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WILLA CATHER'S RELUCTANT NEW WOMAN PIONEER

REGINALD DYCK

In 1913 Willa Cather created a female protagonist who is single, independent, entrepreneurial, managerial, strong willed, wealthy and in love with the land of south-central Nebraska. This character offered a new vision for women at the turn of the twentieth century. Cather's fictional construction of gender, as well as her own experience, embody the contradictions present in the roles society offered women. One can read *O Pioneers!* as a cultural seismometer, one that picks up tremors along

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various social fault lines and then expresses them within a particular framework held by many people of her economic and social position. This essay focuses on the social forces that intersect to shape Cather's fictional constructions of gender.

Although Cather set much of her early work on the Nebraska prairie where she grew up, as an adult she resided in Pittsburgh and New York, working as an editor, journalist, critic, teacher, and writer. Characteristic of the New Woman, she gained a university education, chose not to marry, entered a profession, and rose to a position of considerable importance as managing editor of *McClure's*, a leading magazine of the time. She regularly traveled back to Nebraska and to other rural places, yet she also often went to Europe for business and pleasure. Because Cather's allegiances were mixed, as they were for many in the developing middle class, the culture of urban sophistication as well as rural developments on the Divide shaped her presentation of pioneer life in *O Pioneers!*

Written at a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization, Cather's first Nebraska novel reflects the uneasiness its readers felt toward

changing U.S. culture. Stories of the pioneer past were reassuring to them. However, Cather's pioneer was not typical. Her protagonist is a woman, not a farmwife but a farm manager. Along with her rural attachment to the land, Alexandra shared with her author many qualities of the economically independent, professional New Woman emerging in the urban East. While threatening to her brothers and their wives, Alexandra gains the readers' sympathy. Yet the conflicts between competing definitions of gender roles and Alexandra's relationship to the land are not comfortably reconciled for Cather's reluctant New Woman pioneer, whose farming success is balanced by her personal losses.

THE COUNTRY IN TRANSITION

In the early years of the twentieth century, middle-class culture, and Cather herself, was in many ways antimodern, "a complex blend of *accommodation* and *protest*" against "a complacent faith in progress." T. J. Jackson Lears, in his preface to *No Place of Grace*, goes on to explain, "What [literary] critics call modernism and what I call antimodernism share common roots in the *fin-de-siecle* yearnings for *authentic experience*—physical, emotional, or spiritual."¹

Undermining that experience, many complained, was an emerging society characterized by "industrial progress, rationalization, reorganization of production and administration along more efficient lines, electricity, the assembly line, parliamentary democracy, and cheap newspapers."² While enjoying their own and their country's new accomplishments and power, many middle-class citizens had doubts about the effect these changes were having on the character of its newly prosperous members. In the same year that *O Pioneers!* was published, Henry Ford established his first assembly line, which fragmented and depersonalized production. As John D. Rockefeller baldly stated, "Individualism has gone, never to return."³ Also,

Technological change isolated the urban bourgeoisie from the hardness of life on the land; an interdependent and increasingly corporate economy circumscribed autonomous will and choice.⁴

Many urban professionals looked to some form of "the strenuous life" as an antidote. Theodore Roosevelt called them to "that highest form of success which comes . . . to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph."⁵ For many, this meant a return to the wilderness. The *Boy Scouts of America: A Handbook of Woodcraft, Scouting, and Life-craft*, published in 1910 and selling seven million copies in the next thirty years,⁶ defined for boys and their parents both the problem and the solution:

We have lived to see an unfortunate change. Partly through the growth of immense cities, with the consequent specialization of industry, so that each individual has been required to do one small specialty and shut his eyes to everything else, with the resultant perpetual narrowing of the mental horizon. . . . I should like to lead the whole nation into the way of living outdoors for at least a month each year.⁷

Most Americans, of course, did not choose to spend a month in the woods but instead attempted to live such a life vicariously. In 1903 Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* became "an immediate best-seller and thirty years later it still ranked as the seventh most widely read American novel of the time." The story's message was clear: civilization enervated its inhabitants; a return to the wild offered the dog Buck, and by implication humans as well, a more authentic life.⁸ Models for finding this life were readily available, at least imaginatively, by looking to the part of the country generally understood to be least affected by modern civilization. Although the western frontier of free and open land was officially

closed, historian Frederick Jackson Turner had created a memorial to it in his frontier thesis. His conceptual strategy of cutting off the heroic past from the diminished present—by emphasizing difference and loss—was not uncommon. Celebrations of passing pioneer virtues were part of a common jeremiad against the emerging mass, industrial society.

The immigrants of Nebraska provided Cather her alternative. Published a decade after *O Pioneers!*, Cather's essay "Nebraska" demonstrates her attitude in a hardened form as she uses Turner's discursive strategy of dividing past from present. The essay opens with a description of the land as pioneer Nebraska's foundational characteristic and then describes the climate. When history is finally addressed, the essay emphasizes its lack: the frontier has just recently passed but old values remained. In early days "this newest part of the New World" offered little room for "the pale proprieties, the insincere conventional optimism of our art and thought." Pioneers were not "stamped with the ugly crest of materialism."⁹

A NEW PIONEER

Cather's protagonist in *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson, can be seen as an example of the Turnerian pioneer. She has the imagination to envision the land's potential as well as the "strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind" to implement her vision.¹⁰ Examples include her determination to remain on the Divide during times of depression and her experimentation with silos, new crops, and new ways of raising hogs. The novel's 1913 readers would find this character an inspiring antithesis to the modern urban figure trapped in a world of conformity and enervation. Yet she is a *woman* pioneer, and Turner always used the pronoun "he." Pioneering meant conquering to Turner, not an occupation for women as he and much of his culture envisioned them. But if Alexandra does not fit the commonly held image of the frontier hero because of her sex,

neither does she represent the historical experience of women on the frontier. For one thing, remaining single was not economically viable for rural women. The Homestead Act of 1862 did allow single women to gain their own land, and especially after 1900 they did participate. However, for most women the land was an investment "that would improve their prospects for marriage."¹¹ In contrast, Alexandra's extensive landholdings keep Carl from marrying her and make her brothers wary of suitors because of potential loss to their children's inheritance.¹²

Since almost all rural women married, they were a part of nuclear families whose structure and organization "channeled the flow of goods and services in a manner that isolated and weakened rural women."¹³ Women on the frontier adjusted to new conditions and did accept new positions temporarily, but they maintained their largely domestic role in serving others rather than themselves, thus following the pattern of the nineteenth-century ideal.¹⁴

There is no doubt that numerous women worked in fields, helped with cattle round-ups and drives, and aided in running inns and other family businesses. . . . But in almost every case, the primary focus of women's lives, whether they were married or single, was supposed to be, and usually was, domestic.¹⁵

Challenging these expectations was not easy: "Women who resisted . . . usually encountered pervasive social controls, which enforced traditional rules. Women who emulated men . . . were seen as odd and deviant."¹⁶ Consequently, women seldom permanently took on male roles.¹⁷ Therefore, Alexandra's career as an unmarried farm owner and manager would have been a historical anomaly as well as a contradiction of the Turnerian myth. Further explanation is needed: Cather's own experiences, in the urban East as well as rural Nebraska, combined to shape her presentation of the novel's protagonist.



FIG. 1. *The Chrisman sisters on a claim in Goheen settlement on Lieban (Lillian) Creek, Custer County, Nebraska. These daughters of ranchman Joseph M. Chrisman took homesteads, timber claims, and preemption claims in the Goheen Settlement. Pictured from left to right are Harriet, Elizabeth, Lucie, and Ruth. Courtesy of the Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society Photograph Collections.*

CATHER, ALEXANDRA, AND THE NEW WOMAN

Willa Cather experienced pioneer life at a distance. Her grandparents, the first Cathers who migrated to Nebraska, arrived in 1873. Free land having run out, they purchased their homestead from the railroad and, like many pioneers, started out living in dugout. Coming a decade later (and two decades after the opening setting of her novel), Willa, her family, and a servant

arrived in comparative luxury. They didn't spend their first night, as her Aunt Franc did a few years earlier, in a tent which burnt

down in a sudden prairie fire. They were not going to live in a cave in the ground, and they had not had to cross Nebraska . . . in a "prairie schooner." . . . The railroads had made all the difference.¹⁸

The Divide was becoming a settled agricultural region; the frontier existed mainly in the memory of older inhabitants. Deciding to leave the farm in 1884 after less than eighteen months, Cather's father, Charles, auctioned off his stock and equipment but kept ownership of the land and continued to add to his holdings.

When the family moved to Red Cloud, a county seat with a population of about 1,200,

the Burlington Railroad was bringing eight passenger trains to town each day. The main street, running for several blocks, could boast of the state bank, an opera house, stores, and offices. One office belonged to Charles Cather, who made farm loans as well as sold real estate and insurance.¹⁹ Although Cather often rode around the countryside on horseback or in her doctor friend's carriage, talking especially with the women she met, her personal experience was considerably different from these immigrant pioneers. Her family's life in Red Cloud was comfortably middle class. This experience prepared her to follow the largely urban pattern of the New Woman, who was emerging as Cather was growing up.

In explaining this "revolutionary demographic and political phenomenon" that emerged in the 1880s, historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg includes Cather as an example of "the single, highly educated, economically autonomous New Woman," who as

a member of the affluent new bourgeoisie, most frequently a child of small-town America, *she felt herself a part of the grass roots of her country*. Her quintessentially American identity, her economic resources, and her social standing permitted her to defy proprieties, pioneer new roles, and *still insist upon a rightful place within the genteel world*.²⁰

Just as Cather's construction of the frontier in *O Pioneers!* was shaped in reaction to the "incorporation of America," so her choice of protagonist was shaped by the new cultural conditions some women were then experiencing. In her novel Cather could embody that two-sided identity of the New Woman, "grass roots" and yet "genteel," because her immigrant characters are not "huddled masses yearning to be free" but educated émigrés who brought with them rich, sophisticated cultures.

In 1894, when Cather was studying at the University of Nebraska along with working as a journalist and critic, an article in "the *North American Review* introduced the term 'New

Woman' into popular sexual and social policies." It quickly became part of the "polyphonic" debates over femininity at the time.²¹ What was clear, whether one approved or not, was that the New Woman challenged "existing gender relations and the distribution of power."²² In guarded ways, Cather embodies this debate in Alexandra's struggle for authority. The novel's protagonist reflects the outlook of the burgeoning feminist movement, which in 1913 was "mark[ing] a new phase in thinking about women's emancipation."²³ When *O Pioneers!* was published that year, some reviews recognized the connection. *McClure's*, of which Cather had been managing editor, published a strong review that described Alexandra as "triumphant womanhood . . . with the daring and confidence of one who carries a new message." While the *New York Times Book Review* critically noted that "[p]ossibly some might call it a feminist novel," the *Sewanee Review* approvingly stated that "subtly the feminist theme is made prominent."²⁴ Clearly this was a new novel for Cather, as she herself explained, but not only because it is set in Nebraska and written in a new voice. It had a new protagonist who reflected the changing times.

Alexandra's struggle for authority focuses on her confrontation with her brothers Lou and Oscar, who show no willingness to relinquish male privilege and power. To them a single woman has the social position of a child, someone incapable of making good decisions—wanting to marry Carl was a clear example—and having no property rights. As Oscar states emphatically, "The property of the family really belongs to the men of the family" (220).

In this argument, Lou and Oscar appeal to nature, that is, to the Victorian construction of gender as it had been naturalized. In their minds, men and women are fundamentally different; therefore, they should participate in separate spheres. This idea had cultural and scientific standing at the time. "The womb, doctors emphasized, dominated a woman's mental as well as physical life, producing a weak, submissive, uncreative, emotional, intuitive, and

generally inferior personality."²⁵ From her brothers' perspective, Alexandra's owning and running a farm was unnatural, in spite of her obvious success (221). Challenging this, Alexandra appeals to society as embodied in its legal system when arguing against her brothers' appeal to nature. She claims control over her land because she has a deed. This conflict over the basis of authority engages an important cultural debate of the time.

Related to the gender-based argument about landownership that Lou and Oscar have with Alexandra is these men's belief about the nature of work. For them the family's success in farming was the result of physical labor, "real work," and not Alexandra's "manag[ing] around" (220). They claim to have humored Alexandra by ostensibly letting her run the farm, but she should not think that the work of farming is anything but physical. However, in not having the heroine herself actually work the land, the novel rejects this populist view and marks a major social shift taking place.²⁶

The rise of . . . people who neither grew something from the land nor created something with their hands . . . but managed . . . was as apparent as was the corporation as the ascendant business entity.²⁷

Fewer people were creating a complete product or growing a crop, and more were manipulating abstractions by doing paperwork. While this new "feminization" of work presented opportunities for the New Woman, it created anxieties for those like Lou and Oscar who define themselves by traditional masculine constructions of gender, which equated physical work with natural superiority. Not surprisingly, Theodore Roosevelt shared their fear in his call for "the strenuous life" as an act of recovery: "when men fear work . . . when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom."²⁸ This echoes Turner's concern for the American character at the closing of the frontier.

Because of these anxieties, only the novel's male characters who are on the cultural mar-

gins, Carl and Ivar, can appreciate Alexandra and resist definitions of gender that emphasize difference. Yet even their resistance is contained. For example, as an artist, Carl can understand Alexandra while her brothers cannot; however, Carl struggles to adjust to new gender relations and admits his failure: "'What a hopeless position you are in, Alexandra!' he exclaimed feverishly. 'It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men. And I am no better than the rest'" (227).

As a result, Alexandra remains unmarried throughout most of the novel. She escapes the dependent position of most rural women of the time and instead follows the pattern of the urban New Woman who, like Cather herself, commonly chose not to marry because she had economic independence as a professional. Forty to sixty percent of women who graduated from college from the 1870s through the 1920s did not marry, while only ten percent of all American women did not.²⁹ Although Alexandra does not have the education or urban location of these graduates, she does share their economic self-sufficiency, marital status, and professional or managerial work.³⁰ In creating this character, Cather overlays particular eastern urban qualities on her western rural pioneer protagonist.³¹

"The marriage question was central to most discussions" of the New Woman. "To place a woman outside of a domestic setting, to train a woman to think and feel 'as a man,' to encourage her to succeed at a career, indeed to place a career before marriage, violated virtually every late-Victorian norm."³² Most writers advocating for new gender roles "were not opposed to marriage. Rather, they believed that it should be constituted on entirely different terms."³³ As *O Pioneers!* makes clear, that is what Alexandra wants as well. Cather draws back from completely rejecting traditional marriage norms; she does not put Alexandra in the position of choosing to rebel by remaining single. As Alexandra admits to both Carl and her brother Emil, she has had a lonely life (224, 290). Her marital status is a price she must pay for her independence.

When attacked by Lou and Oscar, Alexandra defends herself by telling them, "I certainly did n't [*sic*] choose to be the kind of girl I was" (221). Because she is a reluctant New Woman pioneer, her career is less threatening to readers with traditional values. Alexandra is not depicted as the selfish and "unnatural" person that critics of the New Woman derided.³⁴ For example, Alexandra states that she has fulfilled her father's mandate to not "lose the land" (150) in order to improve the lives of her brothers. In this response she assumes the traditional role of caretaker.

THE PRICE OF INDEPENDENCE

These aspects that make Alexandra less threatening also mark the price she pays for being a New Woman in a transitional, but still quite traditional, rural society. In a number of other ways Cather also acknowledges the cost Alexandra pays for rejecting social mores.

[P]atriarchal culture repays Alexandra's trespass by isolating her and thus injuring her ability to express her emotions and her sexuality. . . . Alexandra's isolation deprives her of a self-image commensurate to the strongly sexual nature revealed to the reader.³⁵

Reflecting culturally influenced doubts about her new female role, Alexandra says to her brothers, "If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree" (221). A lover only comes to her as part of a recurring dream, and after the encounter Alexandra would scrub herself and then rinse with cold well water (238). These images of repressed sexuality suggest another aspect of Alexandra's character that Cather made safe for traditional middle-class readers.³⁶

Cather gives Alexandra the fate of associating with no man, except in her fantasy, strong enough to marry a nontraditional woman. Carl accepts Alexandra, but as noted earlier, he is unable to compromise his practice of masculinity in order to marry her (227). Alexandra's

independence also affects her relationship with women. In presenting her brothers' wives as caricatures of conspicuous consumption, the author makes common ground impossible. Rather than taking an independent woman farmer as a role model for themselves or their daughters, these women conform to conventional, small-town, middle-class expectations.³⁷ While this hardly seems like a significant loss for Alexandra, it does heighten the isolation she experiences.

Her relationship with Marie, her closest friend, is more complex. Marie enters the novel as a little girl playing the traditional female role of graciously accepting men's admiration (143). Her continuing to play this role throughout the novel creates one of the limitations in Alexandra and Marie's relationship.³⁸ Alexandra does not discuss with Marie her relationship with Carl or her conflict with her brothers: "an instinct told her that about such things she and Marie would not understand one another" (229). And Alexandra certainly does not discuss her sexual fantasies. In this regard, Alexandra is again like her historical counterparts: "The frankness and daring of the New Woman were more fancied than real."³⁹ When Marie wants to open her heart about marriage frustrations, Alexandra abruptly changes the subject. "No good, she reasoned, ever came from talking about such things" (234). Marie wants to establish "the female world of love and ritual"⁴⁰ characteristic of many women's friendships of the nineteenth century, but Alexandra has crossed traditional gender boundaries in ways that make that world no longer available. As Marie's relationship with both her husband, Frank, and her lover, Emil, shows, she establishes her identity as a woman by emphasizing gender differences; Alexandra gains a position of power by challenging that construction of gender. As a result, Marie is a farmwife, Alexandra a farm manager, and their friendship remains limited.

It is not just Alexandra's refusal, or one might say her inability, to play a traditional role that creates barriers between the two

women. Alexandra has limited experience in relationships and is emotionally unperceptive. Because she does not fulfill conventional expectations, she is forced to become a loner. She can enjoy her servants' romantic relationships at second hand,⁴¹ appreciate Ivar's friendship, and love her brother Emil, but she does not become close with any of them. Cather created no character with whom Alexandra can establish a mutual relationship. As a result she is more used to managing agricultural affairs than human ones. Her understanding of Emil's and Marie's death makes this evident (278).

In that tragedy Alexandra uncharacteristically accepts a traditionally gendered point of view. Although she cannot believe that Marie's "being warmhearted and impulsive" was wrong, her brother is dead and Frank is in the penitentiary (283). With little experience at deciphering human conflicts, she cannot create an explanation with new gender dimensions. Saying that the jealous husband who fired the fatal shots was least at fault, Alexandra "blamed Marie bitterly" for bringing "destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her" (283), just as Marie earlier blamed herself for the failure of her marriage, in spite of her husband's actions and attitudes (235). In blaming the woman for the man's violence, Alexandra repeats a traditional story.⁴² Her blindness, ironically, is a result of her turning away from traditional women's roles and thus cutting herself off from close personal relationships.

One other way the novel registers the social costs of resisting gender norms is through Alexandra's relationship with her mother (151-52). Like almost all the female characters in the novel, her mother is pictured negatively. The narrator's first comment about her is that Mr. Bergson had married beneath himself. Mrs. Bergson (the only name given her), like many pioneer women, creates domestic order through gardening and canning, but this is disparaged as a "mania." Although she is given credit for "keep[ing] the family from dis-

integrating morally and getting careless in their ways," this praise is prefaced with the comment that she loves comfort and routine, hardly pioneer virtues from Cather's perspective. In wanting a house made of wood instead of sod and in making an effort to add fish to the family's diet, she is pictured as selfish rather than nurturing. Since even as a young person Alexandra helps manage the farm, domesticity divides Mrs. Bergson from her daughter. As Smith-Rosenberg notes, "Resentful words, lingering guilt, and consequent alienation divided the New Women from their mothers and their female kin" (257). Rather than giving each other love and support, these two women, each a pioneer in her own way, are isolated by their different positions on the gender divide.⁴³

The one person Alexandra does become close with is Carl. Near the end of the novel, they decide to marry. Because Alexandra has just returned from the state penitentiary to visit Marie's husband, Frank Shabata, the novel establishes a contrast in relationships. The Shabata marriage is based on gender differences that create conflict and unhappiness. Alexandra is confident that her marriage will be different: "I think when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like—those young ones" (290). A marriage between friends emphasizes gender similarity, in this case almost to the point of making gender irrelevant. Their marriage could have the "ethic of refined, tender passion between spouses" advocated by the social purity movement, which at the end of the nineteenth century was responding to women's moving out of the domestic sphere.⁴⁴ As a result, Cather's early readers could assume that Alexandra's marriage would not end in the disaster of Marie's two relationships.

At the turn of the century, "American newspapers and magazines brimmed with speculation about the crisis of marriage and the family."⁴⁵ The dramatically rising divorce rate was evidence of the crisis: "Between 1870 and 1920, the number of divorces increased fifteen fold."

Many Americans believed that the family was being destroyed, but in fact a new kind of family was emerging from these demographic and cultural revolutions: It was the "companionate family," a new model and ideal of family function and behavior, which remains with us today.⁴⁶

Carl and Alexandra reflect this new companionate ideal that rejected "the separate spheres that underlay nineteenth-century sexual codes."⁴⁷

DEFINING THE LAND

Alexandra's unresolved conflicts in her personal relationships are further complicated by the competing definitions of her relationship to the land. Even at the end of the novel, conflicting concepts remain. Cather here turns away from both the Turnerian frontier construction of subduing the land and the professional, managerial perspective of the New Woman. Instead, the author engages a mythic vision of the land in order to supersede these competitive, materialist interpretations. She depicts Alexandra as creating a reassuring life story for herself. At the same time Cather offers her readers a comforting national story which suggests that, in spite of rising industrialism and corporate capitalism, the basic national values are spiritual, not economic. Alexandra states,

The land belongs to the future, Carl. . . . How many of the names on the county clerk's plat will be there in fifty years? I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. . . . [T]he people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while. (289)

As an older woman who has lost almost everyone she has cared about, Alexandra creates a transcendent meaning for her life's work. The more distant, Whitmanesque voice lends author-

ity to the novel's concluding sentence: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (290).

This hopeful ending comfortingly elides the family strife that makes up so much of this novel. Alexandra's mythic vision of the land also avoids troubling economic and social realities. The grain mentioned in the final sentence is not commodified, and the youth have not grasped their role in a corporate agricultural system that was as dependent on Chicago commodities trading and railroad shipping rates as it was on the vision of individual farmers. Conflicting gender roles and definitions of farming are transcended as human agency is subordinated to a vision in which the land itself is the great actor in a drama of eternal renewal.

However, this mythic vision is called into question by the narrative context Cather gives it.⁴⁸ Each time it is expressed, it is in response to male characters who are threatened by Alexandra's independence. Subordination of personal agency is not only characteristic of her mythic vision but also a rhetorical strategy in particular circumstances. The conclusion of the first section, "Wild Lands," is the first example. Alexandra has just convinced her doubting brothers that their success depends on land speculation. As if to then deflect attention away from her protagonist's economic insight and initiative, Cather follows this with an expression of Alexandra's close relationship to the land:

She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring. (173)

In contrast to this scene, Cather uses a much different approach when the farm is well established and competing interpretations of the

past put much at stake. Arguing with Lou and Oscar, Alexandra strategically does not claim that the land itself was the agent of success. Rather she creates a strong role for herself as she acknowledges both their hard work and her own astute management (219-21).

It is with Carl that Alexandra is most self-effacing in asserting a mythic vision of the land. At his first return to the Divide, and in response to his self-deprecating contrast between his "engraving of other men's pictures" and the landscape her farming has created, Alexandra claims, "We had n't [sic] any of us much to do with it, Carl. The land did it. . . . [W]e suddenly found that we were rich, just from sitting still" (194). When cautiously, indirectly wooing Carl, Alexandra makes herself seem less threatening by denying her own agency. She does the same in the novel's conclusion: "'You belong to the land,' Carl murmur[s]" to Alexandra near the end as they walk along a ridge overlooking the original Bergson homestead, and Alexandra talks about feeling peace and freedom because the land belongs to the future (289).

However, this mythic vision, used to ease tensions in relationships, does not resolve the conflict over the meaning of the land's (and by implication, the nation's) productivity. Just preceding Alexandra's above comment, she "suddenly," seemingly incongruously, interjects to Carl, "Lou and Oscar can't see those things." This awkward juxtaposition suggests that Alexandra's defensive need to sustain a mythic vision of the land is rooted in economic and social conflict. In its explanation of the still-troubling tension with Lou and Oscar, Alexandra's mythic vision vindicates her economic and social independence. Their estrangement (221, 229) can be attributed to the brothers' spiritual blindness rather than to conflicting explanations of the farm's success.

REASSURING THE READER

In similar ways this mythic vision of the land could provide early readers a reassuring model for negotiating a difficult economic and

cultural transition by explaining changes in non-material terms. Yet the novel does not resolve the conflicting definitions of Alexandra's role in the Bergson farm success story. She is depicted as a female Turnerian hero who transforms the struggling homestead into a successful farm, as a rural New Woman managing an agribusiness increasingly shaped by bureaucratic values antithetical to frontier individualism, and as an agrarian woman who finds a transcendent relationship with the land and is comforted by aligning herself with "the great operations of nature . . . [and] the law that lay behind them" (173). If the title of the novel suggests that the mythic definition has priority, the novel itself does not so easily order these competing constructions of meaning. As the site of these competing constructions, Alexandra is emblematic of the struggle the United States faced at the turn of the century in reconciling its rural, pioneer past with the cultural transformations inherent in the urban New Woman and the industrialism from which she emerged.

O *Pioneers!* could help readers feel more comfortable with the transition. Yet the novel is not just a reassuring, premodern pastoral. As T. Jackson Lears suggests (in the quote near the beginning of this essay), anti-modernism was a protest against but also an accommodation to modern material realities. Alexandra brings the Turnerian pioneer ideal of individualism and inventiveness to a new professional, managerial context. The American character ideal could be maintained, she implies, even as the new prosperity allowed citizens to escape traditional hardships as they established managerial careers in the city. Alexandra does not work the land herself, yet she has a closer relationship to it than her brothers who are directly engaged in the physical labor of farming. Cather also has her protagonist recognize that rural America does not exist in isolation. Although Alexandra has her face "set toward [the Divide] with love and yearning" (170), she also acknowledges to Carl when he returns from the city that "[i]f the world were no wider than my corn-

fields . . . I would n't [sic] feel that it was much worth while to work" (198). In this she suggests that the country's self-definition as Nature's Nation could still be maintained, with some adaptation, in the face of new urban realities.

A third reassurance Alexandra offers relates to gender conflicts of the time. Her freedom from traditional women's roles was based on her economic independence, a hallmark of the New Woman. While this was certainly threatening to her brothers, Cather makes Alexandra reassuring to her readers by showing her independence not as a cause in itself but as a necessity reluctantly accepted. Circumstances force her to take a role that would normally have gone to one of the brothers, and she pays a considerable price for taking that position. When she finally marries at the end of the novel, Alexandra finds peace but not necessarily reconciliation. As discussed above, the conflicts with her brothers are troublingly evaded rather than resolved. In her mind, Alexandra continues to argue with her brothers while not acknowledging their underlying differences, just as the novel is filled with conflicts that Alexandra experiences but only understands in limited ways.

PLEASURES OF THE TEXT

O Pioneers! offers, among many other things, a representation of the conflicting constructions of meaning that U.S. society was continuing to develop as it adjusted to industrial capitalism and the urban mass culture that it shaped. One of the significant uses and deep pleasures of reading this novel is to see Cather's sensitive, open, and imaginative registering of the tensions within her society. She gained narrative power from her conflicted, anti-modernist perspective. This experimental work is pivotal for her Midwest fiction, coming between her early short stories, which emphasize the nearly inhumane conditions of pioneer life, and the later, more exclusively celebratory works.⁴⁹ Her open stance soon became more guarded. As Nebraska became a

badge of allegiance she wore⁵⁰ rather than a social construction she explored, the mythic vision of the land came to predominate. In the same way her protagonists' gender roles came to reflect that narrower range of vision. However, with Alexandra Willa Cather created a reluctant New Woman pioneer, an engaging character who, like Cather herself, embodied many ideals and tensions of her time.

NOTES

1. T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), pp. xv-xvi, xix, emphasis added.

2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 304.

3. Quoted in Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 86.

4. T. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), p. 10.

5. Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," quoted in *The Call of the Wild (1900-1916)*, ed. Roderick Nash (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 79.

6. Roderick Nash, introduction to Nash, *ibid.*, p. 19.

7. Ernest Thompson Seton, *Boy Scouts of America*, quoted in Nash, *ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

8. Roderick Nash, introduction to Nash, *ibid.*, p. 1.

9. Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation*, 5 September 1923, 236, 238. The Great Plains was "the last major American agricultural frontier." In 1870 there were fewer than 50,000 farms in Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas. By 1900 there were 400,000. Part of a general expansion of American agriculture, this increase was "stimulated mainly by the industrialization and urbanization in the United States and Europe." David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 133-34.

10. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (1920; reprint, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), p. 37.

11. Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 4.

Sandra L. Meyers adds support to this assessment in her *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 258. Glenda Riley, in *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 19, explains that "some women homesteaders retained their single status" while many women spent part of their lives as married and part as single. However, neither Meyers in her chapter on "Women as Frontier Entrepreneurs" or Riley in "A Profile of Frontierswomen on the Prairie and the Plains" gives an example like Alexandra, a single woman managing the family farm.

12. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, in *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Sharon O'Brien (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 219. Further citations to *O Pioneers!* are given in parentheses in the text.

13. Fink, *Agrarian Women* (note 11 above), pp. 67, 10. Deborah Fink notes that women's home enterprises, most often limited to egg and cream sales, were "a necessary precondition" for their full participation in social life. However, "[t]he organization of labor within the nuclear family undermined its liberating potential. The work of their wives and children often gave men time for civic involvements beyond the family; women were seldom able to draw on the labor of family members for similar release." As she states, this is the thesis of her book (p. 10).

14. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-80* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 106.

15. Riley, *Female Frontier* (note 11 above), p. 3.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

17. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 187.

18. Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1989), pp. 31-32.

19. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), pp. 35, 43-45.

20. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 245, emphasis added.

21. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, introduction to *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siecle Feminisms*, ed. A. Richardson and C. Willis (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 10-11.

22. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (note 20 above), p. 45.

23. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

1987), p. 15. Feminists wanted more than suffrage; that was "only a tool." Cott summarizes a 1913 *Harper's Weekly* article: "The real goal was a 'complete social revolution': freedom from all forms of women's active expression, elimination of all structural and psychological handicaps to women's economic independence, an end to the double standard of sexual morality, release from constraining sexual stereotypes, and opportunity to shine in every civic and professional capacity" (*ibid.*, p. 15).

24. Margaret Anne O'Connor, ed., *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 45, 56, 57.

25. Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 6.

26. William Conlogue convincingly argues that Cather positively presents Alexandra as a representative of the New Agriculture while her brothers are negatively associated with the populists. "Managing the Farm, Educating the Farmer: *O Pioneers!* and the New Agriculture," *Great Plains Quarterly* 21 (winter 2001): pp. 11-12.

27. Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism* (note 23 above), p. 21.

28. Roosevelt, "Strenuous Life" (note 5 above), p. 81.

29. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (note 20 above), p. 253.

30. "Reflecting the New Agriculture's view of farming as a business rather than as a way of life, *O Pioneers!* argues that farm work is first white-collar work." Conlogue, "Managing the Farm" (note 26 above), p. 8.

31. William Conlogue describes Cather as an "urban agrarian": forward thinking in agricultural understanding yet "concerned with rural uplift and uneasy about the nation's burgeoning industrial system." Believers in the Jeffersonian agrarian myth, urban agrarians sought answers to urban problems in the countryside (*ibid.*, p. 4).

32. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (note 20 above), p. 252.

33. Carolyn Christensen Nelson, introduction to *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. C. C. Nelson (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001), pp. x-xi.

34. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (note 20 above), p. 278.

35. Warren Motley, "The Unfinished Self: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Psychic Cost of a Woman's Success," *Women's Studies* 12 (1986): 149-50.

36. Although Freud had only come to the United States four years before *O Pioneers!* was published, "by the mid-1910s, popularizers were presenting Freudian ideas to a larger audience," which under-

stood the concept of repression that was implied in both Alexandra's dream and her vine-tree metaphor. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper, 1988), p. 223.

37. "Farm families found a swelling cornucopia of factory-made goods available to them. . . . But consuming urban products . . . inevitably meant at least some rural conformity to urban standards of culture, taste and value." Danbom, *Born in the Country* (note 9 above), p. 133.

38. Douglas W. Werden argues that both Alexandra and Marie "are pioneers in crossing socially constructed gender barriers . . . [and] overturn the presupposition that farm women are necessarily subordinate farmwives who support their husbands by working in the domestic sphere" "She had never humbled herself: Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata as the 'Real' Pioneers of O Pioneers!" *Great Plains Quarterly* 22 (summer 2002): 199. While Marie does resist her husband's expectations, I see her transgressing traditional moral strictures rather than challenging gender roles of the time.

39. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres* (note 25 above), p. 77.

40. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (note 20 above), p. 53.

41. Motley, "Unfinished Self" (note 35 above), p. 154.

42. Cather earlier used this traditional story of blaming the woman to explain Alexandra's grandfather's financial and moral ruin (149). The repetition of this story suggests that for Cather this is more than a narrative strategy to make her protagonist less threatening.

43. Sharon O'Brien's biography presents Mrs. Bergson much more positively than I have. She claims that Alexandra and her mother are collaborators in successfully cultivating the land. Sharon

O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1987), p. 441. While this interpretation is appealing, the connection made in the text is between Mrs. Bergson and her convention-bound, intellectually limited son Oscar (ibid., p. 151). Rather than suggesting continuity between old traditions and new circumstances as O'Brien argues, I see Cather presenting Mrs. Bergson as failing to adapt to new circumstances.

44. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters* (note 36 above), pp. 172, 150-51.

45. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 8.

46. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 109.

47. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters* (note 36 above), p. 172.

48. Howard Horwitz, "O Pioneers! and the Paradox of Property: Cather's Aesthetics of Divestment," in *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 64.

49. A comparison with *My Antonia* reveals the shift. In this novel Cather uses the same Turnerian strategy of cutting off the diminished present from the heroic past that we saw in her essay "Nebraska" (note 9 above). Rather than focusing on the successful second-generation Swedish farmers of *O Pioneers!*, who can more easily embody conflicts within U.S. society, Cather in the later novel uses poor Bohemians who choose not to speak English and remain largely cut off from society. As a result, *Antonia's* strength as a woman, seen through the eyes of Jim Burden, is considerably less threatening to the traditional construction of gender than Alexandra's assertiveness is to her brothers.

50. Woodress, *Willa Cather* (note 19 above), p. 36.