
Breastfeeding out West: Willa Cather's Mrs. Templeton in 'Old Mrs. Harris'

Wendy Whelan-Stewart*¹

¹McNeese State University – United States

Abstract

In "Willa Cather's Condition," Nadeane Trowse concludes her examination of Cather's ineffectual doctors by arguing that their best achievements are in nursing-not healing-their ailing patients: "Cather privileges nurturing, nursing over all medico-scientific activity." The act of nursing also figures in Cather beyond its medicalized sense. In fact, I would like to extend the discussion of nursing to include the term's secondary meaning-nursing as breastfeeding. Cather often embeds the nursing (or breastfeeding) mother in her work as a symbol for communal relief and wistful healing. Yet, the nursing mother gets her fullest treatment in "Old Mrs. Harris," a Cather story noteworthy for the narrative's shifting between various women's points of view. According to Kristeva, the woman who is with child is one who is expected to exchange her sexual desires (jouissance) for a union with, a love of, the child. (See *Stabat Mater*.) This cultural expectation is demonstrated in one of the most remarkable scenes in literature-the moment Mrs. Templeton invites her neighbor, the "foreign" Mrs. Rosen, into the parlor and nurses her child by the fire. Any tensions existing between women of different ages and different social and ethnic backgrounds evaporate. The nursing mother temporarily alleviates any cultural conflicts stirred by families migrating to the borderlands of nineteenth century Colorado. Yet, because the narrative also shows us Mrs. Templeton after she has weaned her baby and rediscovered other desires, Cather shows us the fraught relationships between neighboring women when breastfeeding is over. Cather gives us a fuller, more complete portrait of the way child-bearing women are made to operate in nineteenth-century Colorado.

*Speaker