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Gender Relations in *O’Pioneers!* Novel by Willa Cather

A Genetic Structuralism Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of gender in literature which elucidates traditional American women’s notion on gender relations which are absorbed from Victorian values. It is documented in one of the novels written by Willa Cather in 1913, namely *O’Pioneers!* The fictional characters who reflect the traditional American in gender relations between men and women are Mr. Bergson, Mrs. Bergson, Frank Shabata, and Marie Tovesky. The collected data were analysed with reference to the formulation genetic structuralism research by Endraswara (2013). It focused on the sociological analysis of literature which emphasizes the structural aspects of literature and the sociological history of society as literary imaginary genetics. The structural meaning of literary works is considered to have origins from the author’s experience and the historical reality of society. Traditional American women’s notion on gender relations based on Victorian values is reflected in the novel *O’Pioneers!* Which include position, role, identity, and view. The notion of traditional American women as documented in the novel is the domestication of women in family life and maintaining harmony in the household with men is the idealization of gender relations in American society. This notion is a social fact among frontiers in the western region of America witnessed by Willa Cather as the author.

Keywords: Gender relations, Genetic structuralism approach, Traditional American women.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender relations are a social and cultural relationship between women and men in various aspects of life such as social, economic, educational, political, legal, and others. The social and cultural relationship between women and men in a gender perspective is a formulation of the relationship between men and women in the aspect of repositioning functions, roles, and positions based on social and cultural constructions in order to achieve justice and equality in domestic and public life. Ratna (2015) views that the injustice and inferiority that befall women are due to social and cultural labeling that marginalizes them. Gender relations do not discuss biological aspects because the forms and functions of the bodies of women and men are considered as human nature given by God. For example, women have reproductive organs so that they can give birth, while men have production organs so that they can earn a living. The difference in body organs is seen as a gift from God that humans must be grateful for. Based on this awareness, homosexual, lesbian, and transgender behavior in a gender perspective is considered a sexual deviation.

Gender relations as a social fact in certain societies are often documented by humans in various imaginative products such as works of art, literature, fairy tales, fable stories, and others. One of the literary works documenting gender relations in traditional American society is the novel *O’Pioneers!* By Willa Cather. This novel tells the life of frontiers from various national backgrounds who open agricultural land in the American West such as Hanover, Divide, Nebraska and others. They are considered as pioneers who are required to work hard and innovate in opening and cultivating wild land. Some fictional characters that reflect gender relations in traditional American society are Mr. Bergson, Mrs. Bergson, Frank Shabata, and Marie Tovesky.

Documentation of social facts in literary works can be traced through literary genetics based on the physical setting and time of the fictional story. Novel *O’Pioneers!* has a physical setting in a number of places in the American West such as Hanover, Divide, Nebraska and others in the period from the 1880s to the 1910s. The background of the author’s involvement in the community setting that builds the idea of her imagination is also part of the genetics of literature. One

of the literary research methods used in tracing the documentation of social facts in literary works is the Genetic Structuralism Approach. Guerin (1992) reveals that genetic approach is a term used to examine the origin of imaginative ideas in literary works.

Several previous studies, such as those conducted by Cannon (2011), Leichner (2012), and others, tend to inform the competition between women and men as a conception of the identity of the relationship between femininity and masculinity in American society. The research in this article explores the other side of gender relations according to the notion of traditional American women who place men as partners, not competitors in building family life and fostering a harmonious household as documented in the novel *O'Pioneers!* by Willa Cather. The scope of the study on the notion of traditional American women includes position, role, identity, and view in family gender relations, so this research can contribute to notice the idea of male and female partnerships on the other side of the domestication of American women.

Based on the thought that has been explained, gender relations are a universal issue that is in the spotlight in social and cultural construction. The issue became a concept that created the ideal idea of traditional American women in building partnership relationships with men. Then, the idea is documented in the social relations of fictional characters in the novel *O'Pioneers!* so, the researchers construct the title of this article is Gender Relations to the Notion of Traditional American Women in Novel *O'Pioneers!* by Willa Cather: A Genetic Structuralism Approach.

2. METHOD

Literary works are known as imaginative works that have many properties and functions such as social documentation, educating, social criticism, entertaining, and others. The nature of literature is static according to the situation and era, diction that has deep meaning, has an allure that touches the taste and soul of the audience, is able to influence and even change someone, and so on. Literary documentation, according to Mutmainah, Arafah, and Pattu (2022), is able to have an influence on changes in mindset, behavior, habits, and communication in society. Rahman and Weda (2018) say that literary works are able to build a harmonious and tolerant atmosphere as part of universal literary values.

This research is designed as a sociological study of literature, namely placing literary works as social documentation in certain communities within a certain period of time. Genetic Structuralism Approach is the sociological research method of literature that places the historical condition of society as the basis for analyzing fictional story in literary works. It was coined by a

French sociologist named Lucien Goldman. According to Goldman (1981), literary works have origins or genetics, namely the author and social facts. The origin of the author's imagination comes from important events in society that create important issues in the literary works. The involvement of the author as stated by Sahraeny, Darmayanty, and Pammu (2021) is because he has knowledge of the event which can be obtained from personal experience, other people's information, reference readings, and others.

The design of this research is qualitative as it aims to elaborate the meaning of the structural elements of the novel *O'Pioneers!* with its sociological aspects which include the background of Willa Cather's social life as an author and traditional American women as social facts. Alignment of intrinsic elements with extrinsic aspects produces a universal meaning in the novel *O'Pioneers!* Namely the notion of traditional American Women. Abbas (2020) mentioned the data collection procedure was carried out through a literature study consisting of primary data and secondary data. The primary data is the novel *O'Pioneers!* and the secondary data is some information about Willa Cather and traditional American women.

All research data were analyzed with reference to the formulation genetic structuralism research by Endraswara (2013) which consisted of three stages. First stage is to examine the structural meaning of the novel *O'Pioneers!* second is to explore the social background of Willa Cather's life related to the meaning of the novel and third is to reveal the social facts of the traditional American society that underlie the literary work. The researchers then described the overall analysis of the data as the discussion result of this research, namely gender relations to the notion of traditional American women in novel *O'Pioneers!* by Willa Cather.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers construct the results of the study based on the stages and sections of the discussion on the method of the Genetic Structuralism approach, namely the structural meaning of novel *O'Pioneers!*, Willa Cather's social background, traditional American women, and gender relations to the notion of traditional American women in *O' Pioneers!* Novel by Willa Cather.

3.1. Structural Meaning of Novel *O'Pioneers!*

The researchers present two traditional American women in this novel, namely Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky. These two women are considered to have links with traditional American men in social life, namely Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata. The gender relationship

between female and male fictional characters is the structural meaning of the novel *O’Pioneers!*

3.1.1. Mrs. Bergson

She is the wife of Mr. John Bergson who gave birth to three children, namely a daughter named Alexandra, two sons are Oscar and Lou. She is a faithful wife who followed her husband emigrating from Europe, Sweden to America and became part of the frontier people who pioneered land clearing in the western region of America, especially in Divine Nebraska. Mrs. Bergson was involved in helping her husband manage a field grown with corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and others. She is a typical traditional woman who takes on a role in the domestic life of the family as a wife as well as a housewife, “*She was a good mother, but she was glad when her children were old enough not to be in her way in the kitchen*” (Cather, 2012).

3.1.2. Marie Tovesky

She is Albert Tovesky’s youngest daughter from his second wife, “*Marie was his youngest child, by second wife, and was the apple of his eye*” (Cather, 2012). Albert Tovesky was a smart man among the Bohemians. He came to the west around the 1870s and settled in Omaha where he became a leader and advisor to the people there. At the age of sixteen, Marie Tovesky graduated from Omaha High School and became acquainted with a painter named Frank Shabata. She would rather marry Frank Shabata than continue her studies. As a young girl beset by dreams of a luxurious life, Marie Tovesky was often disappointed in her husband’s inability to provide her with luxury. She is a traditional American woman who wanted to do social reform, but failed because she still depended on her husband for her economy.

3.1.3. Mr. Bergson

Mr. John Bergson lives near Norway Creek. The river became the identity of the cultivators and farmers in the new area. The village is called Divide which is inhabited by a number of small houses owned by farmers. For the past eleven years John Bergson has cleared and managed the land with some of his dreams in the still wild land. This land was painstakingly tamed into agricultural land, “*In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame*” (Cather, 2012). As the head of the household, John Bergson tried to provide for the economic needs of his family. He succeeded in educating his children to continue cultivating his fields.

3.1.4. Frank Shabata

He was a young man who came from the Elbe Valley region. His family owned a large area of land there, but he had no interest in being cultivators. He prefers to migrate to Omaha as a painter and souvenir trader. He is determined to marry Marie Tovesky, even though his life is still difficult because he does not have a permanent job. He also often leaves his wife at home and comes home drunk. He is a traditional man who failed to fulfill his responsibility in fulfilling his household economy. Frank Shabata often bickered with his wife, Marie Tovesky at home. One night, Frank Shabata came home drunk and accidentally shot his wife, “*He wanted to get into his own bed! Had his wife been at home, he would have turned and gone back to her meekly enough*” (Cather, 2012).

The fictional female characters in the novel *O’Pioneers!* being analyzed are Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky. They have traits and attitudes typical of traditional American women. Mrs. Bergson’s traits are dependency, passive, weak, and quitter. Marie Tovesky’s traits are inward oriented, subjective, take no risk, and emotional. Then the fictional male characters are Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata. The dominance of traits and attitudes typical of traditional men in the two fictional characters includes independent, aggressive, competitive, leadership, task oriented, self-affirmation, self-discipline, calm and patient, active, analytical, be brave, non-sentimental, rational, and non-emotional. The difference between the two fictional characters is only in the outward oriented, innovation, and objective aspects. The gender relationship between female and male fictional characters is a traditional domestication relationship in domestic life.

3.2. Willa Cather’s Social Background

Willa Cather is an American woman writer who was born and lived decades of her life in the American West, especially in the areas of Nebraska, Illinois, Parthia, Denver, Norway Creek, and others. Ware (1989) expresses that Cather witnessed the lives of immigrants who came to the area to open and manage the fields called the frontiers. They came from various ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds such as Anglo-Saxon, Bohemian, Scandinavian, Slavic, and others. They came around the mid-1800s as cultivators growing corn, potatoes, tomatoes, etc. The houses lined up that used to be barracks for land clearers. The area was originally a stretch of grassland which was later turned into settlements and agricultural land. The main road leading to the train station is lined with the ruts of wagons that pass through it, especially in the winter.

Among the frontiers, there are those who have succeeded in becoming successful cultivators through their innovations and some have failed to develop the

productivity of their fields. In a village in a farming area like this, people are more independent in managing their assets and owning their own property which they interpret as freedom and independence. However, in a city like New York that looks sparkling with luxurious homes and facilities, it turns out that many people are suffering. They have nothing, sleep on the side of the road and overhang, without property, if they die so they are buried just like that and no one wants to know about the lives of others. The frontiers witnessed by Willa Cather are families who still hold strongly to the traditional values of their home country. The gender relationship embedded in their domestic life is that husband and wife work together in the fields to produce economic productivity to meet household needs. Yukman (1988) expressed that Cather found the condition of life on American frontier the institution of work, marriage, the marketplace, heterosexual and desire are not conditions of subjectivity. The view of life that is firmly held is to build and maintain family life. The husband acts as the head of the household as well as the main breadwinner outside the home, while the wife as a housewife manages the family economy and prepares for household needs.

Willa Cather contributed to documenting the social life of cultivators in the central and western regions of America in her imaginary literary works. Carlsen (1979) states that Willa Cather poured out her feelings about the rugged settlers of the West, their codes of behavior and their love for the earth. All of her major work comes out of her youthful impressions of the West, her wide reading in histories of its development, and frequent revisits to her relatives and her favorite towns.

3.3. Traditional American Women

The value system and traditional women's culture is a matriarchal order that places the benefits of women's biological elements as mothers. The roles and functions of women are placed in their natural capacities, both from the physical and psychological aspects. According to Fromm (2011), matriarchal values are in line with women's surrender to become mothers passively based on natural aspects and biological benefits. Spiritual, logical, and rational aspects are considered not too important to be addressed to women because these aspects are more absolute in male or patriarchal values. Traditional women by some 21st century writers are often abbreviated as tread wife. According to Hunt (2020), a tread wife is often considered a woman who still maintains conventional gender roles. Typical of these women are not working, relying on their husbands for a living, taking care of household needs, taking care of babies and children. Her main work is cooking, preparing food, washing, cleaning, others, while her husband works, earns a living, collects money, and fulfills family expenses. This pattern of life, according

to Elsworth (2019), dominated American life until the 1920s.

The habit of white women working outside the home with their husbands changed when black slaves were brought into the southern colonies. Those white women do the tasks of cultivating agricultural lands and plantations Hymowitz and Weissman (1978) stipulate that the arrival of these slaves had repositioned the position of white women back at home as housewives and men still carrying out tasks outside the home taking care of businesses and agricultural fields. White American women followed the model of elite European women who played the role of housewives, arranging household accessories, and managing slaves in the home in the southern colonies such as Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia.

Typical of traditional American women as home women who have developed since the early 17th century colony period and the period of the second wave of immigrants from the 18th century to the 20th century. The position of women as wives and their role as housewives was further strengthened when Victorian values dominated women's discourse in England and Europe throughout the 19th century, especially among the elite. American women fashion and style in 19th century is shown in Figure 1. Victoria (1819-1901) was Queen of England who reigned for 64 years from 1847 to 1901. In fact, according to Rolka (2015), Queen Victoria was dubbed the grandmother of European nations because of her descendants who ruled in the Kingdoms of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Greece, and Russia.

The influence of Victorian values also has a broad impact on the traditional American women's order because according to Djajanegara (2000), American society is dominated by British descent. This resulted in the cultural and traditional ties between the American people and the British so strong that they are often



Figure 1 19th century American women's fashion and style that followed Victorian ideas.

dubbed the Anglo-American nation. The traditional values of women that were initiated by Victoria includes women must maintain their chastity, women must be religious, women must appear feminine, women must be passive, women must be diligent in taking care of their families and households, women must maintain their domesticated life, and so on. These values have an impact on the attitudes of traditional American women who tend to be passive, inferior, dependent, and resigned. Victorian values also influenced traditional American women’s perspectives. According to Olson, Gray and Hofstadter (1950), the view of traditional American society is that the education obtained by a girl is sufficient to be good at reading, writing, and counting. Skills that suit her are sewing, cooking, baby care, music and art. All education and skills obtained by women are intended to support their roles as wives and housewives.

3.4. Gender Relations to the Notion of Traditional American Women in Novel O’Pioneers! By Willa Cather

Researchers found four categories of gender relations in the genetic analysis of the novel *O’Pioneers!* to the notion of traditional American Women, namely position, role, identity, and view. Position is the responsibility of men and women in the household, roles are the tasks carried out by men and women in the household, identity is the stereotype attached to men and women in the household, view is the perspective of men and women in managing household life.

1) Position

In the novel, the position of Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata are the main responsibility for the continuity of family life, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky are people who are fully managed in the family. This is also reflected in the gender relations of traditional American society. Men take the position of being responsible for the sustainability of the family life what they lead. Likewise, women as housewives position themselves as regulators of the family’s internal environment, educating and equipping their children with household knowledge and skills. Willa Cather has experienced this kind of gender relationship in building a household with her husband, Edith Lewis.

2) Role

The main role carried by Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata were on public duties as the main breadwinners for the family, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky are responsible for the domestication tasks of family. Traditional American society as well as the roles played by fictional characters of men and women also recognize the term the main breadwinner for men and women as the breadwinners. Men must try to fulfill the economic needs of their families and women as people

to be supported must be good at managing this income so that food is still available every day. The role of men in the family is very large because he must be able to ensure the continuity of family life. In the development of time in the early 1900s, traditional American women wanted to be given opportunities to work outside the home to help their husbands meet the economic needs of the family.

3) Identity

The identity of Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata are the heads of the family, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky are housewives. This identity is reflected in the gender relations of traditional American family life, where men are heads of households and women are housewives. A married man is seen as the head of the household and a married woman is identified as a housewife. This identity has the consequence of stereotypes attached to men as independent, aggressive, competitive, leadership, active, rational, and others. Likewise, as housewives, women are seen as having a typical dependency, passive, weak, quitter, inward oriented, subjective, and others.

4) View

Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata view that fulfilment of all the needs of the family is an obligation, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky saw that surrendering oneself completely to one’s family was obligatory. In traditional American society, men are seen as people who are fully responsible for all the needs of the family in the form of clothing, food, and housing. Women are seen as complements in the household who are responsible for the domestication of the family and the education of children.

4. CONCLUSION

Traditional American women’s notion on gender relations based on Victorian values is reflected in the novel *O’Pioneers!* and it includes position, role, identity, and perspective between male and female. The position of Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata are the main responsibility for the continuity of family life, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky are people who are fully managed in the family. The main role carried by Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata are on public duties as the main breadwinners for the family, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky are responsible for the domestication tasks of family. Moreover, the identity of Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata are the heads of the family, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky are housewives. The view of Mr. Bergson and Frank Shabata are fulfilment of all the needs of the family is an obligation, while Mrs. Bergson and Marie Tovesky think that surrendering oneself completely to one’s family was obligatory.

The findings on the notion of traditional American women as documented in the novel *O’Pioneers!* deal with the domestication of women in family life and maintaining harmony in the household with men is the idealization of gender relations in American society. This notion is a social fact among frontiers in the western regi⁶ of America witnessed by Willa Cather as the author. The researchers suggest that more studies should be conducted on the phenomenon of idealization of gender relations as the actualization of the principles of traditional society in literary works. It can enrich the comparative information as the other side of the research entitled feminism which has been carried out by many academics so far.

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