masculinized West that permeates literature of the West. The towns she describes are "tied together by twin lines of steel," tracks laid by men. The bonds that the women share are less concrete, more discursive: "love and hate, and talk and busyness...as women always, everywhere." In *The Curlew's Cry*, Pamela's mother Maybelle Lacey and Pamela's best friend Rose Morley represent these women who traffic in "love and hate," "talk and busyness," in that they form their identities through marriage and the development of their town. In her book *The Land Before Her*, Annette Kolodny describes how women settlers imagined the transformation of the frontier as cathartic because "the fantasy of a landscape that might figuratively reconstitute some

prior domestic community soothed the sense of irrevocable loss” (98). Similarly, Walker writes: “The women thought happily of the near future when there would be spreading shade trees as far as you could see along the paved streets and no dust blowing in their faces and sifting into their houses, because the prairie would be moved back so far by the hundreds of new homes built there” (238). “The women” are described as wishing for the settlement of the frontier, but Pamela craves the open spaces of the prairie found at the ranch. Pamela exists outside of the female community in that she no longer wants a husband or the settlement of the prairie. It is telling that Walker focuses her narrative on the character who defies a stereotyped description of gender by choosing to leave the community (and women) of town for the loneliness of a solitary life on the plains.²² Walker’s notes reveal a pointed focus on exploring the female gender experience of loneliness in the West that is ripe for an examination from a feminist perspective.

Walker opens *The Curlew’s Cry* with a telling scene of how a Western mythology of the heroic white male was perpetuated from an early time. She sets the narrative in central Montana where the graduating class of 1905 designs a float for the annual “Pioneer Day” parade. The teacher observes that the students come up with the same “worn-out themes” every year: “The Road Agents, the Vigilantes, the Gold Strike, the Shooting of Rattlesnake Jack...these Western children are more conscious of their past than New England children were of the Pilgrim Fathers” (9). Interestingly, the students’ preoccupation with the past also happens to focus exclusively on violent male endeavors

²² There are workers who help at the ranch, but they do not constitute companions to Pamela –except for Ruby, the only other female at the ranch.

in the West.²³ Sandra Myers describes the gendered stereotypes of the West as “reinforced by twentieth-century interpretation of frontiering as primary a male enterprise in which women played a largely invisible and subordinate role” (8). Walker challenges this stereotype through her portrayal of the scene. After the class decides to depict a “Vigilante Hanging,” only one student, Pamela, questions the tradition of an all-male cast by proposing some of the female students take part in the parade float. She asks, “Why don’t we divide the wagon and have the hanging at one end and at the other end have some women sitting waiting and looking sad?” (9). The division of the float into male and female realms reflects the idea of gendered spaces and a separation of the sexes, but overrides the omission of women all together. Pamela’s suggestion creates a place for women in the traditional all male Western mythology—but draws jeers from the male students, one of whom proclaims: “Naw, we don’t want any women in on this” (10). Because the mythology of the West relies on telling the same (male centered) stories over and over, the suggestion of changing that narrative to include women threatens the traditional imaginings of the West as a man’s world. Pamela’s high school sweetheart, Wrenn, defends her, arguing that “Pamela’s idea of having a woman’s side would be different...besides, it would be fairer” (10). But Wrenn’s support does not drown out the murmur of disagreement from the rest of the class, and doubting herself, Pamela concedes that women “wouldn’t go to the hanging. They’d be sitting at home waiting for someone to come and tell them it was over...They’re worried and they hate killings and all they can do is sit and wait” (12). The nature of the space she imagines reflects the

²³ The trope of violence in Western fiction is well developed in Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. Walker’s story works to override some of the myths of the Western frontier by focusing on the accomplishments of her heroine who never participates in violence.

views of her society that women would not be present at such a violent event. Rather, the women Pamela envisions are “sitting,” in a passive stance, “waiting,” for information, lacking agency, and contained –and constrained—within the female space of the home. Pamela’s recognition of the limitations of the women’s roles forces the reader to recognize how gender limited women’s activities.

In the novel, Pamela’s suggestion to include women in the display creates a spark of controversy forcing the students to think about what roles women had in the settlement of the West. Even if the women were not taking a direct part in the violence that characterized so much of the beginnings of white settlement, they still were present. The class finally agrees to allow the women on the float, although they are separated from the men, and the image of violence, by a false wall (covered by wallpaper on the women’s side!) symbolizing the home, where women were expected to be waiting for the men. Walker takes a traditionally all male “Western” hanging and cleverly re-imagines it to include the women. Placing the female students on the float with the re-enactment of the hanging forces readers to consider women’s roles during the settlement of the West and how our ideas may be influenced by the stories we tell. It is arguable that separate spheres are reinscribed through the hanging/mourning scene, but women are made part of the narrative whole, instead of being omitted. Just as Pamela attempts to include the girls into the parade float, Walker’s text works at challenging the idea of an all-male West by inserting female characters into the fabric of the narrative we already know.

Throughout the text we get an inside perspective on how Pamela imagines it would feel to be the wife of one of the hanged men. Pamela’s fantasy connects her to the trope of frontier justice, but instead of placing herself on the enforcing side of the law

(like her father and Wrenn who consider their pioneer ancestry as entitling them to be equated to earlier enforcers of Western justice—Wrenn even plans to become a lawyer), she contemplates being on the wrong side of the law. As she sits on the float she thinks:

Suppose it were her husband and he had held up the stagecoach and killed innocent people and then been caught. How would she feel? What if she had suspected right along, for surely you'd know what your husband was doing. But she would never marry anyone who could do a thing like that. She would marry someone like Wrenn, of course, and he would be on the side of right and justice. But suppose, just suppose, and now her husband were hanging and she was left out here in a new raw country, with a child, maybe...She would wait till they cut her husband down from the tree, or she would do it herself and see him decently buried, and put up a marker in spite of the shame and then she would leave town and go far away. (28-29)

At first Pamela finds it impossible imagining herself married to a criminal, still believing she will marry her high-school sweetheart Wrenn. However, after she puts herself into the role of mourning wife, she envisions the difficulty of being a single woman in the “new raw country” of the West. She does not foresee anyone coming forward to help her deal with the death of her imaginary husband, envisioning herself as the one to take care of the burial and marker. The self-reliance expected of men living in the “wild west” becomes a quality she applies to her imaginary role as grieving widow. But then Pamela imagines leaving the town, perhaps belying her assumption that single women were not strong enough to survive in the frontier without a man, or that she would not be able to withstand being ostracized by the community. Ironically, later in Pamela's life we see that she does in fact survive on the plains, living alone on the ranch without a husband, and in spite of the townsfolk's gossip about her life. Through Pamela's fantasy of what it would feel like to be a woman alone on the frontier, and her actual life story as told through the rest of the novel, readers are invited to imagine what life was like for women

settlers of the Montana frontier. Pamela dwells on her nostalgic notions of the frontier era because she idealizes the “Western myth” and bases her identity on the fact her family were pioneers who helped settle the plains. But given the choice of roles she imagines for herself as either grieving widow of a criminal, or grieving wife of a hangman, one recognizes these are not rewarding roles to aspire to. So Pamela adopts the more fulfilling dream of running the family ranch as a way of maintaining a connection to the old West as it quickly changes around her.

In her book *Bone Deep in Landscape: Writing, Reading and Place*, Mary Clearman Blew discusses Montana writers and the role the land plays in their works. In her essay “Mother Lode,” she describes Mildred Walker’s writing as resisting the standard approach to writing about the West. Blew explains Walker “might have used her skills to polish and hone and to reinvest in the old myth of the West as paradise before the fall. But she did nothing of the kind” (103). Instead, Walker reveals, from a female perspective, how traditionally imagined gender roles began to unravel with the closing of the Western frontier. Pamela gives voice to these changing roles. First, we see her argue for women’s inclusion in the class school project. After succeeding in getting women on the float and vividly imagining herself as the widow of an outlaw, Pamela reconsiders her expectations for marriage. Her friend Rose senses Pamela’s change of heart, questioning if she still plans on marrying after graduation. Rose asks:

“Are you going to get married...I mean soon after school?”
 “Why, I don’t know.” She said it as she did when somebody asked what she got in algebra, for of course she did know, pretty well. She knew she would get married, too. (32)

Pamela knows “pretty well” she will marry as society expects her to, but her desire to do so has begun to fade, if it was really ever there at all. Others feel that only marriage can

bring happiness to melancholy Pamela, who warily awaits her high-school sweetheart's proposal. Her mother muses that "a girl was never really happy until she was married," further pressuring Pamela to conform to expectations (184). But Pamela feels there should be more to her life than marriage:

Maybe, Pamela thought, sometimes, she wasn't waiting just for Wrenn, but for something else, something tremendous to happen...She was interested in her own life. She woke in the morning with a delicious feeling of excitement, and carried it like a secret as she dressed and had breakfast in the cool darkened house Mama had already closed from the sun. She was eager to be through and go out into the street, almost as though she would find there what she was waiting for. (127)

Pamela eschews staying inside and practicing for domesticity. Her expectations for her life exceed available gender roles for a young woman living in a small town in Montana in the early twentieth century. Pamela does not associate her feelings of anticipation with the man she is expected to marry. This ambivalence towards marriage places her outside the norm of female gender roles. She keeps her misgivings about marriage a secret, as she knows they are antithetical to what her mother and the greater society expect her to feel. Her desire to go outside and discover what waits for her symbolizes a need for self-knowledge beyond what the traditional roles of wife and mother offer. In a literal sense she rejects the enclosure of the traditional female space of the home, resisting the confines of the darkened house and seeking experience in the outside world. She seeks agency in determining the path her life will take but doesn't have any idea of how to break free from her expected gender role. In frustration Pamela rebels against her mother's domesticity by spending her free time outside the home and at her father's ranch. In town she resists social norms that prevent her from doing what she wants.

High-school senior Pamela acts out against female gender role clichés by challenging assumptions of what a young lady can do. She escapes her mother's shuttered house and revels in the outdoors, especially at the ranch. But her acts of rebellion brush up against what is considered appropriate behavior for a girl on the verge of womanhood. At the class graduation picnic following the parade, the girls begin to set out food for the luncheon (already assuming the "women's work" of providing the food), but the boys have a different idea:

"Let's go swimming first!" Bill Kossuth suggested and there was a sudden burst of laughter from the boys. One of them said something in an undertone and the laugh rose again, but with a different note this time that separated the girls from the boys, making the girls draw together, taking in Pamela and Rose. Then Pamela lifted her head a little and there was a defiant note in her voice that made the words more than they seemed.

"I might wade," she said. "If anyone else would."

"Take off your shoes and stockings and walk right out? Pamela Lacey, you know your mother wouldn't let you!" (33)

But Pamela does wade out into the river, leaving her shoes and stockings on the shore and exposing her legs to the other students. The boys find her behavior suggestive of sexual promiscuity and an invitation to flirt, while the girls find her brazen.

Pamela's intention may have been to defy the gender assumption that girls wouldn't (or couldn't) go in the water like boys; but her actions are read by the group within the parameters of what her new gender role dictates, namely, that she is no longer a little girl who can get away with "tomboy" behavior. Due to the fact Pamela has graduated and is of marriageable age she now faces even more restrictions on what are considered appropriate female behaviors. Once out of the water one of the boys touches Pamela's arm to see if she is cold. She protests to the other girls that his behavior is forward, but she receives no sympathy from them. One girl replies, "What can you

expect! ...Parading around with your skirt up to your knees!" (35). As Jane Tompkins explains in *West of Everything*: "gender patrols the borders of expression, keeping men and women from protesting their lot by threatening them with the label of deviance" (127). Pamela tried to prove that she was not restricted by her gender to take risks, but she quickly realizes there is more at stake. The threat of being labeled sexually deviant prevents Pamela from arguing against the limitations of her gender.

Glenda Riley describes the limitations of Western women's lives in her book *The Female Frontier*. She writes the "frontierswomen's responsibilities and sensibilities were shaped more by gender considerations than by region" (2). Gender was the deciding factor in women's experience of the frontier in that regardless of where they lived, "the primary focus of their lives, whether they were married or not," was domestic (3). As children, western girls were granted freedom to defy their gender, but once they become young women, they are expected to conform to gender roles.²⁴ Pamela may have grown up thinking she was exempt from the reality of a life of domesticity as her mother hired a maid to help around the house, freeing Pamela from spending her time at home.²⁵ Her parents also allowed her to go to the family ranch where she was free of domestic duties. At the ranch she was allowed to take part in a lifestyle that did not require her feminine gender role as much as town life did. Pamela was allowed a high school education

²⁴ In *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South*, Historian Anya Jabour describes how "in the antebellum South, girls' and boys' lives were not sharply demarcated prior to adolescence" (19). But later, "in their mid to late teens...young southern women began to think seriously about what it meant to reach adulthood and to assume their adult gender role –to exchange the identity of a little girl for that of a young lady"(27).

²⁵ It is interesting to note that although the maid is never described Mrs. Lacey refers to her as "Mamie" (17) and I wonder if Walker means to suggest she is an African American domestic servant? Rose wonders if the Laceys have Mamie as "full-time help or just for dinner" (19) suggesting the social significance of having a maid as an indicator of the Laceys higher economic status.

because she lived in town and her family was economically secure enough that she didn't have to work. But once she becomes of age, Pamela must face the reality of what her gender role entails, namely that she is expected to marry and raise a family. Riley argues that even "such factors as social class, ethnicity, race, education and marital status did not substantially alter the gender roles and expectations of women on the prairie and on the Plains," and that women who deviated from female social norms "frequently engendered criticism, rejection and other forms of social control" (3-4). Pamela experiences such harsh rebukes for her foray into the water because the other students sense she deviates from socially acceptable form. Pamela thinks she merely acts tomboyish, but because she is on the verge of womanhood her female sexuality becomes part of her gender role, even if she doesn't recognize it. In a discussion with the more sexually aware Rose, 17-year-old Pamela reveals how little she knows about sex. Rose asks:

"Have you ever been kissed by a boy?"

"Nope." Pamela emphasized her answer with a vehement shake of her head.

"Oh, my goodness, not ever?"

"I said no," Pamela said.

...

"When you're married they can touch you, any time they want."

"Pamela frowned. "Who can?"

"Your husband, of course."

The thought was unpleasant, but not entirely clear. Pamela sat silent, wishing she hadn't come down here with Rose, but held here, not able to run back. (32)

Pamela remains ignorant of her changing gender role as she transitions from child to woman. She notices even her mother refers to her "girlhood" in past tense. While discussing the past summer she hears herself referred to as a girl: "The phrase 'as girls' caught on Pamela's mind like a burr. 'As girls'...that was only last summer. Were they

women now? She didn't like going so fast" (183). Pamela resists becoming a woman due to the inevitable marrying off and subsequent loss of personal freedom.

The reality of her new role as a woman slowly dawns on Pamela as she observes a rancher's wife on the ride home from the picnic. Walker writes:

Dusk came slowly as they rode home. Wrenn sat beside Pamela at the end of the wagon but they sang as they rode so they had no need to talk [about her earlier risqué behavior]. A woman came to a lighted doorway in a ranch house and stood watching them. Pamela waved and the woman waved back...Just as the road dipped out of sight of the ranch house Pamela glanced back and saw the woman still looking after them. There was something so sad about her standing there...Why was it? Pamela forgot to sing, wondering about it...the sadness was not around her, it was in her, caught from the woman in the doorway. (36-37)

Walker poignantly portrays Pamela's transition from girlhood to womanhood when she describes that she "forgot to sing, wondering about it," in that she no longer feels like a carefree teenager as she realizes what the future holds for her. This moment represents Pamela's awakening to the reality of her role as a woman –and her realization that her adult role is in conflict with her desires. While Pamela questions marriage, she also relishes her freedom to be out of her mother's house. Her sadness comes from the understanding that the woman she witnesses represents the future she can expect. The woman looks back at Pamela as if looking back on her own memory of a time when she was as free and eager for the future as the young carefree students who sing while passing her home. Supporting the idea of different spheres for married women, the woman appears framed in the doorway of the ranch house that represents her domestic world, while Pamela is still free of the confinement of domesticity and rides unenclosed on the end of the wagon. Throughout the novel Pamela notices this connection of outdoors and freedom, versus enclosure and restriction, making a point of always preferring to be

outside. While town represents the social limitations Pamela feels, the ranch offers her a place she can feel free to be herself.

Walker presents a female protagonist in contrast to other literary depictions of women on the frontier who struggle against the harsh environment. Instead of being dominated or cowed by the surrounding landscape, Pamela feels invigorated and filled with joy whenever she travels out to the ranch. She assumes her school friend Rose will share her feelings about the ranch, but when the two travel from town to the ranch she is surprised by her friend's response:

“I hope it gets prettier; it looks awful bare here,” Rose said looking out the train window.

Pamela looked without saying anything. She hadn't thought it bare. There were the mountains, pale blue on white sky today, like the picture on Mama's Japanese fan. And the creek ran besides the tracks, half hidden in the tangle of willows. She watched the red-winged blackbirds swinging and teetering on a willow whip and kept it to herself as a secret. (128)

Rose does not relate to the wild environment and is discomforted by the unsettled land.

Pamela finds beauty in the natural setting and therefore sees herself as different from Rose. Interestingly, she chooses not to share the discovery of the red-winged blackbirds with her friend, signaling her need to keep what she suspects is a non-gender appropriate response hidden. Rose's character constantly contrasts to Pamela's in that she represents a traditional female gender role while Pamela does not.

When Pamela and Rose first become friends they both notice how physically different they are from one another. Trying on old dresses in the attic reveals how much more developed Rose is than Pamela: “Rose stepped out of her own dress conscious for a moment of her well-rounded bosom beside Pamela's flat chest” (16), while Pamela appears “so straight and thin and her black stockings were so tight over her legs” (19).

Beside the obvious physical differences, Rose also differs from Pamela in that she always dresses in feminine clothing. Before going to the ranch Rose wonders what she will wear, prompting Pamela's response: "It doesn't matter what you wear...I'll loan you a divided skirt and you wear a shirtwaist with it" (127-128). Pamela sees the ranch as a place where gender significant clothing does not matter as much as in town. But to Rose clothing operates as a strong signifier of her femininity that she maintains even while "roughing it" at the ranch. Pamela feels embarrassment for her friend's frilly hat for "Rose came to the train in a wide straw hat garlanded with daisies and bachelor's-buttons" (128). She worries her friend will be judged by the ranch hands as an inconvenience and a burden for being too "girly" for the rustic setting. But Rose uses her feminine wiles to gain acceptance by the rough ranch hands, which proves even more troubling to Pamela. When one of the men comments that Rose is a "good looker," Pamela expects Rose to mind, but "Rose smiled as though she liked it" (128). Pamela values her independence from restrictive female gender roles at the ranch and has little sense of her sexuality; therefore, she cannot understand why her friend would allow or encourage others to see her as feminine or sexually attractive. For Pamela the ideal woman can be found in the lone woman who works at the ranch.

Walker portrays many different types of women in *The Curlew's Cry*, from tomboyish Pamela, to ultra-feminine Rose, to domestic diva Mrs. Lacey. But no character stands out as much as the tough ranch woman, Ruby. While others see her as unfeminine, Pamela looks to Ruby as a model figure of frontier womanhood:

No woman Pamela knew was like Ruby. "A broom with an apron and shawl tied on her," Slim called her because she was so thin and straight and her face and neck and hands and arms were the color of a wooden broom handle. Her hair was no color at all and brushed back in a tight

knot. You never could remember the color of her eyes except when she was mad and then they were glaring yellow and white. (47-48)

Walker's portrayal of Ruby contrasts to that of the other women in the novel, but in many ways upholds a different stereotype about women who lived on the frontier. Historian Myers describes in her chapter "The Madonna of the Prairies and Calamity Jane" from her book *Westering Women* how women of the frontier are often viewed as falling in two categories: civilizers and victims. The civilizers were the women who brought "law and order, cleanliness, and religion" (3), while the victims were those who "working alongside men in 'inappropriate' tasks would lose their femininity, even their looks" (7). Ruby cooks and cleans, but is also tough enough to work alongside men at the ranch. Myers warns that "frequently Western women were caricatured as 'coarse,' 'crude,' 'unlettered,' drudges who were both 'slovenly' and 'unfeminine'" (8). In many ways Ruby's character fulfills that caricature. Walker describes Ruby in terms that define her physically as unattractive and asexual, for her body has no shape, her skin is the color of wood, and her hair "was no color at all." The only things connecting Ruby to her gender are the broom she uses to sweep and the apron she wears when she cooks. By using the metonymy of the traditional female tools of domesticity to represent the figure of the woman, Walker highlights the limited gender roles available to women. On the other hand, Ruby can be read as a stereotype of the female "victim" of the frontier who loses her femininity because she works in an all-male environment. Whether Walker intended Ruby to be caricature or not, Pamela admires her more than any other woman in the novel.

Pamela respects Ruby as honest and unburdened by the conventions that influence Rose and Maybelle Lacey. She values her opinion above anyone else: "What Ruby

thought about anybody was important to Pamela ...[because] you could count on Ruby; she didn't change from one side to the other, the way Mama did" (47). Pamela sees Ruby as the antithesis of her mother in both her decidedly unfeminine physical appearance and her steadfastness to her opinions and values. While her mother appears disloyal to Pamela in her condemnation of the West in favor of her ideas about the East, Ruby appreciates and understands the untamed beauty of the ranch. This shared understanding of the appeal of the ranch life makes Pamela and Ruby closer than Pamela feels to her mother. Ruby becomes Pamela's confidante for her misgivings about her expected gender role. Faced with the frustration of her life not living up to her expectations, Pamela talks to Ruby:

"I don't feel I'm getting anywhere," she had said to Ruby one time when she drove over to the ranch where Ruby worked.

"Whatever made you think women get anywhere, Punk?" Ruby asked in disgust. "They just keep busy and grow older; don't learn much, either." (306)

Ruby places little value on the female experience of the frontier due to her own inability to break free from the restrictive roles her gender and class have played in her life. Ruby differs from Pamela in that she comes from a lower socio-economic class, has had to work to support herself, and probably had little education. Walker's inclusion of Ruby's perspective highlights the significance of class in determining a woman's ability to negotiate different roles. Ruby is stuck as a working drudge because she does not have the means to break free from her economic class, while Pamela is empowered by her economic security to imagine independence. Pamela refuses to submit to the limitations Ruby describes, thinking she can attain a more fulfilling life:

She wouldn't take that. She was going to get somewhere before she grew older. Where was somewhere? It was independence and satisfaction, and

she was going to make some kind of a life for herself. She was going to make enough money so she didn't have to worry about debts. No, that wasn't enough either. She was going to get to the place where she didn't need to depend on anyone. And if she was lonely, no one would ever know it. (306)

Pamela believes she can achieve independence even though the most independent woman she knows warns her of the danger of aiming too high. Pamela resolves not to admit to feeling lonely before she experiences loneliness, belying her assumption that a single woman feels lonely. But her dedication to achieving her dream does not allow doubters, like Ruby, to sway her. A strong desire to remain economically and emotionally independent drives Pamela to resist marrying as she realizes becoming dependent on a husband will compromise her dream of running a ranch.

Marriage plays a key role in defining a woman's domestic gender role in much Western fiction. Of the expected female gender roles she must play, Pamela struggles the most against marriage. An argument between Pamela and Wrenn over Mr. Lacey's dubious business reputation leads Pamela to break up with Wrenn in defense of her father's honor. After the break-up, Wrenn marries Pamela's best friend, Rose, leaving her without a potential husband. Pamela faces townsfolk's expectations that she will marry soon after graduating. A neighborhood woman's comments drive home the point that society polices those who deviate from the norm:

“Hello, Pamela Lacey, I thought you'd be married and gone by now. Well, Mr. Right will come along one of these days; you do a little window shopping first!” Mrs. Rumford winked at her, but she meant hurry and get married, Pamela told herself. Everyone did except Ruby. (190)

Pamela feels the pressure society, especially the town women, exert when a person does not conform to her expected gender role. Only Ruby does not make Pamela feel she has

to marry. Out of frustration, Pamela complains to her mother, “anyone would think there isn’t anything in life for a girl but getting married!” (201). In many ways there was not much else other than marriage and domesticity for women to look forward to at the time. As Riley describes in *The Female Frontier*, opportunities for gainful employment was severely limited for women on the prairie. She explains, “while the enterprises of prairie women sometimes deviated sharply from what was thought ‘acceptable’ ... far more were an extension in some way of women’s domestic functions and focus” (103), such as Ruby’s cooking and cleaning for the ranch. Riley points to teaching, cooking, and millinery work as accepted forms of female employment on the Western frontier, but these jobs paid very little and were generally for lower socio-economic class women. While Pamela could pursue a career, her choices were severely limited, and the income available from these jobs would not financially support her to the level she is accustomed. Also, in 1905, women did not have the right to vote, furthering the expectation that a woman needed a husband not only to provide for her economically, but also to represent her politically.²⁶ Pamela finally decides to accept the hand of a suitor, not because she loves him, but because she feels it is the only way to appease the constant questioning about when will she marry, and resolve the problem of what to do with her life. After telling her mother she intends to marry, Pamela thinks to herself, “she would be gone from here soon, away from Mama and Papa and this house and the street and the town, and she was glad” (206). Marriage becomes a way out of the confines of her small town and her mother’s house for Pamela, but she does not really break free of society’s expectations; rather, she enters into a whole new set of expectations.

²⁶ See Judith K. Cole’s article “A Wide Field for Usefulness: Women’s Civil Status and the Evolution of Women’s Suffrage on the Montana Frontier, 1864-1914.”

Walker plays with dichotomized and regional gender roles by introducing Alan, the son of an Eastern investor, as Pamela's suitor. Alan visits the West as a young man at his father's request to learn about the lifestyle of the ranchers and to become familiar with the business he will one day take over as an investor. Coming from the East makes him different from the Western men. Maybelle Lacey fawns over Alan as if he were an exotic new species: "You can see he has breeding...such lovely manners, and don't you love that Eastern way of talking?" (46). But to the ranch hands who must work with him over the summer, Alan has been de-masculinized by his prim and proper Eastern upbringing. Ruby ridicules his refined clothing, telling him "in her louder-than-man's voice... 'the lady cowboy better take off'n his city clothes so he won't get 'em dirty'" (53). The nickname sticks, and Alan becomes known as the "lady cowboy" for his effeminate dress and inability to ride a horse. Pamela attempts to show Alan the beauty of the ranch, but his Eastern sensibilities, favoring refinement and culture, foreclose his enjoying the wild landscape. He complains that the ranch is so "hot and dusty" he'd rather be "swimming at the club" at home in the East, and instead of helping the men work, he returns to the porch where he sits "reading and writing letters" (48). Alan feels superior to the rough workers claiming that "a cowboy is all right out here roping cattle or something but I'd hate to see him try to get along in Buffalo" (51). His feeling of class superiority does not fit with the more equitable social structure of the ranch, where Mr. Lacey eats with his hired men. The ranch hands, in turn, resent Alan's haughty attitude and ridicule his unmanly ways by calling him the "lady cowboy." In her essay "Pedagogy of the Opaque," Sally Robinson describes how "normative masculinity" constrains men because "men who don't 'measure up' not only suffer the consequences

but are often seen as ‘gender traitors’” (144). Alan does not fulfill normative masculinity expectations of the West therefore the ranch hands view him as transgressing gender.

They police his behavior and emasculate him by calling him names.

After going out alone to escape the humiliating ribbing he receives from the ranch hands, Alan is bitten by a rattlesnake. In a seeming gender switch, Pamela discovers Alan and proceeds to save his life by sucking the venom out of the wound. She recalls Ruby’s assessment that “it’s all foolishness that a girl can’t stick a chicken in the throat; men are twice as squeamish as women any day” as she tends to the injured Alan. Ruby’s claim of female empowerment resonates with Pamela as she tries to save Alan. Walker writes that Pamela “paid no attention to Alan’s moans but she lay down on the ground beside him and put her mouth against the cut” (57). The traditional roles of “heroic cowboy” and “damsel in distress” are switched, as the “hero” Pamela saves the “lady cowboy” Alan. By playing up the reversal of their roles, Walker highlights the gendered perception of the West as a masculine space, represented by tomboyish Pamela, while the East is a feminine space, as embodied by delicate Alan. Jane Tompkins describes the trope of using a set of oppositions as key to many Westerns. She explains:

These are the classic oppositions from which all Westerns derive their meaning: parlor versus mesa, East versus West, woman versus man, illusion versus truth words versus things...[But] what is most characteristic of these oppositions is that as soon as you put pressure on them they break down. (48)

Walker questions the validity of dichotomized gender roles by reversing the conventionally gendered attributes of the characters that represent their respective regions (i.e. she has a woman represents the wild West, while a man represents the refined East). Pamela is capable of saving a life just as much as any “man,” while Alan is as

overwhelmed by the wide-open landscape as any “woman.” Playing these stereotypes up, but in reverse, serves to discredit the notion that there are true gender differences that hold up under scrutiny.

Alan falls in love with Pamela after she saves his life, but she marries him only because she feels she has no other choice. They live on the East Coast, where his family and work are, taking Pamela away from the environment she loves.²⁷ Pamela realizes the “terrible mistake” she makes marrying Alan for “she had married him without loving him” (250). The marriage lasts only a few years, and the couple has no children. The novel does not offer why they remained childless, but the ambiguity of Alan’s masculinity (the “lady cowboy”) suggests his “impotence” may be the cause. On the other hand, Pamela’s lack of femininity could equally be seen as the reason for their lack of procreation. Once Pamela is freed from her unhappy marriage, she returns to Brandon Rapids to carve out a new path that defies traditional gender roles. She comes to believe that “there were other ways of living besides being married to someone” (250). Pamela struggles to achieve happiness in a culture that expects her to become wife and mother. Ultimately, the only way for her to imagine her happiness is to take over running her father’s ranch.

Walker creates a scenario in which it is feasible for a woman to take over the ranch by making Pamela an only child. Were there any brothers in the family, the

²⁷ Pamela’s move eastward with her husband works in contrast to the more commonly described female frontier narratives of a continual westward movement. In her book *The Land Before Her*, Kolodny explores, through first hand narratives, how pioneering women experienced terrible loneliness being separated from their families and home environments. Walker neatly reverses this narrative tradition by depicting Pamela as resisting the more settled east, in favor of returning to the West.

believability of Pamela's dream would be too far fetched.²⁸ Even Pamela's father wishes he had sons. Mr. Lacey thinks to himself, "he'd always been sorry they hadn't had more children; a boy or two. Not that Pam wasn't as good as a boy, but then he'd have him with him" to help with the ranch (225). But because Pamela is an only child (which would be an oddity in the age of limited birth control), and there are no male children, her father imbues masculine values in his daughter. In *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, historian Barbara Welter describes how middle-class girl children, firstborn, often without any male children in the family, developed "extraordinarily close relationships" with their fathers. Welter explains that often such a girl grows to feel that "she must compensate him [the father] for the son she is sure he had wished her to be" (6). Likewise, Pamela feels more connected to her father's way of life and seeks to fulfill the role of the son he never had.²⁹ Her love of the ranch, encouraged by her father, coupled with a failed marriage, lead Pamela to believe she can take over her father's business. But others doubt a woman can do the job. Ruby tells her, "if you was a man now I'd say you oughta take ahold of the ranch, but I never seen but one lady rancher and I wouldn't have give two cents' worth of tobacco for her" (231). Mr. Lacey's cattle ranching proved unprofitable, but Pamela envisions a new approach to running the business by turning it into a dude ranch where wealthy Easterners will pay to come stay in a tamed version of the West. Some see her plan as a solution to the changing economy and proclaim she "will be a pioneer in dude ranches!" (304). Pamela

²⁸ Even today gender is the deciding factor on who inherits the ranch or farm; see Judy Blunt's memoir *Breaking Clean*.

²⁹ Hugo writes in her biography of her mother that Walker told her "almost inadvertently and with shy pride, that her father called her "Peter." He had wanted her to be a boy, she said matter-of-factly" (8).

must cast off the trappings of gender which restrict her access into the “man’s world” of ranching. First, she changes her manner of dress when traveling from dresses in town to shirtwaists and split skirts at the ranch. Later, she goes all the way to wearing chaps, spur and cowboy hats to fit in with the cowboy culture she enters.

Donning the clothing she normally wears at the ranch sets Pamela apart from traditional gender identities. Pamela plans to sell her concept of a “dude” ranch by traveling to the East Coast. Before she leaves, one woman tells her: “You don’t look like Brandon Rapids, Montana sitting there [in her ranch wear]...you should wear pants and a cowboy hat when you talk to these New York people about your ranch” (303). The woman recognizes that the image of a female in traditionally western men’s clothing signals something about the difference between gender roles in “town” versus at the ranch. As Judith Butler describes in *Gender Trouble*, the idea of a single gender identity becomes disrupted through cross-dressing. She writes:

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between “imitation” and the “original” is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. Moreover, it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification –that is, the original meanings accorded to gender –and subsequent gender experience might be reframed. (137)

Pamela’s dressing in cowboy gear plays up the distinction of her anatomical sex, her female gender identity that society expects, and her transgression of gender roles. The idea of the performativity of gender is highlighted especially because of the over-determined masculinity of the Western style of dress. Maybelle Lacey resists her

daughter's "cross-dressing" as it signals a departure from the social norm. Walker writes, "Maybelle looked at her in her wool pants and flannel shirt. Pamela could wear trousers better than most women, but she didn't like them on her. She didn't like her hair cut short either" (329). Pamela refuses to conform to societal ideas of how a woman should dress, claiming that, "I hardly have anything but suits, as a matter of fact. I don't go in for these women's things, you know" (332). The easterners, (especially the men) are fascinated by her Western clothing and think "Pam looked wonderful with her light bobbed hair and worn leather things, and the starched white shirtwaist...her spurs had belonged to Ruby's husband, and they were sterling silver" (310).³⁰ Her masculine style of dress reflects Pamela's work on the ranch, which is generally thought of as men's work. However, even though Walker positions her heroine as breaking gender stereotypes through her dress and employment, she also reinforces an idealized masculine version of the American West. Pamela must dress like a man to convince the potential "dudes" that she offers an "authentic" Western experience at her ranch.

In addition to re-inscribing an idealized cowboy West, Walker's text restricts Pamela's happiness due to the lifestyle she chooses. Melody Graulich describes how the "liberated male/domestic female convention is as 'inescapable' for critics as for fiction writers" (194). As a critic I recognize the danger of falling into the literary trap of feeling unsatisfied with a work that does not neatly partner up its characters into married couples who live in domestic bliss. Unlike Willa Cather's Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*, who runs the farm and finds love and marriage, Pamela battles the loneliness she feels

³⁰ The desire the men feel for Pamela dressed in drag could be an expression of homosocial desire as defined by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. They see Pamela as representing a version of a cowboy that they can sexually desire without compromising their male identities.

alone on her ranch, never finding a partner for her life and feeling abandoned by Ruby who, unhappy with the transformation of the “real” ranch into a commodified “dude” ranch, remarries and moves away. Walker restricts the fulfillment Pamela can experience because she breaks with a traditional female gender role, and becomes more like the traditional male Western hero, alone on the plains. Jane Tompkins describes this trope of the Western story in *West of Everything*. She writes:

The gender system catches Western heroes in a trap. The free, wild prairie promises liberation from stuffy interiors and bad family scenarios, but the type of heroism it seems to legitimize doesn't produce a very viable person, a person who enjoys living with himself and other people. Silence, the will to dominate, and unacknowledged suffering aren't a good recipe for happiness and companionability. (128)

Walker does offer an answer to Pamela's loneliness by suggesting the solution may come from her re-engagement with the (female) community.

At the end of the narrative Walker introduces the idea that Pamela's isolation may be abated through reviving her friendship with Rose. After Rose's husband dies in an auto accident, she shuns the community, shutting herself off from everyone. Pamela comes to offer condolences to Rose. Walker writes:

The silence pushed against Pamela. It had been a mistake to come, just as she had known it would be. Rose didn't want her here. She resented her coming. Pamela turned to go and then she saw them both reflected in the hall mirror: two middle-aged women standing awkwardly there, not saying anything to each other, not able to.

How had they come to this place? She looked away quickly and moved to the door that Rose was already opening, wanting her to go. But she couldn't just walk away and leave Rose like this. Rose's life was too mixed up with hers.

She glanced at Rose's face, closed tight over any feeling. She had never meant to admit it to anyone, least of all Rose, but now she wanted to tell her.

“Rose,” she said quietly, “I've been very lonely out on the ranch this winter...”

Rose turned toward her and there was no dullness in her face. It wasn't so difficult to go on from there. (382)

Walker ends her novel here leaving the reader to interpret the significance of their rekindled friendship. Certainly, she shows that Pamela overcomes the limitations of language that restricts her from communicating her feelings of loneliness to Rose. Their reconnection symbolizes Pamela's return to female community from her isolation at the ranch. Both women have undergone tremendous hardship and suffered personal loss allowing them form a bond that overcomes their different lifestyles. Rose accepts Pamela despite her estrangement from the social functions that would normally bring women together.³¹ The act of reaching out signifies Pamela's rejection of the Western hero myth, as the need for human contact overrides her belief that in order to fulfill her role she must remain alone. Reconnecting to Rose proves a cathartic release for Pamela, and the novel suggests the women form a bond that will sustain both through their difficult lives.

³¹ Social functions as in church groups, school boards, play groups or even as wives and mothers –See Riley and Jeffrey for examples of female bonding. Pamela and Rose have little in common other than they both are women living in the West.

WINTER WHEAT: GAZE, GENDER AND CLASS

Winter Wheat tells the story of Ellen Webb coming of age in north central Montana in the 1940s. In the narrative, Ellen learns to establish her identity as a woman while she transitions from teen to young adult. A year spent at college in Minneapolis complicates her journey to adulthood. While living there, Ellen falls in love with bourgeois Gilbert Borden, whose elitist values influence her to call into question her western upbringing. Prior to coming East,³² Ellen feels free to dress and act however she pleases. However, once she becomes aware (through Gil's perspective) of gender and class distinctions, she struggles to reconcile her life with what she perceives are his judgments of her. The text shows how Gil's "Gaze" operates as an enforcer of the new set of values Ellen adopts. Through her new perspective, Ellen must also come to terms with her parents. She struggles to understand their seemingly disjointed marriage after she learns a long hidden family secret. Ellen grapples with her ethnic heritage as her mother came from Russia while her father came from Vermont. Her parents' different heritages –in terms of cultural and class differences –prove problematic to Ellen's newly reformed set of values. I argue that Walker's text disrupts narrowly defined gender and class definitions through the depiction of Ellen's struggle to find satisfaction in her life.

Through first person narration, Ellen operates as an observer and critic of her and her parents' lives. Ellen describes herself as first blissfully unaware of gender and class. After meeting Gil, she becomes painfully aware of gender and class, to the point her home life is no longer bearable. Ellen mirrors the gaze she feels from Gil, back onto

³² Although Ellen only makes it as far east as Minneapolis, I argue that this represents a large enough cultural shift from Gotham, Montana to signify that she enters a more "eastern" American society.

herself and her life in Montana. Through his reductive lens, Ellen seeks to reconcile traditional binary thinking as it applies to her life—and finds that the model does not satisfy any of her values. She attempts to negotiate between Western and Eastern values, feminine and masculine, poor and rich, foreign and American, urban and rural, only to discover that her own happiness depends on her ability to accept the gray areas between all these distinctions. Thus, the power of the gaze, while still powerful and disruptive, is overcome by a woman living in the West. Ellen narrates her experiences as a woman from the West, who first encounters, and then resists the male gaze. Her narrative operates as a feminist voice in the patriarchal critical discourse of western literature.

The novel also shows how Ellen's parents struggle with their gender roles in the West. Ellen's father is weak and often disabled as a result of injuries received in World War I. His ability to run the farm and be the "man" of the house is compromised by his illness. In turn, Ellen's mother must step into the masculine role of running the farm, which places her outside the norm of female gender roles in the West. Further complicating the parents' roles are issues of race and class. Ellen's father, Ben, comes from New England, which he feels should grant him elevated status in the working class West. However, because he is poor and has chosen to live in a small agricultural community, his eastern roots do not provide the cultural cachet he expects. Ellen's mother, Anna, on the other hand, comes from Russia, where she was a poor peasant. For her, the West offers a new opportunity to work hard, earn a living and live in freedom. However, because she comes from outside the United States, the farming community judges her inferior. Anna's ethnicity marks her as "Other," just as her running the farm sets her apart for disrupting gender roles.

Winter Wheat charts Ellen's departure from, and return to, a small western community, much as Pamela's story in *The Curlew's Cry*. However, unlike Pamela, Ellen goes east for her first year of college, instead of for marriage. Arguably, many of the women who went to college during the 1940s did so to find husbands, but Ellen's parents send their daughter to school to give her the education they were unable to afford for themselves. While Pamela feels pressured to find a husband, Ellen expresses little concern over getting married. When Anna advises Ellen "it would be good for you to marry," Ellen thinks "I was angry at her for trying to plan things out for me like some old country mother" (230). In *Homeward Bound*, May describes the real experiences of emigrant parents and their children in the 1930s:

The emigrant mother often had to work not only in her home, but outside as well, under the most harrowing conditions...For the daughter, however, the most precious legacy was an escape from the hard work and drudgery of her mother and the attainment of leisure—the very leisure this emigrant mother never knew herself...the daughter with nothing but her femininity, would, with luck, marry well and thereby achieve the leisure her mother never knew. (52)

Ellen interprets her mother's motive to marry her off as being more concerned with her economic comfort than with her finding romantic love. She believes her mother's marriage to her father was only a means for her escape from Russia. Ellen does not recognize yet that her mother did marry for romantic love. While marriage is still the expected path for a woman to take, in Ellen's more modern time of 1941, mothers do not match-make. The narratives reflect the forty years between Pamela and Ellen's stories by showing how roles have changed.

The distinct gender roles Walker found available to Pamela in the early 1900s West have shifted during Ellen's 1940s in *Winter Wheat*. Some gender roles are blurred

because of women's expanded rights, including the nineteenth amendment, which gave women the right to vote. But also, war comes into play. In 1941, when the narrative is set, men were joining the military in advance of the U.S. involvement in WWII. While many women filled the jobs the enlisted men vacated, Ellen already works on the family farm. From the early 1900s to the 1940s technology also played a major role in changing the gender roles—for both men and women. In the household indoor plumbing, electricity and refrigeration made domestic chores easier. Machines and the combustion engine made living and working on the plains easier as well. In *Winter Wheat*, we see how Ellen's family embraces the opportunities offered by new farming machines, but at the same time, how they resist the impact it has on certain gender divisions of labor.

Despite the progress towards equity for women from Pamela's time in *The Curlew's Cry* to Ellen's in *Winter Wheat*, the narrative highlights how distinct female gender roles remain. Women still do the housecleaning and (most) of the work in the kitchen, while men work outside the home and earn money. However, in *Winter Wheat*, Walker points out how these gendered roles open up in the West. For example, Ellen works alongside her mother and father in the wheat fields, even driving the big farm equipment. Yet, when Ellen arrives in Minneapolis for college she finds women are expected not to do hard physical labor. The different attitude towards women's work reflects the different gender roles available in the rural agricultural communities of the West versus the urban centers of the mid-West and Eastern United States.

Ellen becomes influenced by the values she encounters at college, leading her to see the western lifestyle she previously regarded as idyllic in a new light. Unlike Pamela, who never questions her place in the West, Ellen returns from the city embittered against

her parents and their lives as farmers. She feels growing up in the West has marked her as “Other,” and consequently she cannot fit in to a modern way of life. At the same time, her experiences in Minneapolis sour her against her western gender roles, so when she returns home she is dissatisfied with the opportunities available to her as a woman.

Caught between the two worlds, Ellen struggles to regain a sense of self, and place. One reason for Ellen’s sense of otherness comes from her non-traditional role models, her parents.

The story begins in September 1941, when Ellen still lives with her parents, Ben and Anna Webb, on dryland wheat farm outside the tiny town of Gotham. Ellen describes the town as “seventy five people, counting the ranchers” (16).³³ Ben is a WWI veteran who met his Russian wife, Anna, when she nursed him back to health from injuries sustained in Russia during the war. After returning from Russia, Ben and Anna decide to move to Montana, instead of settling in his native Vermont. He explains to Ellen that he “wanted to go to the other end of the earth just then and your mother wanted to live on a farm. So we homesteaded. Sort of last-call pioneers”(36). Although they arrive long after the frontier is settled, Ben and Anna still hold ideas about the West as a land of new beginnings. One motivation for moving West is economic opportunity. In *The Land Before Her*, Annette Kolodny describes how women “like their husbands and fathers shared in the economic motives behind emigration; and like the men, women also dreamed of transforming the wilderness” (xii). Kolodny argues that white male fantasies

³³ Walker uses the term “ranch” to describe all the agricultural activities that take place in Gotham, Montana. However, the phrase may be anachronistic, for instead of the plains being grazed by cattle, as they were in earlier times, by the 1940s the plains where the Webb’s live have been cultivated and turned into wheat fields. Later, when Ellen lives at the teacherage, she finds herself in true “ranch” territory.

about the American Western frontier involved the solitary conquest of virgin land, while female fantasy imagined a garden waiting to be cultivated. Although situated long after the settlement of the West, Walker's narrative supports Kolodny's argument. Ben wants to escape the modern world (and the specter of war) through his personal conquest of farming. Meanwhile, Anna wants to settle (on) the plains to begin her "garden," (albeit a winter wheat farm) and new family. Ben describes how when they first arrived in Montana they "could hardly wait to get the house built so we could start plowing" (291). Thus, Ben and Anna share a fantasy of the West as a blank slate where they can realize their dreams through the cultivation of the earth. They also come to the West to escape judgment of their marriage.

Ben and Anna are pioneers in that they undertake a marriage between two nationalities and two social classes. An American marrying a woman from another country is fraught with nationalistic tensions. Further complicating their union, is Ben's status as a middle class Vermonter, while Anna comes from the Russian peasant class. Their mixed marriage places them both as outsiders to their original communities. Anna rarely talks about her homeland because her entire family was killed during the war. But Ben constantly refers to his childhood home in Vermont. Walker highlights the fact that Ben still pines for his New England way of life, almost as a rebuke to their life in Montana. Ellen describes how she feels she knows Vermont, without ever having been there, because her father "so often talked about it –how different it was from Montana" (32). Meanwhile, Anna describes Vermont as a place where she was not welcome. Anna explains to Ellen her experience in Vermont:

"Everything is different when I go to your father's town,
everything!...They don't eat same as I do –house, clothes, church, everything

different. They don't even think the same...They was glad to see me go. We come out here." (36)

Ellen imagines that her father "must have defended [Anna] against any criticism from his mother and sister," (104) but she may be giving him more credit than he is due. Ben seems ambivalent about his wife's heritage. Ellen explains, "Dad always said Mom could make all the dishes he's had back in Vermont as well as though she were a New Englander herself, instead of a Russian" (9). At one point he even describes their Montana neighbors as "ignorant foreigners,"(112) raising questions as to how Ben views his foreign-born and uneducated "peasant" wife. Also, Ben moves them West instead of struggling against the bigotry and classism of his family in the East, who discriminated against Anna. Ellen overhears a conversation between her parents that reveals the tension between Ben and Anna about moving west:

"I brought you back home [to Vermont] and when you weren't happy there, didn't I come out here because you wanted to?"
 "You want to get your Russian girl out of your old town; that wasn't for any love." (93)

Anna believes that Ben moved them away from his hometown because she did not meet the expectations of his community. Her "otherness" drove him to seek out a place that accepted her. Despite their disagreement over why they initially came, Anna and Ben imagined the West offered an opportunity for them to live without the constant censure of others and where Anna would be accepted. But even in the sparsely populated farming community, Anna stands out.

Ellen describes how, even as a child, she realized her mother was viewed as different from other mothers in Gotham:

I remembered, one time in the spring, coming home from school with Judy Bailey and seeing Mom down by the fence. We ran across the field

instead of going to the house first. When we came up to her I saw that Mom was barefoot. She had left her shoes way round by the gate. I didn't mind until I felt Judy looking at Mom's feet. I could feel her thinking right through her silly fat little head...I went barefoot with Mom, not because I wanted to, but out of a kind of loyalty. (100)

What little Judy is thinking, we are to surmise, is that Anna's behavior does not fit with what a "proper" mother would be doing. Judy runs home, no doubt, to tell her mother about the odd behavior of the "foreigner." In a pattern that repeats in her later life, Ellen judges her mother after she witnesses the scrutinizing gaze of others who view her behavior as foreign. Ellen joins her barefoot mother out of allegiance, but internally she distances herself from associating with Anna.

In her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Elaine Showalter describes how a "woman's text...confronts both paternal and maternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance" (203). Walker's text addresses such feminist concerns through the depiction of Ellen coming to terms with both her "lines of inheritance:" namely, her father's highbrow New England roots and her mother's peasant Russian roots. While Ellen sees herself as a product of her two very different parents, she resists associating with her mother's foreignness. She describes that:

I look more like Dad. He is tall and thin and has light hair and blue eyes and his face shows what he thinks or feels. Mom is square and stocky with broad shoulders and hips. It's just as well that I am more like Dad in my body. I like being slender and straight. I am strong like Mom, though, and I like working in the fields better than in the house. (4-5)

Ellen prefers to look like her father who has Anglo-American features. She also favors being "slender and straight" instead of having womanly curves. Her mother, on the other hand, has a stockier, peasant-like appearance. Ellen struggles to find the beauty in her

mother, but openly admires her ability to do physical labor, a trait she sees reflected in herself. She senses that the townsfolk label her mother as foreign and recognizes the discrimination that goes along with the categorization. She thinks that “the people in Gotham, Dad too sometimes, act as though Mom weren’t quite...quite equal to Dad” (6). Ellen hesitates drawing the conclusion that her mother isn’t seen as equal to her father, not because she necessarily believes in equality for women, but because she recognizes that her mother’s foreignness—in appearance, behavior, class, and education—mark her as “Other.” The realization that her mother is viewed differently than herself and her father, strikes deeply at Ellen, who admits, “it hurts me” when others judge her mom (6). But throughout the novel, Ellen also harshly judges her mother for not being like she and her father. During an argument, Ellen realizes cultural difference separate her from her mother: “We looked at each other across the porch as though we were strangers and spoke a different tongue. She was Russian; I was not” (135). As a child, Ellen escapes the social stigma of being labeled as a foreigner because she more closely resembles her father. However, later in her life others do judge her based on her mother’s ancestry. She does not know (yet) how it feels to be seen as an outsider. Also, Ellen does not yet know strict gender roles.

Ellen describes her childhood as free from traditional gender roles. She explains:

I did not really know the difference between work and play. Work on a ranch is interesting to a child: driving the horses and later the truck or tractor, making butter or filling sausage cases. It doesn’t matter much what you are doing, except the things you really hate, like washing dishes and cleaning house. (39)

Unlike Pamela in *The Curlew’s Cry*, who came from a privileged class that could afford to hire help, Ellen grows up working alongside her parents. Ellen views her work more

like play because this is the only way of life she knows. However, the decidedly domestic chores of washing dishes and cleaning house stand out as jobs she hated. In *Growing Up with The Country*, historian Elliot West describes how frontier children viewed domestic chores as secondary to their outside chores. He explains that because “there was so much to do outside the home, frontier housework was mostly left to adult females. Children, both girls and boys, were pulled more into the fields...they identified more with that labor, not the tasks of their mothers” (138-139). Ellen’s family lived much as the early pioneers in that they needed their child’s help more in the fields than in the home. Ellen’s upbringing on a farm allowed her to develop an identity not based solely on traditional gender roles. However, her early feelings of gender equity may in part lead to her later identity crisis. West explains that the freedom and satisfaction frontier girls experienced working outdoors as children “spelled trouble” for them when they neared adulthood:

They grew up identifying more with one area of work –the outdoor labors associated mostly with men. In it they found what [one pioneer woman] called her “established capability.” Then, as they passed into their teens they were expected to devote most of the rest of their lives to their mothers’ tasks of homemaking. The result was a refrain heard often in the writings of girls who grew to womanhood on the frontier. The distinction between men’s and women’s work became a source of contradiction and sometimes frustration. (142)

When Ellen goes to college she struggles with the transition from working on the farm, to spending time indoors. She describes how she “had never been inside so much in all my life as this last month and a half. I hadn’t known how cooped-up I had been” (30). Ellen grew up in an environment that requires her to be outdoors and do what is normally thought of as man’s work. But in her family the gender roles are further blurred by her father’s illness and her mother’s strength. While Ellen does prefer outdoor work to

domestic housekeeping, it is not her father's world she prefers, for her mother is the one who does most of the farming. Her mother served as a model of a woman's ability to do all the jobs on the farm.

Anna is a veritable workhorse on the farm. Ellen describes how her mother exclaims, "“that was easy!”...[after] planting a whole field or cooking for harvest hands or even digging stones out of the field” (36). Because of her husband's infirmity, due to the shrapnel still in his leg from WWI, Anna has had to learn how to run the farm with only the help of her daughter. West describes how during the white settlement of the plains it was not uncommon for wives to step into their husbands' roles when they were ill or away from the farm. However, he notes:

Still, even when bent by the frontier's special demands, the [gendered] patterns of work snapped back to its traditional shape as soon as the stress was relieved. At least among adults, the sexual division of labor held firm in the West more often than not. (139)

On the Webb family farm, gendered patterns of work never snap back. Anna's ability, and desire, to do the farm work creates tension between her and her husband. Stuck inside with a festering leg, while his wife and daughter labor in the fields, Ben makes dinner and awaits their return. The women are surprised he has cooked for them and comment on it. He grumblingly replies, “if you're going to do the work in the fields, the least I can do is keep the house” (115). But Ben taking over domestic roles does not sit well and “a hot uneasy silence settled over [them]” (115). It is arguable Ellen disapproves of her parents' disrupted gender roles. In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May explains that during the depression (not long before *Winter Wheat's* 1941 setting), “because male authority was widely associated with a man's ability as a provider, the more a family's traditional gender roles were disrupted, the more likely the children were

to disapprove of the shift in balance in their homes” (52). Ellen resents her parents’ disrupted gender roles. When Ben is ill, the women must work harder to cover his absence during the harvest. But Ben stepping into the domestic realm seems to cause a greater disruption. Ben resents Anna and Ellen doing “his” work in the fields. Meanwhile, the women resent Ben doing their work in the kitchen. Ben’s discomfort stems from the emasculation he feels because he is unable to do “men’s work” in the fields and provide for the family. His wife’s capability throws his inability to work into even stronger relief. Ben’s illness and Anna’s strength are not the only cause of disruption of gender roles. Another reason for the changing gender roles has to do with the impact of technology.

As Ellen commented about her childhood, she remembers when they relied on horses to plow the fields. But by the 1940s the family has gas-powered machinery that changes the dynamics of who does what work. Ellen describes the significance of the new farm equipment:

We were one of the first ranches around Gotham to get a combine, the first of the small ranches, that is. Mom kept coming out to watch us and look at it. Every rancher’s wife is proud of the combine; it does the work of so many men that there aren’t any big threshing crews to feed any more... We used to be cooking and setting tables and washing dishes at harvest time. Now we can be in the field all day. (123)

Her description neatly sums up technology’s impact on changing gender roles.³⁴ In

“Children on the Plains Frontier,” Elliot West describes how on the farming frontier:

³⁴ In *The Virginian*, Wister imagines the future effects of technology on gender roles through a playful exchange between the Virginian and Molly:

“There’s certainly a right smart o’ difference between men and women,” he observed.

“You’re quite sure?” she retorted.

“Ain’t it fortunate? —that there’s both, I mean.”

“Production” meant breaking and plowing and planting the land, caring for the crops and gathering the harvest. As with most frontier work, these accomplishments are attributed to those stalwart, barrel-chested pioneer males who, we are told, were most responsible for transforming the West. (27-28)

For the Webb family, the combine becomes a means to more efficient “production.”

The machine also disrupts masculine stereotypes of the frontier farmer by replacing “barrel-chested” men. In turn, the women no longer need to work at preparing food for the many men the machine replace. Anna’s pride in the machine reflects the tremendous impact the technology has on her traditional work as a wife. It is interesting to note how Ellen describes the combine from a purely female perspective. The impact of the new technology on male gender roles is ambiguous. Where do the men who are replaced by the machine go? Male farm laborers are replaced by machines –machines that can be run by women. These men then feel emasculated like Ben, who feels replaced by his wife. It is arguable that the mechanization of farming led to the displacement of men from their traditional gender roles in the West.

The dynamic of the dislocated male in the western landscape may give a clue as to the prominence and preservation of the western male hero myth. With men no longer viewed as holding dominion over the landscape, “westerns” focus on the time when independent white males were thought to be masters of the West.³⁵ In her essay on masculine studies “Pedagogy of the Opaque,” Sally Robinson describes “traditional” masculinity “always means distant, cold, insensitive and/or violent masculinity” (144). Western novels, such as *The Virginian* and *The Big Sky*, play on these assumptions of

“I don’t know about fortunate. Machinery could probably do all the heavy work for us without your help.” (324)

³⁵ E.g. Wister’s *The Virginian* and Guthrie’s *The Big Sky*.

masculinity (even if they claim not to endorse it). Robinson writes “the survival of a *dominant* fiction of masculinity means that *some* people are reproducing, acting out, performing it” (her emphasis 151). In this sense, Walker’s narratives offer a critique of traditional western masculinity. Mr. Lacey from *A Curlew’s Cry*, who most fulfills the western male stereotype, appears dissatisfied with his options as the frontier changes around him. In *Winter Wheat*, Ben is characterized for all the ways he does not meet generalizations about masculinity. Walker shows how traditionally imagined masculine gender roles are disrupted by technology and the modern realities of agrarian life in the West.

The narrative also offers new roles for women. For women, the mechanization of farming presents a catch-22: now that they are out of the kitchen, they immediately go to work in the fields all day. To Anna and Ellen, this tradeoff represents a gain, for both women prefer to be out-of-doors. Ellen claims she would “rather run the tractor any day than sit at that old [sewing] machine and treadle it” (62). The Webb’s socio-economic class allows Ellen to move between the traditional female domestic spheres out into the working world of men. Ellen is unlike Pamela in how her class affects her gender mobility. Pamela’s middle class social status allows her relative freedom from gender roles as a child, but once she comes of age she is expected to find a husband. Ellen, on the other hand, is free to remain unmarried—as long as she is contributing (through labor or wages) to the family farm. Ellen has grown up with Anna as an example of the physical labor women can do, therefore, she does not have strong gender conventions that prevent her from doing “men’s work.” In some ways Ellen’s family could not afford for her to do only women’s work. It is arguable that economic factors impact Ellen and

Pamela as much as gender roles, for they both need to find ways to provide income, either through marriage or work. In this regard, Pamela thwarts her social class standings and her gender roles by resisting marriage. Meanwhile, Ellen has less economic maneuverability, making resisting her social class difficult. However, because of her upbringing, Ellen doesn't think of herself as limited by her gender. Like Pamela, she also knows what the male gaze feels like.

Ellen goes with her father to sell the wheat that will finance her first year of college. They drive to the grain elevator where the transaction takes place. Ellen's father negotiates with the buyer as Ellen waits:

I sat down on the running board of the truck while the men were talking, because it was cooler. All of a sudden, a swallow flew out of the shadowy corners way up in the roof. It made a quick shadow on my face as it swooped past. A swallow flying always makes me feel cool³⁶. Then I felt Mr. Mathews looking at me and made me hot again. I had on my oldest pair of jeans rolled up almost to my knees and a white polo shirt that was maybe a little tight. I snapped my fingers at Bailey's big tiger cat so he'd look at her instead of me. (6)

Ellen realizes the male gaze views her developed body as sexual and something to be desired. Her shirt was "maybe a little tight" because her breasts are more visible and defined than if she were wearing a baggy top. Ellen resists showing her womanly figure because she recognizes the vulnerability of her position as a female, especially in the male-dominated realm of commerce.

The man who watches Ellen is significant because he holds a position of authority as someone who works for the grain mill that will be buying the family's wheat. Mr.

³⁶ Birds are a recurring theme in Walker's work. In *The Curlew's Cry* the curlew symbolized the loneliness women experienced living away from community on the plains. Here, the sparrow could represent Ellen's vulnerability to the man's cat-like predatory gaze.

Mathews holds power over the working-class family, because of his economic control over their livelihood. As a woman in his place of business, Ellen represents a rupture of the traditionally all male space. It is interesting to note that Anna never comes to the grain elevator in the narrative. She remains outside the traditionally male space of commerce despite her involvement in all other aspects of farming. Ellen describes the lone woman who does come to the grain elevator to sell her wheat:

She talked as loud as a man and swore worse.³⁷ Klaus Bruhl died the first year I was in high school and she was running the ranch alone. She had three or four children that Bailey said were as wild as coyotes. When she stood in front of the headlights I thought I'd never seen an uglier-looking woman. Her gray hair was straight and bobbed unevenly, as though she'd done it herself. Her red face was big-boned and disfigured by two large bristling moles by the corner of her mouth and she a tooth gone in front. She wore bib overalls that were too tight in the front and back. (131)

Ellen views Mrs. Bruhl as decidedly unfeminine. Ellen's description of the widow suggests that because she single-handedly runs the ranch she has become more masculine. The shift in gender roles allows the woman to participate in male economic world, but she is marked as "Other" for crossing into the male sphere. She is socially repugnant to Ellen for her lewd unfeminine behavior, her extreme poverty and her wild children. Mrs. Bruhl appears un-motherly, the way Anna did when she walked in the mud, because she does not behave like a "proper" mother. Ellen pointedly refers to how Bailey suggests the Bruhl children do not receive the mothering they need to keep them from being "wild as coyotes." Mrs. Bruhl's appearance signifies her gender and class as undesirable. Ellen focuses on the tightness of Mrs. Bruhl's clothing revealing the tension

³⁷ This description recalls Ruby's "louder-than-a-man's voice" (53) in *The Curlew's Cry*. Likewise, both women are depicted as appearing unfeminine.

Ellen feels about the female body. Meanwhile, when Ellen feels watched at the grain elevator she tries to evade the man's gaze.

Ellen avoids the grain buyer's gaze by attempting to distract him with the cat, instead of confronting him with her discomfort. Were she to stand up to him the wheat transaction would be compromised. Meanwhile, Ellen's father appears so involved with the prospects of selling the grain he fails to recognize the objectifying look bestowed on his daughter. It is arguable he would notice someone looking at his daughter in an inappropriate way, so perhaps he too stifles his reaction to prevent any disruption of the sale. He does, however, realize the influence the grain buyers holds over their lives and somewhat jokingly chides: "this girl's going to college on wheat money, so...it's up to you, Bailey, to keep the price of wheat up so's she can stay there" (6). Ben knows the trade market determines the price of wheat, but the men at the grain elevator represent the closest he can get to sway market forces. The Webb family's position as farmers locate them in a lower-socio-economic class, something Ellen knows instinctively, but does not fully recognize until after she leaves Montana. She first comes to recognize how gender roles and class distinctions operate on appearances and style of dress after she leaves for college.

Ellen views men who don't come from her social-economic class as intimidating. On board the train headed for college, she observes all the men "looked like the men who came out from the Flour Company offices to the grain elevator" (15). During the 1940s people would dress-up in their finest clothes for travel; therefore, it is likely all the men on the train, regardless of their economic position, would be wearing suits. Freshly removed from the working class community of farmers, Ellen views men in suits as

persons of power. She confides that she “thought...any man who wasn’t a rancher or cowboy” looked like the Flour Company office men (15). As Ellen spends more time away from her hometown she more precisely situates the class distinctions between blue-collar working class men and the variety of white-collar “suits.” She also begins to discover how female gender roles differ in the “east” versus out West.

On the train that takes her from Montana towards Minnesota, Ellen meets two girls headed to the same college. They are seniors and appear refined and feminine to Ellen. She closely observes the girls:

The one named Kay laid a cigarette case with her name in raised gold letters by her napkin. She opened it and her fingers were long and tapering with polish all the way down, like an advertisement...The other girl was Marge. She wore a thin black dress that made my wool one feel more thick and hot. Her lips were the same shade as her fingernails and they weren’t any of the shades at the Rexall Drugstore where I bought mine. (16)

Ellen begins to develop her understanding of what signifies desirable feminine appearance from the girls on the train. She associates Kay’s manicured nails with an advertisement, suggesting the power of popular culture to reach even remote Montana in the 1940s. Ellen’s observations signal her growing gender and class-consciousness. Her cheap wool dress from J.C. Penny doesn’t feel as comfortable after seeing the finer one Marge wears. Also, Ellen recognizes that the makeup and nail polish available to her at the drugstore represents as less desirable selection than what the more worldly college girls wear. Her awareness of her lower socio-economic class grows as she experiences more of the world outside Gotham, Montana. Ellen learns how she, like her mother, is viewed and categorized by society.

Ellen does not fully realize the power of society's gaze until she arrives at college. Her appearance becomes the key signifier of her gender and class. At college, her roommate whines that Ellen is prettier, forcing her to take stock of her appearance:

I stared at myself in her mirror harder than I ever had before. I saw that my hair had a soft shine to it, but that was because I had just washed it, and I had good color because of my fast walk home. For the rest, my gray eyes and too-high cheekbones and wide mouth were so familiar I couldn't tell. (27)

Ellen hasn't learned yet how to "market" herself based on her looks. Growing up in the working environment of the farm, her ability to accomplish physical labor mattered more than her looks. Although she felt objectified by the man ogling her at the grain elevator, her appearance has not figured much in her life up until she leaves the small farming community for Minneapolis. Once in the new environment, Ellen begins to sense how her appearance operates as a signifier of gender and class.

Ellen's good (American) looks result in her first relationship with a man. She meets her beau, Gil, after he observes her studying in the library. He flatters her by telling her: "I've watched you in the library ever since the first week of October. You came in and sat down there at the end of that same table and the sun on your hair made it like silver" (48). Gil does not comment on the amount of time Ellen spends studying. Her physical appearance is all that matters to him. Later, Gil admits his gaze was more critical than merely admiring. He tells Ellen: "I watched you all those days almost afraid you'd spoil yourself, someway –oh, you know, powder your nose or have runs in your stockings or..." (68). Gil's scrutiny of Ellen reveals the power of the male gaze as an enforcer of femininity as an ideal. It also reveals how Gil reads Ellen's appearance as signaling her class status. Powdering your nose or having runs in your stockings marks a

woman as “cheap.” If Ellen had powdered her nose or (god forbid!) had runs in her stockings, would he not have loved her? This question implicates Gil in idealizing Ellen’s feminine qualities, while he judges her class status through her behavior and appearance.

Gil, and the society she encounters in the East, place great significance on Ellen’s appearance. After taking Ellen home to meet his parents, Gil’s mother tells her: “My dear, you are as lovely *to look at* as Gilbert said you were” (my emphasis 52). Likewise, Gil’s father says she “made him think of the women of ancient Greece” (52). Whether he means she appears statuesque or goddess like remains unclear, but he judges her based on her appearance. The focus on her looks disrupts Ellen’s sense of self. She worries that Gil does not appreciate the depth of her being:

I was always trying to explain myself to Gil. I suppose all people in love do that...I wanted him to know the excitement I felt when the wind blows above the coulee or when we’re threshing and working so fast that I forget I am a separate person...I wanted him to know the terrible feelings of sadness that creeps into my mind sometimes. (53)

Ellen recognizes the limitation of basing their relationship on her looks. She wishes to share more of herself with Gil, but he rebuffs her attempts to tell him about her life (and work) in Montana. She comes to feel, “maybe what I was trying to tell him wasn’t anything anyway” (55). Her self-doubt reflects the way the objects of society’s gaze, such as women, prioritize the dominant culture’s values. Ellen internalizes such concerns and begins to focus on appearances.

With her heightened awareness of gender roles and the significance of appearances, Ellen observes her beloved Gil in a new light. She notices:

His face is finely cut; his features smaller than mine...His mouth is shaped like a woman’s and yet it isn’t feminine...You could never tell a man you

loved his hands, and yet I did. I turned mine quietly in my lap, the one Gil didn't hold. It was as large as Gil's. It didn't look like a hand to be held. (53)

Ellen views Gil in contrast to her ideas of masculinity. She values his appearance for the ways in which it contrasts with stereotypical male qualities, but she knows not to say as much to Gil. Her comment that you “could never tell a man you loved his hands” shows the (un)conscious ways people police their thoughts and refrain from saying things that might disrupt gender roles. Ellen doesn't want to offend Gil's masculine identity by telling him he is pretty or has feminine hands. She also begins to look at her own body with a sense of the differences between masculine and feminine identity. Seeing her hands are as big as Gil's makes Ellen aware that she does not fit the ideal of a petite woman who needs male protection. She describes how “he acted as though I were delicate and kind of frail, and I'm not. I'm as strong as Mom” (49). At one point she even asks: “‘Gil, do you wish I were little?’” (60). He reassures her that her equal height to him doesn't make him love her less, but Ellen senses that Gil has different ideas of how gender operates. She worries her large hands and towering stature “mark” her as “unfeminine” and will eventually hinder their relationship. Another reason Ellen worries about her relationship to Gil is that she sees how differently the two of them live.

Ellen visits Gil's family home and realizes the significant difference between their classes. She explains:

Sitting in their parlor—I mean living room—I understood why Gil shuddered so at the parlor in the rooming house [where she lives at college]. I looked around trying to fix in my mind the differences. The colors in the room were as soft as the summer colors of the prairie. There was an open fire burning white birch logs; it seemed a pity to burn a white birch tree. (52)

Ellen witnesses the fine surroundings and tasteful décor as indicators of Gil's family's upper class status. They even burn a type of wood that Ellen perceives as too nice for firewood. When she talks to Gil's parents, Dr. and Mrs. Borden, Ellen reveals her father was from Vermont, but doesn't offer that her mother came from Russia. Ellen realizes her father's Vermont heritage connects to the Borden's elitist eastern sense of class. She explains she "began to wonder if Dad's family hadn't been the same kind of people that Gil's family were," making her feel "warm and at home" in the posh surroundings (52). Ellen prioritizes her father's Vermont roots to connect to Gil's privileged class.

Ellen presents herself differently at college than she does at home on the farm. Gil assumes that the "version" of Ellen he knows in Minneapolis will be the same one he meets when he travels to visit her in Montana. However, once he comes to visit her and her family out west, Gil realizes how different she is from the way he envisioned her. Most visible to Gil is how Ellen's class status and feminine image are shattered when he sees her in her home environment.

As Ellen prepares for Gil's arrival to her family's home in Montana, her parents worry about the visit. Anna warns Ellen not to wear her usual farm clothes in front of Gil. They discuss the issue of appearances:

"Better not let your young man see you like that," Mom said.
 "Why not?"
 Mom shrugged. "He look to me like he want a girl dressed-up."
 "He's not that way at all! He'll have to see me in them." (61)

Anna recognizes the class distinction between Gil and their family and worries her daughter will be hurt if he rejects her. Anna felt similarly judged by Ben's family in Vermont when she first arrived from Russia. Ellen tries to defend Gil from her mother's observation (based on a photo of him) that he is a (class) snob. But Ellen secretly shares

her mother's concern that Gil will judge her unworthy of his love if he sees her in her normal farm clothes. Ellen fears Gil will not accept all her "lines of inheritance," including her working class status and her mother's foreign ancestry.

Ellen attempts to recreate herself in Montana as she appeared to Gil in Minneapolis. She describes that she "wore the gray linen dress Vera had picked out for me at school and I had my big hat in a bag in the truck to put on when I got out to the station, but I'd feel silly driving the truck with it on" (65). The realities of her life as the daughter of a farmer intrude on her attempted re-creation of herself as the girl she was at school. Her father wonders if it will be all right taking the truck to pick Gil up from his arriving train. He asks Ellen, "'Do you suppose he's driven in a truck before?'" (65). Ben recognizes the difference between Gil's eastern upbringing and Ellen's western one, and worries that Gil may not enjoy the rough reality of their lives. Ben feels concerned because he grew up in the East, in Vermont, and knows that the expectations of the easterner often don't hold up in the West. He later greets Gil by saying, "'Well, if this is your first trip West you'll find you have to revise a good many of your preconceived ideas. I know when I came out here...'" (69). Ben still clings to his ancestry as a Northeasterner as making him a member of a privileged class. Gil represents the class Ben left behind when he came to Montana, so he wants to impress Gil with their similar backgrounds. Ellen, on the other hand, only knows the West as home, so she cannot understand why her father hesitates sending her in the big farm truck to pick up Gil. The truck proves to be the catalyst for the eventual fissure between Ellen and Gil.³⁸

³⁸ The truck operates as another manifestation of how machinery in the settled West plays an important role in redefining gender roles.

After Ellen picks Gil up from the station in Montana he reveals how his thinking about gender differs from hers. He asks Ellen: ““Can you drive this thing? It looks pretty big to me”” (66). He can question her ability to drive without offending her because Ellen is a woman. Were she a man, he would never ask. No one from Ellen’s community thinks twice about seeing a woman driving a large truck. She assures him she is a qualified truck driver: ““I’ve been driving trucks since I was twelve”” (66). After a brief stop on the way home from the train, Gil asks if she wants him to drive. Ellen recalls that in Minneapolis it was the norm that Gil was the driver. But she worries about how he will do in the big truck:

Gil drove so easily in the city. I had always liked to watch him and I’d admired the way he slides a car into a narrow parking place, but he wasn’t used to the truck and he looked so funny sitting up straight on the seat and frowning. We drove off with such a jerk that I laughed at him.

“Stop that!” he shouted at me over the roaring he made with the starter... Gil shifted with such a grating noise I knew the folks would hear it. (68-69)

Ellen mocks Gil for not knowing how to drive in her “world,” but at the same time, she worries about her parents’ judging Gil’s inability to drive the truck as a mark against his manliness. She also worries they will hear how he abuses their valuable farm vehicle. Gil is determined to drive the truck because his masculine identity is challenged by Ellen’s ability to drive. After a rainstorm the roads turn to gumbo mud and Ellen advises Gil how to drive:

“You better go slow, though. This road’s all gumbo to the main highway. Want me to drive?”

“I can do it.” Gil sounded irritated. The truck had to follow the deep ruts gouged out in the mud. He was driving too fast. (81)

Ellen's knowledge of how to operate the truck "marks" her as threatening to Gil's sense of manhood. At the same time, Gil's inability to operate the vehicle marks him to Ellen as an outsider to the Montana way of life.³⁹

The scene culminates in Gil getting the truck stuck in the mud and Ellen getting out to free it. She tells him: "'Gil, you're all ready for the train, there's no use in your getting muddy too,'" but she "looked back at Gil, expecting him to come after [her] anyway" (83). Later, Ellen admonishes herself for acting inconsistently with what he expected of her. She wonders to herself: "Why hadn't I sat still in the truck and wrung my hands and acted scared?" (98). Ellen believes passivity and helplessness represent femininity to Gil. She realizes, too late, that Gil needed her to act like a "girl" in the situation, so that he could be the "man" and get them out of the mud. But she also has expectations for Gil to act like a (gentle)man and help her get the truck out, despite the fact he has no knowledge of what to do. Ellen's gendered expectation positions Gil in an untenable situation. Either way, Gil can not live up to Ellen's expectations. In her mind, Gil doesn't get out to help because he doesn't want to get dirty and because he lacks the "masculine" knowledge of how to dislodge the truck. His inability to help and reluctance to get down in the mud strike Ellen as problematic.

Following the truck debacle, Gil's concern for appearances begins to annoy Ellen. After arriving in town covered in mud, Ellen quickly purchases a new outfit to see Gil off in and checks into the hotel to take a bath. All this comes at quite a price to Ellen, but she refuses Gil's offer to pay. One senses Gil attempts to use his money to make-up for

³⁹ Later, while being driven by another suitor (who is a Montanan) Ellen notes, "he drove the ruts as well as I could" (188). Her comment implies a comparison to Gil's inability to negotiate "the ruts."

his failure with the truck. Upon returning downstairs of the hotel lobby where Gil awaits her, he marvels her transformed appearance: ““Do you know, Ellen, you are the most unbelievable person. You change with whatever you put on.”” But Ellen corrects Gil by saying: ““No, I don’t really...I’m just the same whether I have on jeans and an old shirt hanging out or this outfit”” (85). Ellen finally realizes that she only becomes what Gil desires when she dons the clothing that signifies feminine beauty to him. She resists his assumption that her identity transforms with the clothes she wears. Their contrasting attitudes towards what makes a person who they are reflect the differences of their cultural backgrounds. As a working class Westerner, Ellen feels less concern with exterior trappings of beauty, but stresses the values of character and honor. Gil, on the other hand, comes from an eastern family of means, which the narrative suggests prioritizes appearances and class status. Through the characters’ representations of the East with Gil, and West with Ellen, Walker (again) reverses the historical gender associations of West with masculine and East with feminine. Like Pamela and Alan in *The Curlew’s Cry*, readers are asked to see the disharmony between Ellen and Gil as representing their cultural/regional differences. Ultimately, these differences lead Gil to question his love for Ellen. But Ellen still feels strongly for Gil and takes the break-up hard.

After Gil breaks off their engagement, Ellen reverts to her original look at the farm. She explains:

I did nothing to keep my skin from sunburn or my hands from calluses, or my hair from going coarse and flat in the hot sun, and I felt how slovenly I looked. I kept on wearing shirts that were faded and ragged and the jeans that had patches over the knees, yet I despised myself in them. I couldn’t be content in them the way I used to be, liking whatever I was doing.
(101)

Gil's rejection made Ellen self-aware of her life on the farm and of how her appearance signals her working-class status. Instead of her farm clothes feeling liberating, as they used to, Ellen now judges herself for wearing the trappings of her farm life. It is interesting to note Ellen punishes herself for Gil's rejection. The thing he valued most about Ellen was her feminine appearance, especially her shiny "silver" hair. For Ellen, a means for revenge becomes degrading her looks and letting her hair go "coarse and flat." She performatively uses her body to reject Gil's objectifying gaze. This scene reveals how the feminine body often becomes the battleground site where women fight for their own identity. In *The Curlew's Cry*, Pamela performatively challenged her gender role by wearing men's clothing. Here, Ellen tries to "perform" her rejection of Gil's values by disregarding her appearance, but she has internalized his gender norms and feels no empowerment through acting out against them. After Gil leaves, Ellen describes how she "had a sudden fierce desire to hurt myself" (99). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes how women's internalization of masculine norms leads women to wage violence against their own bodies for "the deconstruction of constructs [e.g. the female body] are always already a kind of violence against the body's possibilities" (126). Using Butler's theory, I argue that Ellen's degraded looks and thoughts of self-destruction represent more than just her rejection of Gil's objectification. Rather, I suggest she attempts to regain agency through the rejection of restrictive gender conventions. Butler explores the multifaceted implications of female subversive bodily acts when she asks:

What is left when the body rendered coherent through the category of sex is disaggregated, rendered chaotic? Can this body be re-membered, be put

back together again? Are there possibilities of agency that do not require the coherent reassembling of this construct? (127)

Ellen attempts to deconstruct her feminine identity that was formed through her relationship with Gil by reasserting her unfeminine “western” identity. However, Ellen has internalized Gil’s attitude towards her looks. The newly established awareness of the significance of her feminine appearance prevents her from enjoying freedom from restrictive gender conventions.

Gil has also changed the way Ellen views her life on the farm. After he’s gone she realizes, “I hadn’t thought how our ranch might strike him, the bareness and ugliness of it. It ought not to have mattered, something in me said, but I crowded it down underneath” (91). Ellen knows Gil’s judgment of her life shouldn’t matter but she pushes away her interior voice of reason. She suddenly resents the life she once loved and “wished we weren’t out here on the dry-land wheat ranch under the burning sun. I wished we were in Vermont and that Dad was a teacher and that I had never worn jeans in my life” (109). Ellen wishes she were from Vermont because it represents a more socially desirable location than Montana in Gil’s (and her father’s) value system. She imagines her father as a teacher because the white-collar job would locate him as higher class of person than that of a working class farmer. Also, being a teacher would not have the same physical demands on her father’s injured body; therefore he would no longer be emasculated by his wife’s doing the physical labor for him. Ellen wishes she’d never worn jeans because she believes Gil has left her because she does not measure up to his expectations of femininity. Ellen’s frustrating logic is that were she from Vermont, and the daughter of an educator, her femininity would be secure from the threat of being compromised, and that in turn; Gil would have no reason to leave her. At this point in the

narrative Ellen feels the most unsatisfied with her life because she has invested value in binary thinking. Before Gil, Ellen felt proud of her ability to move between gender roles. Now she feels trapped between two worlds; Gil's gender and class conscious East, and her family's mixed-up gender and working class West. After Gil's departure the narrative charts Ellen's reconciliation to, and new appreciation of, her Montana way of life.

When Gil leaves Ellen, her life in Montana seems to go from bad to worse. Ellen overhears an argument in which her mother admits that she had tricked Ellen's father into marrying her in Russia by falsely claiming she was pregnant. The discovery of her mother's deceit rocks Ellen's sense of trust in her parents. Ellen assumes that her father would not have married Anna had she not lied about being pregnant. She imagines confronting him with her new knowledge: "I wanted to force Dad into a corner and say: 'I know you didn't love Mom...you could have been like Gil's father, but you came out here and tried to be like a peasant, too. I don't blame Mom as much as I blame you'" (110). Ellen blames her father for marrying Anna and moving to Montana because she sees him as not living up to his potential. In Ellen's deluded sense of her parents she does not think her mother is worthy of her father. In this moment she reveals the bigotry she carries against her own mother. Ellen is also suddenly forced to consider her mother as a female sexual being, who (obviously) had intercourse with her father before marriage. In *Spaces of the Mind*, Elaine Jahner describes why the shocking revelation shatters Ellen:

The newly recognized mother figure is so sexually compelling and so sharp a rebuke to Ellen's own femininity that at first Ellen refuses to deal with her...the father's Vermont heritage is safe, conventional, undeniably American—and unsuited to life in Montana. The mother's Russian

heritage is perceived as dangerous, inimical to Ellen's own hopes for a modern urban life with an American man. (145)

What interests me most about Jahner's reading of the situation is how the mother's alleged sexuality perjures her in Ellen's mind. That her father was equally complicit in the premarital act doesn't factor into Ellen's judgment, because as Jahner describes, his heritage is "safe." Anna, on the other hand, as a foreign woman becomes immediately suspect of having a sexually predatory nature. It is arguable Anna's disruption of traditional gender roles also plays a part in Ellen's rejection of her mother. In any case, Ellen no longer feels sympathetic to either of her parents.

Ellen plans to escape her troubling parents and the ranch by returning to college. However, shortly before harvest the wheat is badly damaged in a late season hailstorm, and Ellen's hopes of leaving are dashed. Out of desperation to get away, Ellen accepts a position as a teacher in a remote Montana schoolhouse where she will live and work. Her job choice reflects a shift in her focus. Previously, Ellen always preferred to work outdoors on the farm. College presented her a space that adhered to more traditional gender roles. Now that going away to college is no longer an option, Ellen enters into a traditionally all female occupation in the West, namely, being a schoolteacher. Ellen's choice of becoming a teacher plays into a western stereotype of the single woman as schoolmarm. She has been rejected by Gil and is attempting to distance herself from her mother's perceived sexuality. However, her new position as teacher presents more rigid gender expectations that she anticipates.

Ellen lives alone in the schoolhouse located in an even more remote part of Montana than her hometown. The small ranching community is so spread out there is no actual town. But Ellen quickly learns how her actions are scrutinized. The community

entrusts Ellen to teach their children until a developmentally disabled boy wanders away from school during a blizzard and dies. Despite the fact Ellen did everything she could to find the lost boy, some feel she is not up to the responsibility of taking care of children. Compounding their concerns, one evening the father of one of her students comes to the schoolhouse while drunk. Ellen allows him to stay to sober up before going home because she knows that the man's son will judge his father harshly for getting drunk. While he is at the school, a passing parent spots his car parked in front and confronts Ellen with her assumed improper behavior:

“Miss Webb,” Mr. Thorson began, “this is a pretty serious proposition for a teacher we send our children to...you see, Miss Webb, I’ve been defending you for some time back. There’s been a party that has seen Warren coming over here and seen you two in town on weekends, and now what I just seen with my own eyes this morning makes it look pretty bad.” (247)

Mr. Thorson assumes that Ellen and Warren are having an affair at the school. The irony of the situation is that Ellen is trying to protect his reputation, but because she is a woman, they assume she is guilty of improper sexual behavior. She also falls under scrutiny because her mother is an immigrant. Mr. Thorson continues:

“I’ve heard your mother’s a foreigner, Miss Webb, I don’t know what. Nels [his son] says you have foreign books here that you read out of, German and French and all like that. And the children say you don’t seem very keen on the war. Sometimes you make ‘em stop talking about. It don’t add up right, Miss Webb.” (248)

Walker critiques Mr. Thorson’s small town thinking by showing how he associates her non-American ancestry and anti-war beliefs with a lack of patriotism. She also reveals how the fear of “Other” can lead to dangerous xenophobia. Considering that Walker wrote *Winter Wheat* during the lead up to the U.S. involvement in WWII, it is understandable why political concerns influenced her work. Her depiction of the scrutiny

of Ellen's (and her mother's) foreign background foreshadows postwar McCarthyism (late 1940s), and mirrors the earlier "red-scare" (1917-1920) in which Americans who had associations with communism, were assumed to pose a threat to national security. In *Homeward Bound*, May describes how "McCarthyism was directed against perceived internal dangers, not external enemies" (10). Mr. Thorson alludes to Anna's foreignness, but it is Ellen's teaching of "foreign books" that draws his deepest concern. It is ironic that the first time Ellen is associated by the outside world with her mother it is seen as an indication of her "otherness."

The small community polices its members through the constant observation of all activity. Ellen reflects on how she has been watched: "The parents must know every single thing that happened in the school. I was glad I hadn't known before. It gave me a spied on feeling. I thought of Mr. Thorson saying 'I've heard your mother's a foreigner'" (250). Ellen feels the hegemonic power of society's gaze, despite the fact she has done nothing wrong. She worries her father "might even wonder if maybe I had been...like Mom" (254). Ellen fears her hitherto feminine chastity has now come into question –but she only worries what her father thinks. What her mother, or the parents of the children she teaches, believe does not matter to her. Ellen's rationale reveals how she still values her reputation as a "good" girl and how she seeks to distance herself from her mother's perceived promiscuity (and conniving female sexuality). She explains: "I hated the way [her life] and mine seemed so mixed up together" (254). But because Ellen feels secure in her own sense of propriety, i.e. she wasn't having sex with Warren, she stands up to the snooping parents of the school. She tells them: "Most of you feel there is no truth in what you are saying about me, but you want to believe there is, just for the

excitement...I'm leaving! I wouldn't stay now if you begged me to" (253). Ellen leaves the school with her ego bruised but her moral values intact. She seems able to reclaim her identity through the transformative experience of defending her character from disparagement. Returning home to live with her parents, Ellen discovers that what the outside world thinks of them is not as important as the reality of the lives they lead.

Ellen returns home with a new perspective on her own and her parents' lives. While Gil has made her aware of their poverty, she realizes through her experience with the judgmental school parents that what others think, or see, is not as important as the bond between family members. Ellen views her parents with new perspective:

Now they were standing together. They looked smaller under the too-wide sky, Mom so thick and peasant-looking with her bandana tied around her head, Dad spare and angular and a little round-shouldered.

Why had I worried about them? I had been as blind in this world as Mom had said. They had love that was deep-rooted and stronger than any love that grows easily. It gave me faith for my own life...I had not always been glad that I was there child, but today I had a kind of pride in being born to them. (306)

Ellen reconciles the bifurcation she felt in her life by accepting both her parents, with their disparate backgrounds and values, as positive sources of her own heritage. In her 2006 introduction to her influential book *Legacy of a Conquest*, Patricia Limerick describes her new theoretical approach to history that mirrors Ellen's new perspective.

She writes:

I now recognize that every human being is a mixture of categories and classifications. We do one another a considerable disservice, complicating our social and political conflicts, when we try to impose a sort of "one identity per customer" limit on our fellow humans. The preferred academic term for this recognition is "hybridity" (5).

Walker offers a similar model some sixty years previous to Limerick's (and academia's) realization that people (and characters) are composites of multiple categories. Instead of thinking of herself as more the product of one parent, Ellen describes herself as a hybrid:

There was an advertisement of Karmont wheat that Dad says was developed especially for me because it has Russian and American parents, too—from Kharkov and Montana. He calls me Karmont sometimes, to tease me. (6)

Just as the hybrid wheat came from two different countries' wheat being combined to make a better and stronger plant, likewise, Ellen comes to see herself as stronger and more resilient due to her parents' different backgrounds. Ellen accepts her connection to her mother's foreign peasant heritage as well as her father's privileged American heritage. As Elaine Showalter describes, Ellen confronts both "paternal and maternal lines of inheritance" and accepts the problems and advantages of both. Through her maturing sense of self, Ellen comes to accept the hybrid nature of her identity and becomes a woman living within the crossroads of gender, race and class in the American West.

CONCLUSION

My goal in this thesis has been to read *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat* from a feminist perspective in search of ways the texts disrupt or dislodge too-narrowly defined gender roles. Melody Graulich writes that contemporary women often search for representations of a female experience of the frontier that doesn't fit the neatly predestined gender patterns. Likewise, women authors attempt to create narratives that challenge the frontier myth of the West as a space for masculine freedom from feminine domesticity. She explains that:

Women writers, too, resist this powerful cultural tradition. Seeking ways to write about their own and other women's experience in the West, they challenge and revise the dichotomized sex roles and the values associated with them. Often aspiring to escape and rebellion, to nonconformity and adventure, they create women whose imaginations do respond to the West's limitlessness, but they also acknowledge and seek to understand the real restrictions in women's lives, to define the way in which we understand such concepts as "individualism" and "freedom." Women writers thus try to liberate for themselves western literary traditions by claiming male territory as their own and by reclaiming from stereotyping the significance of women's values. (187)

Walker's narratives of Pamela Lacey and Ellen Webb do exactly what Graulich describes in that their stories resist the powerful cultural tradition that portrays women in domestic roles. The texts challenge and revise the dichotomized sex roles of the West by depicting characters, both feminine and masculine, as defying stereotyped gender.

In *The Curlew's Cry*, Pamela becomes a successful dude-ranch owner, while her cowboy father becomes a fixture in town. Pamela's short-lived marriage is to a man who prefers the ease and comforts of life in the eastern U.S., to the harsh, dusty world of the Montana plains. Pamela aspires to escape from Brandon Rapids, rebels against her family and classmates, and does not find happiness in marriage or domesticity. Further

breaking with her conventional gender identity, Pamela responds positively to the limitlessness of the Western landscape, preferring the open spaces to the restrictive environment of home and town. Similarly, in *Winter Wheat*, Ellen Webb embraces her surrounding environment, finding strength in her ability to work on the farm. Like Pamela, Ellen travels away from the West and returns with a new perspective on her life there. The narratives chart both Pamela's and Ellen's reconciliation of their identities to the conflicted gender roles they encounter. In many ways, Walker's female characters mirror each other when it comes to their experiences as being "thwarted by gender conventions." In both narratives, Walker allows the reader to see the struggle of a young woman coming of age in the West. Each undergoes a transformation in the process of establishing their "individualism" and "freedom" in the face of a society that places restrictions on women's lives. In all these ways, Walker liberates her texts from western literary traditions by "claiming male territory" as her own literary domain, and as Graulich described, by "reclaiming from stereotyping the significance of women's values."

Walker's narratives also work at displacing masculine stereotypes of Western literature through her depiction of men who do not fit the traditional western mold. In *The Curlew's Cry*, Alan the "lady cowboy" serves as contrast to the hyper-masculine "cowboys" of the dude ranch. Mr. Lacey's character shows how once the frontier has closed, men who have invested their whole identities in the western myth of the "manly" man, find they have no place to call their own. In *Winter Wheat*, Ben Webb is unfit and ill-prepared by his middle-class eastern upbringing to deal with the harsh Montana farming lifestyle. His masculinity appears compromised by his background and war-torn

body. His wife further emasculates him by proving herself more capable than him to do the physical labor on the farm. Walker creates these characters in response to the traditional gender representations found in the “Western” literary genre. However, gender is not the only category Walker explores in her narratives.

Ellen and Pamela have many parallels, as I have discussed, but they are also separated by a major difference: class. Pamela’s experience growing up differs from Ellen’s in that her family belonged to a privileged class, while Ellen’s family struggled as working class farmers. As a child Pamela was able to choose between town and ranch, while Ellen knew only the farm. The economic realities of their two different upbringings influences every aspect of their lives. Whereas Pamela chooses to buy the ranch and run a dude business, Ellen has little choice but to work on the farm or become a teacher. Ellen’s parents’ contrasting cultural and social backgrounds prove a more challenging source of identity than Pamela’s “safe” heritage as descended from American pioneers. On one hand, the privileged position Pamela holds, both economically and socially, grants her more flexibility in determining the path of her life. On the other hand, Ellen’s challenges present her with the opportunity to gain a more complicated, nuanced understanding of life, and to establish an identity that resists easy categorization.

Both *The Curlew’s Cry* and *Winter Wheat* render spatially concerns of gender and class. However, *Winter Wheat’s* narrative offers a more modernist perspective on the ambiguity of gender and class in the American West. In his 1992 introduction to the novel, James Welch explains:

Winter Wheat is a classic novel of the American West. That doesn’t mean it is an old-fashioned novel. It could have been written last year, or next year—but it was written during the period it portrays, giving it an immediacy that is timeless. (xi)

The novel remains pertinent for its insights as to how the American West represents a space in which social class and gender conventions are disrupted. Walker's narrative offers the notion of "hybridity" as a solution to binary thinking in which people are defined by distinct categories that exaggerate differences. In this way, the text liberates too narrowly defined classifications and suggests maneuverability in how we think of characters in the West. Ranchers and farmers needn't all be (white) men, while those who take care of domestic chores needn't all be women. Likewise, pioneers came from many different backgrounds, and not necessarily in covered wagons.

My task re-visiting Walker's work seeks to identify ways in which her texts rupture gendered interpretations of the West. As Adrienne Rich describes the process, I attempt to "re-vision" the frontier myth via Walker's narratives:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves... We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (Rich qtd. in Graulich 190).

Novels such as Walker's *The Curlew's Cry* and *Winter Wheat* offer an opportunity for contemporary scholars to revisit the literature describing the American West in search of characters who challenge historically conventional versions of gender roles. As Victoria Lamont describes: "Women writers have contested prevailing myths of the frontier as a masculine proving ground" (172). But Walker's West is not just re-imagined for women. She also creates a space inclusive of men who do not meet traditional ideals of masculinity. Through a re-examination of characters like Pamela, Ellen, and all the others in the novel who are "thwarted by conventions," we can expose the limited space

still afforded in our collective imaginings of the historic American West. A move towards a more inclusive, hybridized version of the West will help dismantle restrictive gender roles, wherever they are found.

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