



Willa Cather, 1936

**“The Fear of the Tongue, That Terror of Little Towns”:  
Overcoming the Oppression of Gossip in  
Cather’s Nebraska Novels  
by Mr. Nieto III and Dr. Doane**

Gossip is a force of unquestionable power and social control in Cather’s Nebraska novels. Although specific gossipers are rarely named or are not people the characters respect, virtually everyone is controlled by “the fear of the tongue” (*The Song of the Lark* 159) — and at a very conscious level. Jim Burden largely attributes unhappiness in his small town to the desire to “propitiate the tongue of gossip” (*My Antonia* 219); trying to live in a manner that will not stir this “terror of little towns” (*Lark* 159) results in lives of quiet desperation:

This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People’s speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. The people . . . tried to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark. (219)

The fear of gossip stunts the emotional growth and alters the actions not just of the weak: even quite admirable, fairly strong people are controlled by it. People who have rather idealized notions of themselves and who believe they are above gossip nonetheless have their actions altered by the fear of it. Family members knowingly stunt the lives and actions of their siblings or children to avoid this generalized “people say.” For most small town residents, the fear of gossip is the primary — not just a

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contributing, but the primary — factor they consider in determining and sustaining major life choices. The tyranny of small town tongues is so great that some characters can grow only by fleeing the town itself. Only three characters -- Alexandra Bergson, Antonia Shimerda Cuzak, and Marian Forrester -- develop and maintain a strong sense of self while continuing to live in environments so detrimental to the characters of others.

The gossipers in Cather's Nebraska novels are a curious group to have such power over others, since they usually are nameless, generalized, and unspecific in their identities; when the gossipers are named, they are people no one respects whatsoever. Characters are frequently controlled by references that could not be more general: Lou and Oscar come to Alexandra about Carl because "people have begun to talk" (166) and because "people think" she is "getting taken in" (166). "People say" Jim Burden is "growing up to be a bad boy" (227). "Some people" say Lucy is distressed for one reason, while "some say" it is for another, and "still others" say it is for another (146). In *The Song of the Lark*, people attend prayer meetings "'to keep people from talking'" (160), and Thea is urged by her father to sing for church "to keep people from talking" (158). Claude cannot visit Gladys "without causing gossip" (199). While some references are a bit more specific, they are still quite general: "everybody at Sunday-School was talking" about Thea singing in Mexican town (298), or Jim can "well imagine what the old men at the drugstore would do" with the attempted assault by Wick Cutter (250). When gossips are specifically named, they are comic folk: "the short plump figure of Mrs. Beasley, like a boiled pudding sewed up in a blue kimono, waddled through the feathery asparagus bed behind the telephone office . . . to tell her neighbour Molly Tucker" about Marian Forrester (136); or Mrs. Livery Johnson "rustle[s] away to tell a neighbour woman" she has cowed Thea (133). Strangely, characters are controlled by people whose identities are not even certain, or — when their identities are certain — are people with whom characters have little contact and for whom they have little respect.

Perhaps the most major way gossip retains its control is through the family unit: family members attempt to alter the behavior of other

family members by claiming, whether through genuine fear or to justify their own needs, that actions will reflect poorly on the family, or they believe their own behaviors will protect the family from ridicule. Lou and Oscar urge Alexandra to force Carl to leave because they say “people have begun to talk” and because “people think [she’s] getting taken in” (166); these two weak men may indeed be influenced by others, but the brothers’ demands also conveniently match their own desire that Carl depart. Because Lucy is “not like other people” (169) and has a “particular sensitiv[ity] to the strictures of western family life and mentality” (Arnold 58), her sister Pauline feels free to “put up a front . . . to keep up the family’s standing in the community” (169). Anna Kronborg tries to get Thea not to go to Mexican town because “we all get the blame for it” and says that it especially “reflects [poorly] on [their] father” (298-9). It “would be difficult for [Claude] to do [the] simple thing” (11) of taking Ernest out to a meal because he fears gossips will tell his father or Bayliss. In addition to these rather weak people, even strong characters urge others to change when they believe actions will reflect negatively on their families: the stoic Genevieve Burden, who did not even cry at Mr. Shimerda’s funeral, is hurt by gossip that Jim has been attending Black Hawk dances and sobs that “people say” Jim is “bring[ing] blame” on his grandparents (227). The fear of gossip does not simply exert pressure in controlling the actions of families, though. It is instead the primary determiner in controlling the most major life decisions of several quite worthy people.

Even characters with good values, common sense, intelligence, and sensitivity succumb to the power of perceived potential gossip and social pressure. Dr. Archie finds “respectability . . . so necessary . . . that he [is] willing to pay a high price” to escape “common gossip” (107) and stays in a marriage with an obsessive-compulsive spouse who is terrified of dust. He does “the best he [can] to keep up appearances . . . [for] Moonstone gossips” (109). Gladys Farmer’s “own little life was squeezed into an unnatural shape by the domination of people like Bayliss” and by what others would think of her (134). Although she seems sensitive and kind as she interacts with Claude, she is so

influenced by the opinions of others that she is dating Bayliss for “a certain prestige” (221) and will not go to the opera performances that she loves because she fears her friends would correct her and the school board would deny her a raise (134-5). Carl Linstrum leaves the woman he loves because he is “too little to face the criticism of even such men as Lou and Oscar” (181). Dating the wrong man, staying married to the wrong woman, leaving a tearful soulmate: these actions, all performed by good people, show the tremendous power of “the fear of the tongue” in determining even the most important aspects of characters’ lives.

Cather’s romanticizing idealists would like to believe they rise above social pressure but actually succumb to it. Jim Burden disparages Black Hawk residents who do not interact with the hired girls for fear of gossip, but he alters his own actions to curb potential tongues and “adopts, even while piously disavowing, the prevailing class-bound condescension toward the foreign-born hired girls” (Stout 77). Jim gives up the Firemen’s Hall dances he loves because his grandmother has said others have said he is a “bad boy” for attending them (227); he undoubtedly gives them up at least partially for his grandmother’s sake but may also want to avoid the gossip of the Black Hawk community himself. At another point, Jim cares very much what others will say about him: after Wick Cutter has assaulted him, his concern is not for Antonia or even for himself. Rather, he is concerned about what will happen “if the story once got abroad” (250). Claude, a “would-be knight in search of a hero he could admire, . . . a chivalric ideal he could follow” (Rosowski 97), would like to see himself as above the town, located in a state Merrill Skaggs believes Cather associates in the novel with “brain death, meaningless waste and labor, and frustrating fragmentation” (28). Despite his lofty ideals, Claude’s actual actions are marked by cowardice, and he cannot manage a simple visit to a friend, for “in a place like Frankfort, a boy whose wife was in China could hardly go to see Gladys without causing gossip” (199). Niel cuts the phone cord when Marian Forrester angrily talks to Frank Ellinger; he says that he does this to prevent “Mrs. Beasley [from] hear[ing] every word [Marian] say[s]” (130), but he actually may be cutting it to

protect his image of her as well. Characters can perceive they are above being influenced by gossip, or they can acknowledge their oppression at a conscious level, but almost all of Cather's Nebraska characters are greatly influenced by "the fear of the tongue."

Some of the characters escape the pressure of small town gossip by leaving the town altogether. Claude, although he leaves Frankfort, seems throughout his short life to be extremely influenced by his social environment. Thea, a "superior individual pitted against a common world" (Rosowski 65), is nearly pulled in to this world and can develop her full talents only after she leaves Moonstone. Perhaps curiously, since she would appear to have Alexandra's "Amazonian fierceness" (*O Pioneers!* 8), she is subject to a remarkable degree to what others think. Although eventually an artist of "transcendent power," with "energy, vitality, and powers of endurance," she must first escape her "'natural enemies' such as her priggish sister Anna and the town's moral censor, Mrs. Livery Johnson" (Nettels 126, 133) as well as a more generalized "they." She sings in the choir because her mother urges her to avoid gossip (159). Despite her talent and her knowledge of Moonstone values, she is devastated when Lily Fisher wins a competition instead of Thea herself. Even after she does leave Moonstone, a great amount of energy goes not into her own talent but rather into hating those like Mrs. Priest and Jessie Darcey she perceives to be wrongly adored by the public. Thea through much of the book seems not to be guided by inner strength and talent; rather, many of her actions and emotions come as reactions to people she regards as "stupid faces." She does not free herself from Moonstone values until very late; even after considerable success, she has a nightmare in which she returns to Moonstone, "beats her pupils in hideous rages," and "waken[s] breathless after a struggle with Mrs. Livery Johnson's daughter" (467). Thea focuses on the perceptions of others in ways that would seem to be destructive to her talent. She eventually is able to become a great opera singer only because she escapes the gossip and small town values by leaving Moonstone altogether.

Three women — Alexandra, Antonia, and perhaps Marian — are able to stay in small town environments yet rise above them. The nature of some of their talents decrees that two of them stay: it is impossible to be a pioneer in the city, and impossible to be the loyal wife of an aging, somewhat disabled Sweet Water husband without living in Sweet Water. Only Antonia could have left her small town, and she might valuably have done so after Martha's birth but chose not to do so. The three women vary greatly in the nature of their lives and talents, yet some factors can be hypothesized as to why and how they are able to overcome oppressive environments that seem to crush so many.

Alexandra, Antonia, and Marian were all marked as being different from others at an early age. For Marian, about whose childhood we know nothing, this difference took the form of an early scandal: at nineteen, she had been engaged to “a gaudy young millionaire . . . who was shot and killed . . . by the husband of another woman.” Marian was “hurried away from curious eyes” until the scandal subsided (164). Both her beauty and her marriage to a man beyond reproach may make it easier to escape the full brunt of gossips much interested in a woman who is both an adulteress and perceived to be an alcoholic (139). Alexandra and Antonia also, although on a much different basis, are early cast out of mainstream society: each is a foreigner, each early loses her father, and each has a rather ineffective mother. Both girls are forced to grow up early and work extremely hard at tasks usually decreed as belonging to males. Clearly, a number of qualities are needed to rise above gossip, and no small group of qualities is sufficient in itself. If being fatherless or foreign were enough, Alexandra's and Antonia's siblings would rise above gossip, and they hardly do; and not every person who is part of a scandal becomes set apart. Still, being different from the first times we meet them seems to be a factor in allowing the women to rise above the constraints of their social environments.

Vision or an overriding sense of purpose is an additional factor in why each woman succeeds. For so many other Cather characters, the fear of gossip seems to be the ruling factor in their lives: Gladys stays with Bayliss, or Dr. Archie stays with his dust-hating, gasoline-using

wife. Alexandra, however, has a vision for the land unsurpassed by anyone, ever: “for the first time, perhaps, since the land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning” (65). This vision is great enough, and her strength of character is great enough, that she either does not understand, or feigns not understanding, when Oscar tells her “meaningly” that “people have begun to talk.” “What about?” she asks (166). While she is “estranged from the community” (Rosowski 53), she seems to notice it little and care about it little. Sometimes she may not understand gossip, but at other points she well understands but chooses not to consider it. When Ivar comes to her, fearful he will be taken to the asylum, she is forceful in telling him not to listen to others, and she apparently does not listen herself: she “wonders at [him], that [he] should be bothering [her] with such nonsense,” and says that “other people have nothing to do with either [of them]” (91-2). She is a woman of great strength, with an “Amazonian fierceness” (8) that helps her buffet herself against the tongues of the town. She simply does not even listen to gossip or perhaps does not even understand it. Marian’s overriding concern, at the time she cares least about gossip, is of an entirely different nature: she seems to care more about blasting Frank Ellinger for marrying Constance Ogden than she does about what people will say, and she is drunk. This dulling of her social sensibilities with alcohol may contribute to her willingness to go against the likes of Mrs. Beasley, but also her mission to tell off Frank in a voice “quivering [with the] passion of hatred and wrong” (134) is far greater than her fear of blue-kimonoed telephone operators. Later, when the town gossips invade her house, examine her possessions, and observe her behavior, it is clear that a reason she does not care about their opinions is that she is drunk (140). Antonia has an overriding desire: a decent life for her daughter, Martha. “I know what I’m going to do,” she tells Jim. “I’m going to see that my little girl has a better chance than I ever had. I’m going to take care of that girl” (320-1). Antonia values Martha more than what anyone might say. Another factor in Antonia’s ability to deal with the situation is that the gossips, for once in Cather, back off: Antonia “was so crushed and



quiet that nobody seemed to want to humble her” and “folks respected her industry and tried to treat her as if nothing happened” (314). A disgraced new mother, let alone by the town tongues but with a clear mission of motherhood; a drunk on a mission of vengeance, uncaring of what others would say; a genuine pioneer so filled with vision and strength that she genuinely rises above gossip: while purposes and motives vary greatly, each of the three women has a goal so important that it is put above what others may think.

Gossip is suffocating only in Cather’s Nebraska novels: in the other six books, group opinion is generally a very positive, forgiving, elevating force. Bartley Alexander’s “harshes critics did not doubt that, had he lived, he would have retrieved himself” (131). Parthians have lifted Myra and Oswald’s courtship to fairy-tale status (17). When Horace Langtry “very nearly [gets Godfrey St. Peter’s] department away from him” (55), the rallying for St. Peter is astonishing: “St. Peter’s old students throughout the State got wind of what was going on, dropped their various businesses and professions for a few days, and came up to the capital in dozens and saved his place for him” (55). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, public sentiment is strongly against the Smiths, who are illegally holding Sada as their captive; “there had been much whispering among the devout women of the parish about her pitiful cause” (214), and several women have attempted to speak to her (215). In *Shadows on the Rock*, Madame Pommier observes to Madame Pigeon that a client of the local prostitute has made a beaver toy for the prostitute’s son; rather than being judgmental, both women find the gesture “very nice,” one even “quite liking the idea” (112). *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* “teems with stories” (Romines 185), but few are negatively related, even when censure is richly deserved: Martin Colbert has his front tooth knocked out by the brothers of a girl “he [has] fooled.” While “everyone in the Blue Ridge country and in Winchester knew the story of Martin’s blue tooth,” and agreed that he “got what he deserved,” they also hold that “spirited young men were wild and always would be” (163). Henry Colbert will not sell Nancy both because he does not want to do so and because “people hereabouts would hold it against” him (8). Public

opinion in Cather's non-Nebraska novels may demand an elevation of moral standards as it does from Henry and towards Sada; or provide a mere elevation of opinion as it does for Myra and Oswald's elopement; or active support, as it does for St. Peter; or simple kindness, as Madame Pommier and Madame Pigeon feel towards Jacques; or winking at an actual transgression, as it does for Martin Colbert; or forgiveness, as it extends to Bartley Alexander. In all six non-Nebraska novels, though, characters are kindly and supportive in their group views of others, and considerable latitude is given for characters' behaviors. Characters' lives are not negatively determined by their fears of group opinion; on the contrary, group opinion is kind, forgiving, and generally calls people to higher standards of conduct.

For Cather's Nebraska characters, however, the fear of gossip brings pinched lives to all but the bravest. Thea emerges as strong and is able to fully develop her talents only when she is able to shed her concern both for Moonstone values and for others' opinions of other artists or herself. Alexandra had no choice but to remain on the land since her gifts lay in her vision for the land, and her strength is so great that she seems hardly to notice gossip. Perhaps the greatest praise should go to Antonia, whose overriding desire to be a good mother would not have precluded her moving from Black Hawk; she well understood gossip but chose to remain in the small town, perhaps due to strength or perhaps because, for once, the gossips "seemed [not] to want to humble her" (314). It may be a stretch to include Marian Forrester in a group of people who rise above gossip. She is, after all, either drunk or drunk and enraged at the times she is uncaring about what others think. Yet, the group of people whose lives are not determined by what others think is already so tiny that one desires to place any possible candidate in this town-defying category. The fear of gossip is the primary determiner of most major life choices for an alarming number of Cather's characters, a determiner the more shocking since the gossips have so little individual character and are even perceived by those they influence as a nameless, faceless, generalized group — of people they do not respect. Jim gives up "the one thing [he] looked forward to all week" (220), Claude can interact

in ways he desires to with neither Ernest nor Gladys, Gladys stays with Bayliss, Carl leaves Alexandra, Dr. Archie stays unhappily with his wife, family members stunt the growth and lives of family members: the list of wrongs done to self or others in the conscious name of avoiding what people say or the likes of Mrs. Beasley is dazzling. In Cather's Nebraska novels, "the fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns" (*The Song of the Lark* 159) looms as a dominating and ominous force.

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