Contradictory Subtexts In Willa Cather's O Pioneers! And Thomas Hardy's Far From the Madding Crowd

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CONTRADICTORY SUBTEXTS IN WILLA CATHER’S O PIONEERS! AND THOMAS HARDY’S FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

GRACE WETZEL

An independent and strong-minded woman gains control of a farm and determines to effect its fruition. Though many doubt her capacity, the female landowner trumps her male counterparts when the farm flourishes under her effective management. In the end, she marries—but on extremely unconventional terms. Rejecting romantic love, she instead weds a devoted friend. Camaraderie hence privileged over passion, the novel ends.

This summary outlines the story of not one but two major literary heroines—Bathsheba Everdene of Thomas Hardy’s Far from the Madding Crowd (1874) and Alexandra Bergson of Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! (1913). Critics have analyzed these texts with multifaceted lenses, yet there has been no suggestion of their relationship to one another. This oversight is unusual, given documented evidence that Cather esteemed Hardy. In the October 5, 1895, issue of the Courier, Cather wrote: “I admire Thomas Hardy; I admire the lofty conception of Tess of the D’Urbervilles, the finished execution of A Pair of Blue Eyes, the beautiful simplicity of Far from the Madding Crowd.” In an undated letter to Burges Johnson, she included Hardy in a selective list of “classics of English literature,” and on May 29, 1943, wrote to William Lyon Phelps that it was a “pleasure” to hear “through Stephen Tennant that Thomas Hardy’s widow said Hardy liked A Lost Lady.”

At the same time, Cather’s opinion of Hardy was not one of strict admiration. She identified his tone as “sometimes mechanical or patronizing” in a letter to Albert G. Feuillerat on November 6, 1929, and detested both Jude the Obscure and its precursor, Hearts Insurgent. Deeming the latter a “crowning piece of arrant madness and drivelling idiocy,” Cather went on to write an even more vituperative review...
of *Jude the Obscure* in 1896. In it, she indicted Hardy for inventing “two such hysterical and generally erratic parents” and sanctioning the “spontaneous” appearance of children. On this point, Cather was particularly incensed that Hardy made a “blooming mother of three” out of Sue Bridehead. “It will take several decent ordinary novels to bring you to your senses again,” she concluded.

These biographical records hint at Hardy’s complex transatlantic influence on Cather. While Hardy’s repertoire was impressive enough to influence her, it was imperfect enough to encourage revision. This essay will examine the remarkable similarities between *O Pioneers!* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as well as the ways in which Cather deviates from Hardy’s thematic framework to alter the terms of her first major novel. Together, these texts make useful companions for comparing ground-breaking depictions of marriage and gender during two crucial moments in the course of women’s liberation. Neither novel, however, is free from contradiction.

Love, moreover, operated within strict class boundaries. Even early nineteenth-century domestic novels, which according to Nancy Armstrong permitted certain class lines to “dissolve within marriage,” rarely escaped a well-known formula. Typically, only upper-class males pardoned the lower social standing of females whose inner virtue deemed them acceptable objects of desire. By midcentury, even this small window of transgression closed as fiction “no longer provided a fantasy in which . . . class lines dissolve[d] within marriage. Instead, it began marking boundaries that it had formerly felt free to cross.”

Such sexual and socioeconomic restrictions surfaced in both English and American nineteenth-century literature. Despite varying political regimes, the two nations shared similar social and economic patterns as “industrialised ‘urban societies’.” So did they produce comparable class and gender ideologies over the course of the nineteenth century. Promulgated by culture, these ideologies were often rearticulated through literature. From *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Blithedale Romance* to *Wuthering Heights* and *Vanity Fair*, Victorian and nineteenth-century American novels tended to impose on charac-
ters strict social hierarchies and constricting gender roles. In most instances, characters of a similar social class wed; when they did not, the romance frequently resulted in failure. For this reason, the premodern romance plot was often passionate, sometimes tragic, but rarely revolutionary. Strong heroines were few and far between, and the powerful women that were found seldom enjoyed happy endings to their love stories.

In 1874 Thomas Hardy seemed to step beyond this tradition. He did so at a time when the British women’s rights movement had begun to make strides but was still burdened by restrictive mores. On one hand, 1870s feminists openly condemned woman’s sexual oppression. During this period, Annie Besant denounced the “non-recognition of marital rape,” while other women deplored wifelihood for its economic dependence and loss of legal and political rights. Keeping pace with such voices was the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, followed by the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878. What was further notable about the 1870s was its emphasis on a new ideal for marriage. Dissatisfied with decades of psychological and sexual oppression, feminists advocated marriages “based on love, sympathy, companionship,” “equality,” and “women’s autonomy.” On the other hand, the most forceful waves of feminism were not initiated until the 1880s—at least six years after Hardy’s novel was published. And while the accomplishments of this period were prefaced by works such as Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) and John Stuart Mill’s The Subjection of Women (1869), late-Victorian culture lagged behind the feminist evolution, stigmatizing single women and discouraging their economic equality.

CULTURAL TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTORY SUBTEXT

These cultural tensions manifest themselves in Far from the Madding Crowd through the novel’s narrative structure. Specifically, there is a discernable tension between its text and subtext. Charles Baxter has recently defined “subtext” as that which is “implied,” “half-visible,” or “unspoken.” Drawing on deconstructive theory, he claims that a text’s “surface bric-a-brac” suggests “an indistinct presence underneath that surface.” Paradoxically, “[w]hat is displayed evokes what is not displayed,” an argument reminiscent of Shoshana Felman’s “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” which demonstrates how deconstruction works with subtext to argue that any narrative explicitly subverts the thing it ostensibly affirms. The contradictory subtext of Far from the Madding Crowd stems most likely from the ambivalent historical moment in which Hardy was writing. While the denunciation of sexual oppression and the emerging, more equitable conception of marriage made resisting the premodern romance plot possible, lingering ideologies checked the extent to which Hardy actually
challenged conservative ideas about class and gender. The result is an unconventional plot undercut by conventional subtext, by a series of “luminous specific details that take us in the direction of the unsaid and unseen.”

The narrative structure of *O Pioneers!* is similar—except that the conservative subtext is less pronounced; the main plot less radical for its time. This is attributable to a historical moment in which American women of the 1910s could cash in on the rights and opportunities won for them by earlier advocates. As Nancy F. Cott explains, feminists in the late nineteenth century denounced “the expectation of women’s economic dependence on men” and rallied for female “self-support.”

Their efforts facilitated numerous “educational, occupational, and professional advance[s]” for women at the turn of the century: more went to college and many enjoyed “new experiences in public, organizational, and occupational life.” What ensued were women doctors, lawyers, architects, and planners, all of whom forged paths into “male-dominated professions” that were furthered by women in the second decade of the twentieth century. Importantly, this professional advancement altered conceptions of marriage. As more women began supporting themselves, “spinsterhood began to seem more acceptable.” Nearly half of all female college graduates in the late nineteenth century remained unmarried, and by the turn of the century, many women were actually “celebrated” for staying single.

Another advancement concerned attitudes toward sex. Unlike British feminists of the 1870s—many of whom linked sex with oppression—American women’s rights advocates in second decade of the twentieth century resisted the conclusion that sexual self-control was crucial “to gain parity with men.” For these feminists, “sexuality was a frontier for expression of freedom—a zone to invade rather than to evade.” At the same time, tensions did exist. Although these feminists endorsed “heterosexual passion and pleasure,” they “derived much of their own ideological grounding from the critique of traditional marriage and the insistence on women’s self-protection and control of male sexual access.”

Moreover, while more and more feminists and female college graduates were rejecting marriage, general marriage rates were rising. Fewer women in the early twentieth century remained unmarried, while the median marriage age declined.

On the whole, however, the historical moment in which Cather wrote was more amenable to progressive depictions of marriage and gender than the publication year of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Appearing almost forty years later, *O Pioneers!* debuted well after the advent of literary modernism and in the wake of the American women’s rights movements which exploded at the turn-of-the-century. These distinct cultural contexts explain the different extents to which Hardy and Cather challenge conventional depictions of marriage and gender. While Hardy questioned the cultural work of the premodern romance plot, he makes more concessions to his heroine than does Cather. *O Pioneers!*, on the other hand, seems to blur gender boundaries and social hierarchies in ways that *Far from the Madding Crowd* hints at but hesitates to establish firmly.

Susan Neal Mayberry has dealt specifically with Alexandra’s anomalous union in “A New Heroine Marriage: Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*” Mayberry contrasts Cather’s text with those of nineteenth-century novelists whose female characters either died tragically or wedded in fairy-tale-like fashion. In Mayberry’s mind, the nonsexual union of Carl and Alexandra acts as an alternative to “the nineteenth-century notion that woman’s passion must end either in traditional marriage or in isolation or death.” To Mayberry and many others, Cather’s reconsideration of romance indicates the changing conventions of twentieth-century culture, fictionalized by a writer who both signals and shapes the blurring of class and gender in modern America.

What shines on the surface, however, is not fully supported by what lies beneath. While Cather revolutionizes certain aspects of Hardy’s novel, she too makes concessions to her heroine. Like *Far from the Madding Crowd*,...
O Pioneers! contains contradictory subtext that—though less visible—still suggests conformity. For this reason, neither Cather nor Hardy finalizes a subversive vision. Instead, subtext weakens central themes, which in Cather's case were not entirely unusual for their time. Ultimately, both O Pioneers! and Far from the Madding Crowd contradict their progressive agendas and reflect the conflicting social currents of their respective historical moments.

A MODERNIZED FEMINIST REVISION?

For decades, the majority of Cather critics have seen Alexandra Bergson as a celebratory, subversive heroine. Janis P. Stout deems her "a woman strong, independent, and intelligent," while Helen Wussow praises her willingness to stand "outside the dominant culture." For Margaret Marquis, Alexandra's position as a woman "is not the traditional woman's nor the traditional housewife's." Though she "yearns for the land, she does not yearn for a husband to give her children." To Reginald Dyck, Alexandra is a "New Woman"; to Susan Harris, she is a resolute leader. Finally, Dana K. Kinnison discusses ways in which Alexandra blurs traditional gender expectations. Because the heroine "controls her own reproductivity and never marries," she poses a sizable "threat to the status quo." Like Alexandra, Bathsheba has received considerable praise for her subversion. She is a strong pagan figure to Shirley Stave and a "strong-willed woman" to Linda M. Shires, who believes that Bathsheba blurs traditional masculine and feminine behaviors. Similarly, Judith Bryant Wittenberg deems Bathsheba "a spirited woman who tries to affirm her individuality in a society unready to accept her unconventional behavior." Not all Hardy critics agree, however. Rosemarie Morgan deems her a victim of sexual domination, while Richard Carpenter claims that Bathsheba wishes to be "violated by an aggressive male." These testimonies help corroborate the following point: Hardy fails to extend his character's subversion as far as Cather does, suggesting that Alexandra is not a mere replication of Bathsheba, but a modernized, feminist revision. Three points of comparison best illustrate this claim: androgyny, economics, and sex.

ANDROGYNY

From the opening of Hardy's story, Bathsheba exhibits characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity. She dominates relationships, refuses to hire a male bailiff, and deploys enough acumen to make "business in every bank in Casterbridge." Furthermore, she views femininity as an encumbrance. Confronted by her feelings for an unworthy man, "She strove miserably against this femininity which would insist upon supplying unbidden emotions in stronger and stronger current" (201). At another point, she passionately declares, "I shall never forgive God for making me a woman" (195). Bathsheba's masculinity reaches its height during her fiery reproach of her maidervant Liddy, who responds by characterizing her mistress in androgynous terms:

And, dear miss, you won't harry me and storm at me, will you? because you seem to swell so tall as a lion then, and it frightens me! Do you know, I fancy you would be a match for any man when you are in one o' your takings."

"Never! do you?" said Bathsheba, slightly laughing, though somewhat seriously alarmed by this Amazonian picture of herself. "I hope I am not a bold sort of maid—mannish?" she continued with some anxiety. (196)

In this dialogue, Bathsheba is characterized as "Amazonian," a traditionally mythical figure and "death-dealing warrior," according to Dana K. Kinnison. Energetic and aggressive, the Amazonian female is said to blur "traditional gender expectations by pursuing stereotypically male endeavors." Bathsheba's name, moreover, signifies masculine behavior.
Suggestive of the biblical queen who aggressively secured the succession of her own son Solomon in place of David’s surviving son Adonijah, “Bathsheba” carries mythical associations with subversion. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the heroine’s pursuits do seem stereotypically masculine. Bathsheba shocks her compatriots by being “a farmer in her own person,” (90) assumes the traditionally male position of bailiff, and rules her workingmen with aggressive confidence. Yet she is simultaneously alarmed when confronted with an Amazonian image of herself. Her horror is accentuated by the hesitation with which she pronounces her last few words: “I hope I am not a bold sort of maid—mannish?” she questions.

For all Hardy’s subversion, Bathsheba seems circumscribed as “woman.” On numerous occasions, she not merely eschews masculinity but parades femininity. In the novel’s opening scene, she is seen surveying herself in a small pocket-mirror, observing “herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind” (12). Later, she exhibits girlish romanticism by superstitiously seeking the name of her future husband via a Bible and key. Additionally, her business acumen (a traditionally male trait) is largely enabled by her femininity. She succeeds in business partly because she is shrewd, but more so because she is beautiful. This is evident the moment Bathsheba enters the male-dominated marketplace, “prettily and even daintily dressed.” Every face “turned towards her, and those that were already turned rigidly fixed there” (90). This passage makes apparent that the attention her *produce* receives is made possible by perceptions of Bathsheba, herself, as a commodity. As Joe Coggan confirms, “Tis such a shapely maid” that “she’ll soon get *picked up*” (91; italics mine).
A comparison of Bathsheba and Alexandra reveals that the latter is unruffled by her lack of femininity. As Janis P. Stout suggests, “The key to Alexandra’s heroism is her androgyny.” Throughout *O Pioneers!* Alexandra appropriates masculine roles and behaviors while males appear weak in contrast. In the opening scene, both Emil and Carl Linstrum act as foils for Alexandra. The young Emil is the damsel in kitten while Alexandra walks key to Alexandra’s heroism is her androgyny.”

Moreover, Alexandra is not unconscious of her androgyny—she assumes it deliberately: With one “Amazonian glance,” Alexandra “stabbed” the man fiercely. While Cather’s verb choice highlights the violence with which Alexandra purposefully discards her femininity, the phallic imagery further blurs gender lines. Ultimately, whether humiliating male admirers, speculating on business, or managing the land, Alexandra effects her triumphs through androgyny.

**ECONOMICS**

Economics offers a second point of comparison for *O Pioneers!* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. From an early point in the latter text, Bathsheba eschews traditional conceptions of marriage. Confronted with her first proposal, Bathsheba replies, “I shouldn’t mind being a bride at a wedding if I could be one without having a husband.”*(Hardy 35)* Her reason? “I hate to be thought men’s property in that way—though possibly I shall be had some day” *(Hardy 33).* Here, Bathsheba exhibits an aversion to marriage based on feminist principles. She rejects not only the economic inequality of marriage, but the conception of herself as “property” to be purchased. Her attitudes correspond with those of late-nineteenth-century British feminists, who criticized marriage “in terms of its injustices: a woman’s economic dependency, loss of legal and political rights, an unequal divorce law, and, above all, the assumption of a husband’s *ownership* of his wife.”*(italics mine)* Yet like her androgyny, Bathsheba’s economic independence is complicated by her underlying conformism. As forecast by her admission that “possibly I shall be *had* some day” *(italics mine)*, Bathsheba soon forsakes her self-sufficiency to the unctuous Sergeant Troy, who robs his bride of her money and pride. Indicating possession, the verb “had” at this time carried economic connotations (“to hold or possess as property”) while sometimes implying subordination (“to possess, bear, contain, as an appendage, organ, subordinate
When Bathsheba speaks of being "had," she figuratively references her property and fortune while literally commodifying herself as a good available for purchase. Ultimately, Troy's transaction does subordinate her—she is treated as a belonging and exploited for her full economic and sexual value. And while Bathsheba ultimately escapes her husband and weds her former employee, Gabriel Oak, this somewhat subversive union is simultaneously conventionalized. By allowing Oak to rise economically before he weds Bathsheba, Hardy reinforces traditional definitions of marriage as the union of two members of a similar social class.

Alexandra, on the other hand, weds Carl while he is rising, though he has by no means reached (nor will ever reach) her economic heights. And while her attitude toward marriage changes over the course of the novel (growing from utter indifference to level-headed interest), her self-sufficiency remains constant throughout. For the first forty years of her life, she eschews marriage in favor of her own economic independence. By foregoing sexual relationships and romance, she wins a seat at the head of the household. Her ascendancy is particularly telling in relation to Far from the Madding Crowd. In it, Bathsheba inherits her uncle's farm because she is the only remaining relative. Alexandra, however, is chosen as her father's successor in place of his two sons. Unlike her brothers, "It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets. . . . It was Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales closer than John Bergson himself" (Cather 13). Prizing steer fattening over flirtation, and business savvy over sexual attraction, Alexandra appropriates the place of male breadwinner, posing an ostensible challenge to traditional patriarchal order. Even when intimating marriage to Carl, she shies away from social convention. Unaffected by his inferior economic status, she proves herself more progressive than he, who refuses her "only because he is not equally free of conventionalism."39

"I'll be working for you as much as for myself, Alexandra. I want to do something you'll like and be proud of. I'm a fool here, but I know I can do something!" He sat up and frowned at the red grass. Alexandra sighed. (27-28)

Here it becomes evident that Alexandra values Carl's companionship over his ability to act as a breadwinner. His emphasis on working "for," rather than alongside, the female indicates his conventional values—values that oppose Alexandra's more progressive conception of marriage. Her awareness of this clash is indicated by her "sigh"—an acknowledgement of Carl's obstructive conservatism. Whereas Carl defines his self-worth in economic terms, Alexandra illuminates an alternative currency by which his marital value may be measured. "It's by understanding me, and the boys, and mother, that you've helped me," she claims. "I expect that is the only way one person ever really can help another" (Cather 27). Carl, whether through shame or "fear of living with a woman whose economic power surpasses his own,"40 rejects this currency, and sets off for the East. To the discerning reader, his actions appear absurd. The visibly weaker and more defective character, Carl espouses an outdated ideology that is subordinated to Alexandra's more modern vision—a vision that is ultimately realized when Carl returns. At this point, he is somewhat successful, though his achievement—unlike Oak's—never approaches the economic heights of his female counterpart. Ostensibly, then, the quasi-subversion of Bathsheba's marriage with Gabriel is fully realized by Cather's modifications.

SEX

Aside from economics, sex offers a final point of comparison. Importantly, the two are not unrelated. As Margaret Marquis suggests, "a working woman who might threaten traditional relationships of male dominance through her wage earning could 'redeem' herself through maintenance of her male
counterpart’s sexual control and appropriate manifestations of her sexual desire, such as having children."41 Alexandra and Bathsheba, however, neither extend sexual control to their husbands nor evidence the desire to have children. Their withholding seems in large part subversive. Rejecting sexual submissiveness and reproductive responsibility, the women escape the boundaries of "true womanhood." In wedding friends, they supplant sex with something seemingly more empowering. This "camaraderie" is famously celebrated in the penultimate chapter of Far from the Madding Crowd, which concludes:

[Gabriel] accompanied [Bathsheba] up the hill, explaining to her the details of his forthcoming tenure of the other farm. They spoke very little of their mutual feelings; pretty phrases and warm expressions being probably unnecessary between such tried friends. Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship—camaraderie—usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where however happy circumstance permits its development the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death—that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown. (383-84)

Here the narrator clearly differentiates between conventional, sexually based relationships and a more refined and realistic camaraderie. "Warm expressions," "passion," and "pretty phrases" are subordinated to "camaraderie" and a "mass of hard prosaic reality." The itali-

ization of "camaraderie" underscores its superiority over "passion" and "pretty phrases," which seem superficial in comparison. The "evanescent[ce]" of passion is particularly relevant in relation to feminist discourse that circulated at the approximate time that the novel was published. During the late nineteenth century, feminists sought revolutionized sexual relations between men and women, rallying for "the eradication of women's experience of sexual objectification, sexual violence, and lack of bodily autonomy."42 By granting Bathsheba freedom from sexual slavery, Hardy seems to support a woman's right to "bodily autonomy." Such autonomy is predicated on the fact that Bathsheba marries a friend, not a lover. This union seems in Hardy's mind atypical, as it is "seldom superadded to love between the sexes."

Yet Hardy's celebratory endorsement of camaraderie is complicated by sentimentality and the novel's subtext, which hints at Bathsheba's underlying desire to be dominated. First, consider the sentimentality of the previous passage. Though the narrator openly eschews passion and "pretty" romance, the passage itself seems equally cloying. Melodramatic phrases such as "the only love which is strong as death" and "that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown" support the very ideology that Hardy ostensibly wants to overturn. Perhaps the author had reservations about doing so. In a revealing passage approximately halfway through the novel, the narrator describes Bathsheba's "hot," "excite[d]," and erratic response to sergeant Troy, explaining (177):

Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away. One source of her inadequacy is the novelty of the occasion. She has never had practice in making the best of such a condition. Weakness is doubly weak by being new. (186)
Here Bathsheba exhibits a masochistic attraction to the novelty of being seduced. Her "reckless" abandonment of her strength reinforces—indeed, exacerbates—the destructive ideology of helpless, female submission. Not only are "weak" women sexual pawns, but seemingly "self-reliant" women are, too, and in a worse way due to their inexperience. By theorizing the dynamics of sexual domination in this way, the narrator attempts to contain female power. Such sentiments point to growing patriarchal anxiety about advancements in women's rights. More specifically, the narrator's views oppose feminists like Besant who openly denounced sexual domination. For the narrator, domination is not merely natural but is desired by all women.

This philosophy is reiterated when Bathsheba climatically uncovers the corpses of her first husband's dead lover and child. Flinging "her arms round Troy's neck" and crying "wildly from the deepest deep of her heart," Bathsheba exclaims, "Don't—don't kiss them! O Frank, I can't bear it—I can't! I love you better than she did—kiss me too, Frank—kiss me! You will, Frank, kiss me too!" (292). Here Bathsheba's strength dissolves into a humiliating plea for love. Quick to critique her, the narrator concludes that "all women" were "alike at heart," even those of "Bathsheba's calibre and independence" (292-93). Once again, Hardy attempts to contain the transgressive woman. By suggesting that strength masks sexual and emotional dependence, the author undercuts his heroine's self-reliance and dilutes the subversion of her eventual union with Gabriel.

Unlike Bathsheba, Alexandra never abandons her self-reliance. This is probably because she does not permit sex to divert her. "Utterly free of the self-conscious ploys and vanities with which society constructs the sexual game," she builds a business without romantic distraction and a marriage without sexual domination. Even at the age of forty, "she had never been in love, and she never indulged in sentimental reveries" (Cather 106). In O Pioneers! the passion that characterizes Bathsheba's conventional surrender to Troy is condemned by the judgmental depiction of John Bergson's father's second marriage, "an infatuation" born from "the despairing folly of a powerful man who cannot bear to grow old. In a few years his unprincipled wife warped the probity of a lifetime" (13). This marriage may be the foil for Carl and Alexandra's late-in-life union. Unlike her grandfather, Alexandra "does not mind becoming middle-aged," nor will she ever fall prey to marriage on account of passion. Instead, she weds a sincere friend.

If passion exists on the novel's periphery, friendship stands at its center. Alexandra and Carl are repeatedly referred to as "friends" as well as "fellow travelers" on the road of life. When assenting to marriage with one another, they are depicted walking arm in arm. Their
marital future, like their amicable past, is analogized as a journey, one in which friends, not lovers, will overcome life's obstacles together:

How many times we have walked this path together, Carl. How many times we will walk it again! Does it seem to you like coming back to your own place? 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. We don't suffer like—those young ones. (159)

This passage is distinctly reminiscent of Hardy, whose depiction of Bathsheba and Gabriel walking reifies their relationship as two steadfast travelers. Like Bathsheba, Alexandra consciously celebrates her union. Unlike Bathsheba, she has no regrets. While Hardy's heroine muses that "there's no getting out of it now!" (387), Alexandra professes that "I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears." Her confidence corresponds with her control: one scene, particularly, demonstrates that Alexandra will dictate the terms of her sexual relationship. When Carl and Alexandra reach the gate, Carl attempts to introduce romance into the relationship, "drawing Alexandra to him and kissing her softly, on her lips and on her eyes" (159). Alexandra, however, rejects his sexual advances and responds in her own way. "She leaned heavily on his shoulder. 'I am tired,' she murmured. 'I have been very lonely, Carl.'" Again, Alexandra emphasizes camaraderie. She seeks a companion to assuage her loneliness, not a lover to fill a sexual void. Her concluding gesture is one that controls the male's advance, not one that submits to it. This suggests that when sex *does* occur, it will be Alexandra who initiates it. In this way, Cather rejects the sexual slavery that characterized marriage for many nineteenth-century American women of the Victorian era, while leaving open the possibility for pleasure on the female's terms. On this triumphant note, the story ends. But is this the end of the story?

O PIONEERS!: COMPROMISES, COMPLEXITIES, AND CONTRADICTIONS

It is here that a careful examination of Cather's narrative structure proves useful. As suggested, the subversion of *Far from the Madding Crowd* falters as a result of its conventional subtext. Though Bathsheba is depicted in androgynous terms, she is unconsciously impelled to act as a stereotypical woman. Though she is a prosperous farmer, she is financially swindled by Sergeant Troy and weds Gabriel only after he has seen considerable economic success. Finally, though she forsakes passion for friendship, she is psychologically deflated by the lack of sexual domination in her second marriage. It is also clear that Cather appears to correct these shortcomings. Modernizing Hardy's heroine and mending her weaknesses, Cather revolutionizes her predecessor's treatment of androgyny, economics, and sex. On first glance, her agenda appears unconventional. Yet *O Pioneers!* is also undermined by subtext that—though more subtle—suggests conformity, not subversion.

First, Alexandra's companionable marriage is undercut by her recurrent dream of sexual submission. Lying in bed, she imagined the "illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by someone very strong. 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." Though she never saw him, "she could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields" (Cather 106). Feminist critics have critiqued Cather for including this passage in her novel. To many, the dream suggests Alexandra's unconscious desire to become a romantic heroine, one whose agency is undercut by sexual submission. Yet we must consider sex and submission separately here. As Nancy F. Cott has argued, sexuality for feminists in the second decade of the twentieth century "was a frontier for expression of freedom—a zone to invade rather than to evade."45 Because sexual
evasion did not beget empowerment (only "an empty assertion of women's moral power through proprieties")," Alexandra's sex drive is not the thing that undercut her subversion. What does is her submission and shame. "It was a man, certainly, who carried her," the narrator writes. It was a man who "laid her down on her bed." While her dream lover is an active subject, Alexandra is acted upon as a passive object. A typical damsel in distress, she is lifted and "carried lightly" in fairy-tale-like fashion. Surely, Alexandra's androgynous existence is complicated by the clearly demarcated gender divisions in this passage, which underscore her submissive behavior. She is in this way similar to Bathsheba, who—while actualizing her conformity in a way that Alexandra does not—shares with her the unconscious impulse to conform. In this way, Cather reinforces stereotypical gender distinctions and conceptions of female submission by suggesting that the impulse to surrender exists innately in women.

Though some critics have read the dream in an empowering light—as an "inversion of the conventional gendering of artistic inspiration" or evidence of Alexandra's active control over the "passive (but sustaining, or carrying) earth"—it is not clear that this was Cather's intention. In fact, readers are clearly discouraged from celebrating the dream vision. After awakening, Alexandra, "angry with herself," 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" (Cather 106). This shame further problematizes the heroine's sex drive. While submission denies Alexandra agency through sex, shame is an anachronism at a time when sexual drives were as constitutive of women's nature as of men's. If Alexandra is as progressiv easing claim, she would not sublimate her sexuality in this way.

Dreaming is also significant in its connection to a more pronounced subplot: the love story of Emil and Marie. References to dreams and dreaming color descriptions of these tragic lovers, whose affair—while adulterous—reinforces women's sexual submission and follows in the patriarchal tradition of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary. Toward the beginning of O Pioneers! Emil imagines "what it would be like if [Marie] loved him . . . In that dream he could lie for hours." Later, Marie is overpowered by the "sweetness of the dream he was dreaming" (114). Impeding the lovers' consummation, Marie exclaims, "I was dreaming this. . . . don't take my dream away!" (133-34). Even in death, Marie appears "as if in a day-dream" (139). In each case, dreaming carries fairy-tale-like associations that—like Alexandra's illusion—reinforce stereotypical gender divisions and female submission. The two plots in O Pioneers! are not, then, juxtaposed. Marie's reveries do not distinguish Alexandra's nonconformism; they complement her similar (though unconscious) yearning to be a sentimental heroine. As an interlinking motif, "dreams" detract from the main plot, reduce Marie to a sacrificial lamb, and undercut Alexandra's ability to redefine love in unconventional terms.

Cather's subversion is further complicated by the fact that even the main plot of O Pioneers! is less anomalous than many suggest. Critics like Margaret Marquis praise O Pioneers! for its depiction of a working woman who executes "important leadership work, instead of factory work or domestic labor, that was not typically assigned to women at the time." Similarly, Reginald Dyck suggests that Cather's "single, independent, entrepreneurial, managerial, strong willed," and "wealthy" female protagonist "offered a new vision for women at the turn of the twentieth century." Douglas W. Werden, too, deems Alexandra a "pioneer" who topples "the presupposition that farm women are necessarily subordinate farmwives who support their husbands by working in the domestic sphere."

Such generalized support of Alexandra's subversion is questionable given debates over the role of women in the West. On one hand, historians like Deborah Fink have explored the limitations binding Nebraskan farmwomen—despite legal advances such as The
Homestead Act of 1862, which enabled single women to attain their own land. According to Fink, “laws limiting their political rights, the customs regarding the distribution of family assets, and women’s difficulties in supporting themselves independently” handicapped women more than “laws specifically related to women, land, and farming” liberated them. Moreover, very few single women likely farmed in the Nebraskan country Fink examines. These authority structures, according to Mary Neth, “gave power to the male head of the household, who represented the family in the larger political and economic world.”

In this context, Alexandra does seem subversive, as critics suggest. She wields power, supports herself independently, and farms as a single woman for almost the entire novel. Yet as Fink admits, the “position of women on the farm and in agrarian thinking has been diverse and complicated in its contradictions,” and many historians maintain that the West liberated women in ways unaccounted for by most Cather critics. This was largely because the gendered division of industrial labor did not impinge on farmwomen, as Daniel Scott Smith discusses. Unlike their urban counterparts, western women were empowered by their integral role in the production economy. This facilitated the erasure of separate spheres according to Neth, since “farming did not separate the jobs of men, women, and children” but “tied them together.” Sarah Elbert similarly identifies the integration of farm work and family life, while Carolyn Sachs contends that nineteenth-century women in the West had considerable opportunity to “own land and participate in agriculture.” In fact, the dearth of independent female farmers in the Nebraskan county Fink examines does not appear indicative of larger patterns. Sachs reveals that “in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a quarter of a million women ran farms of their own.” Like Alexandra, some were single women, whereas others were widows or wed to men who could no longer work.

In this broader context, the main plot of O Pioneers! is not nearly as anomalous. Patriarchal forces certainly encumbered women’s elevated place in the West, but it was not abnormal for females to own land or assume leadership roles. Hence, we must qualify the claims of critics who deem Alexandra “out of the ordinary,” who argue that she “stand[sl outside the dominant culture.” Cather’s heroine is not an unprecedented “pioneer,” nor did she offer “a new vision for women at the turn of the twentieth century” (italics mine). She is, rather, a reflection of the conflicting roles, opportunities, and ideologies that defined farmwomen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

AN ONGOING TREND

In short, though O Pioneers! and Far from the Madding Crowd seem to varying degrees subversive, neither text escapes the contradictory currents of its time. As many critics deem these novels nonconforming, it is necessary to qualify their claims. While Far from the Madding Crowd contains an unconventional plot undercut by conventional subtext, O Pioneers! is undermined by subtext more subtle and a plot less radical given the cultural context. To deem either novel strictly subversive, then, is to dismiss important complexities and contradictions. Notably, these modern novels are not alone in exhibiting these types of complications. Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, for instance, offers a progressive story of a black American woman who escapes patriarchy to find her own voice. Yet in the end, she embraces a man who covertly embodies all that she is attempting to escape. A second example, Thomas Wolfe’s Look Homeward, Angel, depicts the tenacious, entrepreneurial Eliza—yet characterizes her so as to appear unappealing to most readers. This trend is as ongoing as it is prevalent, affecting even midcentury writers such as Carson McCullers, whose The Ballad of the Sad Café begins with the masculine, hairy-thighed Miss Amelia, but ends in a tragic love plot. These examples
underscore the need to closely examine narrative structure—and more importantly, to acknowledge that the advent of modernism did not mean an uncompromised avant-garde.

NOTES

3. Stout, Calendar, 146.
4. Slote, Kingdom of Art, 358.
5. Ibid., 360.
6. Ibid., 359.
9. Consider Hawthorne’s Zenobia, Hale’s lectures, Chopin’s Edna, Braddon’s Lady Audley, and Thackeray’s Becky Sharp.
10. Consider Warner’s Ellen, Wilson’s Beulah, and “reformed” characters such as the class-content Mary Barton and the Methodist preacher-no-more Dinah Morris.
13. The Last of the Mohicans eschews the union of the economically and ethnically “mismatched” Uncas and Cora, while in The Blithedale Romance, the powerful Hollingsworth lays claims to the frail Priscilla. Across the Atlantic, the story was much the same. From Cathy’s rejection of the indigent Heathcliff to Thackeray’s punishment of the masculine ambition of the social-climbing Becky Sharp, Victorian novels, like their American counterparts, seemed to rarely support a subversive couple.
16. Ibid., 149.
20. Ibid., 22, 217.
22. Cott, Grounding of Modern Feminism, 151.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 147. According to Cott, “Of the men and women born in the twenty years after the Civil War, almost 10 percent never married. The median age at first marriage for the 90 percent who did marry was about twenty-six for men and near twenty-four for women. In the generation born thirty years later (from 1895 to the outbreak of the Great War), who came of age from the late 1910s through the Depression, the proportion who never married dropped to near 6 percent, and the median age at first marriage declines to about twenty-five for men and even further for women, to twenty-two and a half.”
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33. Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd, ed. Suzanne B. Falck-Yi, 51 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Further citations to Far from the Madding Crowd are given in parentheses in the text.
34. Kinnison, “Cather’s O Pioneers!” 97.
35. Stout, Writer and Her World, 113.
37. Lucy Bland, Banishing the Beast, 124.
42. Bland, Banishing the Beast, xiii.
43. Stout, Writer and Her World, 115.
44. Ibid.
45. Cott, Grounding of Modern Feminism, 151.
46. Ibid.
47. Stout, Writer and Her World, 114.
48. Cott, Grounding of Modern Feminism, 42.
53. Ibid., 63.
54. Ibid., 67.
56. Fink, Agrarian Women, 195.
58. Neth, Preserving the Family Farm, 17.
60. Sachs, Invisible Farmers, 16.