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# ALEXANDRA'S DREAMS "THE MIGHTIEST OF ALL LOVERS" IN WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

MAIRE MULLINS

In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde writes, "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling."<sup>1</sup> Lorde notes that women often deny the erotic within themselves because of the suspicion in which it is held by western society; she exhorts her readers to challenge the artificial dichotomy between the spiritual and the erotic and to recognize this connection in

their lives. In Willa Cather's second novel, *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson, the main character, spends much of her life sublimating the erotic power that lies within her, focusing her energies instead on carving a farm out of the Nebraska prairie. Alexandra experiences a series of dreams throughout her adult life, dreams that underscore her connection to this silenced, powerful resource.

For most of her life Alexandra discounts these dreams, literally washing away their residue the next morning. But near the end of the novel, after a powerful dream in which a mysterious figure appears to her, Alexandra finally recognizes, accepts, and articulates her need for the erotic as a source of power in her life.<sup>2</sup> By enriching and deepening her understanding of the erotic and the spiritual, this final dream releases Alexandra from her isolated existence and allows her to accept her need for human love. Alexandra at last comes into a new and different understanding of her relation to others and her connectedness to the land; after this dream, Alexandra embraces more consciously and fully, in Lorde's words, the "resource within" her "that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane."<sup>3</sup> Alexandra's dream

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sequences are thus crucial to an understanding of the transformation that takes place in her character at the end of the novel.

#### ALEXANDRA'S FARM

In order to understand the importance of the dream sequences to the changes in Alexandra's character, two significant factors must also be considered: the implications of the Homestead Act for the sustainability of the Bergson farm, and the choice of Alexandra as the head of the Bergson household after her father's death. Cather published *O Pioneers!* in 1913 but the novel begins in 1883, a time of tremendous westward expansion and growth, due in part to the Homestead Act and to the surge of interest in land west of the Missouri River. Signed into law by Abraham Lincoln on May 20, 1862, the Homestead Act gave 160 acres of land to any American citizen who was the head of the family or at least twenty-one years of age. C. Susan Wiesenthal notes that:

although Alexandra presents a new type of heroine in the tradition of American frontier fiction, she is by no means an anomaly in a historical context; indeed, by the late nineteenth century, many women had begun to take advantage of the Homestead Act to acquire property in the West—some of them single, adventurous New Women.<sup>4</sup>

The land became theirs if they had lived on it and cultivated it for five years. The difficulty that many settlers faced in the land grab that ensued, however, was that in the Great Plains it was necessary to have at least 360 to 640 acres for a farm to be viable. Michael Roth writes, "On the Great Plains, formerly known as the Great American desert, it was estimated that a rancher needed 2,000 to 50,000 acres, while farmers would require 360 to 640 acres for any extensive stab at agriculture. Ultimately, beyond the 98th Meridian, a spread of 160 acres was not capable of supporting ranching or farming. Thus, settlers could not acquire enough free land under the Homestead Act to



FIG. 1. Willa Cather at Jaffrey, New Hampshire, c. 1916-1918. Courtesy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries Archives and Special Collections.

flourish in the West."<sup>5</sup> One could settle on the land, but living on the land and farming it were nearly impossible unless more land was acquired and access to irrigation was procured.

Thus, some farmers failed and their farms were absorbed by those who were fortunate enough to have the capital and the resources to acquire more land and to irrigate it, such as the Bergson family in *O Pioneers!*: John Bergson "owned exactly six hundred and forty acres of what stretched outside his door; his own original homestead and timber claim, making three hundred and twenty acres, and the half-section adjoining, the homestead of a younger brother."<sup>6</sup> When the Linstrums decide to leave

for St. Louis (Carl tells Alexandra “‘We will sell the place for whatever we can get, and auction the stock’”), Alexandra convinces her brothers to buy their farm, as well as “‘Peter Crow’s place; raise every dollar we can, and buy every acre we can’” (34). Despite their resistance, Alexandra prevails. Her motivation is not profit or greed; she genuinely loves the land. For Alexandra, work on the farm “becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which . . . [Alexandra] enter[s] gratefully and from which . . . [she] rise[s] up empowered.” These are Lorde’s words for labor that is done joyfully and lovingly, and these words capture Alexandra’s feelings and her strong intuition about what needs to be done to make the Bergson farm a success.<sup>7</sup> This approach to labor, however, suggests both Alexandra’s strength—her love for farming and her tremendous physical energy—and her weakness—described later in the novel as her “blind side” (105). Because Alexandra diverts all her energy into the farm, she has none left with which to cultivate her own erotic and spiritual power, thus blocking her ability to form an intimate adult relationship, or even to recognize the developing physical attraction between her youngest brother, Emil, and her friend Marie.

The second central factor to consider to understand the significance of the dream sequences is the choice of Alexandra as head of the family despite having three younger male siblings. This choice not only underscores to the community and to her immediate family Alexandra’s abilities, it also, and perhaps more importantly, provides Alexandra with cultural permission to sheer off the erotic side of her existence and to focus instead on the shaping of the farm, so much so that later her brothers will question her desire to cultivate a more intimate relationship with Carl. Alexandra, in their eyes, has made a choice: she cannot pursue *both* the stewardship of the family farm and a serious adult relationship. Alexandra’s pursuit of a love relationship threatens the established, and implicitly understood, ideas about patrimony that Lou and Oscar have already counted upon. Alexandra’s single status must be preserved so

that her land will be passed to her brothers’ families rather than to Carl, considered an interloper whose motives cannot be considered outside Alexandra’s window of fertility and sexual desirability: she is “nearly forty” when Carl returns. Even Emil considers the situation “ridiculous,” dismissing Alexandra’s affair as “indecorous” (90).

Alexandra’s accomplishments as a successful farmer, and her selection as steward of the family, should also be measured against prevailing cultural ideas about the Midwest, considered “a vast desert wasteland” in the early nineteenth century. This view was strongly influenced by the reports of the explorers who had crossed the prairies on their way to the Rocky Mountains or to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>8</sup> Maj. Stephen H. Long of the Army Engineers, who traveled to the Rocky Mountains in 1820, writes: “‘In regard to this extensive section of the country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence.’ Dr. Edwin James, chronicler of the expedition, stated that he had ‘no fear of giving too unfavorable an account’ of the region. It was ‘an unfit residence for any but a nomad population.’ He hoped it would remain forever, ‘the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackal.’”<sup>9</sup> Despite these reports, after Nebraska became a state in 1867, many settlers came in hopes of cultivating the region.

John Bergson, Alexandra’s father, arrived in 1872 with his wife, daughter, and two sons, Lou and Oscar (Emil had not yet been born).<sup>10</sup> As the wisest and most visionary of her siblings, Alexandra is given the responsibility of overseeing the family farm when her father dies eleven years later in 1883. Bergson recognizes in Alexandra a capacity for clear insight, practical knowledge, and imaginative energy, qualities he believes she has inherited from her paternal grandfather: “Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying that she was intelligent. . . . In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of

thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days" (13). Alexandra's life's work in developing the farm is thus seemingly fashioned "within the context of male models of power" (Lorde's phrase) beginning with her paternal grandfather and extending to the death of her youngest brother, Emil; because of this focus, Alexandra has silenced the erotic "as a source of power and information" in her life.<sup>11</sup> Several times throughout the narrative, however, in moments of quiet thoughtfulness and in dreams, Alexandra experiences a connection with this suppressed resource. Cather uses the terms "fancy" and "reverie" to refer to these dream sequences, suggesting a blending of the spiritual and the erotic.

Although her father traces Alexandra's intelligence and perspicacity back to her paternal grandfather, much of her resourcefulness, practical wisdom, and willingness to experiment come from her mother. As Sharon O'Brien notes, "[W]hile Alexandra and her creator both rewrite the inheritances they receive from their fathers, absorbing what they can use and altering what they cannot, they draw more directly on their mothers' gifts."<sup>12</sup>

Reginald Dyck, on the other hand, sees Alexandra's relationship with her mother as divided: "Rather than giving each other love and support, these two women, each a pioneer in her own way, are isolated by their different positions on the gender divide."<sup>13</sup> Although they do have different roles, Alexandra and her mother become allies when Lou and Oscar wish to sell the farm for a place down on the river: "They [Lou and Oscar] felt that Alexandra had taken an unfair advantage in turning their mother loose on them. The next morning they were silent and reserved" (31). Alexandra shares the inside of the house with her mother on Sunday afternoons: "Mrs. Bergson always took a nap, and Alexandra read. During the week she read only the newspaper, but on Sunday, and in the long evenings of winter, she read a good deal. . . . To-day she sat in the wooden rocking-chair with the Swedish Bible open on her knees" (31). These scenes suggest not division but comfortable coexistence. Each

also possesses, unlike the male siblings of the family, a realistic acceptance of what tasks and roles must be assumed after the death of John Bergson in order to assure the survival of the family and the farm. Clearly, Lou and Oscar do not have the qualities that Alexandra possesses in order to ensure this survival. The relationship between Alexandra and her mother is thus understated but secure and loving; they are united in their mutual goal of preservation. Mrs. Bergson bequeaths to Alexandra a careful attentiveness to detail and a keen moral sense: "Habit was very strong with Mrs. Bergson, and her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways" (15). Because Mrs. Bergson reveres the old ways and insists on cultivating habits that others might dispense with on the prairie, she helps to inculcate in her daughter a respect and a tolerance for her ethnic heritage, and a disciplined, careful way of thinking and of completing tasks.<sup>14</sup>

#### "RICH, STRONG, AND GLORIOUS"

Alexandra occasionally labors physically but her work is mostly intellectual; she reads the agricultural papers, visits other farms, and talks to those who experiment with crops or whose knowledge might be helpful to her. Her reveries, moments of detached contemplation that usually occur when she is alone, refresh Alexandra and help her to focus more completely on the task before her. These quiet moments give her renewed energy and help to seal her bond with the land. Early in the novel, in chapter 4 of part 1 ("The Wild Land"), one such moment occurs; a young Alexandra is still struggling with her brothers and her mother to survive on the farm:

The second of these barren summers was passing. . . . One September afternoon Alexandra had gone over to the garden across the draw to dig sweet potatoes—they had been thriving upon the weather that

was fatal to everything. But when Carl Linstrum came up the garden rows to find her, she was not working. She was standing lost in thought, leaning upon her pitchfork, her sunbonnet lying beside her on the ground. . . . Carl came quietly and slowly up the garden path, looking intently at Alexandra. She did not hear him. She was standing perfectly still, with that serious ease so characteristic of her. (26)

Alexandra's "serious ease" suggests both quiet intensity and focused leisure. Her love of the land communicates itself to Carl without words. He is able to glimpse momentarily through her eyes what she feels about the land. Even as he is preparing to tell her that he and his family are about to leave for good, Carl's vision becomes inflected by Alexandra's:

The air was cool enough to make the warm sun pleasant on one's back and shoulders, and so clear that the eye could follow a hawk up and up, into the blazing blue depths of the sky. Even Carl, never a very cheerful boy, and considerably darkened by these last two bitter years, loved the country on days like this, felt something strong and young and wild come out of it, that laughed at care. (26)

When he visits the farm sixteen years later, he tells Alexandra that he is "disappointed in my own eye, in my imagination" (55). Alexandra's eye and imagination, not Carl's, see in the unspoiled prairie the potential for rich farmland; because of her effort and persistence the wild land becomes "a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light" (39). Carl recognizes in this tremendous change Alexandra's artistry, for a "pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (25).<sup>15</sup> Like the artist, the pioneer can sense the potential inherent in raw material.

Later in this same chapter, Alexandra again becomes deeply thoughtful, a habit she

cultivates: "Alexandra stayed in the house. . . . To-day she sat in the wooden rocking-chair . . . but she was not reading. She was looking thoughtfully away at the point where the upland road disappeared over the rim of the prairie. Her body was in an attitude of perfect repose, such as it was apt to take when she was thinking earnestly. Her mind was slow, truthful, steadfast" (31).

This "attitude of perfect repose" echoes her earlier stance of "serious ease." Although to the casual observer it might seem as though Alexandra is not doing anything, she is making some very careful decisions. Her brothers are thinking of trading their land for "a place down on the river" (30). They tell her, "There's no use of us trying to stick it out, just to be stubborn. There's something in knowing when to quit" (29). Instead of ignoring their objections, Alexandra at this point in the novel decides to weigh all of the family's options; she will drive down to the river country to see if a move would be a good idea. As Michael Roth points out, however, "By most accounts the best lands—almost seven-eighths of the public domain—ended up in the hands of nefarious speculators, who purchased strategic lands along rivers and railroads, lands that were destined to be future town sites."<sup>16</sup> Alexandra realizes this as she drives along the river. She tells her brothers, "The river land was settled before this, and so they are a few years ahead of us, and have learned more about farming. The land sells for three times as much as this, but in five years we will double it" (33).

Alexandra grasps and articulates these ideas so clearly partly because on her way back to the Divide, she experiences a visceral sense of connectedness to the land, a reciprocal connectedness that will later shape itself into a form that will haunt her dreams:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded

her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. (33)

Of this passage Susan J. Rosowski writes, "Alexandra returns to the Divide as a bride to her groom. The scene is one of the most dramatic in all of Cather's fiction, for in it a human imagination joins with the land in an epiphany of place."<sup>17</sup> The wedding imagery that Rosowski employs in her description of this scene suggests culmination and closure, a fixed moment in time in which heterosexual gender roles are simultaneously projected onto the land and codified. What Alexandra's recurring dreams in the ensuing years reveal, however, is the toll that her denial of the erotic as a source of power in her conscious adult life will take on her psyche. Alexandra's love for the land blossoms in this moment, and rather than signifying culmination, the breath of the "Genius of the Divide" will continue to return to Alexandra in the form of dreams over the next several decades. These dreams Alexandra will attempt to wash away until, broken and near despair, the "mightiest of all lovers" (146) will visit her and provide her with a refreshed spirit that will allow her, finally, to acknowledge the erotic power that lies within her.

#### SPIRITUALITY, INDIANS, AND EROTIC POWER

Melissa Ryan asserts that Cather has "deliberately forgotten" the Native Americans "in weaving her pioneer narrative" and argues that the "removal of native populations to reservations—the confinement upon which the 'moral victory' of the pioneer depends—constitutes the most deeply disavowed layer of meaning embedded in Cather's complex motif of enclosure,"<sup>18</sup> but this passage and the dramatic dream sequences that follow it suggest otherwise. Ryan's use of the word "deliberately" implies a conscious decision on Cather's part to excise

references to the Native Americans, when it is more likely that Cather may have lacked a historical understanding of the native inhabitants displaced by the settlers. Ryan concludes, "Cather has tried to erase the Indian from her Nebraska landscape, but we may find that the vanished Indian returns as an unconscious element of her text."<sup>19</sup> The "vanished Indian," however, represents much more than "an unconscious element" of the text; the "Genius of the Divide" and the figure in Alexandra's dreams provide Alexandra with crucial and intimate connectedness to the spiritual and to the erotic, elements present not only in the land, but also within herself. This knowledge later helps Alexandra to heal, to forgive, and to love. Thus, although Cather does not provide any direct historical information in the novel about the Native American Plains tribes that inhabited Nebraska before the pioneers, central episodes in the narrative allude to their preexistence and to their continuing influence in the life of the main character.

The significant exchange between Alexandra and the "Genius of the Divide" prefigures the dream sequence that is described at the end of part 3, "Winter Memories." The "Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it" later becomes the large, strong, swift figure with the "smell of ripe cornfields about him" who lifts her up bodily and carries her "across the fields" (106). This "fancy" occurs again and again, and "persist[s] through her girlhood"; it is not an isolated incident, nor is it a habit that has developed in middle age. Alexandra experiences these dream sequences over time, although Cather notes one change in their recurrence:

As she grew older, this fancy more often came to her when she was tired than when she was fresh and strong. Sometimes, after she had been in the open all day, overseeing the branding of the cattle or the loading of the pigs, she would come in chilled, take a concoction of spices and warm home-made wine, and go to bed with her body actually aching with fatigue. Then, just before she

went to sleep, she had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness. (106)

Alexandra's physical condition in this passage ("tired," "chilled," "aching with fatigue") foreshadows the intense weariness, grief, and sadness that she later experiences after Emil's murder. Cather does not directly mention the Native American tribes who lived in Nebraska before the settlers, but Alexandra's dreams and reveries suggest that her connectedness to the land may come from a culture that precedes her own and whose spirit still infuses the landscape. Mike Fischer writes, "Any story of the settlement of Nebraska—or 'America'—will inevitably find itself referring to those peoples whose 'removal' preceded that settlement. The function of criticism, accordingly, is to uncover those traces."<sup>20</sup>

The Pawnee people inhabited the area where Alexandra owns land. They were mostly a farming community, although they did hunt. As Olson notes, "During part of the year they were sedentary farmers, living in permanent villages; during the remainder they were nomadic hunters, adopting dwellings and habits generally associated with the wandering tribes of the Plains. At heart, however, they were farmers, particularly corn growers, and this is reflected in their religion."<sup>21</sup> Like Alexandra, the Pawnee grew corn, and there is "the smell of ripe cornfields" about the figure who enters her bedroom and carries her "swiftly off across the fields" (106).

Do these removals signify an "erotic kidnapping," as Melissa Ryan asserts?<sup>22</sup> Alexandra is carried from her bedroom, but does she resist? Is Alexandra taken against her will out into the fields? The language that Cather uses suggests that this incident is consensual; Alexandra is relieved to be "lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness" (106). This recurring "illusion" brings Alexandra comfort and rest, especially as she "grew older" (106). The figure is also portrayed as a hyper-masculinized figure: "It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no

man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat" (106). Alexandra becomes the crop she grows in her fields and she is harvested by this large, strong, swift, mysterious figure. Dorothy Van Ghent sees this figure as having godlike attributes and as being connected to the unconscious: "The subject of the dream is an authentic god straight out of the unconscious, one of those vegetation and weather gods by whose urgencies she is compelled and whose energies sustain her."<sup>23</sup>

Two of the dreams are described at length in the narrative. The first occurs at the end of "Winter Memories," when Emil is away in Mexico and the love between Emil and Marie grows stronger; thus, this dream is linked not only to Alexandra's own erotic impulses but also to the deepening illicit love between Marie and Emil. Alexandra, unwilling to recognize her own sexual impulses, is also unable consciously to discern the growing desire that Marie and Emil feel for each other: "If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie's mind, and she would have seen long before what was going on in Emil's. But that . . . was Alexandra's blind side" (105):

Her training had all been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do. Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields. Nevertheless, the underground stream was there, and it was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her affairs prospered better than those of her neighbors. (105)

Alexandra has worked diligently to create a successful farm, but she has also blocked out her need for the erotic, used here in the sense that Lorde defines the term: "The erotic is a



measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction . . . born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony."<sup>24</sup> Alexandra's dreams will not let her completely forget this aspect of herself; yet because she is so resistant to its manifestations, her ability to recognize what is happening between Marie and Emil is blunted. In her work on psychoanalysis and its implications for feminist theory, Juliet Mitchell, focusing on Freud's ideas about dreams, notes that

Behind the manifest dream-content there lies the latent content composed of largely pre-conscious thoughts to which the dreamer can reach through his [or her] associations. But there is always an absolutely unconscious element—an aspect of the drive's representation, thirsting for satisfaction; it is the unconscious drive that produces the psychical energy for the dream's construction. *The strength of the person's resistance may make this for ever inaccessible*, but most often, by a breakdown of the structure and composition of the dream, part of it can eventually be reached.<sup>25</sup>

Because of her focus on creating and sustaining a successful farm, Alexandra has blocked any conscious interweaving of the erotic and the spiritual in her daily life. Her recurring dreams signify her unconscious thirst for this connection.

Alexandra's response to her dreams usually follows a pattern, also described at length after the first sustained description of one of her dreams: "After such a reverie she would rise hastily, angry with herself, and go down to the bath-house that was partitioned off the kitchen shed. There she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far" (106). Alexandra's anger and her desire to clean her body the next morning suggest shame for the sexual/erotic elements represented in her

dreams; the verb "prosecute" and her use of "cold well-water" point to self-inflicted punishment. Sharon O'Brien interprets this behavior as anxiety that comes from "succumbing to a superior male force. The man she envisions is more than her match."<sup>26</sup> The likelihood that Alexandra might feel anxiety about "succumbing to a superior male force" seems slender, however; she has not met a male who could represent "a superior male force" up to this point in the narrative, and even if she were to meet such a male, the possibility that she would be interested in becoming involved in such a relationship also seems slender. Warren Motley, on the other hand, views Alexandra's first dream sequence as the "internalization of conventional ideas of womanhood. . . . Only in autoerotic daydreaming can Alexandra imagine a man willing to engage a powerful woman."<sup>27</sup> Rather than indicate a retreat into conventional feminine roles, however, Alexandra's dreams reveal her hunger for a partner, an equal secure enough in his masculinity not to desire superiority over her or to feel threatened by her success. These dreams ultimately signify Alexandra's inability to acknowledge and to remedy the tremendous suppression of the erotic in her waking life.

Alexandra responds to her dream by connecting her behavior to that of Marie later in the novel, and this helps to explain why her anger later remains focused on Marie, and why she cannot forgive Marie. In her conversation with Frank in prison, she reflects on Marie's behavior: "She blamed Marie bitterly. And why, with her happy, affectionate nature, should she have brought destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her, even to poor old Joe Tovesky, the uncle who used to carry her about so proudly when she was a little girl? That was the strangest thing of all. Was there, then, something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive like that? Alexandra hated to think so" (153). Later, to Carl, Alexandra remarks, "Can you understand it? . . . I have had nobody but Ivar and Signa to talk to. Do talk to me. Can you understand it? Could you have believed that of Marie Tovesky? I would

have been cut to pieces, little by little, before I would have betrayed her trust in me!" (156).<sup>28</sup> Alexandra, vexed with her own blocked erotic desire, focuses her anger on Marie rather than on Frank; because of this, she views Marie's illicit sexual activity as more directly responsible for the tragedy than Frank. Alexandra focuses on Marie's impulsiveness and seeming unchecked desire (her emotions do not extend toward Emil's responsibility in the affair) rather than Frank's ongoing mistreatment of Marie, his abusive and sullen nature, and his drunken, murderous rampage.

#### LOVE AND DESPAIR

The second dream sequence in the novel takes place after the murder of Emil and Marie. Alexandra has been outside all day, in a driving rainstorm, weeping for her brother and trying to imagine what it must be like for Emil to be outside in the rain, under the earth. After Ivar brings her back to the house, and she is given physical comfort and succor from Signa, she lies in bed thinking of the past and of what she might have done differently in order to prevent the tragedy. In this state of mind, grieving, chilled, and exhausted, she lapses into sleep and is again visited by the figure that has haunted her dreams for decades. This time, though, there is a significant difference in her dream and in the appearance of the figure who visits her:

As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by some one very strong. He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as

strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was that she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep. (146)

Most critics identify "the mightiest of all lovers" in this dream sequence as Death, although Cather does not name the figure specifically. Sharon O'Brien interprets this second dream sequence as a "death wish" and asserts that "Alexandra feels that death is the true identity of the male figure."<sup>29</sup> Peter Damian Charles notes, "It is here, still profoundly moved by her spiritual encounter with the dead, that she seems to give herself totally to Thanatos for the first time. . . . Alexandra lies ready for the ministrations of her illusory lover, the mythic Land-Death image of her dreams."<sup>30</sup> David Stouck writes, "The only lover mightier than Alexandra herself is the man of her dreams, a figure identified with the harvests and seasons who, toward the end of the novel, is revealed to be the personification of Death."<sup>31</sup> Margaret Doane focuses on the response of the reader to these dreams: "Readers, however, are not told of the identity of the figure and are further baffled when the dream seems to prompt Alexandra to go see Frank Shabata."<sup>32</sup> For the first time, Alexandra can see the figure clearly, and she knows who he is. This is an important moment for Alexandra. Her certainty about the identity of the figure, however, as Doane points out, is not shared with the reader.

This dream occurs at a crucial point in the narrative. Alexandra is on the brink of despair. She has devoted her life to creating a prosperous farm that will allow her youngest brother, Emil, to choose a profession other than farming, should he so wish. When he is murdered, Alexandra's past and her future seem destroyed. All she has worked for has been swept away in a moment of passion and rage. Carl, her confidant and peer, has been driven away by her younger brothers, Lou and Oscar, who refuse to recognize

the work that she has done to create prosperity and security for the family. When Ivar brings her back to the farmhouse, her physical state matches her emotional and mental state. She has been chilled "clear through" (145). The second dream, however, pulls Alexandra out of despair and into a deeper knowledge of the erotic and spiritual resources that she has until now denied.

The focus of this passage, unlike the earlier dream sequence, is no longer on Alexandra's removal but on her return (literally and figuratively) to her room, to her farm, and to her self. Instead of feeling shame and anger when she awakens, Alexandra experiences relief, acceptance, and freedom from pain. She also comes into a more certain knowledge of who this figure is, and this awareness gives her certitude about the future and eases her anxieties. Cather employs biblical language to describe this figure: his shoulders are "strong as the foundations of this world"; his right arm is "dark and gleaming, like bronze"; and he wears a "white cloak" thrown over his face.<sup>33</sup> Rather than Death, who would hardly be personified in the way Cather describes and who would most likely terrify Alexandra in her present mental state, this figure appears to be Christlike, a loving, nurturing, and understanding presence.<sup>34</sup>

Alexandra's behavior the next morning lends credence to this interpretation; she decides to go to the prison in Lincoln, where Frank Shabata is incarcerated, so that she can offer him her forgiveness for what he has done and her assistance in trying to procure release from his sentence. If this figure were simply a personification of Death, then Alexandra's subsequent behavior makes little sense. Alexandra is sure now "for whom it was that she had waited, and where he would carry her" (146). Cather thus weaves Christian themes indirectly into the narrative in this final dream sequence. The "mightiest of all lovers" in this passage may thus be read as a figure who represents a merging of the Native American myths with elements of Christianity. Cather, rather than denying the Native American past, blends it

with Christian and biblical imagery in this last dream sequence.<sup>35</sup>

The death and despair that visit Alexandra at the end of the novel are healed only by the appearance of the mysterious figure in her last dream sequence. She realizes that at the end of her life this "mightiest of all lovers" will return for her and she will blend into the breath of the Divide and the spirit that moves across the land. Alexandra is at last receptive to the spiritual and the erotic within her own nature: no longer "blind," her vision has been "sharpen[ed]" and the "underground river" that had always been present but only occasionally "came to the surface" now breaks free (105).

#### CONCLUSION

The two dream sequences have different effects upon Alexandra. In the first dream sequence, Alexandra responds the next morning with shame and denial. In the second, Alexandra feels compelled to go to Lincoln to forgive Frank. Doane writes that "the action fostered by the [second] dream leaves readers incredulous," especially given Alexandra's deep love for Emil.<sup>36</sup> Alexandra, despite all that she has been through at this point in the narrative, is not an impulsive person. She is deeply reflective, and she realizes that Frank's actions did not stem from hatred of Emil: "She and Frank, she told herself, were left out of that group of friends who had been overwhelmed by disaster. She must certainly see Frank Shabata. Even in the courtroom her heart had grieved for him. He was in a strange country, he had no kinsman or friends, and in a moment he had ruined his life. Being what he was, she felt, Frank could not have acted otherwise" (148).

More importantly, as she arrives home and opens the telegram from Carl, Alexandra is finally able to recognize and to articulate her need for Carl. No longer does she deny the erotic side of her existence: As they plan their future life together, Alexandra asks Carl, "Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. I

think when friends marry, they are safe'” (159). Alexandra's comment could be read as lacking in erotic overtones, but in fact she is linking the spiritual to the erotic in a conscious, careful way. As Douglas W. Werden notes of this relationship, “Far from a spontaneous declaration of passion, Alexandra's thoughtful proposal reflects her desire for happiness through intimacy with another person who understands her but will not limit her.”<sup>37</sup>

Alexandra's earlier feelings of ownership in regard to the land have dissipated along with her hopes for Emil; she no longer sees herself or what she has accomplished in an acquisitive, accumulative way. Marilee Lindemann describes Alexandra's attitude in this last passage as “a massive yet predictable denial of her life's work, which has at every point involved expanding her holdings in land, using the law to protect her claims to them, and seeking ways to maximize their profitability.”<sup>38</sup> Yet as the novel ends Alexandra does not deny her life's work; rather, she reaffirms her earlier relationship to the land, before she transformed it into vast wheat- and cornfields, when the Genius of the Divide bent to her “will” and to “her heart” (33). This time, it is Alexandra who bends her will and her heart to the land, for she understands that the land does not belong to Emil or to Lou and Oscar's children, but to those who “love it and understand it” and even then only “for a little while” (158). Her conscious connection to the internal resources that Lorde describes has given Alexandra a new vision, and a new understanding of ownership.

After her brother's murder, she realizes how blind she was to Emil's love for Marie and how fleeting her imprint upon the land will be. David Laird reads the novel's ending as “far from triumphant, leav[ing] us anxious and perplexed before what no single idea or interpretive construction is able to encompass or represent.”<sup>39</sup> Years later Cather would describe this technique in the following way: “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created.

It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.”<sup>40</sup> Laird's “anxious and perplexed” reader resembles those who heard the parables of Jesus: rooted in paradox and slant meaning, the parables revealed their meaning to those who had an ear attuned to their spiritual message.

Cather ends the novel with an allusion to John 12:24 (NSRV): “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This paradox, of dying and rising, ceasing to be, yet giving birth to new life, is expressed in the last sentence of the novel. Cather writes, “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!” (159). In the course of Alexandra's second dream, the “mightiest of all lovers” enables her to embrace the spiritual and the erotic in her nature. As a result of this dream, Alexandra changes. She is able to offer forgiveness and help to Frank Shabata and to open her heart to Carl. Because of the dream, and her conscious connection to the erotic and spiritual power within, Alexandra now understands differently her relation to Carl and to the land. As the novel ends, Alexandra breathes *with* the “Genius of the Divide,” and in her breath she releases and inhales the erotic and the spiritual resources that lie “firmly rooted” within her.

#### NOTES

1. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53.
2. C. Susan Wiesenthal describes the first dream passage in the novel as evidence of “an unclear impulse” that Alexandra wishes to “wash away” and the second dream passage as “alarmingly associated with the hooded figure of Death, ‘the mightiest of all lovers.’” “Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's

*O Pioneers!* and the Era of Scientific Sexology: A Dialogue between Frontiers," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 21, no. 1 (January 1990): 53. Melissa Ryan sees the figure in the second dream sequence as "doubly threatening, as both heterosexual aggression and as the symbolic Indian, whose literal presence would disrupt Cather's epic narrative." "The Enclosure of America: Civilization and Confinement in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*," *American Literature* 75, no. 2 (June 2003): 295. Sharon O'Brien writes that Alexandra "never thinks of herself as a sensual woman," and that she "never acknowledges any sexual feelings or betrays a hint of passion for her ever-faithful suitor, Carl." "The Unity of Willa Cather's 'Two-Part Pastoral': Passion in *O Pioneers!*," *Studies in American Fiction* 6 (1978): 159. I argue, however, that Alexandra does come into a deeper knowledge of herself as a sensual and physically attractive woman in her dream sequences, when she is visited by a series of hyper-masculinized figures, culminating in her most powerful dream at the end of the novel. This dream levers her into a deeper knowledge of her erotic resources, a sensuality that is linked to spirituality in the way that Lorde describes.

3. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 53.

4. Wiesenthal, "Female Sexuality in *O Pioneers!*," 48.

5. Michael Roth, *Issues of Westward Expansion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 105.

6. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 11. Further citations to *O Pioneers!* are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

7. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 55.

8. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 3. The years 1876-92 were particularly good years for rainfall (see Olson, p. 11, for a discussion of Nebraska's soil and p. 13 for water tables). A dry period from 1893-1901 might have tested the resilience of the Bergson family, however. It certainly affected Willa Cather's family; she had to return home to Red Cloud in 1893 from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln because the drought had depleted the Cather family finances. Most likely Alexandra was adept enough to procure access to the surface water resources that made their way into the rivers and creeks around her land, thus providing irrigation for her fields.

9. As cited in Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 3-4.

10. As he lay dying, John Bergson reflects on the "eleven long years" that he had spent on the land. Since the novel opens in the year 1883, the Bergson's arrival date of 1872 is thus confirmed.

11. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 53.

12. Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 441.

13. Reginald Dyck, "Willa Cather's Reluctant New Woman Pioneer," *Great Plains Quarterly* 23 (Spring 2003): 168.

14. Wiesenthal describes Alexandra as one who brings order out of chaos: she is a "pre-eminent symbol of order and a bedrock of stability. Under Alexandra's creative and loving will, for example, the natural world is gradually though steadily transformed from a hostile 'wild land' to a productive and geometrically neat farm, noteworthy for its 'most unusual trimness and care for detail'" ("Female Sexuality in *O Pioneers!*," 83). Although Wiesenthal does not mention Mrs. Bergson as an important influence on Alexandra, in her work on the Nebraska prairie Alexandra resembles her mother.

15. Sharon O'Brien writes, "Alexandra's role as artist is evident in her visionary imagination, her combination of creative ability and technical skill, her discovery of self-expression in the soil, and in the emergence of the fertile, ordered landscape. . . . Returning from his sixteen-year absence and seeing the wilderness transformed into settled land, [Carl] acknowledges that his is the imitative and Alexandra's the creative sensibility" (*Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, 434).

16. Roth, *Issues of Westward Expansion*, 106.

17. Susan J. Rosowski, "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *A Lost Lady*," in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E. Mallory (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 85.

18. Ryan, "Civilization and Confinement in *O Pioneers!*," 278.

19. *Ibid.*, 286.

20. Mike Fischer, "Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism," *Mosaic* 23 (Winter 1990): 32.

21. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 23.

22. Ryan, "Civilization and Confinement in *O Pioneers!*," 294.

23. Dorothy Van Ghent, *Willa Cather*, Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 36 (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), 16-17. Van Ghent is drawing upon Sigmund Freud's ideas about dreams. Freud writes, "[W]e are confronted with the fact that the dreamer has at his command a symbolic mode of expression of which he knows nothing, and does not even recognize, in his waking life." *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1943).

24. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54-55. In her essay, Lorde seeks to reclaim the concept of the erotic so that it is linked less to sexuality per se and more to the creative impulse.

25. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing, and Women* (New York: Random House, 1974), 101. Emphasis mine.

26. O'Brien, "Unity of Willa Cather's 'Two-Part Pastoral,'" 164.

27. Warren Motley, "The Unfinished Self: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Psychic Cost of a Woman's Success," *Women's Studies* 12 (1986): 161.

28. Some critics read Alexandra's anger toward Marie in this part of the novel as connected to Alexandra's own hidden love and desire for Marie. For instance, Warren Motley writes, "Marie's affair with Emil is a two-fold betrayal. . . . Marie betrays Alexandra's unspoken love from woman to woman." "The Unfinished Self," 161.

29. O'Brien, *Willa Cather*, 438.

30. Peter Damian Charles, "Love and Death in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*," *CLA Journal* 9 (December 1965): 148-49.

31. David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 29.

32. Margaret Doane, "The Non-Interpretation of Dreams: Cather's Use of a Detail in Characterization," *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Newsletter and Review* 46, no. 3 (2003): 60.

33. The language that Cather uses in this passage is biblical in tone and in its use of allusions, particularly in the way in which the body of the figure (especially the arm) is described. For instance, in Isaiah 52:10 (New Revised Standard Version), the prophet says, "The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations," and Isaiah 53:1, 4 says, "To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? . . . Surely he has borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases." In the Gospel of Luke 1:51, Mary, paraphrasing Isaiah, tells Elizabeth, "He has shown strength with his arm." Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet, is often seen as describing the figure of Christ in his prophetic utterances. When Christ begins his public ministry, he cites passages from the book of Isaiah, clearly underscoring the connection.

34. White clothing is associated with the risen Christ, with the angels present at Christ's tomb after his resurrection, and with the apocalyptic vision that John records in the book of Revelation. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew (28:3) an angel comes to the tomb and rolls back the stone from the door: "[H]is appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow." This figure speaks to the women gathered there, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary." In the Gospel of Mark 16:5, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome see "a young man dressed in a white robe" when they visit the tomb to anoint the body. In the Gospel of John 20:11-12, Mary Magdalene encounters two angels dressed in white: "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white." Luke 24:4 describes "two men in dazzling clothes" at the tomb. In Revelation 1:13-14, John writes, "[I]n the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow."

35. Bruce P. Baker II sees the structure of the novel as containing allusions to Genesis in Alexandra's transformative power of shaping "the land into an abundant Garden of Eden and a reminder that within that Garden lurks death and despair." "*O Pioneers!*: The Problem of Structure," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (1982): 221.

36. Doane, "Cather's Use of a Detail," 62.

37. Douglas W. Werden, "'She Had Never Humbled Herself': Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata as the 'Real' Pioneers of *O Pioneers!*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 22 (Summer 2002): 205.

38. Marilee Lindemann, *Willa Cather: Queering America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 45.

39. David Laird, "Willa Cather's Women: Gender, Place, and Narrativity in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 12 (Fall 1992): 245.

40. Willa Cather, "The Novel *Demeuble*," in *Not Under Forty* (London: Cassell Publishing, 1936), 54.