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In honor of
Marilyn Judith Atlas

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PREFACE

Wisconsin native Zona Gale (1874-1938) was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. However, her ability to combine writing and political activism successfully was no less a feat. Zona Gale fought for Prohibition and women's suffrage and against capital punishment and racial discrimination. She helped found the Women's Peace Party and write the language of the 1923 Wisconsin Equal Rights Law. She campaigned for Progressive Senator Robert La Follette Sr., as well as for his sons, and endowed scholarships for promising young writers at her alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she served on the Board of Regents. (Simonson 54-67). During World War I, she was such a strong pacifist that she fell under federal surveillance (Derleth 119).

Perhaps it was Gale's early newspaper experience in Milwaukee and New York City that focused her attention on the social problems of her day; however, she was no less dedicated to literary projects than to progressive causes. She found time and energy to publish twenty-two volumes of fiction, four volumes of nonfiction, seven plays, and a book of poems, as well as a great number of essays and stories in periodicals. Possessed of a sensibility by turns romantic, sentimental, realistic, poetic, propagandistic, naturalistic, and mystical, she idealized the "dear hearts and gentle people" of the Midwestern small town in her Friendship Village stories and exposed the mundane and stultifying aspects of small-town life in *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920). The earnest anti-war novel, *Heart's Kindred* (1915), the grimly pessimistic *Birth* (1918), and the spiritual *Preface to a Life* (1926) all came from her pen.

The essays in this issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* situate Gale and her work within a number of contexts. Nancy Neff and Marcia Noe examine Gale's most well-known novel, *Miss Lulu Bett*, focusing on responses to the work throughout the decades. Riann

Bilderback discusses the Pulitzer Prize-winning theatrical adaptation of this novel as a satirical treatment of patriarchy; Catherine Kalish looks at the way Gale's Friendship Village stories enact the ideal of a feminist utopia and oppose patriarchal tyranny. Kenneth Grant and Barbara Burkhardt establish contexts for Gale's work, examining her relationships with and influences on Margery Latimer and William Maxwell respectively. Taken as a whole, these essays portray Gale as a prolific and widely respected best-selling novelist and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who was equally dedicated to both her political and her literary goals. Her feminist critique of patriarchy enacts the dictum that the personal is political; her vision for the future is shaped by a strong communitarian ethic that she exemplified in her warm and caring relations with others.

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READING *MISS LULU BETT*: THE RECEPTION
HISTORY OF A MIDWESTERN CLASSIC

MARCIA NOE AND NANCY NEFF

Zona Gale was a significant contributor to the revolt from the village movement of the 1920s, so identified by Carl Van Doren in his landmark essay, "Contemporary American Novelists," published in *The Nation* in 1921 and subtitled "The Revolt from the Village." Before this movement arose, according to Van Doren, small towns were described as peaceful, safe, happy places where neighbors looked after each other and all stories had happy endings. Authors of the 1920s, such as Gale, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis, rebelled against this utopian vision of small-town life. They wrote the truth as they interpreted it; much that was cruel and petty could be found in small-town America. Some people were hypocrites and harsh judges of their fellow men. Everyone was not kind, honest, and helpful. Technology was altering people's lives, not always for the better. This harsher, more realistic view of existence in Middle America ushered in a new phase in American literature.

Zona Gale's prominence in this movement would first make her literary reputation and later contribute to its eclipse. It is intriguing to see Gale's progression toward revolt. In her early works, she was a staunch defender of small-town life. Her collections of short stories, *Friendship Village* (1908), *Friendship Village Love Stories* (1909), and *When I Was a Little Girl* (1913), depict village life at its best. One can depend on the inhabitants of Friendship to do what is right. No one is really poor, sick, or lonely. People help one another; former big city dwellers find peace and comfort and healing by moving to this lovely, comfortable, tranquil town. Gale obviously reveres, respects, and admires this tiny piece of the world that she seems to have created from memories of her beloved Portage, Wisconsin. She knew these people and this place. The proverbial rose-colored lenses appear securely in place.

Changes in her view, however, became apparent as she continued to write. Beginning with *Birth* (1918), Gale's description of village life changed, and her work was forever altered. She continued to feel substantial affection for her small town and its residents, but she no longer idealized them. She understood and depicted their imperfections and falls from grace. Perhaps Gale's growing political awareness and interest, her work with the progressive movement in Wisconsin, and her association with the La Follette family helped lead to this change in her perception of small-town life. She was a well-known pacifist; perhaps the horrors of World War I altered her ideas and opinions. August Derleth suggests that Gale suffered from and resented the disapproval of her friends and neighbors after she took a strong stand against World War I and never felt the same about her hometown after that experience (119). Her increased sense of feminism may also have been a factor in developing this new view of life in the village. Gale took this realist approach even further with one of her most powerful books, *Miss Lulu Bett*.

Gale's growth as a writer and skill as an artist were reflected in the many favorable reviews of the novel at the time of its publication; however, despite the recovery work undertaken by feminist literary scholars of the '70s, '80s, and '90s, there has not been much critical attention paid to Gale's work in recent years. When *Miss Lulu Bett* was published, it was widely reviewed and well received by the critics and public alike. While its readership diminished as the twentieth century progressed, the novel has never completely disappeared from the cultural radar screen. In this essay we will discuss five main trends that recur throughout the novel's reception history. First, as American literature became increasingly accepted as canonical, less critical attention was paid to *Miss Lulu Bett*, particularly as an exemplary American novel worthy of anything Europe might offer, a prominent theme in the reviews of the 1920s. Secondly, as the revolt from the village became a less dominant critical rubric, the novel became less and less read and discussed, and these discussions no longer focused on its role in that movement. Thirdly, over the decades, gender has been a factor in the ways in which readers have responded to the novel's central character, Lulu; most male readers have seen her primarily as the victim and downtrodden drudge that we see at the beginning of the novel while most female readers have focused on what she has become by the novel's end: an empowered and emancipated woman. Fourth, during the last decade of the twentieth century and the early years of the

twenty-first, scholars who have studied *Miss Lulu Bett* have been almost exclusively female. Lastly, regardless of gender or era, almost all readers have admired Zona Gale's craftsmanship.

It is enlightening to read the reviews of the novel that were written in 1920 and 1921. Some are long and detailed, others are very brief and to the point; almost all are positive and appreciative of the work and especially of Gale's skill as an author. Reading these reviews helps one to understand the novel better and to realize just how critics received the book. Two dominant patterns are sympathy for the character of Lulu and pride in the new realistic style of American literature emerging from the Middle West that *Miss Lulu Bett* epitomizes.

Frederic Taber Cooper's review in *Publishers Weekly* is paradigmatic of responses to the novel that dominated its reception for much of the twentieth century. The title of his review, "A Family Beast of Burden," echoes a quotation from the novel. Lulu is treated as an unpaid servant in her relatives' home; she views herself, and others see her, as a drudge. This article emphasizes the pathetic situation in which Lulu finds herself. Her role as an unappreciated laborer is explored. Cooper describes the book as the "ultimate, detailed, commonplace, humble tragedy" (991). He believes that Lulu's desperate attempt to break free from her repressive reality is a tragedy that is a "natural corollary" (991) of her mistreatment at the hands of Dwight and Ina. Cooper is quite complimentary of Gale's gifts as an author, saying that her "writing is an abiding joy to the discriminating" (992).

Another work that aids in understanding and evaluating the novel is an anonymous article published in *The Nation*. The reviewer compares *Miss Lulu Bett* to other current works and states that Gale is in the "same part of the physical and moral world as Spoon River and Winesburg" (557), thus linking Gale's novel to the revolt from the village movement that Van Doren introduced in his 1921 essay in the same publication. Also, this critic, as do many others, accentuates Lulu's helplessness and her feeble attempts to change her life. The idea that Lulu has "no weapons" (558) is a very perceptive and sympathetic analysis.

Pride in *Miss Lulu Bett* as an example of a changing American literature is very evident in an unsigned review in the *Atlantic Monthly*. This author glowingly describes the novel as being "without flaw" and compares it to Wharton's *Ethan Frome*: "eloquent without condensation. Gale wastes no words in her novel and makes no obvious judgments." This critic aptly sees in the book the "terrible simplicity and finality of an old maid awakening to self appreci-

ation." The terms may be rather out of fashion, but the idea of accepting oneself is certainly a modern one. Respect for Gale's work is apparent, and concern about the canonical status of American literature is evident in this quotation: "We can show it to Europe without the sign of a blush in deprecation of our proverbial rawness." This novel, in this reviewer's estimation, is comparable to the Old World's works and does not suffer in the comparison.

Constance Mayfield Rourke, writing in the *New Republic*, also sounds this note of national pride. She believes that both the novel and the character of Lulu are "very American" (315) and states that Gale's book is a "signal accomplishment in American letters" (316). Rourke is impressed with Gale's artistic craft; she gives the author great praise when she writes, "not a verbal stroke is missed, yet there is no mechanized precision" (316). Rourke says that the characters of Dwight, Ina, and Monona are "ruthlessly drawn" (315). This review, with its focus on style and skill, is a particularly useful tool in understanding the appreciation her contemporaries accorded Gale.

The Bookman contains another glowing review of Gale's novel. It sees the work as Gale "laughing at our own provincialism" (568). This unknown reviewer expressed much empathy and sympathy for Lulu and her predicament. Gale is seen as an able interpreter of small-town American life and is much praised for her ability to depict true situations. The writer of this article states, "She has pictured with alarming faithfulness and understanding the tragi-comedy of the small-town family and the poignant starved passions of the love-denied spinster" (567). The author goes on to say that Gale is a "skilled observer and fine recorder of American temperament" (568). Literary nationalism is again expressed: "We no longer need Bernard Shaw patronizingly to shout across the waters that we are a nation of villagers" (568). In 1928 this point was proven when the French scholar Regis Michaud praised *Miss Lulu Bett* as a true masterpiece in his book on the American novel (248). Also that year, Grant Overton included a large section on Zona Gale in *The Women Who Make Our Novels*, calling *Miss Lulu Bett* a masterpiece, comparing it to Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Cather's *A Lost Lady*, and asserting that the novel bore the stamp of genius (143-7).

Miss Lulu Bett was included in many of the books on American fiction that appeared during the next several decades, usually as an example of the shift to realism and/or the revolt from the village. As Ima Honaker Herron put it, the novel turns on "the triumphant revolt

of a village drudge, who unexpectedly rebels against her menial position in the household of her silly married sister" (347). Louis Parrington in volume three of *Main Currents in American Thought* (1930) and Arthur Hobson Quinn in *American Fiction: A Historical and Critical Survey* (1936) also read the novel in this way, the latter, like Michaud, emphasizing Lulu's role in the Deacon household as a figure of fun and family beast of burden (703-4). When Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* appeared in 1942, this emphasis on the novel as the prime example of the turn toward realism was reiterated.

Miss Lulu Bett rated only a sentence in Robert Spiller's landmark *Literary History of the United States* (1946); however, the novel continued to be discussed, albeit briefly, in book-length studies of American literature. Frederick J. Hoffman, in *The Twenties* (1955), saw Lulu as "victimized by a narrow-minded, selfish community" (333), and Edward Wagenknecht described her as a "domestic drudge who revolted, generally associated with the revolt from the village school" (482) in *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (1952).

Ten years later, the Twayne United States Authors series published a volume on Zona Gale. In this work Harold Simonson praised Gale's depictions of character and terse prose style, as had so many other readers. At the end of the decade, Anthony Channell Hilfer's study of the revolt from the village emphasized Gale's shift toward realism by devoting a chapter to "Brooks, Mencken and the new Zona Gale," calling the novel "an opposite of Friendship Village" (136).

With the second wave of feminism that sparked recovery work on forgotten female authors came a new way of reading *Miss Lulu Bett*: as a story of female empowerment rather than of female victimization, a trend presaged by earlier female readers, such as Constance Rourke, who wrote of Lulu's "slow, spasmodic climb to self-assurance" (315) and Ima Herron, who stressed her "triumphant revolt" (347). In her entry on Gale in *American Women Writers* (1980), Nancy Breitsprecher called the novel "a story of growth" (Vol. 2, 97), and in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, Gwen Nagel emphasized the novel's role in Gale's shift from romanticism to realism, as did so many other readers. However, Nagel also read *Miss Lulu Bett* as "a terse depiction of the disillusionment and rebellion of its heroine" (338).

During the next two decades, several scholars developed this notion. Lynn Rhoades saw the novel as "exposing the limitations of male authority through a rhetoric of rebellion that multiplies examples

of the dangers of domesticity, exposes the domineering characteristics of the male head of the household" (75) and characterized Lulu as embarking on a journey of self-recognition and self-discovery. Deborah Williams echoed this interpretation in her book on Wharton, Cather, and Gale: "Lulu's gradual emergence from grim sexless drudge to autonomous sexual woman is a classic feminist awakening: Lulu is a kind of self-actualized Cinderella" (109). An early twenty-first century essay by Marilyn Atlas asserted that "[I]n the novel version of *Miss Lulu Bett*, Zona Gale helps Lulu evolve from a passive victim with no confidence to a woman who refuses to be forced into a lie, who takes responsibility for her silences and her choices" (42).

Almost unanimously, Zona Gale's contemporaries praised her artistry in *Miss Lulu Bett*. The characters of Lulu, Dwight, and Ina were discussed and analyzed, and the small-town, village mentality was explored. The importance of the work was asserted, and Gale's position as a significant author was stated and defended. Why is an author whose work was so noted and acclaimed during her life so little studied today? Diane Quantic, Deborah Williams and Julia Ehrhardt have written dissertations that discuss Zona Gale, along with other writers; the latter two have been revised and published as books. However, there are no dissertations or books focused solely on Gale other than August Derleth's 1940 biography and the 1962 Twayne volume. There are only seventeen entries found on Zona Gale from 1963 to the present in the MLA database; several of these sources are simply memoirs or short biographies, exploring the early years of her life and her career in journalism. Current book-length scholarship focuses mainly on her correspondence with Edith Wharton and Willa Cather (Williams) and on her politics in comparison with those of Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Rose Wilder Lane, and Josephine Herbst (Ehrhardt). Some works, such as *Faint Perfume* and *Borgia*, have been studied very little. Even *Miss Lulu Bett*, when discussed in contemporary scholarship, is usually examined in its play form.

We could better understand this virtual neglect if Gale's artistry had not progressed from the somewhat simplistic, cloying *Friendship* stories, but her later work is quite powerful and moving. She lived a somewhat quiet life and certainly did not seem to be highly interested in self-promotion. This theory is persuasive as a partial explanation for her relative obscurity. Williams cites the contrasting examples of Willa Cather and Edith Wharton, who distanced themselves publicly from other female writers and feminist issues and opted instead to fol-

low the male model of focusing on their individual careers; they became canonical American authors, unlike Gale, who embraced a more communitarian aesthetic which conceived of the artist as a social being who mentored other writers and diverted time and energy to social and political causes (*Not in Sisterhood* 6-13). Still her literary output was significant: thirty-four published volumes.

Another point to consider is that Portage, Wisconsin, was certainly not the center of the literary universe. Gale's star was in the ascendancy as long as realistic literature from the Middle West dominated the literary scene; after 1930 when proletarian literature became the new rage, Midwestern literature was no longer in the spotlight and neither was *Miss Lulu Bett*, thus demonstrating that tastes change, and current criticism can elevate an author to incredible heights or relegate him or her to simple entries in reference books.

Nevertheless, despite its widely acknowledged excellent craftsmanship, *Miss Lulu Bett* has been left behind by modern literary scholarship. Deborah Williams asserts that Gale's work has been neglected by scholars because her books have not been compatible with any of the major critical paradigms that contemporary critics have used in their analyses of literature (*Not in Sisterhood* 176). We agree in part with Williams's explanation, but we would like to amend it: when *Miss Lulu Bett* was published in 1920, it did fit a dominant critical paradigm, that of the revolt from the village. When that paradigm lost cultural currency, so did Gale's novel. Even Gale's 1939 obituary in *The Nation* noted that the novel was "exactly contemporaneous with *Main Street*" and "hardly less influential in establishing a new tone in fiction dealing with provincial America" (quoted in *Twentieth Century Authors* 510). When this literary development ceased to be big news, *Miss Lulu Bett* began to fade from view.

August Derleth maintains in *Still Small Voice* that Zona Gale may not be considered a great author, but she could surely be judged to be a great woman (267). We agree but believe the case can also be made for the literary merit of many of her works. She certainly does not deserve to be neglected. Her life and her work warrant more attention.

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MALE FRAUD: ZONA GALE TRAVESTIES PATRIARCHY IN *MISS LULU BETT*

RIANN BILDERBACK

Zona Gale wrote approximately fourteen novels, four works of non-fiction, seven plays, and numerous short stories, articles, poems, and book reviews. In 1921, she earned the distinction of becoming the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her hallmark play, *Miss Lulu Bett*. Her writing was well respected by her contemporaries for both its popularity and complexity. Though highly acclaimed and popular in her day, Gale has been overlooked by academic scholars. Instead, she is frequently dismissed as the author of sentimental works or consolidated into a category with other prominent authors of the time. Gale's works are significant in light of her social and political involvements and her role in the revolt from the village movement of the 1920s; she was heavily involved in women's rights and the suffrage movement, pacifism and other progressive social and political causes in both Wisconsin and the nation. Her numerous social and political involvements are reflected in her writing, and her ideologies are integral to understanding her work.

Miss Lulu Bett was originally published as a novel in 1920. Gale adapted the text as a play at the urging of producer Brock Pemberton. She later said, "I'm ashamed to say how quickly it was done. I finished it in a week, but as I wasn't satisfied with the last act I held it over from Saturday to Monday to revise it. So I can say that it took me ten days, and that doesn't sound quite so bad" (Simonson 84). New York critics greeted the play with mixed reviews, and several commented that the play seemed largely undramatic. The satirical aspects of *Miss Lulu Bett* appear to have gone unnoticed by the majority of the critics until later on in its run. Critics outside New York received the play well because they were more attuned to Gale's accurate portrayal of small-town life and the oppression of women (Barlow xxiv). In *Miss Lulu Bett*, Zona

Gale presents a microcosm of a patriarchal system based on misconceptions and lies from which Lulu rises to regain her individuality and find power of her own.

Through her play, Zona Gale demonstrates a flawed patriarchal power system in which a female protagonist claims power and her rightful position within the household and society. Lulu's awareness of herself and her role is present at the beginning of the play and slowly grows through her relationship with Ninian and observation of those around her. She understands that it is her work that keeps the household running and that her family only values her as a servant rather than as a person. However, through her brief encounter with Ninian, Lulu begins to see that she possesses power of her own, and she is able to express herself and direct her own future rather than succumb to the will of those around her. She progresses from verbal acts of rebellion to rebellious action, and the play culminates in her climactic departure from the Deacon household.

Gale begins the play by establishing the power structure within the Deacon household as basic and primal. She utilizes animal imagery and comparisons to convey the idea that the Deacon household functions in a manner that is considered to be the natural order of things. The male figures believe themselves to be entitled to positions of authority and power, viewing the women as merely necessary underlings who perform no valuable functions. Dwight frequently refers to Ina as his "pet" and "precious pussy" (Barlow 89, 92). Ina's status in conjunction to Dwight is that of a pet, and she merely defers to his opinion while scarcely voicing one of her own. In the revised ending, Mama Bett refers to Dwight as a cockroach and Ninian as a centipede. By categorizing the men as insects, Mama Bett dehumanizes the men and instead associates them with lower life forms. In a particularly meaningful comparison, Dwight calls Lulu a bird and then more specifically a dove. In fact, Lulu's position in the household is that of a bird as she is held captive by the demands of the family and not allowed any freedom of her own.

Significantly, the natural order of the household is flawed. Power held by Dwight and Ninian is not earned or deserved; rather, it is achieved through deceit and manipulation. Dwight certainly considers himself the head of the household. He frequently comments that he is the provider of the family because of his employment as a dentist and also as a magistrate. He reminds Lulu that "we give you a home on the supposition that you have no money to spend, even for the necessities" (Barlow 91). Furthermore, Dwight asserts he has no desire to deal with

the domestic issues of the household, but he wants to know everything that transpires in his house. He berates Lulu for purchasing a pot of flowers, and he questions Ina about the price of salmon. However, when Lulu asks Ina a question about buying more butter, Dwight chastises her. He demands, "[t]he conversation at [his] table must not deal with domestic matters," even though he is the one who initiated such a discussion (Barlow 93). The true head of the household is Lulu, a fact which the other family members unintentionally articulate throughout the play.

While Lulu is away with Ninian on their honeymoon, the house subsequently falls apart. In particular, Ina finds herself at a loss of how to manage the household without Lulu. She confides to Dwight, "I wish Lulu was here to leave in charge. I certainly do miss Lulu—lots of ways" (Barlow 119). Mama Bett sarcastically remarks that Ina especially misses Lulu at mealtimes. Ina does not long for her sister's company, only her cooking. Ina cannot manage the household because she has always submitted to Dwight's will and Lulu's management. She has no skills or ideas of her own. Thus Lulu's abandonment results in Ina's being forced to confront her own inadequacies. This concept is further reinforced in the revised ending. When Lulu announces her intentions to leave, Ina goes to pieces out of concern for herself. She cries to Lulu, "[h]ow am I ever going to keep house without you? Dwight, you've simply got to make her stay. When I think of what I went through while she was away ... everything boils over, and what I don't expect to b-b-boil b-b-burns. Sister, how can you be so cruel..." (Barlow 152). Ina demonstrates her true concern is only her desire for a live-in housekeeper and cook rather than her sister's desires and well-being.

Throughout most of the play, Lulu is naïve about her real position in the household and the corresponding power that goes along with her position. The male figures in the play withhold truth and lie in order to maintain their status and power. Dwight feels it is necessary to lie about the situation with Lulu and Ninian because he is afraid of harming his status and appearance in the community. He appears to be graciously allowing Lulu to stay in his home; however, he then proceeds to offer terms of her return to the Deacon household. "[Y]ou will have to continue to live here on the old terms and of course I'm quite willing that you should. Let me tell you, however, that this is on condition—on condition that this disgraceful business is kept to ourselves" (Barlow 122). When Lulu hesitates, Dwight subtly threatens her further and proceeds to make Lulu feel guilty. "You have it in your own hands to repay me, Lulu, for anything that you feel I may have done for you in the past. You

also have it in your hands to decide whether your home here continues" (Barlow 123). He attempts to make Lulu feel as though the decision is in her own hands when actually he is leaving her little choice.

Lulu pressures Dwight to write to Ninian and discover the truth of the matter. Dwight finally acquiesces but has every intention of concealing Ninian's letter from Lulu. Mama Bett intercepts the letter, and Lulu discovers the truth before Dwight has a chance to conceal it from her. When Dwight returns, Lulu confronts him with the knowledge that she has been correct in her assumptions all along. Instead of admitting Lulu was correct, Dwight proceeds to further convince her that the entire matter should still remain secret. He accuses her of "wicked vanity" (Barlow 142) because she wants to let the truth be known. At the end of the revised version of the play, Lulu finally recognizes Dwight's continued lies and verbally berates him for his dishonesty: "That will do, Dwight. You've pretended so long you can't be honest with yourself, any of the time. Your whole life is a lie" (Barlow 152).

Ninian commits important acts of dishonesty. When Lulu and Ninian discuss formal labels such as Mister and Miss, Lulu informs Ninian that she is a Miss by choice, which is not a particularly credible assertion. When Lulu asks Ninian what kind of mister he is, he dances around the question without providing a direct answer but instead remarks, "There's no telling whether a man's married or not by his name" (Barlow 102). Lulu offhandedly comments that it does not really matter about Ninian's name; however, later in the play Lulu will care deeply about Ninian's marital status as it will play an important role in her future with the Deacons. Toward the end of the conversation, Ninian reminds Lulu that "you know you've got a friend in me, don't you?" (Barlow 104). This statement is ironic because Ninian turns out to be married to another woman. While his bigamy eventually leads to Lulu's freedom from the Deacons, it also creates a great deal of mental and emotional strain on her. During the same scene, Monona enters the room and begins to exclaim over Ninian's diamond. Ninian begins to exaggerate about the diamond's origin, and Lulu admonishes him not to lie to the child. Ninian quickly defends his actions. "That's not lying. That's just drama" (Barlow 105). According to Ninian, he is merely dramatizing the situation as opposed to lying to Monona. Perhaps he also considers the concealment of a previous marriage merely dramatizing as well. Ninian's deceitful nature also becomes integral to the developing plot as the audience later learns he has lied to his family and concealed a previous marriage.

Freedom is first asserted by the female characters by means of asides to the audience or sarcasm. Lulu's rebellion begins on a small scale with verbal assaults and sarcastic remarks about her family and her situation. She works in the kitchen making apple pies, an activity which occupies a lot of her time. Monona asks her why she wants to make and eat pies, to which Lulu replies, "To grow strong—and even sensible" (Barlow 101). Lulu's comment is sarcastic because the men would never entertain the idea that women can grow to be strong and sensible. During the same scene, Monona and Lulu discuss Ninian's comments about Lulu, and his praise for her is limited to her cooking skills. Lulu mutters, "The cooking. It's always the cooking," demonstrating her disgust that this quality is the one attribute that men repeatedly find most admirable (Barlow 101). She further asserts this position when Ninian expresses surprise at her witty comebacks to his comments. He says that Lulu does not look particularly clever, yet she is able to continue a snappy, back-and-forth conversation with him. Lulu replies, "It must be my grand education" (Barlow 103). Of course, Lulu has had no formal education and will never be entitled to such in her household. Any wit she possesses has come through her own experiences and inherent intelligence. However, Lulu's wit is not always self-deprecating. When Ninian invites her to the theatre, she frets that her meager closet contains nothing appropriate to wear. Her thoughts finally settle on a particular dress, and she tells Ninian, "I could wear the waist I always thought they'd use—if I died" (Barlow 106). In another expression of sarcasm, Lulu exposes a valuable insight for the audience. Her life up to this point has been such that she has saved a special dress for her death and never considers she may be invited out of the house. Death has long been the only appointment on Lulu's calendar.

Lulu's attending the theatre is an active step towards rebellion against her family. She engages in small acts of rebellion throughout the play. For example, Dwight chastises Lulu for purchasing flowers. He reminds her that "[t]he justice business and the dental profession do no warrant the purchase of spring flowers in my home" (Barlow 91). Actually, Dwight objects to the purchase of flowers because he did not pre-approve the purchase. Rather than argue with Dwight, Lulu picks a flower to place on her lapel, and when Dwight's back is turned, she throws the flower pot out the window. Perhaps even more ironic is the fact that Dwight hardly notices the missing flower pot but only comments on the fact that Lulu "ruin[ed]" the plant by picking one of its flowers (Barlow 98).

Dwight also expresses confusion that Lulu agrees to attend the theater with Ninian. He snidely asks, "How [did you] hypnotize the lovely Lulu into this thing" (Barlow 109). Ninian matter-of-factly replies, "I asked her to go with us. Do you get it? I invited the woman" (Barlow 109). Ninian fails to understand why Dwight and Ina have never previously invited Lulu to go out with them. Lulu even goes so far as to borrow Ina's linen duster to wear out on the town. Dwight repeatedly makes snide comments about Lulu on the way to the theater. Finally, Ninian yells at Dwight and tells him that if Lulu wants Dwight to stay at home then Ninian will make it so. Lulu's decision to accompany Ninian to the theater catches Dwight off guard, and his remarks are retaliation against her for what he considers disobedience. The trip to the theater leads to the first of two key rebellions in that it is on this trip that Ninian and Lulu unintentionally find themselves married.

Of course, the marriage itself is not a rebellion because Lulu does not knowingly marry Ninian. However, her decision to remain married and subsequently leave on a honeymoon demonstrates her desire to break free from the family. Ninian further empowers Lulu by giving her a choice when he confesses his prior marriage. Dwight fails to understand why Ninian would have allowed Lulu the ability to determine her own fate. This event enables Lulu to become stronger and more confident in her own ability to direct her own life. The only regret Lulu has about the situation is that Ninian told her before they arrived in Oregon, so she must return home to the Deacon household.

The succession of verbal acts of rebellion followed by small actions of rebellion leads to Lulu's ultimate acts of defiance of her societal role and the patriarchy of the Deacon household. Ina and Dwight note the changes in Lulu after her return home. Ina comments, "It certainly has changed Lulu — a man coming into her life. She never spoke to me like that before," to which Dwight responds, "I saw she wasn't herself" (Barlow 129). This statement is ironic because neither Dwight nor Ina really knows Lulu. Ina attributes the change in Lulu's demeanor to Ninian's presence, but actually Ninian has only empowered Lulu to begin to stand up for herself. Lulu's ideas and thoughts are her own and have not originated from Ninian's influence.

When Neal Cornish proposes to Lulu, she kindly rejects him because she is now aware that a man is not necessary in order for her to live a fulfilling life. Cornish is offering to care for her and provide in the best way he knows how, but Lulu rejects that offer in favor of awaiting true love and becoming self-sufficient. He further offers Lulu five hundred dollars of his savings, which she also firmly turns down despite the fact that the

money could easily enable Lulu to leave and seek out Ninian. Lulu has gained not only a voice but also self-respect and pride.

This evolution allows her to challenge Dwight's authoritarian status and motivations. After intercepting the letter from Ninian and learning the truth of her situation, Lulu expresses a desire to let it be known about the actual circumstances of her and Ninian's separation. Dwight vehemently challenges this and demands Lulu not speak of the marriage. He attempts to guilt her into remaining silent by labeling her search for truth as "wicked vanity" (Barlow 142). The old Lulu would have responded meekly and deferred to Dwight's judgment on the matter; however, the new Lulu has found the ability to speak and exposes Dwight as a false figurehead. "I know you better than anyone else in the world knows you— better even than Ina. And I know that you'd sacrifice ...everybody, just to your own idea of who you are. You're one of the men who can smother a whole family and not even know you're doing it" (Barlow 143). After Lulu's attack on Dwight, she notes that she's "glad the whole thing happened" (Barlow 144). Had the encounter with Ninian and the subsequent discovery of another wife not occurred, Lulu would have most likely continued as a dutiful servant of the Deacon household.

Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* relates the story of a woman who rises above patriarchal authority and finds her own voice and direction in life. The play is particularly significant given Gale's active role in the woman's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. Gale exposes the patriarchal system as being inherently flawed, and she further insinuates that masculine power and authority are based on deception and lies. Lulu's changes in character are gradual, giving the play force and credibility. Her progression throughout the play leads to a climactic rebellion in which she recognizes and appropriates her power in order to direct her own fate. *Miss Lulu Bett* contains compelling insights about flawed patriarchal power structures and advocates the acknowledgement and support of women's rights.

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NOBODY SICK, NOBODY POOR: ZONA GALE'S
CONSTRUCTION OF A FEMINIST UTOPIA

CATHERINE KALISH

Like many novels written by women of the nineteenth century, Zona Gale's work falls under the category "sentimental fiction" or "domestic fiction." Despite the fact that Gale herself was a twentieth-century author, her popular fiction is steeped in the conventions used by her predecessors. While the appeals to emotion, the victimization of women, and the focus on the domestic sphere are often subjects of "sentimental fiction," it is possible to understand sentimental fiction in a positive and progressive way. Emily Miller Budick introduces a new paradigm for understanding sentimental fiction in her article, "When a House is not a Home." She explains her new definition in relation to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Sentimentalism is a form of political radicalism. It aims at nothing less than the subversion of the consensus and the replacement of the status quo by a new order...Stowe's text appeals to the emotions in order to motivate the reader toward political and social change" (309). This understanding of sentimental fiction as a way in which the female author is capable of both understanding and writing about women's roles in society as a means to change her society is key in unlocking some of these "sentimental" texts. Gale's own text, *Friendship Village*, focuses on the lives of women living in a rural town; however, within her text, Gale presents her contemporary readers with a mode for exercising authority via community by using the conventions of a feminist utopia.

Gale's progressive novel, *Friendship Village*, has a structure somewhat similar to that of James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Each chapter or two tells a story about life in "Friendship Village." However, the stories are not interconnected—they are only tied together by the cast of characters. While the structure of this text is innovative, the subject is more

traditional. Most of the plots center on women's activities. For example, Calliope Marsh, the narrator's closest friend in Friendship Village, has come up with an idea to make a Thanksgiving dinner for all the poor and sick people who live in Friendship Village. The only problem that she faces is the lack of sick or poor people in town:

"I just been tellin' myself," she looked up to say without preface, "That if I could see one more good old-fashion' Thanksgivin', life'd sort o' smooth out. An' land knows, it needs some smoothin' out for me.

With this I remember that it was as if my own loneliness spoke for me. At my reply Calliope looked at me quickly—as if I, too, had opened a door.

"Sometimes Thanksgivin' is some like seein' the sun shine when you're feelin' rill rainy yourself," she said thoughtfully.

She held out her blue-mittened hand and let the flakes fall on it in stars and coronets.

"I wonder," she asked evenly, "if you'd help me get up a Thanksgivin' dinner for a few poor sick folks here in Friendship?"

In order to keep my self-respect, I recall that I was ungracious as possible. I think I said that the day meant so little to me that I was willing to do anything to avoid spending it alone. A statement which seems to me now not to bristle with logic.

"That's nice of you," Calliope replied genially. Then she hesitated, looking down Daphne Street, which the Plank Road had become, toward certain white houses. There were the houses of Mis' Mayor Uppers, Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, and the Liberty sisters,—all substantial dignified houses, typical of the simple prosperity of the countryside.

"The only trouble," she added simply, "is that in Friendship I don't know of a soul rill sick, nor a soul what you might call poor" (29).

It is fairly safe to assume that a story written about a village where there are no sick or poor residents suggests a utopian text; however, Gale's creation of a feminist utopia reached beyond this.

In order to explain how Gale creates a feminist utopia, it is essential to have a greater understanding of what comprises a feminist utopia. Barbara Quissell discusses the qualities that define a utopia as particularly feminist in her essay, "The New World that Eve Made," from Kenneth Roemer's collection of essays, *America as Utopia*. Quissell addresses the idea of what she calls the "woman question" (148). When an author creates a feminist utopia, she does so by imagining a world in which she, as a woman, can thrive. Frances Bartkowski, in her text, *Feminist Utopias* builds on this

idea. She writes that feminist utopias are written by "[w]omen writers who have asked the questions of desire cast in a mood of 'as if,' 'what if,' and 'if only'" (40). Because the text is based on the answer to these questions, the feminist utopia is extremely individual—it is the author's own idea of a perfect society that is portrayed. It seems as though it could be easy to counter the ideas presented in a feminist utopia.

One could argue, after reading a utopian text, that one would not like to be a participant of that society. B.F. Skinner addresses this concern in his essay "Utopia as an Experimental Culture." He writes, "[the utopia is] a world designed to please the author, and he is bound by his culture, not mine" (Skinner 34). A feminist utopia is particularly complex because we expect that as a feminist text, it will reflect the author's desire for the promotion of women's rights. At the same time that the author presents the way that a common goal can be obtained, the author's individuality remains present. Though the ideal society is bound to the author's own answer to the woman question, it must have a universal quality as well. A fictional setting helps contribute to the universal quality of a feminist utopia. Bartkowski explains that "[t]he storytellers or history makers define their own notions of perfection and plenty in the good society which is 'nowhere' but could be 'anywhere'" (Bartkowski 8). The feminist utopia has both the qualities of the individual and the universal. This way, the author has the ability to propose her own answer or solution for those who live in similar societies.

What defines a utopia as feminist is the answer to the "woman question." Barbara Quissell writes about how women can use a utopia to answer this question in a feminist context: "Women use the utopian genre to question the comfortable supposition that men speak for all humanity" (Quissell 159). There are many ways of achieving this answer; however, this task proves difficult for women who are living in the early twentieth century. In "American Women Playwrights as Mediators of the 'Woman Problem'" Cynthia Sutherland introduces Zona Gale, Zoe Atkins, and Susan Glaspell, all Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatists, as writers who dared to incorporate feminism in their texts. She writes, "During a period in which most American Playwrights confined their work to representations of the middle class, these women were distinctive because they created principal roles for female characters whose rhetoric thinly veiled a sense of uneasiness with what Eva Figes and others more recently have called 'patriarchal attitudes'" (Sutherland 319). The way in which women

authors, during Zona Gale's time, created feminist works is somewhat tricky. In order to present their feminist ideas, these women authors needed to create a text that people would be willing to receive in a positive light. Frances Bartkowski explains how the feminist authors do this, "[the feminist utopia] is a magical kind of fiction—a crossbreed of tract made palatable as literature through a poorly and hastily constructed romance" (9). While I would argue that Gale's text is not poor or hastily constructed, this point is essential to make. It explains why women characters in this text remain in their traditional roles. However, women are not cast in these traditional roles just so they can, like a Trojan horse, sneak the feminist ideals into the Troy of popular culture. Using traditional roles serves as a way to propose a solution realistically. Jeanne Pfaelzer, author of *The Utopian Novel in America*, expands on this: "Feminist utopias reproduce many of the real conditions of women's work, as well as patterns of belief about femininity, in the society they seek to transcend" (141). Perhaps the best way to understand how this idea works is through application. In an article about Sally Miller Gearhart's utopian novel, *The Wanderground*, Jeana DelRosso presents a brief plot summary of the text:

In *The Wanderground*, hundreds of women have escaped the patriarchal oppression of the Cities and have banded together in interconnected, loving, lesbian, communal groups. Their development of inherently female telepathic powers allows them to live in harmony with their environment and with each other, as well as causes them to create new languages—ranging from the simple inventions of verbal terms to account for their newly acquired abilities to the sharing of thoughts through projected emotions instead of words (213).

While this example of a feminist utopia is extremely imaginative and interesting, it does little to solve the "woman question." It is not likely that women in the 1920s were ready or willing to band into communal groups; it is even less likely that these women would soon develop telepathic powers. Thus, it is more effective for the author to present her ideas via a fictional society that is similar to that of the audience. Nina Baym writes of the way that a "realistic" setting allows for women to use the fiction as a paradigm for change: "Learning becomes a way of taking charge of one's life, so that the novel might be read as a demonstration of how to grow beyond sentimentalism." Furthermore, this demonstration is something that Warner's audience would be able to emulate.

The focus on growth and authority is presented in close proximity to the domestic spaces with which Warner's readers would be familiar.

Now that I have presented the characteristics of the feminist utopia, I will explain how Gale's text fulfills these criteria. The first issue that I will address is Gale's answer to the "woman question." Gale was known to, as Deborah Williams puts it, "[a]ttempt to make the 'community of spirit' with other writers" (233). Gale was interested in establishing a writing community with Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. Though she exchanged letters with both authors, she failed at establishing these relationships, in part because neither Wharton or Cather was interested in situating herself within the realm of feminist debate. They were more interested in seeing themselves as individuals within the field (Williams 211). Her failed attempts to establish a community of women influenced Gale's answer to the "woman question"; Gale's desire for women to unite appears throughout *Friendship Village*. Gale understands that while one woman has a certain degree of power, an entire community of women has a great deal of power. Gale presents situations where women gain power throughout the text. In her chapter entitled "Grandma Ladies," Calliope Marsh decides that she will host a Christmas party for the women who live in the nursing home. Calliope lives alone and barely has the means to host these women. While the evening eventually becomes a complete success, a great amount of tension leads up to the event, as there is possibility for failure. This is contrasted with several events in the book where women, in groups, are shown to get a lot done. In Gale's chapter, "The Big Wind," the Through Express, the train that runs through Friendship Village, goes off its tracks. One of the cars contains little girls from an orphanage and their leader, a man named Middleton. Unfortunately, Middleton dies in the accident, and the orphaned girls are left in Friendship Village for the night. Through the community of women these girls receive care. Because there are so many girls, there aren't enough people who live in the village to keep them. The girls are to stay the night at a newly built church that has not yet been dedicated. The women in town must care for this large group of children, and they can do so only through community:

"Mis' Postmaster Sykes use' to set sponge twice a week, an' she offered five loaves out o' her six baked that day. Mis' Holcomb had two loaves o' brown bread an' a crock o' sour cream cookies. An' Libbie Liberty bursts out that they'd got up their courage an' killed an' boiled two o' their chickens the day before an' none o' the girls'd been able to touch a mouthful, bein' they'd raised the hens from

eggs to axe. Libbie said she'd bring the whole kettle along, an' it could be het on the church stove an' made soup of. So it wen on, down to even Liddy Ember, that was my partner an' silly poor, an' in about four minutes everything was provided for, beddin' an' all (94).

Gale had the vision that women, as a community, have the ability to achieve more than a single woman. Because she was not able to live out this goal, it is fitting that it manifests itself as a characteristic of her utopia.

Community is not the only answer to the "woman question" that Gale is proposing. She also writes about women having authority. A woman in Gale's text is likely to stand up to a man and argue as an equal, rather than allow herself to be dominated. For example, in the same chapter, "The Big Wind," the only thing that stands in the way of the women's success is a man. Timothy Toplady thinks it is inappropriate to house the girls in a church and therefore does not want his wife to bring them milk. Gale takes this as an opportunity to give women a voice:

"Amanda," says Timothy, "What in the Dominion o' Canady air you doin'?"

"I shouldn't think you would know," says Mis' Toplady, short. "You don't do enough of it."

She hed him there. Timothy always will go down to the Dick Dasher an' shirk the chores.

"Amanda," says Timothy, "you've disobeyed me flat-footed."

"No such thing," s'she, milkin' away like mad for fear he'd use force; "I ain't carried a drop o' milk here. I've drove it," she says.

Timothy groaned.

"Milkin' in the church," he says.

"No, sir," says Amanda, back at him; "I'm outside on the sod, an' you know it" (102).

Amanda Toplady has authority. In the feminist tradition she is, as Frances Bartkowski puts it, "questioning the hierarchical structures and divisions of labor, power, and discourse" (14). She feels that feeding the young girls is a worthwhile cause, and when her husband does not agree, she does not feel compelled to "obey" him. Furthermore, she uses logic in the argument with her husband. Hers is not a reaction of hysterics—from the body—but a well-thought-out response to her husband's demands. Thus, Gale is giving her female readership a paradigm for using logic and asserting themselves. In return for employing her authority, Amanda Toplady is rewarded with spiritual satisfaction. This is a device that Gale uses

regularly. Women who live according to the feminist "answer" that Gale puts forth are always spiritually satisfied.

This spiritual satisfaction as a reward for participating in the community can be seen in "Nobody Sick, Nobody Poor" as well. Calliope Marsh wishes to have a Thanksgiving Dinner for the sick and poor folks of Friendship Village; however, what Gale highlights is the way that Marsh joins together a group of lonely women. As the women begin to plan and come together to create a meal for these people, they become spiritually satisfied. In the end, the feast is for themselves, Calliope Marsh justifies this when she declares, "Sit Down!...Sit down, all six of you. Don't you see? Didn't you know? Ain't we all soul sick an' soul-hungry, all of us? An' I tell you, this is goin' to do our souls good—an' our stomachs too!" (48). As the women band together, forming a community, they find solace in each other. The problems they had been dealing with fade away, and their reward for establishing community comes from the joy they find in each other.

In the society Gale creates, women achieve community and authority—this leads to their spiritual satisfaction. Furthermore, they do so in a setting that is realistic. Frances Bartkowski puts forward the idea that a feminist utopia "exists 'nowhere' but could be 'anywhere.'" It is certain that Friendship Village fits this ideal. It is important that Gale chose Portage as the model for Friendship Village; as Portage is a small town like many others—Friendship Village could easily be considered any rural Midwestern town or village. It is the realistic setting of this text that allows it to not only answer the "woman question," but also proposes a solution. The idea of a town that can be nowhere but anywhere goes hand-in-hand with Jeanne Pfaelzer's idea that "feminist utopias reproduce many of the real conditions of women's work, as well as patterns of belief about femininity, in the society they seek to transcend" (141). Gale is presenting a way for women who live in towns similar to Friendship Village to claim community and authority. She is giving them a model that they can discuss and replicate. Furthermore, she is doing so in a way that seems highly achievable. Gale is not asking them to separate themselves from their entire lives: their husbands, roles in the home, or children. She presents her ideas in a realistic context.

Certainly Gale's references to domesticity are idealized. However, this may have more to do with the "country" setting in which the text is situated. The location of the country is an important one in framing the way that women embody power. In her text, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong explains this

significance: "The opposition between the city and country, which marked a major division between economic and political interests at the time, only enhanced the advantages of the domestic ideal" (69). By this, Armstrong means that particular factors, such as social or economic power, no longer define a person or family. With constraints like money and lineage taken away, what makes a person stand apart from others is the way that they manage their domestic space. The focus on the domestic space creates an inward turn, toward the home. In her afterword to Susan Warner's novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, Jane Tompkins explains the reason why women remained close to their domestic space: "Women writers of that era [the nineteenth century], unlike their male counterparts, could not walk out the door and become Mississippi riverboat captains, go off on whaling voyages, or build themselves cabins in the woods" (593). The same constraints apply to women in the early twentieth century as well. Certainly, it would be impossible for Gale to instigate change by asking her "sisters" to break away from their marriages, their homes, and their children. This emphasis on the "domestic ideal" presents more than just a template for creating an ideal household. It is a way for Gale to write about women who exercise power in their own domestic space.

Part of the "realistic" context that Gale creates is established by focusing on women as central characters. Cynthia Sutherland writes that feminist utopias demand "principal roles for female characters" (319). Gale achieves this criterion easily. *Friendship Village* is a book about women. The narrator is a woman who moves to Friendship Village and lives alone. Her closest friend is Calliope Marsh, and together, these women interact with the community of other women who live in Friendship Village. Despite the fact that women are often identified by the position that their husbands occupy within the town, for example Mis' Postmaster Sykes, the men are often tucked away in another room while the women are the center of activity.

I have discussed the attributes found in the stories that establish *Friendship Village* as a feminist utopia. The form of the text itself is worthy of discussion. In Gale's own essay, "The Novel of Tomorrow," she writes about structuring fiction: "Organic beauty in art usually consists of beauty not already familiar to us...it is strangeness in beauty alone which can weave the spell and bear the perfume" (Gale 159). The structure of *Friendship Village* is unusual. Unlike most novels, no central plot runs through the entire novel; rather, Gale presents a series of stories about Friendship Village that gives the reader, to use

Gale's word for it, an "essence" of what that place is like. A feminist utopia centers on the question "what if?" It is interesting, then, that Gale writes about her own novel as "The Novel of Tomorrow." Because in a feminist utopia, the author is proposing an answer to this question, the novel is always focused on the future. Gale explains, "Between the naturalistic novel, which is a record, and the romantic novel, which is the product of human imagining, lies the novel of tomorrow, concerned with imminent yet almost undivined reality of human conduct, human dream, perceived" (160). Gale writes about her own "human dream" in her novel, *Friendship Village*. In "The New World that Eve Made," Barbara Quissell writes, "The utopian dialectic always features contrasts between the imperfect present and the ideal world" (149). Zona Gale has created, in both content and structure, the novel of tomorrow: a feminist utopia.

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ROMANCE AND REVENGE: ZONA GALE AND
MARGERY LATIMER'S CONFLICTS OVER LOVE

KENNETH B. GRANT

Zona Gale died in a Chicago hospital of pneumonia, shortly after Christmas in 1938. Brought home to Portage, Wisconsin, she is buried in a shady corner of Silver Lake Cemetery close to the Wisconsin River and the Caledonia Hills. The gray stone slab marking her grave is inscribed with a line from her novel, *Birth*: "Life is something more than that which we believe it to be." The sentiment is reflective of her long-time interest in mysticism, in a spiritual life beyond that offered by traditional Christianity. A few yards away, a smaller stone marks the grave of Margery Latimer, another Wisconsin writer. Latimer died in a Chicago hospital, too, some six years before Gale. She had developed complications after delivering her first child, and she left her husband, poet Jean Toomer, a widower with a daughter to raise. Latimer's stone simply carries her name and life dates, no expression of faith, hope, or memory. The proximity of these two graves to each other is one of death's strange ironies. Gale and Latimer were never very far from each other in life either—at one time living next door. Gale, the successful writer, critiqued Latimer's manuscripts, tendered advice, and supported the young writer financially as well as emotionally. In response, Latimer created two objectionable characters clearly based on Gale, characters most people who knew Gale regarded as unflattering and unfair. Why was Margery Latimer drawn to and repulsed by Zona Gale? Why did Zona Gale continue to support the so obviously ungrateful Margery Latimer? What is clear from a reading of Latimer's novel, *We Are Incredible*, and novelette, *Guardian Angel*, is that she felt betrayed by Gale on issues of importance to her: love, marriage, children, and career. Latimer certainly must have felt complimented by Gale's encouragement and support, but at the same time she may have been

reluctant to be shaped by a woman with strong views regarding a woman artist's role. Latimer had shown early signs of becoming one of Wisconsin's most talented writers. Regrettably, her early death left not only her creative potential unrealized but also a petty and unbecoming literary record regarding one of her most serious supporters.

Wisconsin grows many of its artists along the Wisconsin River. The small towns along the banks of the short stretch of river in Columbia and Sauk counties nurtured Zona Gale, Margery Latimer, August Derleth, Aldo Leopold, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Perhaps with the exception of Aldo Leopold, these authors knew each other well because they frequently attended the same local cultural and social events. Certainly, almost everyone in Wisconsin in the 1920s had heard about Frank Lloyd Wright, just as many, perhaps more, knew Zona Gale and her Friendship Village stories. In 1920, Gale published *Miss Lulu Bett* to great popular success. The *New York Times* review of *Miss Lulu Bett* saw in the novel "promise of a new type of work from her" (28 Mar. 1920), and the *New York Evening Post* observed, "Nothing could well be more astonishing or claim a more ungrudging tribute than Miss Gale's recent achievement in 'Miss Lulu Bett'" (1 May 1920). The critics acknowledged a shift and development in Gale's work from the syrupy sentimental but popular Friendship Village stories to the sharper realism of the work in *Miss Lulu Bett* and *Birth*. The next year, her dramatization of the novel earned her the Pulitzer Prize, the first awarded to a woman in drama. She lectured on the modern novel at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1922 and was named to the Board of Regents of the University the next year by Governor Blaine. Her reputation as an influential figure secure, Gale established scholarships for creative writers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and used her considerable influence to assist young writers in developing their careers. Many students at Wisconsin received her support and encouragement, among them Margery Latimer, and the barrel-chested boy from Sauk City, August Derleth.

Latimer had come to Gale's attention before she matriculated at the University of Wisconsin. In 1917, Latimer had published a short story in the Portage newspaper that caught Gale's attention. She invited the teenager to her home for tea. Latimer was determined to be a writer, and after unpleasant experiences at both Wooster College and the University of Wisconsin, she moved to New York to pursue her career. In 1921, with her play a success on Broadway, Gale had

used her influence to get Latimer a job with the *Woman's Home Companion*, from which Latimer was fired a few months later. Latimer returned to Wisconsin and the University in Madison, and, once again, Gale sought to promote the young woman in whom she saw so much potential. The Zona Gale Scholarship fund was largely created to help Latimer, whose own family—her father was a traveling salesman—was struggling financially.

Back in Portage, in 1925, Latimer began reading sections of her novel, *We Are Incredible*, to Gale. In a letter to her friend Blanche Matthias, she wrote that Gale found the novel strong, though Latimer writes, "There are parts that I shudder to read to her and when I have finished I feel that I can't go on but she sits there beyond emotion, poised, remote" (quoted in Afterword: *The Life* 221). The reason for Latimer's discomfort during the readings is reflected in the subject matter of the novel itself. In *We Are Incredible*, Margery Latimer depicts Zona Gale in the character of Hester Linden with icy brutality.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the reader to Stephen Mitchell, a thirty-one-year-old man so damaged by his time as part of Linden's coterie that he is incapable of a healthy relationship with anyone. The second part adds the character of Dora Weck, a version of Latimer herself, copper-haired, attractive, and herself torn between her admiration for the distant, cold Hester Linden and her desire for romantic attention from Stephen Mitchell. Dora has returned to live with her sister, Myrtle Fry; her husband, Rex; and their children, Gloria and Deva—perhaps the most repulsive family of Wisconsin letters. The Frys are bad manners, bad taste, invincible ignorance, and corrupt values personified. Stephen Mitchell lodges with the Frys, people so nasty that the sterility of Hester Linden looks attractive in comparison. The final part of the novel focuses on Hester Linden. The character is drawn with icy bite: as Dora returns to Hester's house, Hester gives herself instructions on how she is to respond—"Let the voice be cold but not too cold. Let the eye have a spark of kindness and understanding. Eyes look out at her with compassion" (225). Later, Hester Linden instructs herself in changing Dora: "Make this girl rise from her false emotional world that is meaningless into the towers of the mind. Make her live behind her eyes in the cold, vast world of choice and freedom" (228). Hester does not want Dora ever to have a meaningful sexual relationship with a man, even though she is sexually attracted to Stephen Mitchell: "Let her always be like this with the sun inside her and her eyes staring out at the distant sky. Let those

flames of hair curl round her head. Keep her a girl with hope bright between her breasts and the world still and good in the towers of her mind, safe and pure in the depths of her heart.... Oh, let not hand touch her and leave its print on that golden skin" (243).

Mitchell confronts Linden with the damage she has done him:

"When I was eighteen I was in love with you. You have stuffed me full of all the silliness you could think of about not having desires and being pure and noble.... Well, all of it turned me insane, as you can't imagine, and once I confessed to you that I thought I was sterile, impotent...you very deliberately and gravely told me," he stopped again to smile and deposit his ashes in the grass, "that impotence was a superior state of development." (270)

Both Stephen Mitchell and Dora Weck are damaged, but Hester Linden is beyond feeling and caring. Latimer's version of Gale is given these thoughts:

You know that no man can possess me, no man can touch me, I am far away in the sky, safe from you all. No man can move my thoughts or change my path or feel me softening. I am myself. I mix with none of you. I am your quest because you dare not possess me. I am as far as the stars and until you reach me you can have no reason for existing. You will strain and suffer because the foot is on your head, instead of your foot being on the defenseless heads of women and women who would give you everything they possess and hang to your heels...I am beyond you all. I am untouchable. (273)

Shortly thereafter, Stephen and Dora commit suicide in Linden's backyard. Looking at their bodies, Linden knows

they were in her forever. Mitchell and Dora, forever young, now forever beautiful. Her eyes closed as if she must sleep and she seemed to be looking at tides of snow that rose vast and smooth and swept away toward the cold sky in waves that were intolerably still and complete and unknown. (283)

The image that Latimer draws of Gale, her patron, advocate, and mentor, is uncharitable at the least. She accuses Gale through Hester Linden of rejecting marriage, sexual intimacy, and children. There may be some truth at the core of her portrayal; those who knew both authors immediately identified Hester Linden as Gale. Gale must have been a person of great reserve; a man so sexually confident and flirtatious as Frank Lloyd Wright found himself stymied when he

attempted to court her. Years later, Wright would complain in his autobiography, "I thought Taliesin would be a much more appropriate place for the author of 'Lulu Bett.' But I had been spoiled, or something. Perhaps I had always expected women to make love to me. I just didn't know how to make love to Zona Gale." (Gill 197-8). Latimer, like Dora Weck, seems torn between two value systems. She despises Hester Linden's aloofness, her distrust of men, her asexuality, and clichéd mysticism, but she despises as well everything represented by the family of Myrtle and Rex Fry: the traditional role of marriage, intimacy, and procreation. Latimer rejects the donut-frying world of the Frys, but she also rejects the suggestion that life might offer more than we believe. In his biography of Gale, Derleth reports that Gale told a friend that "she was glad Margery had written it, 'to get it out of her system'" (181). How painful must those sessions have been with Latimer reading her manuscript and Gale, apparently unmoved, listening and, perhaps, offering editorial advice.

In 1928, the year that *We Are Incredible* was published, Latimer was shocked to discover that the Hester Linden she imagined might not match the Zona Gale living on Edgewater Street. Gale married Portage banker and businessman William Breese. The wedding was clearly a shock to Latimer, who did not learn that Gale intended to wed until she read it in the newspaper the day before the June 12, 1928, wedding. Moreover, Breese, a widower, had a daughter, and Gale had become guardian of a two-year-old girl whom she and Breese would adopt after their marriage. Marriage, intimacy, children, poise, control, a lack of temper—this was not the Gale who argues that women must choose between creative life and married life. According to Nancy Loughridge's biographical sketch, Latimer was so distraught by Gale's marriage that her parents thought they might need to send her to a hospital (222-3). Latimer would signal her subsequent, renewed rebellion from Gale in what Derleth, in uncharacteristic understatement, refers to as "the unkind novelette, *Guardian Angel*" (181).

Once again, a young woman, Vanessa, is drawn to an intellectual older woman, Miss Fleta Bain. Fleta Bain has encouraged Vanessa's artistic development, at the same time dissuading her from becoming entangled in a romantic relationship. Fleta Bain is dismissive of Vanessa's aunt, who at one time had a singing career in Chicago but is content now with her marriage and children. Vanessa learns that Fleta is investigating Pliny Bope, the richest man in town. Bope is a man of questionable reputation: he pays low wages and may be

engaged in objectionable business practices. Vanessa's father has invested all his money with Bope, who is believed to be paying his attention to Fleta Bain's aunt, the obnoxious Clavira Weir.

Vanessa opens the newspaper to discover a wedding notice: "Today, at the home of Miss Clavira Weir, 512 East Eleventh Street, was solemnized the marriage of Miss Fleta Bain and Mr. Pliny Bope, prominent citizen and owner of the local gas works" (*Guardian Angel* 132). Vanessa is shocked—just like Dora Weck in *We Are Incredible*, Vanessa is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by Fleta Bain. Fleta proves herself a hypocrite, choosing life with a man of commerce in direct conflict with the life of celibacy she preached. Moreover, she is blessed with an immediate family, Bope's two spoiled teenage daughters. In her disgust, Vanessa initially cuts herself off from Fleta, only to be drawn into Fleta's web. Vanessa apologizes to Fleta, who claims it is unnecessary since Vanessa has not hurt her: "I can't be hurt. Really. It's something I've worked on for a long time. No one can hurt me. I won't permit it" (148). Fleta invites Vanessa to live with her as a way for her to educate and help refine the young woman's sensibilities. Vanessa can repay her by helping a bit around the house. The helping quickly degenerates into Vanessa serving as an unpaid maid, and in the course of her stay with Fleta Bain, Vanessa realizes Fleta's deception and deceit. She leaves the house, and at the close of the novelette, is about to embark on an artistic career in Chicago. Before she takes the train, Vanessa visits Fleta. Still under Fleta's thrall, at the close of the visit, Vanessa "dropped to her knees as she had that day in the wood at the picnic, and touched her lips to the toe of Fleta's shoe" (164).

The image of Zona Gale created by Latimer in *We Are Incredible* and *Guardian Angel* is palpably cruel, but the meanness and pettiness reveal how seriously Latimer herself was conflicted in life. Gale's interest in mysticism is reviled in both books—though Latimer herself would become involved in Gurdjieff's philosophy and would, in fact, participate with her husband, Jean Toomer, in the Portage Experiment. Latimer mocks Gale's independence and feminism as well as her marriage and family. In *Guardian Angel*, she blames Gale for preaching restraint in relationships and hypocritically establishing a relationship with William Breese. In both works, Latimer is torn between a desire for motherhood and an expressed rejection of the role of mother. Latimer is attracted to Gale and repelled by her. She desires Gale's recognition at the same time that she feels she should live with-

out it. How else could Latimer have described Gale but cold when every effort she had made to hurt Gale was met by tolerance? When Gale's friends came to her defense after the publication of *Guardian Angel*, she responded in characteristic fashion, "Margery must write whatever she feels is right for her to write" (Derleth 181). For Latimer, Gale's patience and tolerance are translated into icy emotionlessness.

August Derleth, another of Gale's protégés, summarized her achievement:

She made of hers a name to reckon with, this woman who left always an impression of fragility belying her great inner strength, concealing the tirelessness with which she fought her causes—and these were legion. All the warm humanity of her, the keen perception, the unfailing understanding and compassion, the sensitive appreciation of her world—all these things are gone, and yet linger in everything of her she left behind: the stories, poems, the novels, plays—and in her brief essays that told so much of what she did and why... (Derleth 2).

Her works do reveal a sensitive and compassionate voice, a voice Latimer might have been on the verge of hearing. Shortly before Latimer and Toomer left for Chicago and while Gale was in New York, Latimer stopped at Gale's home to say goodbye. Disappointed at missing her but filled with joyous expectation at the impending birth of her first child, Latimer left a note announcing that finally "[a]ll my inadequacy in life and in pain are gone." Sadly, not much more life was given her. Gale was deeply moved when she learned of Latimer's death. "Now," she concluded in a letter about Latimer's importance in her life, "she is incandescent" (Derleth 225).

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A FEMINIST INFLUENCE: ZONA GALE AND WILLIAM MAXWELL

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In the summer of 1925, William Maxwell took the train from Chicago to Portage, Wisconsin, to work at a nearby farm during the months before his senior year in high school. He had moved to the Windy City from his beloved home in Lincoln, Illinois, with his father and stepmother just two years earlier. The departure had encapsulated his youth as well as his image of the town of Lincoln—the Lincoln he had known before his mother's untimely death in the 1918 influenza epidemic. As a young man, Maxwell did not feel understood by his father—a circumstance exacerbated when he did odd jobs in the senior Maxwell's office in the Chicago loop during school vacations. On the 40-minute ride south on the El, his father, concerned for his son's social life, always insisted that he put away *The Brothers Karamazov* and read instead the bridge column in *The Chicago Tribune*. But the younger Maxwell could not be dissuaded: when his father was not looking, he "stopped thinking about bridge...in order to go on with *The Brothers Karamazov*."¹ Now, he was headed to a place where he could read Dostoevsky without looking over his shoulder. Indeed, in a real sense, the train ride from Chicago to Wisconsin proved an escape: an escape *from* his father's insurance office on South Jackson Street and an escape *to* Bonnie Oaks, a farm that would become a second home to him in the year ahead, a haven where he found the freedom and nurturing to begin the first serious writing of his career.

Bonnie Oaks was no ordinary farm—in later years the author likened it to the farm in Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Mildred Ormsby Green and her husband, Harrison Green, a Milwaukee attorney, had inherited the property from her family.

Buoyed by Mildred's ebullient personality and love for the creative temperament, it became a retreat for authors and musicians, an informal artist's colony, in the twenties and thirties. As the Greens's daughter writes, "The summer months became legend. Mildred was a warm and hospitable woman whose genuine interest in people drew them to her... From the bootblack to the artist, the very young to the very old." The estate was idyllic and extensive; wooded land rolled through wild flower meadows to a calm creek perfect for rowing. In all, fifteen buildings dotted the property, most of which had been built in the mid-to-late nineteenth century: the Main House where the Greens lived, several guest houses, a boathouse, woodshed, carpenter's shop, and chicken coop.²

Several noted artists became regular guests at Bonnie Oaks. Beginning in 1922, renowned pianist and Juilliard professor Josef Lhevinne spent twenty-two summers there where his grand piano, sent annually from New York in a crate, occupied the first floor studio of the "tower" across from the main house. Lhevinne, who often encouraged students and other New York musicians to stay at the farm, slept on the second floor, while the third floor, originally a huge water tank, was renovated to make another studio—and the retreat where Maxwell would eventually write his first novel.

Bonnie Oaks was a halcyon world to the teen-aged Maxwell. Here he not only soaked up the intellectual and creative atmosphere, but met Zona Gale, one of the primary literary mentors of his life. She had won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Miss Lulu Bett* just four years earlier and was a good friend of Mildred Green. Although Gale's work became neglected later in the century, she was a famous literary figure at the time and was the first nationally acclaimed writer Maxwell knew. "[I]f you picked up a magazine there was a very good chance you'd find a story of hers in it," he wrote in a tribute to Gale for the *Yale Review*. In an interview, he exclaimed, "Oh God, what a lovely creature she was! And so kind to me."

Gale was probably the first feminist in Maxwell's life. Fluent in the artistic, cultural, social, and political movements of her time, she was an active national voice on women's suffrage, pacifism, prohibition, civil liberties, and racial equality—not to mention the future of the novel. She exemplified a highly successful, independent woman who had made her way in a male-dominated profession early in the twentieth century. Unlike Maxwell's Aunt Edith, whose father forbade her to go to Smith College, Gale graduated from the

University of Wisconsin and ventured to New York in her twenties, as Maxwell would. There she wrote for the *New York World* to support her “real” work: fiction that most often centered on life in her small Midwestern hometown. Although Gale and her young protégé would share this literary calling, ultimately her path would differ from the future *New Yorker* editor’s. In 1911, after ten years in Manhattan, she published her first novel, *Romance Island*, and later that year received first place out of 15,000 entries in a short story contest conducted by the *Delineator*. She returned home with the \$2000 prize money to live the rest of her life as a writer in Portage.³

There, twelve years after Gale’s return, Maxwell met her the day he arrived on the train from Chicago. One of Mrs. Green’s daughters greeted him at the station and, on their way to Bonnie Oaks, stopped to deliver a box of strawberries for Miss Gale’s father at the writer’s Greek-revival home on the Fox River. While Miss Green spoke with Mr. Gale, Zona spoke with Maxwell: “I remember her showing me a Hiroshige print of some men walking in the rain, and a parchment lampshade with cutouts and explaining that they were of mystical significance. She also—and it is the one thing that always makes an adolescent’s head swim—treated me as an intellectual equal. There was thirty-four years difference in our ages, and I was by no means her intellectual equal.”⁴

The next day, while Maxwell was pulling weeds in the Greens’s vegetable garden, he heard the telephone ring. Gale was calling to invite Mildred and “the little Maxwell” to dinner. He remembered it as one of the best days of his life: “When I was talking to her I felt I was conversing with a celestial being, in a world of light.” Indeed, Gale introduced him to an alluring world of letters and intellectual pursuits: she was engaged in correspondence with the most famous American women writers of the day—Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Anzia Yesierska—and showed him their letters. He recalled “a note from Elinor Wylie, a letter from A.E. and others. These were talismans.” At the time he met her, Gale had also become increasingly interested in mystic and psychic phenomena as a result of her mother’s death two years earlier. Her credo—that life is more than we believe it to be—left a permanent impression on him, influencing his own way of observing and thinking about the human condition. As he remembered: “It was understood that I would make something of my life, but meanwhile it was life—the secret nature of all things that were something more than they appeared to

be—that’s what she talked to me about.” After the first dinner, their visits “fell into a pattern”—a member of the Green family would deliver him at the Gales and then go about the family shopping. “I came to talk and we talked,” he recalled. “Her voice was both sad and humorous at the same time. Suddenly the car would be waiting at the curb, and it would be time for me to go. I had been immeasurably enriched, in ways that I didn’t even try to understand.” At first, he wrote down everything she said, but later found that he couldn’t: “I said good-bye on the front steps and at that moment a curtain came down over my mind and I could not to save my life have told anybody what had happened inside that house or even what we talked about.”⁵

Gale’s impassioned *Portage Wisconsin and Other Essays*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1928, offers a glimpse of the concerns consuming her when they met. These writing seem to lay out the very essence of her conversations with the young man in the light-filled office at the back of her stately home and suggest she was an ideal mentor who sparked his interest in the years before he decided to become a writer. Through hindsight and knowledge of his own novels and stories to come, we can say that these meetings with Gale were a revelation for the seventeen-year-old and influenced his approach to the art he would later claim as his own. Her ideas about literature, for instance, and the novel in particular, spoke directly to the way he himself would write as a mature author. For Gale, the “naturalistic” or “realistic” novel of the time captured sordid, dramatic, and bleak aspects of common existence while ignoring its “brighter” implications: she called for a future fiction that would lie somewhere between the photographic “records” of naturalistic novels and the “human imaginings” of romanticism. Neither turning its back on base realities nor resorting to sentimentality, her “novel of tomorrow” would find significance in the simple patterns of daily living, in “the mysterious beauty of the commonplace.” Artists, she believed, should find “excitement in the presence of life,” not just for “acute situations”—the “tragedy, the zeniths, the nadirs”—but for “life’s sheer deadly death-dealing routine.” She longed for regional color, for American authors who would concentrate on their “native sources”—“the growth of the individual: marriage, the great American home, relatives, traditions, and the accepted virtues in the route of [their] civilization.”⁶ All this would become Maxwell’s own field of labor in years to come, and Gale would live to see his first fruits. On a visit to the Zona Gale home, I could imagine them sitting together at her

mahogany desk or looking across the sloping lawn to the river below: an impressionable, book-loving, and somewhat romantic young man enchanted by her pontifications on literature and serious concerns for the state of the nation's fiction. Most likely, her conversations first planted in him the notion that art could emanate from everyday town life—even from Lincoln, Illinois—that his “native sources” could become central subjects for fiction. Her “novel of tomorrow,” with its reconciliation of the realistic and romantic, foretold the dark realism Maxwell later coupled with his reverence for homeland—a quality that would foster a distinct clear-sightedness, a dual and balanced view that would set his work apart, particularly from other Midwestern literature. By example, Gale also taught him that fiction could be a viable career: she and her parents lived comfortably in a stately home that her writing had built for them.

Gale's essays indicate she may have spoken in high flown, philosophical terms with a dramatic flair; her intellect clearly impressed Maxwell, whose more linear manner of thinking may explain why he remembered her discussions only in generalities. Even so, he connected with her: she shared his interest in stories of human nature and sought a higher meaning in everyday life, particularly in her small Midwestern hometown. She most likely encouraged her young friend to heighten his sense of wonder and perception through what she called a “special grace of seeing”—to find and interpret the unexpressed, to record what lay beneath the familiar externalities of human life. For Maxwell the writer, this quality—an emphasis on the unsaid, on the power of silent epiphanies—would become an intrinsic part of his artistic sensibility and work. Gale may also have introduced him to the “new psychology,” which she held great stock in, particularly as it applied to the novelist: “the secret of understanding of human beings is now something in which all the world may share.”⁷ After Gale's death in the 1940s, Maxwell would have his own experience with this “new psychology,” using what he learned in Freudian analysis to deepen characterization in his novels, particularly in *The Folded Leaf* and *Time Will Darken It*.

Maxwell would return to the farm, off and on, for the next twelve years and continue to see Gale during his stays there. In both Mildred Green and Gale he found women who encouraged and nurtured his literary interests—indeed introduced him to what a literary life could be—and helped put him on the path to becoming a writer. While in college at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Maxwell corresponded with Gale,

who returned his letters periodically: during this time, she was traveling extensively following her marriage to William Breese, a Portage businessman. Once Maxwell received a letter from Japan saying “that she had been the guest of honor at a dinner party and after dinner, for the entertainment of the guests, five hundred fireflies were released in the garden.” When she came to lecture at the university, she had a dinner for Maxwell and his friends in the upstairs dining room of a Chinese restaurant. “My friends took her simply as a visitation,” he writes. “Which is what she was. I don't know which of the nine orders of angels she belonged to—was she a power, a dominion, a principality, an archangel? All I know is that when I was with her I had her undivided angelic attention.”⁸

Gale came to see him again during his year at Harvard. She took him to dinner followed by an informal meeting of young people where she spoke about writing. “What I remember,” Maxwell writes, “is that an over-serious young man stood up and said, after she had finished speaking—he meant no offense: he was speaking as one writer to another— ‘Miss Gale, when you read something that you have written are you ever ashamed of it?’ And she smiled mischievously and said, ‘Not as often as I should be.’”⁹

In 1933, Maxwell left graduate school at Illinois to make his way as a writer in New York. He had no luck finding employment there and he returned to the Greens at his beloved Bonnie Oaks. There, on the third floor of the renovated water tower, looking out over the trees, he sat at his typewriter composing his first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, as the sound of Josef Lhevinne's piano rose through the floorboards. All his life the writer would appreciate this idyllic atmosphere and remember Mildred Green as the charming, lively woman who provided him the space and unconditional support he needed to launch his literary career. “Some of the characters [in *Bright Center*] were derived from people living on the farm at the time, so it was a handy place to be,” he remembered. “I would come for lunch and they would make remarks I had put in their mouths that morning. Which wasn't really mysterious, because if you are conscious of character—in the other sense of the word—you can't help being struck by how consistent people are in everything they do and say.” Maxwell finished the book in four months, “with the help of Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Elinor Wylie, and a girl on the farm who was also writing a novel. When somebody said something good we would look at each other and one of us would say ‘I spit on that,’ meaning ‘keep your hands off of it.’” In the early years of their

careers, Maxwell and Illinois friend Robert Henderson read everything they wrote aloud to each other. "So I heard most of his very first novel," Henderson told me. But the final word came from Wisconsin: Maxwell brought the manuscript to Zona Gale to ask her if he had written a novel. She told him yes, but also mentioned that she had "read until four in the morning, and then gone downstairs to her study looking for the last chapter." Maxwell remembered that he was "too thickheaded to understand what she was trying to tell me," and told her, "'No, that's all there is.'" Two decades later, he realized what Gale found missing, but in later years could not recall the ending she envisioned.

Bright Center of Heaven traces a single summer day at Meadowland, the pastoral haven of the widowed Mrs. West and the assortment of artists she welcomes each year to live and work in rural Wisconsin. While her houseguests paint, write, and feverishly tackle the *Allegro con fuoco* of the Tchaikovsky B flat Minor piano concerto in a renovated water tower, her two teen-aged sons help with the farm chores. Two lovers are in residence: Paul, a newly reformed academician, courts Nigel, an actress, who secretly fears she is pregnant. A hypochondriac, Mrs. West's disgruntled sister-in-law, Amelia, clings to social attitudes of her native South, while Johanna, the Bavarian cook, privately ponders the fate of her ill mother back in the homeland. Mrs. West directs Meadowland's coterie with an endearing exuberance that lends an eccentric, even magical tone to the ordinary day. From the moment breakfast is served, she anticipates the four-o'clock arrival of Mr. Jefferson Carter, a "Negro lecturer" and leader of his race who has accepted her invitation to Meadowland following a meeting in New York. His impending visit strings the work with subtle suspense as characters anticipate how Mrs. West's "sociological experiment" will end.¹⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, the experiment turns out badly. Jefferson Carter, the black intellectual, becomes offended by callous remarks made by some of the other guests and storms out of the screen tent just as they begin after-dinner conversation. Gale herself had experience writing about the blending of races in social situations: her short story, "The Reception Surprise," portrayed an interracial marriage and was originally rejected by the *Atlantic Monthly*, although she published it later under the title "Dream" in her 1919 collection, *Peace in Friendship Village*. Perhaps Gale wanted resolution with Maxwell's black character—her views suggest that she

might have been looking for a more definitive and sympathetic closure for the African American—or at least a sense of where Jefferson Carter went and how his departure affected Mrs. West. Gale wrote her story out of her desire for political change and commented on Maxwell's novel from that perspective. Her words of endorsement appeared on the book's back cover: "Here is the first human, laughing treatment of one of the most pressing of national problems, turned quaintly on its head."

Harper's published Maxwell's second novel, *They Came Like Swallows*, in 1937. When it was chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club, Gale praised it in a glowing review that went out to subscribers. She had been distressed when Maxwell accepted a position at *The New Yorker* the previous year and encouraged his writing over the editorial work: "She didn't like *The New Yorker* particularly, and she thought I would stop writing, as indeed I did after three or four years," he said. His first payment from the Book-of-the-Month Club totaled eight thousand dollars, so much money that he "went into Wolcott Gibbs's office to tell him and he could hardly walk, stunned by the overwhelming sum." Soon in New York, Gale asked him if there was anyone there he would like to meet, and he answered, "Willa Cather": "At this period of her life Willa Cather was a recluse," he said, "and I had asked for the one person in New York that Zona Gale couldn't take me to."¹¹

Gale died the following year, yet although she lived to see only Maxwell's first two novels, she continued to influence his thinking and later works. Unlike his mentor, Maxwell would never assume the role of activist artists—in that way he was more like Cather, another of his literary influences. His literary world would, for the most part, remain separated from political and social causes. Even so, Gale's role as progressive woman in the public eye offered him an important model, particularly for his portraits of women in his 1947 novel *Time Will Darken It*, set in 1912. Here, his depiction of women's dreams and frustrations, outlooks and socialization, shares close affinity with that of female authors a generation or so before him who were writing about the same general period. Women characters in the novels of Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Anzia Yezierska, as well as Gale, provide his cast of female characters a spiritual sisterhood of sorts; despite diverse backgrounds, they are connected by the attitudes and obstacles of their era, by the "New Woman" movement that advocated female fulfillment beyond the home and challenged patriarchal order beginning in the late nine-

teenth century. Maxwell, of course, did not need to read about this type of female because he knew one of the most famous of the era—Gale was, in a sense, the ultimate “New Woman.” To have spoken with her regularly and intimately during his formative years certainly helped him to develop notions of femininity and gender roles that would later result in sensitive characterization of women in his own fiction.

As Deborah Lindsay Williams has noted, “Like many early feminists, Gale realized that putting women on a pedestal was only an excuse to exclude them from their own lives, and in no way prevented exploitation.” Gale wrote in 1922, “The pedestal does not seem to be high enough to prevent a husband from scaling it to collect his wife’s earnings.”¹² Maxwell echoes this sentiment in *Time Will Darken It*: “Boys brought up the way Austin King was brought up are taught, along with table manners, to create a handsome high pedestal and put the woman they admire on it, for purposes of worship. What they are not taught is how to get her off the pedestal, for purposes of love.” Indeed, while Gale was not Maxwell’s only influence, she undoubtedly helped him develop a sensibility about women that inspired this novel; not only is the work structured around a woman’s pregnancy, but it also presents women of the early twentieth century at nearly every stage of life—from childhood to old age—addressing challenges of marriage, vocation, childbirth, and fulfillment outside of the home.

What Maxwell most remembered, however, was Gale’s mysticism. When he met her, she had adopted a new philosophical emphasis on inner transformation and the spiritual quest of the individual. She was interested in the mysteries of human experience as stated in her mantra, “life is something more than we believe it to be.” Turning again to Maxwell’s novel, *Time Will Darken It*, we can see her influence at work in the narrator’s poignant meditation on parents—especially those who, like the author’s mother, have died, and so are part of the enigmatic past. “There is nothing so difficult to arrive at as the nature and personality of one’s parents,” the narrator reflects:

Death, about which so much mystery is made, is perhaps no mystery at all. But the history of one’s parents has to be pieced together from fragments, their motives and character guessed at, and the truth about them remains deeply buried, like a boulder that projects one small surface about the level of smooth lawn, and when you come to dig around it, proves to be too large ever to move, though each year’s frost forces it up a little higher.¹³

The intimacy of this observation and the straightforward simplicity with which it inverts conventional thinking about the human condition are pure Maxwell. As is often the case in his work, the past’s puzzles connect inextricably to maternal and paternal figures; a focus on the private realm reconsiders the import of life’s most basic elements. Like the boulder pushing up from the grass, the narrator suggests, personal history reveals itself incompletely: for every fact unearthed, myriad truths lie beneath impenetrable soil. In this case, he maintains that the omnipresent mystery of death—the “grand “life question—is perhaps no mystery at all. More complex, more incomprehensible is the essential character of those with whom one shares the most fundamental, biological relationships. The aspects of life closest to us, the narrator infers, may be more than they appear to be—they may be the most mysterious and perplexing of all. Certainly Gale’s voice resonated here: in their talks twenty years earlier, she had introduced him to her belief in a secret nature of things that are something more than they seem to be. Throughout his life, Maxwell remembered with certainty only this topic of their conversations, an idea so sacred to his mentor that it was etched on the flat surface of her own gravestone projecting above the smooth lawn of the Portage, Wisconsin cemetery.

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NOTES

¹WM, Interview by the author, 11 November 1991.

²WM, Interview by Bonetti, 10; Eleanor Green Piel, personal account of the history of Bonnie Oaks, *Annex A*, 11 May 1984, Wisconsin State Historical Society (“The summer months became legend”).

³WM, Interview by Nemanic, 9, 7 (“Oh God, what a lovely creature”); WM, “Zona Gale,” *The Yale Review*, 76 (1987): 221, (“If you picked up a magazine”); Dianne Lynch, introduction to *Miss Lulu Bett and Birth* (collected), by Zona Gale (1920 and 1918; reprint, Oregon, Wisconsin: Waubesa Press, 1994), 8.

⁴WM, “Zona,” 221.

⁵WM, Interview by Nemanic, 7 (“When I was talking to her”); WM, “Zona,” 222 (remaining quotes).

⁶Zona Gale, *Portage, Wisconsin and Other Essays*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 155 (“naturalistic”), 145 (“brighter”), 173 (“novel of tomorrow,” “mysterious beauty”), 135 (“excitement in the presence of life”), 140 (“the growth of the individual”).

⁷*Ibid.*, 167 (“special grace of seeing”), 119 (“new psychology”).

⁸WM, “Zona,” 222-3.

⁹WM, “Zona,” 223.

¹⁰WM, *BCOH*, 39.

¹¹WM, Interview by Nemanic, 8 ("She didn't"); WM, Interview by Bonetti ("went into Wolcott Gibbs's office"), WM, Interview by Nemanic, 9 ("At this period").

¹²Deborah Lindsay Williams, *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 52; quoted in Williams, 52.

¹³WM, *Time*, 222.