

## MASTER'S THESIS

### Problematics of self in moral space: a study of Willa Cather, Susan Glaspell and H.D.

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**Problematics of Self in Moral Space:  
A Study of Willa Cather, Susan Glaspell and H.D.**

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for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy**

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## Abstract

The present study explores the works of three early twentieth-century American women writers (Willa Cather, Susan Glaspell, and H.D. [Hilda Doolittle]), who deal with the problematics of self in moral space. In the six selected texts, namely, *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Trifles*, *The Verge*, *Trilogy*, and *Helen in Egypt*, the selected women writers discuss how the problematics of self within moral space is affected and characterized by ethical norms and gender prejudices. In her novels, Cather contextualizes problematics of the self in moral space within the transitional period from the great Frontier period to the modern period, from the virtue-worshipped society to the morally degenerated modern pragmatic world. In her plays, Glaspell demonstrates how women, in search of their selves, find themselves entrapped by the paradox of individuality and community and highlights the internal conflict between patriarchal conventions and women's personal desires. In her poems, H.D. expresses women's frustration and confusion in the course of self-formation by looking at the inherent conflict of gender and ethical norms, the unstable gendered moral agency, and the compromising prospect of maternal moral authority.

These three women writers' literary contributions lie in their humanistic concern, their interests in perplexed women souls within sexist and male-oriented moral space, in which gendered ethical norms and universalization of gender norms were regarded as moral good. Cather shows the rise of female consciousness and moral degeneration in the modern world, which lead to her portrayal of self-awakened female characters. Glaspell bestows her female protagonists with various radical views and rebellions, showing their passive resistance. H.D. mediates the fragility of gendered moral consciousness and the prospect of maternal moral authority, which as H.D. envisions, is the compromise between maternal principles and paternal principles.

The study also shows how gendered ethical violence continues to haunt the lives of self-searching modern women. Thus this feminist moral-philosophical study about literary works by women, for women, and of women is significant as it addresses the causes, difficulties, and problems in constructing the female self in the social and ethical contexts of early twentieth-century American literature.

## Table of Contents

<b>Declaration</b> .....	i
<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iv
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	v
<b>Introduction</b>	
Problematics of Self in Moral Space.....	1
<b>Chapter One</b>	
Willa Cather: Strategic Representation of Problematics of Self in Moral Space.....	25
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
Susan Glaspell: Transgression of Gender-Biased Moral Space.....	52
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
H.D.: Meditation on the Essence of the Problematics of Self in Moral Space .....	75
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	102
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	107
<b>Curriculum Vitae</b> .....	119