

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Summer 2002

"She Had Never Humbled Herself" Alexandra Bergson And Marie Shabata As The "Real" Pioneers Of *O Pioneers!*,/i>

Douglas W. Werden

West Texas A & M University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Werden, Douglas W., ""She Had Never Humbled Herself" Alexandra Bergson And Marie Shabata As The "Real" Pioneers Of *O Pioneers!*,/i>" (2002). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2324.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2324>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

“SHE HAD NEVER HUMBLLED HERSELF”

ALEXANDRA BERGSON AND MARIE SHABATA AS THE “REAL” PIONEERS OF *O PIONEERS!*

DOUGLAS W. WERDEN

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) has traditionally been read within the twin contexts of Cather's pioneering childhood and her nostalgic reminiscences that glorify the lives of prairie settlers. These critics interpreted the novel in light of Walt Whitman's poem of the same name in *Leaves of Grass*, which celebrates the conquering American pioneer who "civilizes" the land for production.¹ More recent critics have contextualized it within her family history, agricultural history,

domestic plots, American migration, and women leaving the home.² However, if we consider *O Pioneers!* in relation to the gender role redefinitions of Cather's adult life, we discover a work that is not primarily about homesteading pioneers, but rather about two women who are pioneers in crossing socially constructed gender barriers. Both Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata overturn the presupposition that farm women are necessarily subordinate farmwives who support their husbands by working in the domestic sphere. As a woman farmer, Alexandra Bergson is a superior manager of her land, money, workers, and extended family. Alexandra's movement in the novel is from an initial rejection of traditional women's roles to an exploration of how she can be a woman in a dominant position and a family woman simultaneously, while Marie's movement is from a farm woman who embodies contemporary ideals of women's roles to rejecting them because of their oppressiveness. Marie Shabata acknowledges that her marriage is not emotionally fulfilling, resists her husband's verbal and physical abuse, and seeks personal fulfillment outside marriage. Each woman subverts traditional late-

KEY WORDS: Willa Cather, new woman, *O Pioneers!*, pioneer, spousal abuse, woman farmer

Douglas W. Werden is assistant professor of English at West Texas A & M University. He researches literature and rural life and has written on such authors as Hamlin Garland, Zora Neale Hurston, Linda Hasselstrom, and Judy Blunt. Currently he is preparing a book on the narratives of women homesteaders.

[GPQ 22 (Summer 2002): 199-215]

nineteenth-century gender perceptions by eschewing the role of supporting a male regardless of the consequences. In doing so, each of these women appropriates traditional male roles and explores pioneering possibilities for women's lives.

THE PIONEERS OF *O PIONEERS!*

The American "pioneer" usually refers to those at the leading edge of American migrations whether frontiersman, forester, mountain man, miner, overland trail venturer, prospector, gold rusher, or homesteader. These people are initiators, originators, and forerunners preparing the way for "civilization." Etymologically the word is derived from foot soldiers who "march with or in advance of an army or regiment, having spades, pickaxes, etc. to dig trenches, repair roads, and perform other labours in clearing or preparing the way for the main body."³ Within Cather's novel, genuine homesteading pioneers are curiously absent.

Homesteading is finished on the Divide, except for the "the rough country across the county line" near Old Ivar's homestead (18).⁴ The Bergsons were pioneers of this region who staked and "proved up on claims," but when the novel opens they have accumulated the wealth of a debt-free section of land (640 acres). This is a significant acreage considering that the government census of 1890 claimed the average Nebraskan farm was only 190.1 acres.⁵ The novel begins with the death of the family's founding pioneer, and most of the novel transpires twenty-seven years after the Bergsons initially homesteaded their land. Mrs. Bergson compares droughts from early pioneer days to the current water shortage and describes their predicament as less arduous than those the family faced when they first arrived (31). The novel's main characters are second-generation settlers who do not create houses out of the wilderness, but like farmers in American agrarian novels they steadily work to improve the land, the crops, the animals, and their fortune.⁶

In the novel Cather uses the term "pioneer" only twice, and both times it applies to the aging generation that is virtually elided from the text. When Emil cuts grass in the Norwegian graveyard, he is "not thinking about the tired pioneers over whom his blade glittered" (40). Many of the "pioneers" are dead and, at twenty-one, Emil has only shadowy memories of pioneering life, which is "among the dim things of childhood and has been forgotten in the brighter pattern life weaves today" (40). The sea of native prairie grasses has disappeared, replaced by "a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light" (39). Telephone wires, painted farmhouses, weather vanes, steel windmills, and red barns are all markers of "industrial agriculture."⁷ The farmers have transformed the region so radically that John Bergson would not have recognized the country if he could have risen from his grave. The second time Cather uses the term "pioneer" she reinforces the idea that pioneers are gone. The narrator comments that "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (25). Such adventuresome spirit is present in Alexandra, Emil, and Marie but is certainly absent in Lou and Oscar who are conventional, unenterprising maintainers of the status quo. Cather's title is clearly not referring to historical settlers of the plains. Instead, she invites us to recognize that Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata are pioneers of a new womanhood in opposition to more conventional early-twentieth-century representations of women. Alexandra and Marie both seek freedom from society's constricting, prescriptive definition of a woman's traditional role, especially that of a farm woman who supports and serves a male. In striving for personal and economic autonomy, Alexandra and Marie each redefine a nineteenth-century American farm woman's role.

Cather was not the first to link the "pioneer" concept and the women's movement. In the popular literary magazine *Punch*⁸ (10

November 1894), an unknown author adapted Walt Whitman's poem "O Pioneers" as a motivational exhortation to the "Pioneers Club" whose membership consisted of "strenuous lady champions, all extremely up to date" (l. 7): "artists, actresses, singers, writers, journalists, speakers, and temperance workers" (ll. 21-23).⁹ The poem celebrates the spirit of Whitman's pioneers and applies it to women, exhorting them to fight for freedom from constricting Victorian gender roles and for personal autonomy. Their weapons are not Whitman's pistol and ax, but the "eyeglass" (education) and the "cycle" (physical strength):¹⁰

We primeval fetters loosing,
We our husbands taming, vexing we and
worrying Mrs. GRUNDY,
We our own lives freely living, we as
bachelor-girls residing,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

The author recognized the fighting, goal-oriented, unflagging spirit of Whitman's poem as the same spirit needed for the battle against the fetters of patriarchy. This is especially apparent at the conclusion, where the anonymous author wryly notes that most of Whitman's poem needs little adaptation to apply to the women's movement (see Appendix). It is not possible to know if Cather was familiar with this poem, but she understood that the women's movement saw its struggle for freedom as a pioneering activity. The October 1909 issue of *McClure's* published while Cather worked there as an editor, suggests that she was familiar with the use of "pioneer" in relation to the women's movement. It contains a short story by Helen Green entitled "Pioneer Goes Suffragette."¹¹ The term pioneer in the title refers to the town of Pioneer, Idaho, where the story is set, but more importantly it applies to women living beyond traditional women's roles, including a mother who settled on a plains ranch, a daughter from a mountain gold-mining camp, and women from a traveling burlesque show. These women are the first female voters in Pioneer after Idaho

grants women's suffrage. To emphasize their pioneer feminist roles, the matriarch of these women has on her parlor wall a picture of Susan B. Anthony, a pioneer in the nineteenth-century women's movement.

We also find evidence of Cather's political awareness of gender-role "pioneering" in *My Ántonia* (1918): Book 4 is entitled "The Pioneer Woman's [singular] Story," but none of its four chapters is about traditional pioneer women. A "pioneer" woman does tell a story in book 3, but an interpretation that covers all four books would be to understand the title as also referring to woman pioneering gender roles. Cather treats three daughters of immigrant farming pioneers who work in town to support their families; Tiny, Lina, and Ántonia are turn-of-the-century "working girls." The first chapter describes the success of Tiny Soderball, who started a boardinghouse in Seattle and later joined the Alaskan gold rush. She became one of the founders of Dawson City, where she started a hotel, was deeded a claim, sold the hotel, worked her claim, speculated in land, and returned to San Francisco with a fortune. The second chapter is about Lena Lingard, who moved to San Francisco and developed a fine dressmaking business into a comfortable living. Ántonia is the final "pioneer woman" represented in book 4. Cather's narrator praises her decision to bear and raise her child without shame. Instead of marrying and keeping house, she plows fields, herds cattle, and works uncomplainingly on the farm even on the day she silently delivers her daughter alone in a room behind the stove. By grouping these diverse *herstories* under the singular heading "The Pioneer Woman's Story," Cather invites the reader to see commonality among the narratives, to understand their stories as those of pioneer women. Each woman rejects society's traditional roles for women: Tiny and Lina are business entrepreneurs; Ántonia is a single mother, farm laborer, and farm manager. None of these women depends upon a man for economic support; rather, they all rely upon a supportive female community. Cather used the term "pioneers" to include

independent women in *My Ántonia* in 1918 and made the same rhetorical connection five years earlier in *O Pioneers!*

ALEXANDRA BERGSON AS A GENDER-ROLE "PIONEER"

The novel's initial conflict is Alexandra's struggle to establish herself as an independent woman farmer. The traditional role of American women on the farm is as "farm women"—that is, women living on a farm but not involved in farming activities, except when they are needed. Typically, "farm woman" and "farmwife" are synonymous terms, revealing a prevailing assumption that a farm woman is a domestic appendage to the male farmer. The terms suggest an inherent subordination that places the farmer at the defining center of the woman's life. Deborah Fink claims, "that women would enter farming as appendages or wives of farmer husbands was taken for granted that no explicit discussion of the fact was necessary."¹² Government and private farm publications actively exalted the position of farmwife in order to encourage women to seek and accept a role that called for long arduous hours of physical labor to support a man. In an analysis of a 1937 publication the *Nebraska Farmer*, Deborah Fink notes how this influential magazine constantly encouraged women to get married:

No mention was made of the possibility that an educated woman who could support herself might choose not to marry. . . . If farms needed married women, then women must understand the importance of marriage. They must not tarry in indecision but marry when they could.¹³

However, Alexandra appropriates the position of "farmer." The occupation of "farmer" and the term "farmer" are both traditionally understood as applying only to males, like scientist or mechanic, yet women farmers have always existed.

The government censuses report that between 1875 and 1900 approximately 250,000 women operated their own farms.¹⁴ The 1900 census counted just over 300,000 women as farm owner-operators, tenants, or "foremen." By 1920 the number had dropped to just over 265,000, yet "farmer" was still the sixth largest money-making occupation for American women.¹⁵ The census defined "women farmers" as women who own, co-own, manage, or co-manage a farm. This excludes not just farmwives but paid or unpaid women farm laborers who toil on the "home farm" or "work out."¹⁶ The census's distinction shows that landownership, level of authority, and decision-making—not tasks performed—distinguish a woman farmer.

From the start, Alexandra occupies a traditional male position of responsibility and power. Before her father's death, Alexandra functions as the head of the family, assigning her brothers' daily work, exemplified when she sends Lou and Oscar to the river to cut wood. The dying Mr. Bergson makes her position official, though normally the seventeen-year-old Lou or the nineteen-year-old Oscar would inherit the responsibility for the family's welfare since it was often given to sons as young as five or six. Mr. Bergson deviates from tradition by bestowing the responsibility for the family's welfare on a woman because of her "resourcefulness," "good judgment," and "strength of will" (12-13). Knowing the controversial nature of his decision, he makes his sons promise on his deathbed to be guided by Alexandra's management, but in doing so he also lays the foundation for a sibling rivalry exacerbated by the tension between Alexandra's managerial skills and new ideas and her brother's physical labor that implements her ideas.

The novel's brewing gender conflict reaches its climax when Lou and Oscar attempt to deny Alexandra's managerial role and claim to be the family's "real" farmers. In a devious bit of revisionist history, Lou argues that he and Oscar were always in control of the farm

operation and allowed Alexandra to administer it just to humor her:

This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business. . . . We ought to have taken things into our own hands years ago. But she liked to run things, and we humored her. . . . Oh, now, Alexandra, you always took it pretty easy. Of course we wanted you to. You liked to manage round, and we always humored you. . . . But, of course, the real work always fell on us. Good advice is all right, but it don't get the weeds out of the corn. (85)

Alexandra points out how crucial her decisions were for the farm's success and reminds Lou of the many major managerial blunders that she averted. To this, Lou mumbles, "That's the woman of it; if she tells you to put in a crop, she thinks she's put it in" (86). The men of the family patronize her, arguing that physical exertion is essential to all farm labor and denigrating Alexandra's mental work. More important, Lou challenges her capacity to do "real" work. However, Lou and Oscar know farming as a tradition and haven't begun to understand farming as a business. Social Scientists Sonya Salamon, Ann McKey, and Keim Salamon, in their article "Land Ownership and Women's Power in a Midwestern Farming Community," distinguish the farmer from others on a family farm: "A real farmer makes the crucial decisions about when to plant, harvest or sell and assumes the full responsibility for those decisions because he 'takes the risk.'"¹⁷ Decision-making and active responsibility for the farm's well-being are the very roles that Alexandra performs, such as installing a windmill, building a silo, investing in land, planting alfalfa, and planting wheat. This reflects post-pioneering agriculture where land is no longer conquered to provide sustenance but carefully managed to provide a living.¹⁸

As the conversation progresses, it becomes clear that their purpose is also to limit her freedom by rejecting Carl Lindstrum as her

potential marriage partner because they feel he is too young for her and only after Alexandra's money. Lou and Oscar are afraid that they and their children will permanently lose claim to Alexandra's money and farms, especially the "Bergson homestead." Invoking patriarchal familial claims, Oscar repeats, "The property of a family belongs to the men of the family because they are held responsible, and because they do the work" (85). This view that Alexandra's property is at their disposal is more insidious than their attempt to denigrate her labor because it attacks the foundation of her freedom—her economic autonomy. Alexandra recognizes her brothers' attempt to control her personal relationships, devalue her work, and control her economic base (her land). She refuses to tolerate it: "All that does n't (*sic*) concern anybody but Carl and me. Go to town and ask your lawyers . . . the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again" (86). She terminates her relationship with her brothers and even attends another church, so she will not have to see them. Thus she asserts that as a woman farmer and a family member, she will make her own decisions and be free of traditional gender roles where males hold sway over family decisions.

Despite Lou and Oscar's attempts to deny Alexandra's success as a woman farmer, the community recognizes and admires her farm knowledge and skills. As a young girl, Alexandra knew more about horses than their neighbor Mr. Lindstrum and helped him let the wind out of a colicky horse. Whenever he was uncertain, Mr. Lindstrum sought Alexandra's advice: "I wonder what the Bergsons are going to do about that? I guess I'll go and ask *her*" [my emphasis] (27). Mr. Lindstrum knows that Alexandra is the Bergson family farmer. The townsmen also respect Alexandra, as she blushing acknowledges: "The men in town, at the banks and the county offices, seem glad to see me." She modestly claims that the reason is "it is more pleasant to do business with people who are

clean and healthy-looking" (68), but she knows that their liking is also due to the business she can bring them. Alexandra breaks society's gendered perceptions that women were neither to be business administrators nor to perform tasks in a dominant position. Her challenge to these boundaries provides a pioneering route for other women farmers—farming with the mind instead of with the body. She makes her family prosperous through intelligent farm leadership, long-term planning, and land speculation—not through the physical labor that dominates most pioneering novels.¹⁹

After Alexandra's conflict with her brothers, she needs a supportive community, so she expands her exploration of traditional women's gender roles. Her first role is that of mother/guardian to her youngest brother, Emil. After their mother's death, Alexandra cares for him, building a large new house on the homestead solely so Emil can learn about life beyond farming. Although she encourages Emil to attend college, her deeper concern is for her brother's happiness: "He shall do whatever he wants to. . . . He is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for" (60). When Emil is on vacation from university, he returns to her home, not to Oscar's or Lou's, because her house is the one in which he was raised. Alexandra treats Emil as her son, and Emil looks to her as a mother figure, talking to her about his dreams for homesteading, studying law, and visiting Mexico.

Alexandra expands her supportive group beyond relatives by creating a community with herself as the household matron. When Old Ivar loses his claim, "Alexandra took him in, and he had been a member of her household ever since" (45). She gives him a job caring for her stock, invites him to live in the house, allows him to choose to sleep in the barn, and protects him from the community. When neighbors pressure her to have him committed to an asylum, Alexandra refuses: "I am still running my own house, and other people have nothing to do with either you [Ivar] or me" (47). Alexandra also provides a periodic ref-

uge for Mrs. Lee, whom she invites for a yearly weeklong visit. Mrs. Lee enjoys the license that Alexandra gives her: speaking Norwegian all day, wearing a nightcap, sleeping with windows shut, going to the stables in farm boots, and drinking brandy before bed. Alexandra also nurtures the young Swedish girls who do the housework. "It was to hear them giggle that she kept three young things in her kitchen" (44). Cather notes that she could have performed the work herself if necessary, but she never writes about her participation in these domestic rituals. Nowhere does Cather allow Alexandra to do household labor, thus avoiding identifying her heroine with the women writer's tradition of domestic ritual.²⁰ Instead, Alexandra hires young women to perform these tasks, but she also revels in their companionship: "These girls, with their long letters from home, their finery, and their love-affairs, offered her a great deal of entertainment, and they were company for her when Emil was away at school" (44). The Swedish hired girls give Alexandra a surrogate family and proximity to the world of romance. She lives vicariously through them, observing their flirtations and joking about marrying them off. Alexandra also has six male hired hands who also appreciate her efforts to create a supportive home. Comfortable at last in her supportive community, economic freedom, and social prominence, Alexandra oversees both her domestic and agricultural spheres while offering support to her employees.

Alexandra explores the role of marriage cautiously because it traditionally implies subordination. Unlike many farm women, Alexandra does not marry for economic or personal security; she has these freedoms before marriage. As a woman farmer, her position is incompatible with the traditional role of "farmer's wife," a role of subordination she fears she must assume if she marries a farmer. Therefore, Alexandra can only accept a husband outside the agricultural community. In her relationship with Carl Lindstrum, the pioneering Alexandra offers him the unconventional role of a "farmer's husband," which

leaves her secure in her position as "the farmer." Defying another gender role, she proposes marriage to Carl Lindstrum because she wants to deepen the happiness that she has found in his friendship:

I don't need money. But I have needed you for a great many years. . . . People have to snatch at happiness when they can, in this world. It is always easier to lose than to find. What I have is yours, if you care enough about me to take it. (92)

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. Later, when Carl and Alexandra do decide to marry, he realizes that there will be no economic dependency nor forced obligations in such a union. Alexandra will keep her farms because, as she tells him, "There is a great peace here, Carl, and freedom" (158). This freedom lies not only in her spiritual communion with nature and the land but also in economic self-sufficiency; with the farm, Alexandra will always have a resource for economic survival and will never be financially dependent. Her inveterate friendship evolves into a bond that suggests Cather's own preference for pragmatic, nonsentimental alliances over intensely romantic ones.

Alexandra Bergson is a feminist pioneer throughout the novel; she breaks traditional gender boundaries by becoming a successful woman farmer, creating a nurturing, supportive household around her, proposing to her future husband, and asserting her right to maintain her land. Like Alexandra, Marie Shabata also revises traditional gender boundaries, but unlike Alexandra, Marie initially adopts the traditional servile role of a farmwife. Her resultant suffering reveals the inadequacies of romance myths, happily-ever-after marriages, and domestic submission. Finally, Marie's search for emotional fulfillment and self-respect propels her to escape an abusive spouse.

MARIE SHABATA AS A GENDER-ROLE PIONEER

As a child and as a woman, Cather read and identified with male literary heroes full of self-determination, self-possession, power, and autonomy.²¹ She reveled in the romance of the self-assertive individual whose personal force could make a difference.²² Both in fiction and in life, Cather disliked the "identification of personal fulfillment with a self-indulgent romanticism."²³ Therefore, she reviled novels that celebrated a woman's unquenchable desire for a man's love, whether it was the nineteenth-century American domestic novels or the late-nineteenth-century British sensationalist fiction.²⁴ She despised any story that depicted women as "victims of over-idealization of love," the exact words she used to critique Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.²⁵ She said that these latter two stories "demand more romance out of life than God put into it."²⁶ *O Pioneers!* is a correction to such crippling excesses. Alexandra and Carl's relationship, as well as Marie's life, reveal that marriage and romantic love need not be the all-consuming goals of a woman's existence.²⁷ Instead, Marie finds love to be only one of a multitude of a woman's needs.

As a child, Marie seems to embody and validate several romantic clichés. She is a cute, pampered doll who precociously chooses the recipient of her affections. As a teenager, her courtship and marriage are like pages from a dime romance novel: Frank, the handsomest, most eligible bachelor in the territory proposes to her, only to have her father oppose the union and exile her to a convent in St. Louis. But as soon as she is of legal age, they elope. Mr. Tovesky resigns himself to their marriage and buys them a farm as a wedding gift. At the beginning of their marriage, Marie adores Frank and cares for nothing but him; however, the fairy-tale romance is short-lived.

Frank wants a "slave," who will feed his ego by "admir[ing] him abandonedly," and at the start of their marriage Marie adopts this role

(114). But Marie begins to mature and wants something different while Frank doesn't: Marie says, "I've got to remember that Frank is just the same now as he was then. . . . And now I pay for it" (119). As she understands herself and Frank more, she realizes that she is not the type of woman Frank should have married; she is much too outgoing and independent: "Frank's wife ought to be timid, and she ought not to care about another living thing in the world but just Frank! I didn't when I married him, but I suppose I was too young to stay like that" (102). Marie knows that her sanity demands that she resist subsuming her personality in her husband's. Her world must no longer revolve around Frank and his needs:

The spark of her life went somewhere else, and [Frank] was always watching to surprise it. He knew that somewhere she must get a feeling to live upon, for she was not a woman who could live without loving. He wanted to prove to himself the wrong he felt. What did she hide in her heart? Where did it go? (114)

Frank senses Marie's increasing personal autonomy and her growing resistance to his authority. He has delusions about her fidelity, suspecting that other men covet his three most valuable possessions: "his farm and his horses and his pretty wife" (61), so he fires the hired man. Since Marie is friendly with everyone and everyone loves her, Frank's jealousy becomes what Donald Dutton calls "conjugal paranoia," an obsessive fear characterized by delusions of sexual infidelity by one's spouse, which is a common characteristic of spousal abusers.²⁸ Frank fits many of the personality traits and emotional characteristics associated with the type.²⁹ In addition to this conjugal paranoia, his emotional volatility, desire to control Marie, exasperation with his current life, reliance on alcohol, and misuse of firearms all conform to characteristics of spousal abusers as described by many psychologists.³⁰

Like many abusive husbands, Frank feels frustrated professionally. He resents being

forced to farm for a living when he had aspired to a life of leisure. Battered women have described their husbands in a similar way:

Though [abusers] may be terrifying, they often have about them an aura of helplessness, fear, inadequacy, and insecurity. The battering husband is likely to be a "loser" in some basic way. He is probably angry with himself and frustrated by his life . . . [and has] feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.³¹

Frank is frustrated and insecure, not merely because of his lot as a farmer but because he has always felt that other farmers failed to appreciate his innate superiority (61). "[Frank] felt sorry for himself" (174) because he believed he had lowered himself to till the soil. His mother in the Old Country was a hard-working woman farmer, but in America,

He was easily the buck of the beer-gardens . . . [and] set all the Bohemian girls in a flutter . . . [with] his silk hat and tucked shirt and blue frock-coat, wearing gloves and carrying a little wisp of a yellow cane. . . . He had a way of drawing out his cambric handkerchief slowly, by one corner, from his breast-pocket, that was melancholy and romantic in the extreme. (73)

Therefore, when he is forced to farm to support his wife, he feels ill-suited, degraded, and defeated. Frank's exasperation increases when he sees Marie's easy adaptation to and enjoyment of the farm: "He wanted his wife to resent that he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative people; but she had seemed to find the people quite good enough" (138). Alexandra recognizes Frank's thinly disguised self-contempt and observes that, "to get on with [him] you've got to make a fuss over him and act as if you thought he was a very important person all the time, and different from other people" (61). He wants the same admiration he had when he was a young city dandy.

Spousal abusers tend to be emotionally volatile, suffering "intermittent explosive disorders."³² As J. E. Alcock notes, "The abuser is often impulsive and unable to control emotions. Emotions rapidly build to an extreme, although sufficient control is generally maintained to avoid inflicting serious permanent injury or death."³³ Other psychologists describe this behavior as rooted in interpersonal and intrapersonal stress conflicts, and in the failure of anger management skills.³⁴ Throughout the novel, Frank shows no capacity for emotional self-control. The first time Alexandra mentions him, she characterizes him as "one of these wild fellows" (61), which Frank validates the first time we meet him: "He was breathing hard, as if he had been running, and was muttering to himself. . . . Even in his agitation he was handsome, but he looked a rash and violent man" (71). Because Mrs. Hiller's hogs have gotten into his wheat, Frank works himself into a rage, vents to Marie, threatens to sue Mrs. Hiller (a widow with a lame son), throws himself on the couch, turns his face to the wall, clenches his fists on his hip, and falls asleep (71-72). He often works himself into these rages and is "rough and quarrelsome with his neighbors," most of whom tolerate him only for Marie's sake (72). Frank's combative nature is so dominant that at the end of the novel Alexandra fears he will get himself into trouble while in jail (150). Even the follies of other people enrage him: "Frank was always reading about the doings of rich people and feeling outraged. He had an inexhaustible stock of stories about their crimes and follies" (75). Unable to control his bitter futility, he often turns to Marie, who "soothed [him] when he had worked himself into a frenzy" (136). His paranoia, jealousy, and self-destructive emotional outbursts show that, despite his Byronic youth, Frank has become a sad, unstable man.

Feeling helpless and undervalued, Frank is preoccupied with being in control of Marie's life. As Alcock notes, spousal abuse often results from "exaggerated efforts to gain or main-

tain control over the other person," an obsessive need that increases with the diminishing of other forms of control over their world (social, economic, sexual).³⁵ Frank holds that the male is the dominant figure in the family and that his authority should be unquestioned. Therefore, when Marie seeks companionship outside their marriage, Frank seeks to rein her in; he fires Jan Smirka, is hostile toward her at church, and berates her for befriending Mrs. Hiller. Frank knows that his cruelty is driving her away:

Frank knew well enough that if he could once give up this grudge, his wife would come back to him. But he could never in the world do that. The grudge was fundamental. Perhaps he could not have given it up if he had tried. Perhaps he got more satisfaction out of feeling himself abused than he would have got out of being loved. If he could once have made Marie thoroughly unhappy, he might have relented and raised her from the dust. (113-14)

Frank clings to his grudge against his wife because it gives him power over her while his pathological need to feel himself abused suggests a masochistic urge to preserve the source of his own agony. He wants total control of Marie, and a sadistic impulse within him would relinquish his grudge only if he could crush her spirit and make her totally unhappy. "For three years he had been trying to break her spirit . . . he wanted her to feel that life was as ugly and as unjust as he felt it. He had tried to make her life ugly" (138). He also tries to control her perception of life so that through her he can affirm his vision of himself as a victim of circumstances. Frank begins to "bully her and to be unjust" (114), transferring to her the injustice he feels life has directed toward him. As a result, Marie ceases to sympathize, thereby sharpening Frank's feelings of rejection and his desire to control her and possess her only for himself. The text is never explicit about how Frank

makes Marie's life ugly or how he bullies her, but Cather uses vignettes to imply that Frank's emotional abuse becomes physical.

Frank's possessive affection for Marie is similar to Uncle Joe Tovesky's affection for her in childhood. At the beginning of the novel, a group of men in the store jokingly asks Marie to choose a "boyfriend." When she chooses Joe Tovesky, he is ecstatic: "Marie's uncle hugged her until she cried, 'Please don't, Uncle Joe! You hurt me'" (7). In expressing his joy, Joe Tovesky causes her pain. The gesture becomes symbolic of the violence born of a male's emotional need, which Cather draws upon in the middle and again at the end of the novel to emphasize how men try to control Marie (71, 157). Frank, too, wants to possess Marie so much that he hurts her both emotionally and physically.

Frank's desire to control Marie drives him to the extreme of bolstering his authority with a rifle. Marie knew that he was "like a crazy man when he was angry. She had more than once taken that gun away from him and held it when he was angry with other people. Once it had gone off while they were struggling over it" (137). Neil Websdale in his ethnographic study *Rural Woman Battering and the Justice System* found that many rural men who batter their wives "think nothing of using guns to intimidate their wives or partners."³⁶ Using a gun as an outlet for his emotional frustrations becomes a common practice for Frank.

When abusing Marie and wielding a gun aren't enough to relieve his vituperative outbursts, Frank turns to alcohol (75, 137). Social psychologists agree that there is a close connection between inordinate alcohol consumption and domestic abuse, and Frank illustrates the correlation. On the day that Frank kills Emil and Marie, he begins drinking at noon and is soon "in a bad temper" although it is Sunday (135). Adding alcohol to his volatile temper only increases his rage. When Frank arrives home drunk, he cannot find Marie but finds Emil's horse in the barn. He picks up his gun:

[I]t gratified him to feel like a desperate man. He had got into the habit of seeing himself always in desperate straits. His unhappy temperament was like a cage; he could never get out of it; and he felt that other people, his wife in particular, must have put him there. It had never more than dimly occurred to Frank that he made his own unhappiness. (135)

Frank revels in his self-image as a caged, desperate man ready with his gun to guard his possession and execute justice. He abandons responsibility for his actions, blames others for his unhappiness, and feeds his outrage. He finds no release from his anger both because it gratifies him and because he feels entitled to it, as if he has earned the right to violence through his long suffering. In this state, he shoots Marie and Emil. After attempting to destroy Marie psychologically through his insistent desire to control her, Frank finally ensures that she will not have freedom beyond him.

Critics often sanitize Marie and Emil's murder by reading it symbolically.³⁷ There is, of course, some basis for this as part of Cather's reconfiguration of man's original sin in the Garden of Eden. The adulterous love and killing take place in a pastoral cherry orchard, and Old Ivar announces the murders to Alexandra as retribution for sin: "[I]t has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy upon us!" (140). Death was the punishment for Adam and Eve's sin in the garden (Genesis 3:19), and according to symbolic logic, death is the just punishment for Marie and Emil's illicit passion. On the surface, the text affirms these readings and validates Frank's actions as an avenging angel. But Frank's words and actions problematize this moral logic by exposing him as a spousal abuser. More deeply, Cather points to Frank's culpability and effectively exonerates Marie of a sin rooted in her basic need for emotional reciprocity.

After murdering Marie, Frank mentally separates his wife from the woman he killed,

conceiving of them as two different people: "Frank knew that he had murdered somebody, that a woman was bleeding and moaning in the orchard, but he had not realized before that it was his wife" (137). When Alexandra visits him in jail, he repeats this mental manipulation: "I never hate my wife, but dat woman what make me do dat—Honest to God, but I hate her!" (153). Because Marie has been creating a self independent of Frank, he has not been married to "his wife," who he believes should be his slave, for several years, but has viewed her as "dat woman," the one who raises his ire and wrath. It is "dat woman" that Frank has been mistreating, not the wife he chooses to remember. These mental contortions are an attempt to exonerate himself from guilt, not only for murder but for the spousal abuse that preceded it. Violent husbands often think this way: "[M]inimization, denial, and projection . . . allow them to avoid responsibility for their behavior and to obscure the reality of what they have done."³⁸

Cather has Frank perform other revealing actions. When Alexandra visits him in jail, he explodes in a tirade when Alexandra asks, "You do not feel hard to me, Frank?" (152). Since Emil was Marie's lover, Frank has good reasons to be angry. However, Alexandra's question triggers Frank's guilt over his "hard" treatment of his dead wife. His response uncovers his inordinate preoccupation with his years of cruelty. He never answers Alexandra's question, but launches into a self-defense against accusations of hitting Marie:

"I not feel hard at no woman. I tell you I not that kind-a man. I never hit my wife. No, never I hurt her when she devil me something awful!" He struck his fist down on the warden's desk so hard that he afterward stroked it absently. A pale pink crept over his neck and face. "Two, three years I know dat woman don' care no more, bout me, Alexandra Bergson. I know she after some other man. I know her, oo-oo! An' I ain't never hurt her. I never would-a done dat, if I ain't had dat gun along." (152)

Like other abusers, Frank denies the truth of his own violence, but Cather ironically confirms his physical abuse as he strikes his fist on the warden's desk when he says, "No, never I hurt her" (152). His actions subvert his denial, and he rubs his fist throughout his denial as a visual reminder of his act of aggression. In his delusion, Frank claims that Marie no longer loved him and had been chasing "another man" for two or three years. However, the text clearly shows that she did love Frank. Ultimately, the source of Frank's jealousy is nothing less than Marie's desire to seek personal fulfillment beyond the bounds of his control. If Frank is wrong about Marie's not caring about him, is he not also wrong about not wishing to hurt her?

At the end of the novel, Frank needs to assuage his conscience by seeking external affirmation that he treated Marie well. His last words to Alexandra in the jail are revealing because Frank again asks for assurance that he did not abuse Marie: "You ain't t'ink I use dat girl awful bad before—" (153). Alexandra refuses to discuss the subject, just as she refused to allow Marie to talk about her difficulties in her marriage to Frank. I believe that Alexandra knows Frank did not treat his wife well, but she cannot speak it (101). She comes closest in the last pages when she admits to Carl that "for a long time [Frank's] love has been bitterer than his hate" (157). She knows that such a vindictive love is perverse, but she may not have been aware of the extent to which Frank mistreated Marie any more than she saw the sexual tension between Marie and Emil. Nevertheless, her uncomfortable silence points to an intuitive suspicion of physical abuse and a literal knowledge that Frank attempted to imprison Marie's fun-loving spirit. Neither Alexandra nor society wants to recognize and wrestle with the problem of spousal abuse and victimized wives. The family was, and is still, viewed as a "private and untouchable domain."³⁹ Even an independent woman such as Alexandra tacitly affirms that it is a man's right to kill an unfaithful woman, for she blames Emil and Marie for their own deaths.

Several passages show that Frank's violence reflects a societal acceptance of controlling and violent aspects of male temperament at large. According to Alexandra, Norwegians and Swedes view anger in a male farmer as a positive trait. Signa, one of Alexandra's Swedish girls, believes that Nelse is courting her because "he scolds me about everything. Like as if he wanted to have me!" (44). Alexandra comments that Signa married Nelse because "I suppose she was too much afraid of Nelse to marry anyone else. Now that I think of it, most girls have married men they were afraid of. I believe there is a good deal of the cow in most Swedish girls. . . . I guess we think a cross man makes a good manager" (117). By extension, a fearful and compliant wife, like a docile cow, makes a good domestic helper. Marie has listened to remarks about an angry man managing his wife, but she does not comment. Her silence weighs heavily upon the passage, as if she recognizes that this was her view of a good husband before she married.

All the characteristics Cather has given Frank conform to descriptions of spousal abusers: his emotional volatility, controlling personality, paranoia about Marie's fidelity, desire to control her, disillusionment with his life, and misuse of alcohol and firearms. Though indirectly, Cather also points to abuse: Uncle Joe hurting Marie, Frank's disassociation of his wife from "dat woman," his constantly undermined denials of physical abuse, and Signa's fear-motivated marriage.

The theme of spousal abuse is not new in Cather studies, as physical abuse inside and outside love and marriage surfaces often in her work. Even in one of her most loving depictions of a married man, Anton Rosicky, she reflects a concern about spousal abuse by explicitly stating that he was never abusive: "He was a city man, a gentle man, and though he had married a rough farm girl, he had never touched her without gentleness."⁴⁰ By contrast, Cather implies that a bad husband would touch a woman roughly, and she provides clear examples of physical violence in other works. In the short story "On the Divide" (1896), Canute

is close to suicide or insanity and seeks rescue by marrying Lena. He goes to her parents' house, picks her up, drapes her over his shoulder, and carries her to his house. Wick Cutter in *My Ántonia* (1918) sexually abuses the girls who work in his house, and Martin Colbert in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) tries to rape Nancy. Why did Cather not make Frank's violence explicit as she did with these characters? These men are so depraved that there is nothing redemptive about them, and the reader readily seeks emotional detachment. However, most spousal abusers are not such thorough villains, and many on the surface appear charming. As a semi-sympathetic character torn between self-hatred and desperate love, Frank Shabata is a more realistic representation of domestic cruelty, and Marie's need for liberation is more poignant because her husband is not a monster but a deeply troubled man who is trapped by his own dark temperament.

Although the women's movement had made physical beatings of wives a concern, by the end of the nineteenth century, wife assault by "rule of thumb" was still legal. The "rule of thumb" law stated that a man could beat his wife with a cane no larger than the width of his thumb at the base of his right hand.⁴¹ By 1910, thirty-five of forty-six states granted divorce on the basis of physical cruelty.⁴² Despite slightly less tolerant laws, turn-of-the-century attitudes generally sanctioned the husband's physical domination of his wife, and the legal system was reticent to enforce laws on spouse beating. Abuse on farms was especially difficult to identify because neighbors—even sympathetic ones like Alexandra—often did not know what transpired in these isolated farm areas or did not know how to help.⁴³ However, Cather is not willing to be silent about its devastating affect on women.

Refusing to bow to Frank's physical and mental abuse, Marie endeavors to create a life apart from Frank and his negative worldview. Such acts would make her a "pioneer" feminist. She invests hope in her future and seeks to celebrate life to its fullest. She enthuses

even at the most mundane things in life and has unflagging energy: "[S]he's the kind that won't be downed easily. She'll work all day and go to a Bohemian wedding and dance all night, and drive the hay wagon for a cross man next morning" (61). Requiring Marie to drive the hay wagon the next day is Frank's method of punishing her for her pleasure at the dance, for he has a hired hand who could drive the wagon. Marie also participates in church functions, volunteering to tell fortunes at fundraisers and teasing people with her humorous predictions (113).

Marie claims her right to self-fulfillment even if it comes outside her marriage. Marie and Emil's attraction is not primarily sexual but a part of her quest for freedom, a merging of two spirits that are passionately drinking the elixir of life together—something that is absent from Marie's abusive home and Emil's pragmatic household. Together they have celebrated life, whether hunting ducks, mowing cemeteries and orchards, picking fruit, or attending church. Since Marie cannot fight Frank physically, she nurtures her inner life through her soulmate Emil. When he asks her to run away with him, she feels content to live with the memory of their oneness and to live without him (119). This is in sharp contrast to Clara Vavrika's decision in "The Bohemian Girl," in which Cather presents a similar assault on a free spirit who is being crushed by a conventional marriage. Clara, however, embraces risk and flees her marriage.⁴⁴ Marie chooses the conventional course, stays, and is killed for her deep friendship with Emil. Although Frank has chained her body, she refuses to endure his attempts to chain her soul. While hardly an ideological rebel, Marie challenges the ideal of the traditional farmwife who endures everything a husband metes and sacrifices all her needs and desires for the success of her husband's farm.

In presenting Marie's marital discontent and attempt to establish herself as an individual, Cather offers another version of a "pioneering" portrait.⁴⁵ In rural American society of the time, it was commonly held that "Nothing

would justify a divorce."⁴⁶ A large family working the land was the foundation of society and necessary to raise the Gross National Product and help the country prosper. American society needed women to support their husbands; therefore, popular literature promoted the glories of being a farmwife and insisted that enduring marriage was a farm woman's duty. Agricultural magazines promulgated the view, and "[n]o countervailing popular texts existed to help women weigh the costs and benefits of maintaining sour relationships."⁴⁷ Through Marie Shabata, Cather produced a countervailing text that revealed how male oppression can destroy a woman and a marriage. Cather wanted us to condemn Frank's abuse and recognize that Marie's search for independence and vital self-fulfillment are at the root of her relationship with Emil. Alexandra recognizes this after Marie's death: "Marie was, after all, Marie; not merely a 'married woman'" (147). Marie sought individuality beyond that of a wife. In subverting idealized marriage, Cather exposes the delusions inherent in romantic love and the perversity of a man who seeks to "manage" his spouse.

O Pioneers! is the story of two women who refuse to confine their activities on the farm, to conform to male wishes, or to be secondary to men. Both women think and act independently of men, traditional gender roles, and societal opinion. While most rural women in literature are "merely" farmwives who support their husbands, *O Pioneers!* quietly reveals a woman farmer and a farm woman struggling for the power of self-definition in lives that had not previously been represented in American literature. Although Cather echoes Whitman's title to ally her vision of America with that of a beloved icon, her main project is to invest "pioneering" with female political significance. By reenvisioning "pioneers" as women who break down society's gender barriers, Cather subtly establishes feminist concerns at the heart of the novel. In the process, she undermines the discursive power of male writers over American mythology and transfers this power to a less aggressive female

discourse. In dramatizing the revolutionary qualities of two women, Cather redefines the American pioneering myth.

NOTES

1. David Stouck, for example, claims that Cather's "focus is on the struggle of the earliest pioneer settlers of the prairie" (*Willa Cather's Imagination* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975], p. 24). Susan J. Rosowski asserts that Cather's focus is on "immigrant pioneers" (*The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986], pp. 52-53). Joseph Urgo calls Alexandra Bergson the "iconoclastic pioneer" (*Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995], p. 44). Sharon O'Brien calls Alexandra a pioneer "gifted with imagination" (*Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], p. 430). Guy Reynolds believes that the novel is best understood as a "transformation of the conventions underpinning the pioneer myth" (*Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* [New York: St. Martin's, 1996], p. 58). These readings use the title and part I of the novel as the primary lens for understanding the entire work. Robert Thacker is one critic who recognizes that pioneering is over by the end of "The Wild Land," but he still insists that homestead pioneering is at the novel's thematic center (*The Great Prairie in Fact and Literary Imagination* [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989]).

2. See the following works respectively: Susan J. Rosowski *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) William Conlogue, "Managing the Farm, Educating the Farmer: O Pioneers! and the New Agriculture," *Great Plains Quarterly* 21 (winter 2001): 3-15; Ann Romines, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Urgo, *Willa Cather*, *ibid.* and Janis P. Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure from Austin and Cather to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

3. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1988), s.v. "pioneer."

4. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (New York: Random House, 1992). All citations to *O Pioneers!* made in the text are taken from this edition.

5. Donald B. Dobb, *Historical Statistics of the States of the United States: Two Centuries of the Census, 1790-1990* (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 213. It wasn't until the early 1970s that

the average farm size was 640 acres. The average size of a family farm is likely much smaller than this because this statistic included large corporate bonanza farms that encompassed thousands of acres or even square miles.

6. Roy Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 7. An excellent example of the differences between these two novelistic foci is in O. E. Rølvaag's prairie trilogy. The pioneering novel *Giants in the Earth* (1927) is primarily about the first two years of homesteading; then the plot skips seven years and ends. The next novel in the series is his farming novel, *Peder Victorious* (1929). It begins eleven years after the end of *Giants in the Earth*, and is about a well-settled community similar to the one at the beginning of *O Pioneers!*

7. Conlogue, "Managing" (note 2 above), pp. 3-15.

8. Although *Punch* was a British magazine, it was popular among the American literary community including Emerson, Longfellow, Dickinson, and Henry James, who devoured it regularly. For more information see the introduction of Marion Harry Spielman, *The History of Punch* (1895; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), and Richard D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841-1851* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1997).

9. For the complete text of the poem, see the Appendix.

10. Nineteenth-century medicine claimed that physical exercise had negative effects on women's health, intelligence, and sexuality, a myth the women's movement strove to eliminate; therefore, "New Women" actively participated in the late-nineteenth-century cycling fad.

11. Helen Green, "Pioneer Goes Suffragette," *McClure's Magazine* 33 (1909): 676-82.

12. Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 64.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

14. Robert Smutts, *Women and Work in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 10-11.

15. Joseph Hill, *Women in Gainful Occupations, 1870 to 1920* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Press, 1929), pp. 64-65. These census figures likely underestimate the reality of women farmers by omitting several subgroups, including women who managed farms while their husbands moved temporarily to find cash-paying work, women who were listed as widows instead of farmers, and women who managed the farm but allowed their husbands to maintain the semblance of authority. Literary examples include Antonia Shimerda in *My Antonia*, Mrs. Ericson in Cather's

"The Bohemian Girl," Grace Fairchild in *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Prairie*, and Mary Sandoz in *Mari Sandoz's Old Jules*.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

17. Sonya Salamon and Ann Mackey Keim, "Land Ownership and Women's Power in a Mid-western Farming Community," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 41 (1979): 115.

18. For an excellent discussion of the affect of the new industrialized farming ideas on the novel, see Conlogue, "Managing" (note 2 above): pp. 3-15.

19. We actually see very little of Alexandra's day-to-day administrative skills because Cather's interest lies beyond the physical development of the farm in the psychological development of her character. By the middle of the novel, the farm is relegated to the novel's periphery.

20. Romines, *Home Plot* (note 2 above).

21. Bernice Slote, ed., *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 409.

22. O'Brien, *Willa Cather* (note 1 above), pp. 83, 151-52).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

24. Sensationalist fiction often constructed sensual desire and heroines who scorned Victorian mores of chastity and piety. However, Cather disparaged them because of their characters' feminine weaknesses and overridealization of romantic love. *Ibid.*, p. 180-81.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

26. William M. Curtin, *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 13:181.

27. Marriages in Cather's fiction are often fraught with problems. In "The Bohemian Girl," Clara Vavrika is bored with her marriage to Olaf Ericson and elopes with her brother-in-law, Nils Ericson. In *Alexander's Bridge*, Bartley Alexander has an affair with an actress and decides to leave his wife. In *The Professor's House*, Godfrey and Lillian St. Peter's marriage is troubled. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra regrets her marriage and grows to despise Oswald. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Henry and Sapphira Colbert sleep in separate buildings. In *One of Ours*, Gladys and Bayliss as well as Claude and Enid marry because that is what is expected of them, but both couples are very unhappy. In book 2 of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Buck Scales abuses his wife, Magdalena.

28. Donald G. Dutton, *The Domestic Assault of Women: Psychological and Criminal Justice Perspectives* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995), p. 27.

29. Elizabeth Ammons is one of the few critics who briefly recognizes the violence of many of Cather's heterosexual relationships: "Cather's work contains image after image of deadly male heterosexual aggression" (*Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], p. 130).

30. My reading summarizes nine recent studies: J. T. Hart, "Spouse Abuse," *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. Raymond J. Corsini (New York: J. Wiley and Sons, 1994); J. E. Alcock, "Battered People," *ibid.*; Dutton, *Domestic Assault* (note 26 above); Terry Davidson, *Conjugal Crime: Understanding and Changing the Wifebeating Pattern* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1978), Lewis Okun, *Woman Abuse: Facts Replacing Myths* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Ron Thorne-Finch, *Ending the Silence: The Origins and Treatment of Male Violence Against Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Richard A. Stordeur and Richard Stille, *Ending Men's Violence Against Their Partners: One Road to Peace* (Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications, 1989); Mary P. Koss et al., *No Safe Haven: Male Violence Against Women at Home, at Work, and in the Community* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1994); and Del Martin, *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Glide Publishing, 1976), each of which surveys recent studies on spousal abuse. These sources all agree with the characteristics that I emphasize.

Because a variety of personality disorders creates the potential of spousal abuse, no psychologist will definitively assert causes of marital violence, but they all list actions, personalities, and social factors that correlate with spousal abuse. These characteristics are descriptive, not prescriptive.

I have excluded childhood contributions (especially child abuse or observing spousal abuse in childhood) because we know nothing of Frank's upbringing. Immediately stressful situations such as financial difficulties, a death in the family, a loss of a job, or a move precipitate abuse, but the text mentions none of these.

31. Martin, *Battered Wives*, *ibid.*, p. 46.

32. Dutton, *Domestic Assault* (note 28 above), p. 27.

33. Alcock, "Battered People" (note 30 above), p. 131.

34. Okun *Woman Abuse* (note 30 above), p. 6.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

36. Neil Websdale, *Rural Woman Battering and the Justice System: An Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 9.

37. Many critics see the murder as the reenactment of the archetypal Garden of Eden and do not condemn Frank Shabata for his actions because he is merely the agent for meting out punishment for

sin necessary for *O Pioneers!* to reenact its literary predecessors. David Stouck completely ignores the fact that Frank murdered Emil and Marie. Instead, he discusses Emil and Marie's death as a retelling of the archetypal "death of lovers" narrative, "The death of the lovers is necessary to give Alexandra's story a tragic depth" (*Imagination* [note 1 above], p. 32). Susan J. Rosowski sees the orchard as a symbolic garden and interprets it in light of antecedent myths including the Garden of Eden, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes." She is more concerned about the "consequences of disobedience rather than the validity of the experience" (*Voyage* [note 1 above], p. 56). Richard Giannone views Emil and Marie as "victims of reckless physical passion" (*Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968], p. 79).

38. Stordeur and Stille, *Ending* (note 30 above), p. 41.

39. Websdale, *Rural Woman* (note 36 above), p. 53.

40. Willa Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," in *Willa Cather: Stories, Poems, and Other Writing*, ed. Sharon O'Brien (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 596.

41. Dutton, *Domestic Assault* (note 28 above), p. 23.

42. Okun, *Woman Abuse* (note 30 above), p. 6.

43. Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" exemplifies this because Mrs. Hale has lived beside her

neighbor, Mrs. Wright, for twenty years without visiting. Deborah Fink also notes, "Evidence that men brutalized women on isolated farms where bystanders and neighbors could not come to their rescue suggests that relative isolation from institutions of social order conferred even more power on the husband than he might have had in European or eastern US setting" (*Agrarian Women* [note 12 above], p. 94).

44. Cather wrote "The Bohemian Girl" in 1911 and 1912 between writing the two short stories that later became *O Pioneers!* In "The Bohemian Girl," Clara Vavrika has sacrificed her fun-loving, convention-defying self in exchange for economic and social security with Olaf Ericson—a conventional, unimaginative farmer and politician. She elopes with her childhood playmate and sweetheart (Nils Ericson), thereby suggesting that a woman ought to seek fulfillment and happiness in life.

45. Chopin, James, and Wharton all explore marital discontent before Cather, but farmers' isolation and the nation's economic reliance upon the family farm as a production unit make Cather's voicing of marital discontent more subversive. Farmers depended immensely upon their wives' labor in and out of the fields, and to voice and validate farm discontent threatened the nation's livelihood.

46. Fink, *Agrarian Women* (note 12 above), p. 83.

47. Ibid.

APPENDIX

"A Slight Adaptation"

(Suggested by the recent Debate (Ladies Only) at the Pioneers Club
on the Shortcomings of the Male Sex)

Nova mulier vociferature more Whitmanico

- 1 Come my modern women,
Follow me this evening, get your numbers ready,
Have you got your latchkeys? have you your members' axes?
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
- 5 To the club in Bruton Street
We must march my darlings, one and all a great ensemble,
We the strenuous lady champions, all extremely up to date,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
- 10 Have our lords and masters halted?
Do they humbly take a back-seat, wearied out the Madame SARAH
GRAND?
We take up the dual garments, and the eyeglass and the cycle.
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
- 15 From North Hampstead, from South Tooting,
From far Peckham, from the suburbs and the shires we come,
All the dress of comrades noting, bonnets, fashions criticizing.
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
- 20 We primeval fetters loosing,
We our husbands taming, vexing we and worrying Mrs. GRUNDY,
We our own lives freely living, we as bachelor-girls residing,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
- Literary dames are we,
Singers, speakers, temperance readers, artists we and journalists,
Here and there a festive actress (generally to be found in our smoking-room),
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
- 25 Raise the mighty mistress President,
Waving high the delicate President, over all the Lady President (bend
your heads all),
Raise the warlike Mrs. M-SS-NGB-D, stern impassive Mrs. M-SS-NGB-D,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

This sort of thing goes on for almost twenty more verses, for which readers are kindly referred to the original in *Leaves of Grass*. It really applies without any further adaptation.

—*Punch*, 10 November 1894