

Naturalism, Social Dance and the Evolution of Identity in Chopin and Cather

“Anyone who is white may go to a ’Cadian ball, but he must pay . . .”

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RÉSUMÉ

À la fin du dix-neuvième siècle et au début du vingtième siècle, les danses sociales régionales, qui figurent au premier plan dans l’évolution et la définition de l’identité raciale, ethnique et nationale, jouèrent un rôle important, largement ignoré par la critique, dans la fiction naturaliste.

Liée à l’évolution du statut social, la danse servit aussi à renforcer la cohésion sociale et la formation de l’identité, et beaucoup d’écrivains naturalistes, Kate Chopin et Willa Cather en particulier, prêtèrent une attention particulière au pouvoir social de la danse dans leur fiction. La formation de l’identité nationale à travers la danse est aussi liée de manière importante à l’identité de genre, cette composante culturelle socialement déterminée dont dépendent l’indépendance et l’autonomie des protagonistes féminins et qui influe sur leur transformation dans les récits.

Cet article explore les diverses façons dont la danse fut essentielle pour l’évolution et le maintien de groupes sociaux, et partant, la formation de l’identité personnelle et nationale. C’est en considérant la danse comme une force déterministe, qu’il est possible de mieux saisir les dimensions naturalistes de la fiction de Cather et Chopin, et le rôle plus général que joue la danse dans les récits naturalistes.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regional social dances were central to the evolution and definition of racial, ethnic, and national identity, and they served as an important device in naturalist fiction that critics have largely ignored. As dance signified transformations in class status, it also acted as a force for social cohesion and identity formation, and many naturalist writers, in particular Kate Chopin and Willa Cather, paid special attention to the social power of dance in their fiction. This paper will illuminate a number of ways in which dance was central to the evolution and maintenance of social groups and, thus, to both personal and national identities. This focus on dance as a kind of determinist force, I argue, enables a better understanding not only of the naturalist dimensions of Cather’s and Chopin’s fiction, but also of the broader role dance plays in naturalist fiction.

For Chopin and Cather, dance is central to the socialization process in the formation of regional identity, a process which is complicated by an insistence on ethnic identity. Indeed, each successive wave of immigration during this period brought the music and dance from the country of origin. For all of these various groups, cultural boundaries continued to be a source of anxiety. Dance is an articulation of this anxiety and a means for managing that anxiety through the policing and reification of social, racial, ethnic, and national identity. Moreover, gender identity is also an important interwoven cultural strand in the formation of national identity through dance. Thus, as my analysis of Cather and Chopin will show, this socially deterministic process

influenced the transformation of the female protagonists in the narratives, demonstrating an important, but unexamined aspect of determinism in each author's approach to literary naturalism.

Many of Willa Cather's works include scenes of social dancing that not only help reveal the various communal strategies for defining and maintaining social identity and cohesion, but further highlight the limitations that these deterministic forces place on individual characters. In *My Ántonia* (1918), Cather conveys the popularity of social dance during an earlier period. As the protagonist, Jim Burden, recounts his childhood in Nebraska, he fondly remembers one of the best summers of his youth, the summer that he and his friends spent dancing.¹ The novel also offers a concise image of the historical and cultural phenomenon of traveling dances in the frontier spaces Cather writes about. We thus learn that, typically, a dance pavilion was constructed so that the dance instructors who were visiting a town would have a place to teach. Itinerant dancing masters created a sensation upon their arrival in small Western towns because of the professional training they provided the community. Lack of formal training did not discourage pioneers and cowboys from dancing; and almost any occasion, for example a barn-raising or a quilting session, was reason to dance. On the frontier, dances were spontaneous and unstructured, and it was the role of the caller to impose order and to remember the steps.² Thea Kronenberg, the Scandinavian protagonist in Cather's *Song of the Lark*, compares the graceful Mexican dances to the rowdy country dances with which she is familiar, observing that "for the square dances there was always the bawling voice of the caller, who was also the country auctioneer" (229).³

Song of the Lark charts the tension between the Scandinavian and Mexican immigrants in Colorado by contrasting the respective community dances. Thea becomes enthralled with the Mexican community when she attends a Mexican ball; she is impressed by the intimacy and refinement of the occasion. The narrator notes:

There was no calling. [...] There was an atmosphere of ease and friendly pleasure in the low, dimly lit room, and Thea could not help wondering whether the Mexicans had no jealousies or neighborly grudges as the people in Moonstone had. There was no constraint of any kind there, but a kind of natural harmony about their movements [...]. (493)

At the ball, Thea sings for the first time for an audience consisting of "musical people" – rather than the teachers and groups at churches and funerals for whom she had sung previously

¹ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, in *Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987) 715-937. Subsequent references to Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* will be to this edition (footnotes by Sharon O'Brien), and page numbers only will appear in the text of this essay.

² Sally Somner, "Dance II. Social Dance," *The Readers Companion to American History*, ed. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991). For further information on the history of dance in American literature, see, for example, "Dance," in Tom Quirk and Gary Scharnhorst, eds., *American History through Literature, 1870-1920* (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006). Another article that has been consulted for this study is "Hester Santlow's *Harlequine*: Dance, Dress, Status, and Gender on the London Stage, 1706-1734," in Jessica Munns and Penny Richards, eds., *The Clothes That Wear Us* (Newark, USA: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

³ Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, in *Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987) 291-706. Subsequent references to Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* will be to this edition (footnotes by Sharon O'Brien), and page numbers only will appear in the text of this essay.

– and her Mexican audience is entranced by her singing. The aura of this rapturous experience is dispelled the next morning when she contends with the hostile disapproval of her siblings who comment that “[e]verybody at Sunday-School was talking about you going over there and singing with the Mexicans all night” (500). The occasion of the ball is the catalyst for Thea’s character transformation through the realization of the power of her voice and her disillusionment over the prejudice and intolerance of the Scandinavian community. The dance is a deterministic force that defines a particular ethnic community, re-inscribing a group’s ethnic and social difference in the new context, even inferiority; but it is also a force that helps push Thea to a broader experience of culture and life.

Furthermore, dance works to define community and ethnic identity in Cather’s “The Dance at the Chevaliers” (1900), but this time with more tragic consequences.⁴ In this story, two men vie for the attention of Severine Chevalier, the daughter of a wealthy French landowner, Jean Chevalier. The object of her affection is Denis who is described by Harry Burns, an acquaintance, as “a remarkably attractive man [...] a big choleric Irishman [...] a pure creature of emotional impulses who went about seeking rhymes and harmonies in the flesh, the original Adam” (547). His rival for Severine’s attention is Signor “a little Mexican who had strayed up into the cattle country” and is employed by Chevalier. In the rather melodramatic conclusion, by virtue of Signor’s devious machinations, Denis ends up dead as the dance winds down, poisoned by the hand of his rival. The dance, hosted by Chevalier, is the last dance before the onset of the summer heat and is well attended by “all the French for miles around.” In her portrayal of this community, Cather, on the surface, seems to reinforce racial/ethnic stereotypes through her depiction of Signor as a cheat and a liar. Burns, Denis’s acquaintance, cautions the Irishman:

Look out for him [...]. They are a nasty lot, these Greasers. I’ve known them down in old Mexico. They’ll knife you in the dark, any one of them. It’s the only country I could never feel comfortable in. Everything is dangerous – the climate, the sun, the men and most of all the women. (548)

Although Signor appears to be positioned as a sinister outsider to the community, the dance is the vehicle whereby Cather subverts this positioning through the revelation that Latin blood courses through the veins of most of the French people in the community. Burns, playing the bass viola, describes his enjoyment “watch[ing] those gleeful young Frenchmen seize a girl and whirl her away with a dexterity and grace really quite remarkable.” However, he goes on to assert:

They were not of pure French blood, of course, most of them had been crossed and recrossed with Canadians and Indians, and they spoke a vile patois which no Christian man could understand. Almost the only traces they retained of their original nationality were their names, and their old French songs, and their grace in the dance. Deep down in the heart of every one of them, uncrushed by labor, undulled by enforced abstinence, there was a mad, insatiable love of pleasure that continually warred with the blood of dull submission they drew from their red squaw ancestors. Tonight it broke out like a devouring flame, it flashed in dark eyes and glowed in red cheeks. Ah that old hot, imperious blood of the Latins! It is never quite lost. These women had long since

⁴ Willa Cather, “The Dance at the Chevaliers,” in Virginia Faulkner, ed., *Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912*, (Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1970) 547-56.

forgotten the wit of their motherland [...] but in the eyes, on the lips, in the temperament was the old, ineffaceable stamp. The Latin blood was there. (551)

Through this passage, we see that dance is a conduit to reclaim origin – the commonality of “their grace in the dance” and their “Latin blood” and temperament – and to elucidate the inner conflict between “enforced abstinence” and the “insatiable love of pleasure,” a conflict that is often inherent in community structure. Cather’s naturalism, which is apparent in her description of the primal and genetic in determining identity, can be seen in the description of Denis in the previous quotation as “a pure creature [...] the original Adam.” In a similar vein, Severine, despite the fact that she is wealthier and better educated than the other girls, is described as “a very human young woman, and not wise enough to disguise or to affect anything.” She herself tells Signor, when he challenges her, that she is, in fact, in love but not with him, going so far as to say “I am in love all the time, [...] I burn up with love [...] I am tortured by it, [...] my pillows are hot with it all night, and my hands are wet with it in the day” (549). Severine’s powerful expression is startling in its brute frankness and illuminates the torment of repressed desire imposed by societal strictures. In this regard, Latin blood is a trope for primal instincts, and Signor is symbolic of the danger posed by community restrictions of these instincts. As he tells Severine, “[i]f you kiss him [Denis] again I will kill you. I like to kill the things I love, do you understand?” (549). In the end, Signor spares Severine, killing Denis instead by poisoning him with a concoction he learned how to make from a “negro from the Guinea coast.” In this story, although the dance is meant to create social cohesion and a sense of shared identity, the emphasis on the Latin “blood” of the French ironically produces the effect of enabling violence, blurring the lines of difference that the dance would try to assert and determining the “devouring flame” of passion that rips the community apart.

In her work, Kate Chopin focuses on both the Creole and Cajun cultures of the Deep South (the latter being the culture of Acadian French immigrants) and the centrality of dance in regional identity. Historically, the Acadian community, like the Creole community, distinguished itself by excluding Americans. This exclusion was integral to the socialization process and evident in the customs in place at social dances, as Chopin’s work demonstrates. In “At the ’Cadian Ball,” the Cajun community welcomes Creoles to their balls in spite of a distinction between the two communities.⁵ For the aristocratic Creole men, these balls were a diversion from the Creole culture’s rigid codes of conduct. For example, upon the loss of nine hundred acres of his rice crop and after continual rejection by the Creole Clarisse, the object of his affection, Alcée Laballière attends the ’Cadian ball, undoubtedly with the intent of engaging in a dalliance with the Cajun Calixta. The Cajun men welcome, and are somewhat honored by, Alcée’s presence, yet they distinguish themselves by excluding Americans, who are referred to as “white.” The narrator specifies that “[a]nyone who is white may go to a ’Cadian ball, but he must pay for his lemonade, his coffee and chicken gumbo and he must behave himself like a ’Cadian” (223). This restriction was instated after railroad workers exhibited rowdy and rude behavior at the balls – an attitude that can be seen when the host of the ball, Grosbœuf retorts “Ces maudits gens du raiderode” (223). Cather also mentions this behavior in *Song of the Lark* when Thea remarks that during the dances given by the railroad men, “[t]he boys played rough jokes and thought it smart to be clumsy and to run into each other on the floor” (493).

⁵ Kate Chopin, “At the ’Cadian Ball,” in Per Seyersted, ed., *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge, USA: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 219-27. All references to Kate Chopin’s “At the ’Cadian Ball” “will be taken from this edition. Henceforth, page numbers only will appear within the text of the essay.

Like Thea, who enjoys increasing empowerment in Cather's novel, Calixta initially demonstrates boldly independent behavior. She is flirtatious with Alcée and dares to leave the dance to sit outside with him for an extended period of time. It is interesting to note that the community would not readily tolerate this type of behavior from other Cajun girls. Before she retreats from the dance to enjoy her interlude with Alcée, Calixta chides Bobinôt for his disconsolate attitude. Of course, his attitude is understandable since Calixta has persistently rejected his proposals, just as Clarisse has spurned Alcée's; in fact, Bobinôt only changes his mind about going to the ball upon learning that Alcée would be there. In front of everyone, Calixta exclaims that he is "standin' *planté là* like ole Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog," (224) an exclamation which "started a clamor of laughter at his expense" (224). The narrator notes that "Madame Suzonne, sitting in a corner, whispered to her neighbor that if Ozéina were to conduct herself in a like manner, she should immediately be taken out to the mule-cart and driven home. The women did not always approve of Calixta" (224), but they make an exception for this "Spanish vixen": "Calixta's slender foot had never touched Cuban soil; but her mother's had, and the Spanish was in her blood all the same. For that reason the prairie people forgave her much that they would not have overlooked in their own daughters or sisters" (219).

Calixta's Cuban ancestry sets her apart from the other Cajun girls so that her passionate temperament is humorously dismissed by the men, "C'est Espagnol, ça" (219) and impatiently tolerated by the women. As we saw in "The Dance at the Chevaliers," Latin blood is a trope for primal instincts; however, in "At the 'Cadian Ball," the community restrictions placed on these instincts remain intact through the enforcement of the boundaries between social classes and ethnic groups. When the tryst that Calixta is secretly enjoying with Alcée outside the dance hall reaches a frenzied point, and the narrator confides that "[her] senses were reeling; and they well-nigh left her when she felt Alcée's lips brush her ear like the touch of a rose" (225), Creole Clarisse appears on the scene to beckon Alcée home. With Clarisse's intervention, Calixta is made aware of the limitations of her class status and her displays of assertiveness and sexual playfulness give way to irritation and resignation as she "flippantly" proposes to Bobinôt herself. Ultimately, the socially deterministic forces of the ball remain in place with the pairing of the Creoles – Alcée and Clarisse – and the Cajuns – Bobinôt and Calixta.

In a similar register, Chopin's "A Night in Acadie" records the sequence of events that take place during the evening of a ball, hosted every Saturday in Acadia Parish by a gentleman who goes by the name of Foché.⁶ Two young people, Telèspore Baquette, an Acadian farmer, and Zaïda Trodon, a young woman, meet on a train; Zaïda is en route to the ball and Telèspore, making her acquaintance, decides that this will be his destination as well. Initially, he is concerned that she might mistake him for a "Western traveling man":

He wondered if she would speak to him [...] in which event he knew that she would not; for the women of the country caution their daughters against speaking to strangers on the trains. But [as it turns out] she was not one to mistake an Acadian farmer for a Western traveling man. She was not born in Avoyelles parish for nothing. (486)

⁶ Kate Chopin, "A Night in Acadie," in Per Seyersted, ed., *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge, USA: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 484-99. All references to Kate Chopin's "A Night in Acadie" will be taken from this edition. Henceforth, page numbers only will appear within the text of the essay.

Zaïda engages him in conversation in a manner that makes him feel as if he has known her for some time, and he becomes quite intrigued by this young woman who is so expressively assertive and different from the young women in his town.

As in the ball depicted in “At the ’Cadian Ball,” the preparation of the gumbo is an important ritual: “[T]he mammoth pot of gumbo [...] bubbled, bubbled, bubbled out in the open air. [...] [I]nto the pot went the chickens and the pans-full of minced ham, and the fists-full of onion and sage and piment rouge and piment vert” (489). Telèspore makes quite an impression on the women because of his elegant dress, which undoubtedly stands out from the attire of the other men who are, for the most part, prairie Cajun laborers, like Bobinôt. Indeed, the black cook “was all courtesy as she dipped a steaming plate” for him, even though the gumbo was not quite ready. Another ritual was for the women who were traveling from nearby towns to bring their ball apparel and dress for the dance upon their arrival. After the girls dress for the ball, Zaïda is the one who creates a sensation. The narrator notes:

[T]he real, stunning effect was produced when Zaïda stepped upon the gallery [...]. She was [dressed in] white from head to foot [...]. Her white fan was covered with spangles that she herself had sewed all over it; and in her belt and in her brown hair were thrust small sprays of orange blossom. (490-91)

As it turns out, Zaïda is using the occasion of the ball to elope, and we now realize that she has imaginatively fashioned herself a bridal outfit. Her intended is André Pascal, a man of dubious character who has a reputation for laziness and drunkenness, although Zaïda insists that he is unjustly criticized by the community. Zaïda has concocted quite a plan and is in the process of making her getaway from the ball to meet her fiancé, steering a horse and buggy herself (albeit recklessly), when she is intercepted by Telèspore who insists on accompanying her (493). When they arrive at the prearranged location, Pascal is not there; he finally does show up, rather inebriated, to the consternation of Zaïda, who now realizes the validity of his reputation as a ne’er-do-well. A fight ensues between Pascal and Telèspore, and Telèspore will emerge victorious. The narrator relates: “Presently Telèspore entered the room. The elegance of his apparel had been somewhat marred; the men over at the ’Cadian ball would hardly have taken exception now to his appearance” (498). Zaïda appears to be dazed from the revelation of Pascal’s true nature and, during the course of the combat between the two men, she undergoes a change in nature:

Her will, which had been overmastering and aggressive, seemed to have grown numb under the disturbing spell of the past few hours. An illusion had gone from her [...]. She realized, but could not comprehend it, not knowing that the love had been part of the illusion. She was tired in body and spirit. (498)

In this brief period of time, Zaïda has experienced a transformation from determination and independence to submission and dependence, so that as Telèspore takes the reins to drive them back: “she was like a little child and followed whither he led” (499). Like Calixta who resigns herself to acquiescing to her marriage to Bobinôt in “At the ’Cadian Ball,” Zaïda dispassionately relinquishes her fate to Telèspore. Here we have a classic naturalist ending, whereby Zaïda cannot escape the various determinisms that shape her. In addition, the Acadian ball depicted in this story reveals class anxiety: we notice the distinction between the white “Western traveling men” and the Acadian men, and the distinction between the higher class status of Telèspore and

the lower status of the other Cajun men at the ball. This social structure is similar to the class hierarchy depicted in “At the ’Cadian Ball,” and these hierarchies help accentuate the deterministic forces that both shape and reify class and ethnic identities. The occasional mingling of upper-class men and “white” men emphasizes the boundaries of the ethnic groups and introduces the thrill of provisional or potential female agency within and beyond the ritual of the dance, as we saw with the flirtation between Alcée and Calixta. Yet at the same time, the dance ritual’s power to both maintain and constrain community identity reinforces those hierarchies and demonstrates the almost fatalistic determinism that can also limit women’s agency and freedom.

While these narratives by Chopin explore the boundaries of ethnic identity, other narratives use dance to signify the complications of miscegenation and the anguish of the African Diaspora during the period of slavery. “La Belle Zoraïde” thus recounts the story of “an old, half-forgotten Creole romance” (303)⁷ whose eponymous main character a beautiful biracial slave woman, likely a quadroon, as her skin is described as being the color of *café au lait* – who is on the higher rung of the caste hierarchy by virtue of her complexion and her position as the personal maid of Madame Delarivière, the mistress of the house and her godmother. Madame insists that when Zoraïde is “ready to marry, it must be in a way to do honor to [her upbringing]” (304). In other words, her future husband must be from the same caste level as Zoraïde and Madame had already selected her future husband, a “mulatto” slave who is a neighbor’s manservant.

In New Orleans, slaves were allowed to observe tribal rituals in a designated area of the city, Congo Square, and it was in this locale that Zoraïde was struck by Cupid’s thunderbolt when she beheld the beautiful “Mézor dance the Bamboula [...] That was a sight to hold one rooted to the ground. Mézor was as straight as a cypress-tree and as proud looking as a king. His body, bare to the waist, was like a column of ebony and it glistened like oil” (304). Despite Zoraïde’s pleas and logical appeal to Madame Delarivière to allow her to marry Mézor, Madame adamantly refuses and even goes so far as to request that his owner sell him so that eventually he “was sold away into Georgia, or the Carolinas, or one of those distant countries far away where he would no longer hear his Creole tongue spoken, nor dance Calinda, nor hold [the beautiful] Zoraïde in his arms” (306). Zoraïde is bereft, but looks forward to the solace of her maternal connection to their child. However, Madame arranges it so that after the delivery, Zoraïde is informed that her baby is dead when, in actuality, the infant has been sold to another plantation owner. Zoraïde subsequently goes mad. In this story, the African tribal dance, and of course Mézor himself, is a conduit to ancestral origins and Zoraïde’s birthright. However, she is denied this ancestral connection as a result of the heinous racial oppression integral to antebellum social strictures. As with Chopin’s other stories, the relative freedom of movement and contact within the dance raises the reader’s awareness of the potential for agency, yet the racial and ethnic markers of the Bamboula once again act as a deterministic force that forecloses Zoraïde’s choice of a lover and thus consigns her to a tragic end so common in naturalist fiction.

⁷ Kate Chopin, “La Belle Zoraïde,” in Per Seyersted, ed., *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge, USA: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). 303-08. All references to Kate Chopin’s “La Belle Zoraïde,” will be taken from this edition. Henceforth, page numbers only will appear within the text of the essay.

Finally, the deterministic power of dance to reify social, ethnic, and sexual norms and expectations also helps reveal the naturalistic conventions of Cather's most canonical work, *My Ántonia*. The novel tells of a summer when the dance teachers come to town "and all the ambitious mothers were sending their children to the afternoon dancing class" (835). It is, according to Jim, "the summer which was to change everything" (835). A temporary dance hall is set up under a tent in the middle of town and on Saturday nights dances are held until midnight. The young female Bohemian immigrants or the "hired girls," including of course, Ántonia, are always in attendance and Jim himself "never missed a Saturday night dance" (837).

In the story, dance signals a pivotal moment in plot development, namely in the character transformation of Jim and Antonia. For Antonia, dance is a liberating force that affords a brief period of agency. However, for Jim, as for Thea in *Song of the Lark*, dance is the vehicle for his increasing awareness of the simmering prejudice that the community harbors toward the young female Bohemian immigrants as they come of age. Indeed, Jim remarks that "[t]he [Bohemian] country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly [...]" (840). He also comments at some length on the distinction between these young women who have come to the prairie from the old country and the Black Hawk girls, whose fathers were merchants:

I can remember a score of these country girls who were in service in Black Hawk [...]. Physically they were almost a race apart and out-of-door work had given them a vigor which [...] developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women. (838)

Jim is critical of the discrimination faced by the Bohemian women who are considered unrefined and unintelligent, and regarded as mere domestic laborers. Indeed, the Black Hawk girls considered themselves to be in a separate, superior social class. In contrast to the physical vibrancy and vitality of the Bohemian girls, Jim comments that "[w]hen one danced with [the Black Hawk girls] their bodies never moved inside their clothes; their muscles seemed to ask but one thing – not to be disturbed" (838).

Antonia, as it turns out, was a very good dancer and this particular summer marks her awakening, as she begins to catch the attention of the young men in the town; indeed, one or another of these young men escorts her home after the dances, much to the consternation of Mr. Harling, the patriarch of the respectable family for whom she works. He finally gives her an ultimatum, insisting that she either stop attending the dances or move out. Ántonia defiantly refuses this command, retorting that her "own father couldn't make [her] stop!" (843); and she finds employment with Wick Cutter, a man of ill repute, who has already compromised the honor of at least one of the Bohemian girls.

At the end of the summer, the tent comes down and the dancing masters leave town, but dances are still held on Saturday nights at a local town hall. Jim sneaks out of the house to attend, since his guardians (his grandparents) do not, in general, approve of dancing. However, for Jim, "[t]he dance at the Firemen's Hall was the one thing [he] looked forward to all the week" (851). All of the Bohemian girls are there and he particularly likes to dance the schottische (a form of polka) with Antonia who "had so much spring and variety, and was always putting in new steps and slides" (853). Jim meets with his grandparents' displeasure after they learn of his forays to the dance hall. They express concern about the potential damage to his reputation and disapprove of the amount of time he spends with the Bohemian girls (who are

several years older), rather than with the proper Black Hawk girls his own age. Jim agrees to stop going to the dances, but this leaves a void in his life so that “[a]s the spring came on, [he] grew more and more lonely [...]” (856). Here it seems that Jim submits to the deterministic social and familial forces that constrain his ability to follow his desires. His acquiescence to his grandparents’ wishes results in an acute sense of alienation, and he immerses himself in his academic studies in preparation to attend college in the upcoming fall.

By contrast, *Ántonia*’s refusal to stop dancing does afford her space to enjoy some agency. However, in keeping with the conventions of naturalist fiction, the deterministic forces of social and gender mores lead her to a tragic end. Her agency is quickly circumvented by Wick Cutter’s attempt to seduce her and by her subsequent failed engagement to the young man who deceives her into believing that he intends to marry her, but who then abandons her after she becomes pregnant. The dance grants *Ántonia* a limited amount of freedom and power by allowing her to express herself through her movements. Yet her sexuality ultimately constrains her, for the dance continues to determine her role in society as a lower-class Bohemian girl whom men can seduce but not marry. Jim’s presence at the dances introduces the possibility for greater social mobility and sexual freedom in this Midwestern world, but ultimately the dance reinscribes the lines of ethnic and gender hierarchies. In the end, Jim is equally constrained by these deterministic forces, and Cather shows that it is only the more traditional, aggressive forms of masculinity that are allowed to prevail because they reinforce the deterministic hierarchies confronted in the naturalistic presentation of the dance.

With these endings, Chopin and Cather seem to be more invested in the ideas and patterns of naturalism than critics have previously allowed. But there are also key differences between the two authors. Chopin’s female characters try to escape the forces that determine their lives – figured centrally here in the community dances, in the end, as in *Zoraïde*’s case, tragically, they fail to escape at all. By contrast, Cather’s representations of dance, which show how dance can be viewed as a deterministic force, ultimately leave room for greater forms of agency and transcendence. Unlike Chopin’s *Calixta*, *Zaïda*, and *Zoraïde*, Cather’s *Thea*, *Severine*, and *Ántonia* find greater windows of opportunity for getting beyond their deterministic worlds. Though this ultimately does not work out as well for *Severine* and *Ántonia*, the representations of dance nevertheless help us recognize how both Chopin and Cather incorporate the conventions of naturalistic fiction into their work. And significantly, these scenes show how dance needs much more serious and sustained consideration of literary naturalism in a broader sense. For dance is clearly a powerful social force, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a powerful force that Chopin and Cather understood well, but that we are only just beginning to recognize in our study of naturalism today.