

**The Quest for Self:
Studies of Individuality in Willa Cather's Fiction**

**By
Lonna Lutze**

**Presented to the American Culture Faculty
at the University of Michigan-Flint
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Liberal Studies
In
American Culture**

March 11, 2007

First Reader

Joy Lane JTF

Second Reader

Heather Laube, PhD

Table of Contents

Introduction		
<i>Individuality: Willa Cather's Uniting Theme</i>	...	1
Chapter One		
<i>The Early Years: Willa Cather's Own Quest for Individuality</i>	...	9
Chapter Two		
<i>The Apprenticeship: A Developing Artist</i>	...	22
Chapter Three		
<i>Strong Women and Independent Minds</i>	...	42
Chapter Four		
<i><u>My Antonia</u>: Two Representations of Marriage</i>	...	67
Chapter Five		
<i>The Social Network: Family, Responsibilities, and the Loss of Self</i>	...	88
Conclusion		
<i>Looking Back: A Study in Individuality</i>	...	114
Works Cited	...	121

Individuality: Willa Cather's Uniting Theme

During the 1920's Willa Cather was among the most venerated living authors. Although she did not receive much recognition until her fourth book, *O Pioneers!* was published in 1912, throughout Cather's long career H. L. Mencken, Edmond Wilson, Randolph Bourne and other well known critics gave her much praise. She was also admired by respected contemporary authors such as Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald (Lindemann ix). Now, nearly six decades after her death, her work continues to be studied and esteemed.

Today, what most readily comes to mind when thinking of Willa Cather is the unique setting she chose for her most celebrated novels. The majority of the country was not interested in the Nebraska prairie or in the immigrant farmers that settled there. But Cather chose these everyday people and seemingly uneventful places for her greatest novels.

The uniting characteristic of Cather's fiction, however, is not her use of immigrant characters in the American West, but their quest for individuality. This theme shows up even in Cather's work not set in the West—*The Professor's House* and *Alexander's Bridge* are two examples. If readers examine Cather's life and work closely, they can see that her characters' struggles, views, and admirable qualities are rooted not in the novel's setting but in their need for individuality.

Cather's fiction demonstrated the conflicting emotions most Americans will have at some point in their life: the need for companionship conflicted with the need for individuality. In an essay entitled "Katherine Mansfield" she described the feelings that occur in any American family:

I doubt whether any contemporary writer has made one feel so keenly the many kinds of personal relations which exist in an everyday “happy family” who are merely going on living their daily lives, with no crises or shocks or bewildering complications to try them. Yet every individual in that household (even the children) is clinging passionately to his individual soul, is in terror of losing it in the general family flavour. As in most families, the mere struggle to have anything of one’s own, to be one’s self at all, creates an element of strain which keeps everybody almost at the breaking point.

One realizes that even in harmonious families there is this double life: the group life, which is the one we can observe in our neighbour’s household, and, underneath, another—secret and passionate and intense—which is the real life that stamps the faces and gives character to the voices of our friends. Always in his mind each member of these social units is escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and his own affections have woven about him. One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them. In those simple relationships of loving husband and wife, affectionate sisters, children and grandmother, there are innumerable shades of sweetness and anguish which make up the pattern of our lives day by day, though they are not down in the list of

subjects from which the conventional novelist works. (*On Writing* 108-110)

The theme of individuality is often overlooked or downplayed by scholars. She says herself that the “sweetness and anguish” of our relationships—the struggles between self and community—“are not down in the list of subjects from which the conventional novelist works” (*On Writing* 110). Perhaps this, coupled with her ambiguous writing style, is why individuality is so often downplayed by critics.

While Willa Cather’s writing structure is simple and direct, she also leaves much of the overarching meaning up to the reader’s interpretation—she has a certain amount of purposeful ambiguity. She is vivid and elusive at the same time. Her writing is rich with characterization, description, and information, yet it often leaves the reader with a haunting enigma. In one of Cather’s most famous essays, “The Novel D meubl ” she states it is unspoken knowledge, the information contained on the page but not written with words, which makes any novel into a great work of art:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.
(*On Writing* 41-42)

All of Cather’s novels contain a “presence of the thing not named.” Cather does not tell the reader what to feel about a character or situation and does not explicitly state what message or lesson she is trying to demonstrate. Instead, Cather creates a scene and

gives an impression through settings, background information, dialogue, and her characters' reactions. She creates a definite ambience in her pages but also allows her readers to assume a lot. This assumption is "the thing not named," and critics continue to argue over what exactly this "thing" really is—what Cather, herself, was most likely intending to say.

The study of individuality in Cather's writing is important. Often, critics point to certain works and narrow them to one specific theme—feminism in *O Pioneers!*, an artist's attempt for success in *The Song of the Lark*, the loss of pioneering days in *A Lost Lady*. Cather has many themes in her fiction and most of them can be better understood if one remembers how vital it was to Cather (and her characters) to maintain a strong sense of self.

Each of Cather's novels has a different ambience, and each of her characters is unique. Some of the women she creates are described with masculine characteristics, others are almost dangerously feminine. Some of her protagonists, both male and female, are trapped in dull unhappy marriages; others staunchly hold on to their independence and deny any union but friendship. Some of her protagonists never have children or express any interest in them; others have many children. Some characters rarely reflect on their childhood years; others seem almost obsessed by youth, constantly seeking a way to return to it. The rich variation in her writing and her ability to create a feeling without stating fact have allowed critics to walk away with a great number of interpretations. Many of these interpretations, however, would be altered if they were examined in the context of Cather's beliefs about individuality.

The purpose of the present research is not to narrow Cather's writing and claim that a quest for individuality is the main theme of all her fiction. As previously stated, her work is rich and ambiguous. Her novels have a number of themes, many of them "unspoken." To reduce her work to one would be misleading. This research examines the theme, individuality, and discusses how it changes throughout Cather's career. The following chapters consider what was occurring in the world and in Cather's own life that may have affected her work. They show that even though her novels' characters and ambience may change dramatically, individuality remains a theme throughout her career.

Most often, Cather presents a struggle for individuality in three different ways. At times Cather's characters resist marriage and family, knowing that it threatens their sense of self. Other characters marry and then discover later in life that because of their social responsibilities, they have lost their true self. The novel then becomes a psychological struggle in which the protagonist attempts to either regain it or accept the loss. Finally, Cather believed that people are most aware of their true selves when they are young, before their lives revolve around social commitments and responsibilities. Therefore some of her characters seek individuality by attempting to return to youth.

Because they are so closely linked, there are some additional themes that are discussed in relation to individuality. First of all, as Cather did in her own life, many of her characters display an opposition to conformity and an aversion toward social expectations. Also, Cather's own life experiences showed her that the socially accepted version of women was inconsistent with their true potential. So she allowed her female characters a right to individuality outside of marriage and family. This was a unique viewpoint in Cather's time and leads to the discussion of various feminist ideas.

Chapter One gives a brief summary of Cather's childhood. Although she did not do any writing until she was a student at the University of Nebraska, her relatives, especially the female role models in her family, greatly affected her beliefs about individuality and independence. She was exposed to strong women who defied accepted gender norms. This helped to shape her female protagonists. Many of Cather's characters are modeled after the friends and family she was closest to during this time. Knowing Cather's history will aid a reader's understanding of her work.

Chapter Two explores Cather's apprenticeship years—the time she discovered she wanted to become a writer until she published material that began to win her acclaim. Although Cather criticized her fiction from this period, her thematic preference for individuality begins to develop. Two samples of Cather's early work—"Paul's Case," a short story from Cather's first published book of prose, and *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather's first novel—are examined. In both of these works, Cather shows how one's true self is most fully realized in youth. The social responsibilities of adulthood are contrasted to carefree self-awareness one has as a child.

Chapter Three discusses two novels frequently cited as feminist and considers the problems associated with calling Cather a feminist author. Scholars use *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* to label Cather a forerunner to feminism. Because these novels seem to support feminist ideals, it seems enigmatic that Cather did not support the movement itself. Chapter Three uses individuality, feminism, and Cather's contemporary culture to examine this conflict. Most notably, it discusses how an endorsement of a woman's individuality can be understood as a promotion of feminism. In that era a woman was expected to devote herself to a husband and her family; a striving for success was

considered only a man's domain. Cather, however, allowed all of her characters to seek self-fulfillment. That she allowed women as well as men to do so was an unintentional sanction of feminism.

Chapter Four studies Cather's novel *My Ántonia*, published in 1918. This novel is the only one in which the protagonist is married with numerous children yet still feels content and fulfilled. Since Ántonia is highly glorified at the end of the novel, it seems as though Cather began to move away from the individuality theme. However, a sense of self and a strong character are lauded as much in *My Ántonia* as they are in Cather's other novels. At the end Ántonia is put on a pedestal not because she is married, but because she is a symbol of the pioneering spirit. This chapter also examines Lena's character. Although Lena is not glorified like Ántonia, she plays a significant role in the novel. She remains unmarried throughout adulthood and is financially successful.

Chapter Five discusses how consumerism affected Cather's writing. Her early fiction portrays protagonists who triumph. Her later fiction depicts individuals who feel smothered and cannot escape their circumstances. *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy* are all examples of her later fiction.

A Lost Lady shows what happens when a woman becomes economically dependent on the men in her life. Cather saw that the pioneering spirit of the West had disappeared and had been replaced with a new culture of consumerism. While on the frontier, women were able to do anything a man could do, but education and mercantilism more stringently defined women's roles. Women's labor was confined to the home and they became financially dependent on their husbands. With *A Lost Lady*,

Cather demonstrates how a strong-voiced independent woman can be lost in the new consumerist culture.

Cather's next novel, *The Professor's House*, has a male protagonist. Similar to *Alexander's Bridge* the main character discovers in middle age that he has become smothered in social responsibilities and has lost his true self. The object of his awakening is his student, Tom Outland, who reminds him how alive he was during his youth. The relationship with Outland reveals to the professor the discrepancy between the freedom of youth and the entanglement of family. This leads him to believe that he had been closest to his true, original self as a very young boy. His family and economic responsibilities make him feel entrapped.

The final novel discussed is *My Mortal Enemy*. In this novel the antagonist becomes a more intimate part of the main character. Myra Henshawe believes that love itself destroyed her. She gives up a large inheritance to run away and marry a man she loves and then grows old desiring her lost fortune. As she dies, Myra calls her husband a "mortal enemy" because he made her want to give up a great wealth. She believes that their impulsive marriage ruined them both.

Cather was a prolific author, publishing twelve novels, a book of poems, three collections of short stories, a book of essays, as well as a collection of stories and essays published after her death. Though this study of individuality in her fiction is not exhaustive, the pieces that are examined were chosen with the purpose of showing a variety of fiction from various stages of her career. This sample of literature can be used to display how important a strong sense of self was to Cather in her own life and how these beliefs permeated through her writing.

The Early Years: Willa Cather's Own Quest for Individuality

Much of Cather's own life is seen in the fiction she created, and many of her characters were inspired by childhood friends. Thea Kronborg of *The Song of the Lark*, for example, is considered her most autobiographical character, representing her own struggles as a developing artist. Thea was also inspired by Olive Fremstad, a great singer of the time and Cather's friend (Brown 188). In 1916 when Cather went back to Red Cloud, Nebraska, she visited a Bohemian friend she had known as a child, Anna Pavelka. When she saw Anna surrounded by many children, Cather became inspired to write the character of Antonia Shimerda (Brown 199). Captain and Mrs. Forester of *A Lost Lady* were heavily influenced by Governor and Mrs. Garber of Red Cloud (Brown 37). There are numerous such examples in most of Cather's novels.

One of Cather's greatest strengths is that she wrote about what she knew firsthand. Her failure to do this in her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, led her to severely criticize it after its publication. In an essay "My First Novels (There Were Two)" she explains her criticism:

[*Alexander's Bridge*] was the result of meeting some interesting people in London. Like most young writers, I thought a book should be made out of "interesting material" and at that time I found the new more exciting than the familiar. . . . London is supposed to be more engaging than, let us say, Gopher Prairie; even if the writer knows Gopher Prairie very well and London very casually. Soon after the book was published I went for six months to Arizona and New Mexico. . . . When I got back to Pittsburgh I began to write a book entirely for myself; a story about some

Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been neighbors of ours when I lived on a ranch in Nebraska, when I was eight or nine years old. (*On Writing* 91-92)

O Pioneers!, the book to which she refers, is placed in a setting that Cather had become intimately familiar with as a child, and she based her characters on friends that she remembered fondly. From this point on, she used her Nebraska roots as a positive source for creativity. Because she used material from her own life, knowing Cather's background is important when analyzing her characters. Understanding the way in which she asserted her own individuality will reveal parallels between Cather and her characters.

Willa Cather spent her early childhood in Virginia. Cather liked her life on the Virginian farm, Willowshade. She had a great variety of people she could talk with. The home and farm were filled not only with her parents (Charles and Jennie) and their four children, but also with cousins, friends, and hired workers. Cather especially liked the "humbler sort of travelers" that "were often lodged over night in the wing at the back of the house" (Lewis 8). Even from this very young age, she liked interesting people and listening to their stories. As a child in Virginia, when "the old women came from Timber Ridge to make quilts, Willa Cather would creep under the quilting frames and sit there listening to their talk" (Lewis 10). She knew which of the women were the best storytellers, and years later could still remember the "fire and wit" in their voices (Lewis 11).

The travelers who came to work at Willowshade taught Cather a great deal. She began to learn the value in every person and how to listen to their stories. But the most

important figures in her life were the permanent members of her family. William Cather, Willa's grandfather, had a strong personality. He had deep-seated convictions and held onto them even when the rest of the community disagreed. For example, he was unwavering in his support for the union throughout the Civil War even though he "was ostracized by some of his sisters and brothers" (Brown 12). He had many of the characteristics that Willa Cather found so admirable: unusual strength of mind and body, an unwavering upright character, profound endurance—characteristics that her most esteemed protagonists embody.

Most of Cather's role models were women. Throughout her family history there are many examples of extraordinary women who showed unusual strength against all odds. Cather's great-aunt Sidney Gore who was in her early fifties when Cather lived at Willowshade was "a powerfully competent woman. . . . She single-handedly turned her husband's farm, after his death, into a big health resort called Valley Home, which she managed and where during the war she looked after the wounded of both sides" (Lee 27). Willa Cather's paternal grandmother Caroline "was a tough, efficient farming housewife and pioneer. . . . She upped and left Nebraska with her husband in her mid fifties, and her letters to her daughter . . . are full of resilient advice against life's trials" (Lee 27). Although Cather's mother was "subject to prolonged bouts of depression and illness," she was "strong-willed . . . and dominating over her indulgent husband and numerous children" (Lee 28).

Cather's maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, affected her writing more than any of the other women in her family, even her mother. Cather did not attend school as a child. Consistent with many other children growing up in the later part of the 19th

century, she was educated at home. Rachel Boak taught her to read from the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Peter Parley's Universal History*. Cather learned a great deal from her grandmother. According to E. K. Brown, Cather's first biographer, "Mrs. Boak had gone to a good school in Baltimore, she had read much and carefully, and she had an alert mind" (20). Also, Mrs. Boak was remembered as being "a vigorous practical woman, always busy, always efficient, with a talent for being unobtrusively agreeable and helpful" (Brown 15). Her image is evoked in some of Cather's early poems, as well as in Rachel Blake of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and as "Old Mrs. Harris" (Lee 28). Rachel Boak would accompany the family when they moved to Nebraska in 1883 and would continue teaching Willa Cather.

The influence these family members had on Cather cannot be overstated. The accepted Southern outlook on gender relations dictated that a woman be subservient to a man. A minister in Alabama gave a perfect summary of women's accepted place in southern society when he stated that, like slaves, women were held to involuntary service:

Her relation to her husband, in the immense majority of cases, is made for her, and not by her. . . . he has authority, from God, to rule over you. You are under service to him. You are bound to obey him in all things. . . . you cannot leave your parlor, nor your bed-chamber, nor your couch, if your husband commands you to stay there. (Scott 149)

Cather, however, had female role-models who showed her that women had much more potential for success than what society wanted to allow them. In 1895, after she had graduated and was working for the *Lincoln Courier* in Nebraska, she responded to a

reader who asked “Does not the Bible teach that God created woman subject to and subordinate to man and is it not a dangerous presumption in her to claim to be his equal?” Cather’s answer is complicated. She does not deny the Bible taught female subjugation, she also does not claim that this social dogma is incorrect, but she does say that female subordination has never been a reality: “The Bible undoubtedly teaches that woman should be subservient to man, but does it say that she was, is, or ever will be?” Cather then gives examples from the Old Testament in which a female had power (either by flattery or trickery) over their male counterparts and altered history. Then Cather adds: “These are only a few of the hundred Biblical instances in which the women who were undoubtedly created subservient turned the tables. In theory the Jews maintained the superiority of man but in practice it did not always follow. Woman may be man’s inferior but she makes him pay for it” (*The World and the Parish* 127).

The strong women in Cather’s life gave her much advantage over other female writers she would later criticize. Cather said she was not a fan of women writers because they too often narrowed their subject material to love and romance. Many of these female writers Cather criticized were limited in their subject matter because their own lives did not contain the variety of experience or strong female role models that Cather had. As Cather did, these women wrote of what they knew—their own life experiences. Cather was fortunate to have had strong women and personal freedom as a child. It changed both her writing and her life. As Lee states:

Cather owed a great deal to the women who brought her up: her own ruthless drive towards independence, her ambitiousness, her resilience and adventurousness, her competence in organizing the shape of her life, her

great capacity for work, . . . Above all, her childhood gave her a sense of possibilities for women. Witness to the negotiation, for all her ‘mothers’, between fulfilling conventional female roles and asserting great powers, it was no wonder that her youthful admiration—and identification—went to exceptional women playing larger-than-life roles on an elevated stage, women as heroes rather than women as mothers. . . . In all her writing there was to be a see-saw between the epic and the quotidian, the heroic and the domestic, the ‘unwomanly’ and the ‘womanly’, which derived from her earliest relationships. (29)

Cather’s time in Virginia would only last until she was nine years old. She left her large extended family to move to Nebraska. George Cather, her uncle, had been the first to move west. William, Cather’s grandfather followed shortly after, leaving the Virginia farm in the care of Willa Cather’s father, Charles. Willa Cather was heartbroken in 1883 when her family left Virginia and joined her grandfather and uncle. When Charles Cather decided to move, he sold the large Virginian farm and all their possessions. At nine years old, Willa Cather was made to leave everything that was familiar to her, everything she loved. It was a very traumatic experience. Shortly after the publication of *O Pioneers!*, which pays tribute to life in the West, she stated how difficult the move was at first: “I would not know how much a child’s life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. . . . For the first week or two on the homestead I had that kind of contraction of the stomach which comes from homesickness” (Bohlke 10).

However much she loved Willowshade, Cather does not use these early experiences in her fiction. None of her novels, until her very last one, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, are set in Virginia. In 1921, after she had established herself as an author and had published some of her most recognized works, she stated in an interview for the *Omaha Bee* that “the years from 8 to 15 are the formative period of a writer’s life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material” (Bohlke 31). For Willa Cather, these essential years were spent in Webster County Nebraska. The experiences she had there are found throughout her writing.

Edith Lewis, who Cather met in 1903, had a “unique authority” to comment on Cather’s work. “For almost forty years Lewis traveled with Cather when Cather was gathering material for her fiction, and Lewis helped her prepare that fiction for publication.” They also lived together for many years (Murphy v). Edith Lewis states that Cather’s years in Virginia “With its freedom from all tension and nervous strain, it may have helped to give her that deep store of vitality which underlay her work” (12). It did not, however, give Cather her main inspiration as a writer. Despite the difficulty of leaving Virginia, Willa Cather came to see it as imperative to her success as a writer. As Edith Lewis explains:

When her family sold Willowshade and moved West, she felt the break cruelly. But in later years she believed that for her the move was fortunate. Even as a little girl she felt something smothering in the polite, rigid social conventions of that Southern society—something factitious and unreal. If one fell in with those sentimental attitudes, those euphuisms

that went with good manners, one lost all touch with reality, with truth of experience. If one resisted them, one became a social rebel. (12-13)

And fitting in with social expectations was certainly not one of Willa Cather's strengths. She had no desire to be molded to the roles society held for little girls. In fact, it was the opposite. She wanted to find her own individuality and pursue her own goals, whether they were considered "proper" or not. Her years in Nebraska provided an outlet toward exploration of herself and the surrounding world. Throughout her youthful, somewhat eccentric explorations, the Cather family supported her. Cather's mother was a very strong woman and the dominating figure in the household. She demanded respect from her children, but at the same time, allowed them to be individuals.

In spite of her occasional severity—even tyranny—she had a most unusual sympathy and understanding of her children's individuality—gave them almost complete freedom, except where the rules of the household were concerned—let them carry on, without interference, all those queer schemes and passionately cherished undertakings that children get into their heads. She had her own absorbing life, and she let her children have theirs. (Lewis 6-7)

Although the family stayed on the Nebraska farm for only about two years, Willa Cather took full advantage of them by meeting new friends and learning their stories. Cather found the immigrants to be the most interesting people on the divide:

A sprinkling of Americans there were in this district, but most of the "near" neighbors were Scandinavians and ten or twelve miles away there was a township settled by Bohemians. Winter and summer, rain and

shine, found the future novelist on her pony, riding and visiting the neighbors. Miss Cather feels that those youthful visits to the foreigners, her long talks, as she played and worked with them, were the greatest influence of her literary life. (Bohlke 18).

There were two types of settlers on the divide: American settlers and immigrant settlers. American settlers were those that had been living in the United States for generations and moved west from some other area of the United States. Immigrant settlers came to the West from European countries and, if they spoke English, did so with an accent. Cather refers to the distinction between these two groups in *My Ántonia* and, to a lesser extent, in *The Song of the Lark*.

American settlers held a sense of superiority over their foreign-born neighbors. Cather, however, enjoyed listening to the stories of immigrants and was frustrated with her family's indifference toward them. Cather stated that she "used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbors" (Bohlke 20). She was much more open-minded than her American counterparts and recognized that she could learn about the human spirit from all types of people.

In discussing the move from Virginia to Nebraska, Brown states that "it gave her an awareness of her differentness from others, her individuality" (Brown vii). Her extraordinary open-mindedness and her attraction to the immigrants are two examples of how Willa Cather was different from those around her. She was a strong-willed, confident person, and rather than try to make herself conform to the standards and expectations of those around her, she threw herself against them. Her opposition to conformity occurred even more dramatically when her family left the farm to take up

residence in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Her father moved his family into a one-and-a-half story house not far from Red Cloud's main street. Charles Cather, not made to farm the prairie, decided to open an office in town and begin doing business in farm loans and mortgages.

The people Cather met in Red Cloud, like the immigrant farmers, greatly influenced her writing. She used the little town as a setting for much of her fiction, and many of Cather's friends here later became her protagonists. In town, however, her differentness became even more apparent to her. As Brown states, "she threw herself impetuously against the way of the majority and sought out the exceptions, the dreamers, the nonconformists, the questioners" (vii).

Like the women role models in her family, Willa Cather had a very strong personality compared to her female contemporaries. She was so different that those living around her could not help but to notice her. Edith Lewis says that "with a personality so striking in its originality, daring, vital force, that no one could possibly ignore her; she awakened either strong liking, or hostility and disapproval" (20). She made many friends in Red Cloud, most of them much older than herself, and she also aroused much talk, but "she did not shrink from—it may be rather enjoyed—challenging public opinion. She wore her hair cut short, in a period when this in itself was the mark of a rebel. She dressed as much as possible like her brothers. . . . She preferred the society of older people . . . and especially the society of older men" (Lewis 26-27).

Cather's seemingly erratic behavior may have caused legends of her to form in Red Cloud, but she had no desire to seek the same future most other girls accepted. And she was frustrated with the town's lack of understanding. The same experience is related

in *The Song of the Lark* when Thea's sister rebukes her for choosing Mexican immigrant companions: "We all hoped that going away would improve you. Of course, it reflects on father when you are scarcely polite to the nice people here and make up to the rowdies" (215). Although Cather's own family was supportive, she, like Thea, was irritated that no one else saw the value in differences. The feeling of estrangement is very apparent in *The Song of the Lark*, which, though placed in Colorado, is set in a small town similar to Red Cloud. The novel describes the struggle of a young girl's quest to become an artist. Though Thea is a singer, the novel is consistently seen as Cather's most autobiographical work. Thea's feelings are very similar to Cather's own as she tried to leave Red Cloud and pursue higher goals.

Cather described her childhood in Nebraska as her "formative years"—a time of unconsciously gathering material for the artistic life—and she spent them with a heightened awareness of her differentness from others. She did have the strength to throw herself against expectations but still found Red Cloud quite stifling. Edith Lewis, when describing a return trip to Red Cloud she made with Cather, said that returning to the town brought back that feeling of "forlornness, that terrible restlessness that comes over young people born in small towns in the middle of the continent; the sense of being cut off from all the great currents of life and thought" (17). Many of Cather's frustrations are seen in her characters: a differentness from others, an inability to be understood, a refusal to conform, or a feeling of being smothered by expectations. Thea, of *The Song of the Lark*, for example, feels as though her goals are unique and would never be understood by her peers. Thea demonstrates this frustration when she looks at her family and acknowledges that "Their ambitions and sacred proprieties were meaningless to her. .

. . . it was all clear enough. Nothing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to them, and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her” (217).

Although moving into town gave Cather a heightened sense of her differentness, it also brought her many more opportunities than she had had on the farm. For the first time Cather went to school and was fortunate to have teachers that would significantly affect her. Her teachers took to her right away, recognizing her talent and appreciating her admiration of the classics and the Latin language she had begun to learn at home. Cather had such a close relationship with two of her teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Gaudy, that they continued to write letters to each other for forty years. She had the opportunity to read Latin and Greek classics and to do laboratory experiments with Mr. Ducker, which led her to believe she wanted to become a physician. She liked talking with the two leading doctors of the town and her German music-teacher.

She made a number of friends in Red Cloud, most of them, like herself, people who pursued their own goals and spoke their mind, paying little attention to the town’s expectations. Even so, Willa Cather soon felt a need to leave. Her father’s small house was crowded with seven children and, with the exception of her treasured attic room, it gave little allowance for her to be alone with her thoughts. What Cather felt was very similar to Thea Kronborg’s feelings. Willa Cather was a dreamer, and even if she did not yet know she would be an artist, she knew the little town of Red Cloud could not offer her the means to achieve the big things she wanted in life. As Thea told Dr. Archie, “it’s silly to live at all for little things. . . . Living’s too much trouble unless one can get something out of it” (219). Red Cloud could only offer her “little things” and petty endeavors didn’t mean much to her. She wanted to do something uncommon. At that

time, she thought she would be a surgeon, a high achievement for a woman in 1890. It was this unique drive that led her to leave Red Cloud at sixteen to enter the preparatory school at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

She entered into her studies at Lincoln industriously, using every moment wisely. She began as a classical student, but also took classes in chemistry, still thinking that she would become a physician. In March, 1891 her first English professor, Ebenezer Hunt, was so impressed with a theme she had written, that he took it to the *Nebraska State Journal* and had it published without her permission. The “talk, the praise, the sudden elevation to fame among her classmates that followed had a marked effect on Willa Cather” (Lewis 31). It was the defining moment she needed to change her course of study. The mere mention of scientific pursuit never occurred after this first publication. All her focus and energy went into writing.

Cather had a long apprenticeship before she finally began publishing work that won recognition. From the time she discovered she wanted to become a writer, fourteen years passed before she published her first book of prose, *The Troll Garden*. Six more years would go by before publishing her first novel. It would be a long path for Cather, but when she began to use her youth in Nebraska as a positive source for her fiction, her writing took a new direction.

The Apprenticeship: A Developing Artist

As with everything Cather pursued, she dove into her studies at the University of Nebraska wholeheartedly. Cather was a very busy student. In addition to her classes, she took on a number of responsibilities involving activities such as drama, literary societies, editing the undergraduate literary periodical, and editing the yearbook. She also took on journalistic obligations outside of the university. At the same time, she worked to refine her own writing skills. Her first short story, "Peter," appeared in a Boston literary weekly in May of 1892. The story contained what later became the suicide in *My Ántonia*. Other stories would follow. She wrote many before she was twenty.

In addition to her stories, in 1893 she began contributing regularly to the *Nebraska State Journal*. Nebraska was going through a very difficult economic time and Cather's family was struggling. For financial reasons, she began writing reviews for the *Journal*. She reviewed plays, actors, music, fiction, and published various sketches and vignettes describing certain people or places. She enjoyed this work and earned a reputation for it. She was not afraid to be completely honest and was soon known throughout the country as a strident reviewer.

While Cather was writing reviews for the journal it was said that actors feared their arrival in Lincoln and even those of "national reputation wondered on coming to Lincoln what would appear next morning from the pen of the meat-ax young girl of whom all of them had heard" (Brown 68). It was no wonder. Cather knew what she liked, knew what she believed made good literature or drama and spewed forth an unbridled opinion. At times she lavished praise, such as on her most admired author, Henry James:

Everyone who thinks seriously about such matters at all has long acknowledged him as one of the most subtle analysts, perhaps the greatest living English master of the counterpoint of literary style. . . . he has achieved that unity of great art with great emotions that made Balzac what he was. He has put aside his graceful studies in repose, his scholarly analysis of characteristics. He has taken love and fear and hate and pity and made a tragedy, throbbing with the aching pulse of life. (*World and Parish II* 551-553)

Many actors and writers enjoyed a review that gave a balance of positives and negatives, strengths and weaknesses. Some, though, were not so lucky, and they found stinging criticism:

For the benefit of those who may be fortunate enough to be in ignorance of Dr. Owen and his so-called Baconian cycles, it may be stated that he has invented a wheel which he runs over the pages of the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Greene, and others Dr. Owen is now at work unraveling *The Tragical Historie of Mary Queen of Scots*. The play thus evolved is a string of meaningless, high sounding words without action, without deeper meaning, utterly unfit for the stage and very unpleasant to read. The scene between Mary and Elizabeth which Shakespeare would have filled so full of action is but a long tirade of ugly epithets. (*World and Parish I* 86-87)

Cather thoroughly enjoyed the praise and vanity she got from seeing her writing in print, but she later hated to be reminded of this early work because it fell so far below

her standards. In a letter to the *Nebraska State Journal* in 1927 she stated, “what youthful vanity can be affected by the sight of itself in print! It had a kind of hypnotic effect. I still vaguely remember that [first] essay, and it was a splendid example of the kind of writing I most dislike; very florid and full of high-flown figures of speech” (Bohlke 180-181). Throughout her five-year course of university study, she wrote and published many essays and stories, and, in the end, she was deeply critical of them. The more developed a writer she became, the more she began to find these stories “bald, clumsy, and emotional” (Bohlke 21). Although critical of her early writing, she recognized that writing students take time to refine their skill and was grateful for the opportunity to “riot in fine writing until [she] got to hate it, and began slowly to recover” (Bohlke 181). As Thea’s music teacher says in *The Song of the Lark*, “Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer” (160). Cather described her development as an artist in a 1915 interview:

Every young writer has to work off the ‘fine writing’ stage. It was a painful period in which I overcame my florid, exaggerated, foamy-at-the-mouth, adjective-spree period. I knew even then it was a crime to write like I did, but I had to get the adjectives and the youthful fervor worked off. (Bohlke 12-13)

Although Cather was critical of her early work, these years gave her experience writing and allowed her to make connections with newspaper editors and other artists of her genre. Cather took on so many responsibilities, however, that they interfered with the amount of time she needed to devote to the kind of writing she really cared about.

Cather's years at the University of Nebraska were quite draining. She had scholarly responsibilities, extra-curricular commitments, and a budding career in journalism. She wrote for the *Journal* and, for a time, she held an associate editor position at the Lincoln *Courier*. All of her responsibilities led her to spend late hours in theater halls and at her desk preparing articles.

At the end of her five years in Lincoln, she was burned out from the long hours and endless responsibilities. She returned to be with her family, to rest, and to recuperate. But her return to Red Cloud made her feel even more out of tune with her surroundings, and the emotional stress she experienced impacted her writing. "She liked nothing she wrote, and apparently made no attempt to write for publication" (Lewis 40). Eventually, she began to seek a way out (Lewis 40).

In 1896 Cather was given her escape. Although exhausting, Cather's experience in Lincoln gave her opportunities to meet many new friends and expand her social network. As in Red Cloud, most of her relationships in Lincoln were formed with older people, many of them editors. While on a visit to see Mr. Gere of the *Nebraska State Journal*, she met Mr. Axtell, a man from Pittsburgh who was planning to start a magazine called *The Home Monthly*. He offered Cather an editorial position. She accepted and, in June, moved to Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh meant to Cather "what Chicago was to mean to Thea Kronborg and Lucy Gayheart, 'the freedom to spend one's youth as one pleased'" (Brown 76). She had "economic security, access to the arts, liberation from the ceaselessly active tongues in Red Cloud that had given her an acute sense of being an outcast among her own people" (Brown 76). Her freedom, however, also cost her dearly. Cather often reiterated that an

artist must devote himself fully to his art. Working in journalism reinforced this belief. Her year at *The Home Monthly* and her four years at the Pittsburgh *Leader* were exhausting, and she had little time for the silent solitude needed to write quality fiction.

Cather did publish short stories while working at these periodicals in Pittsburgh, but she was not satisfied with them or with the progress she was making as an artist:

she wrote and published a number of short stories, some of them under her own name, more of them under pseudonyms. They are an indication, I think, of how valueless this sort of writing can be for a truly original writer. They were, to be sure, a kind of practice—but a practice in the wrong direction, in doing over and over the kind of thing most destructive to talent. . . . she was trying to conform to artificial and mechanical standards which had little relation to her own thinking and feeling. (Lewis 42)

Even if she wrote little, her dramatic reviews for the *Leader* led Cather to make numerous friends, many of whom had a lasting impression. As in *Red Cloud* and *Lincoln*, she was especially attracted to individuals with whom she could read French classics or who shared her love of the arts. She developed relationships with musicians and actors. One special friend, actress Lizzie Hudson Collier, introduced her to a woman who became a very important confidant: Isabelle McClung. Isabelle McClung would help provide Cather with a lifestyle more conducive to creativity.

One evening Cather visited Collier in her dressing room when Isabelle McClung happened to be there. McClung, although not an artist, had a special admiration for them. The two took an immediate liking toward each other. Soon afterward, Isabelle convinced

her family to invite Cather to stay in the McClung household. Isabelle's father was a prominent judge and the family had a lavish lifestyle. It was a dramatic change from the boarding houses to which Cather had become accustomed. Not only was she released from the discomfort of boarding house life, but Isabelle also set up a "quiet room at the back of the house Here she could work in peace, looking down over garden and trees to the Monongahela and the hills beyond" (Brown 97).

Her change in residence also marked a change in employment. In 1901 she began teaching, first at Central High School and later at Allegheny High School. She threw herself into teaching as with any feat she undertook, but it was a wise move for her writing career. Teaching took up much of her energy, but did not drain her like journalism. And she now had weekends, holidays, and three months during the summer to work on literature that she truly cared about. It was in the McClung household that Cather wrote her first book of prose, *The Troll Garden*.

She did not produce a great quantity of fiction during the five years she taught high school and lived with the McClungs, but she had time to hone and practice her craft while gaining the experiences she needed to write. One such experience was her first journey to Europe which she took with Isabelle McClung one year after she started teaching. She and Isabelle took a second trip to Europe in 1908. She later drew from these experiences when she wrote *Alexander's Bridge* which takes place, for the most part, in London.

Cather lived with the McClung family for about five years. During this time, "She wrote slowly and with great care and had little difficulty in placing her work in larger magazines" (Brown 113). In 1905 she assembled some of her stories and

published her first collection, *The Troll Garden*, from which “Paul’s Case” is taken. Although it does not match the quality of her later work, *The Troll Garden* brought her much attention and more opportunities. The stories show the extent to which she was growing as an artist. Her best work would begin almost a decade later, but both Cather and Lewis note a tremendous difference from what she had been writing while at the paper and what she wrote while teaching and living with Isabelle McClung: “There is a difference in character, almost like a change in personality, between most of the stories she wrote while working for the *Home Monthly* and the *Leader*, and those she wrote after she began to teach—the ones S. S. McClure swooped down on and published in *The Troll Garden*” (Lewis 42). Although she did not know it at the time, the little book “would mark the end of a decade, and indeed of a distinct period of her life” (Brown 113).

The Troll Garden was published by McClure, Philips & Co. in 1905. In general it is about the artist’s survival and struggle in the world. The epigraphs of the book refer to a fairy tale world of trolls and goblins. The “trolls are of course the dedicated working artists, and the goblins the savage, famished noncreators, the corruptors and prisoners of the mind and spirit” (Porter 150). It seems understandable that Cather’s first book of prose would deal with the artist’s struggle for survival or a warning against what could stifle creativity. She, after all, had been drowning in responsibilities and time constraints put on her by journalism and was already almost thirty by the time she began teaching and excelling in her writing. As Lee states, “it dramatically displays all Cather’s preoccupations about becoming an artist, all her sense of frustration, ambition, and fracture” (73).

“Paul’s Case” is the final story which appears in the collection, and it is an excellent example of where Cather was in her writing stylistically. It is her most popular short story, and its study is important for various reasons. First of all it is the rare fiction from Cather that was set in and inspired by her teaching career in Pittsburgh. Cather “drew the character from a boy she once had in a Latin class in her Pittsburgh teaching days, a restive, nervous show-off, always trying to attract attention” (Lee 21). Secondly, “Paul’s Case” shows Cather’s feelings about New York City, one of the story’s settings. Paul’s emotions toward the city “reflected her own early emotions about New York City” (Lee 21). As her literary predecessors, Cather knew there were many more artistic opportunities waiting in New York than there had been in Lincoln or Pittsburgh. The city is portrayed “as a dream city, snow-covered, with a beautiful thick impressionistic haziness that suits the setting for the dreamlike climax of Paul’s life” (Brown 122). This shows that, although Pittsburgh gave Cather more opportunities, she had her sights set on places that could further her career even more.

The story takes place in both Pittsburgh and New York and relates the story about an uncommon boy who feels trapped and smothered in the everyday sameness in which he lives. The story opens at a Pittsburgh High School where Paul is made to face the faculty about his suspension in order to try for readmission to the school. His father has already spoken to the principal and “confessed his own perplexity about his son” (170) and after the meeting ends a teacher “voiced the feeling of them all when he declared there was something about the boy which none of them understood” (171).

Although Paul had committed a number of transgressions, there is one specific cause for all of them: the need to feel different and the desire to escape the redundancy

and normalcy he had grown to hate. His lies and impertinence are all an attempt to stand out and convince others that he is not like any of them. The loathing way in which Paul views his home wonderfully displays this theme:

It was a highly respectable street, where all the houses were exactly alike, and where business men of moderate means begot and reared large families of children, all of whom went to Sabbath school and learned the shorter catechism, and were interested in arithmetic; all of whom were as exactly alike as their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived. Paul never went up Cordelia Street without a shudder of loathing. His home was next to the house of the Cumberland minister. He approached it tonight with the nerveless sense of defeat, the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness that he had always had when he came home. The moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head. (175)

Paul's only escape from smothering sameness was through art. He had no desire to be a musician or actor himself, but the theater "was Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love. The moment he inhaled the gassy, painty, dusty odour behind the scenes, he breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant things" (179). The theater was the only place he felt different from everything around him and going back to the real world was like going back into a prison. No one in the real world could understand that about him.

To allow himself this escape, Paul took a job as an usher, the one thing in the story which he is described as being able to do quite well. He also becomes friends with

Charley Edwards, a young actor who is the only one in Paul's life that sees promise in him. When his father follows the advice of Paul's principal and forbids him to work as an usher, go to the theater, or spend time with Charley Edwards, Paul steals money from a Pittsburgh firm where he works and goes to New York to taste the lavish life at the Waldorf-Astoria. After reading in the papers that his father had paid his debt and had gone east to find him and bring him home, Paul plunges into despair. Living luxuriously like he had always wanted, he felt different from all the other boys on Cordelia Street. He felt that the men living in his old neighborhood were "Mere rivets in a machine" (185) and going back "was to be worse than jail, even; the tepid waters of Cordelia Street were to close over him finally forever. The grey monotony stretched before him in hopeless, unrelieved years" (187). The final episode in the story is a dramatic, wonderfully written account of Paul taking his own life in his attempt to escape the unbearable commonness he experienced at home.

Cather does not hold back in telling the reader Paul's transgressions or the preposterous things he does to make himself stand out. Even so, the reader does not feel the same animosity toward Paul as do his teachers or father. Rather, Cather evokes sympathy for Paul and his hopelessness. She attempts to make the reader into the only one who can understand his difficult case. After all, "He had never lied for pleasure, even at school; but to make himself noticed and admired, to assert his difference from other Cordelia Street boys" (186). Cordelia Street would have been a nice middle class neighborhood at the time, but when seen through Paul's eyes, it suddenly becomes so terrible that one does not blame him for his feelings. When he throws himself against the train and at once "the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the

vastness of what he had left undone,” when “There flashed through his brain, clearer than ever before, the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands” (189) the reader feels immense sympathy.

The setting for “Paul’s Case”—the Pittsburgh high school—was no doubt influenced by the teaching Cather was doing at this time. The theme, however, is one she had thoroughly felt herself—the inability to fit in, the frustration with commonness, the escape provided by the arts.

“Paul’s Case” is the most widely read short story to come from *The Troll Garden*, but the same theme can be seen in its other stories. “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” for example, deals with a sculptor, Harvey Merrick, whose student, Henry Steavens, accompanies his body back to his home for a funeral. Throughout the story it becomes clear that Merrick was from a very different class than the other people from his town. None of them appreciate the art he accomplished in his life, even belittling its importance. The first time Merrick’s father speaks to anyone other than his wife, he reminds them that “we didn’t none of us ever understand him” (202).

The Troll Garden won Cather much praise and attention from other writers and editors and drew the attention of S. S. McClure; he came to Pittsburgh to meet her. He dined at the McClung household and spoke to Cather about taking a job in New York at his national magazine. She was then thirty-two and had spent ten years in Pittsburgh—five of them working long hours at newspapers, and five of them teaching and living with the McClung family. She accepted his offer and, in 1906, resigned from Allegheny High School at the end of the school year. She entered “*McClure’s Magazine* after the worst

upheaval in its never tranquil life” (Brown 125) and would work for him for six years as editor.

McClure’s magazine published a combination of fiction and “human interest” stories (Brown 126). There were many great authors of the time that made their first appearance in the magazine, but by the time Cather started on his staff, “McClure’s enthusiasm had more and more centered on factual material” (Lewis 63). Much of her job entailed taking poorly written stories about a matter of journalistic interest, checking facts, and rewriting them into publishable material. One such example is *Mary Baker G. Eddy: The Story of Her Life and History of Christian Science*. This particular job was so large that Cather was sent to live in Boston for a year. Although most of her time was spent researching and writing this story for McClure, the year in Boston, as all the other places Cather had lived, gave her the opportunity to meet many people who would impact her life—writers, editors, publishers, actors—individuals who cared about artistic writing. One such friendship, although it would only last about one year, was with the author Sarah Orne Jewett. Cather had much respect for this author, and, before Jewett’s death in 1909, the two women corresponded a great deal. Jewett would give her the most important advice Cather would receive to help her writing.

Sarah Orne Jewett told Cather that she needed to give up her big journalistic responsibilities to focus on her own writing:

I cannot help saying what I think about your writing and its being hindered by such incessant, important, responsible work as you have in your hands now. I do think that it is impossible for you to work so hard and yet have your gifts mature as they should—when one’s first working power has

spent itself, nothing ever brings it back just the same. . . . If you don't keep and guard and mature your force and, above all, have time and quiet to perfect your work, you will be writing things not much better than you did five years ago. . . . you must find your own quiet center of life and write from that to the world. . . . (Lewis 66-67)

While Cather was working with McClure, she was not very prolific in her own writing. She again had the hard, time-consuming responsibilities of an editor and wrote only seven stories between 1904 and 1911, and she was, for the most part, unsatisfied with them: "they were mechanical, 'sophisticated' performances, with Jamesian house-parties, ocean liners, and expatriate studios for settings" (Lee 79).

Later in her career, Cather dismissed her first two books of prose, *The Troll Garden* and *Alexander's Bridge*. Although she had developed tremendously, she still had not found her own unique voice. Cather admitted that she had great deference for Henry James and tried to mimic his style in her own work:

All students imitate, and I began by imitating Henry James. He was the most interesting American who was writing at that time, and I strove laboriously to pattern after him. All students began by imitating those they admire, and it is a perfectly right form of education. . . . Later you find your own style. (Bohlke 76)

Alexander's Bridge, Cather's first novel, does not use characters Cather was intimately familiar with as does her later and more popular fiction. As in James' novels, *Alexander's Bridge* has upper-class protagonists, house-parties, ocean liners, and, as a setting, alternates between Boston and London. *Alexander's Bridge* is quite often

overlooked by scholars who study her work. Despite being dismissed by Cather and her critics, it greatly reveals her beliefs. Even though James' influence was so dominant in the novel's structure, setting, and characters, it is another clear example of a recurring theme—individuality.

On the surface, the novel centers around Bartley Alexander, a Boston engineer, who struggles with the decision of maintaining the relationship with his wife or continuing the affair with his mistress. His choice, however, has very little to do with the women themselves. In a letter to his mistress, Hilda, in which Alexander relates his anguish with having two identities, he tells her, ““And what have you to do, Hilda, with this ugly story? Nothing at all”” (69). Also, Alexander's wife and marriage are never portrayed negatively. In fact, his wife, Winifred, is always described extraordinarily positively, not once does Cather give her negative traits, and she makes her admirable disposition clear from the very beginning:

She was a person of distinction he saw at once, and, moreover, very handsome. She was tall, carried her beautiful head proudly, and moved with ease and certainty. One immediately took for granted the costly privileges and fine spaces that must lie in the background from which such a figure could emerge with this rapid and elegant gait. (4)

Every time a guest sees her at their home, she is always viewed with “perplexed admiration” (12). Bartley Alexander, himself, admires her. Shortly before his death, the narrator states that “In his feeling for his wife there was all the tenderness, all the pride, all the devotion of which he was capable. There was everything but energy; the energy of youth” (77). His wife is, in fact, the last thing he thinks of before he dies.

Alexander's struggle has little to do with the choice between two women; rather, it's a middle-aged man's choice between an entanglement of social responsibilities and the carefree life of youth. In this case, youth represents the original self. Blanche H. Gelfant notes that Cather uses this type of regression often in her novels. "She valued above all the inviolability of the self. Romantically, she saw in the child the original and real self; and in her novels she created adult characters who sought a seemingly impossible reunion with this authentic being" (64).

There is a foreboding of what's to come when Bartley Alexander is first introduced. With his guest, Professor Wilson, he states,

"life doesn't offer a man much. You work like the devil and think you're getting on, and suddenly you discover that you've only been getting yourself tied up. A million details drink you dry. Your life keeps going for things you don't want, and all the while you are being built alive into a social structure you don't care a rap about." (10)

These smothering social responsibilities are precisely what Alexander tries to get away from by returning to his "original self."

When he goes to London and finds that an old girlfriend has become a famous actress and is starring in a play, he reflects that he has no remaining feelings for her, that he had even forgotten her: "He had not thought of Hilda Burgoyne for years; indeed, he had almost forgotten her. . . . He felt guilty and unhappy about her for a time, but after Winifred promised to marry him he really forgot Hilda altogether" (21). As his stay in London continues, he thinks of Hilda often, but for a while does not have a desire to see her. He reflects that "Remembering Hilda as she used to be, was doubtless more

satisfactory than seeing her as she must be now—and, after all, Alexander asked himself, what was it but his own young years that he was remembering?” (26).

He spends many hours walking about London’s streets remembering how his life had been in the past, and Hilda begins to represent those years. The more he remembers, the more he longs to return to his boyhood. Bartley’s ponderings sound quite similar to certain feelings held by young Paul in “Paul’s Case.” Although Paul is still a boy, he has an intense fear of falling into the redundancy and “normal” social responsibilities that come with middle age. Paul refers to the men on his street as “Mere rivets in a machine” (185) and fears becoming one of them. Bartley looks at his own life and fears that he already has become one, and then returns to his youth through memory.

In all those busy, successful years there had been nothing so good as this hour of wild light-heartedness. This feeling was the only happiness that was real to him, and such hours were the only ones in which he could feel his own continuous identity—feel the boy he had been in the rough days of the old West, feel the youth who had worked his way across the ocean on a cattle-ship and gone to study in Paris without a dollar in his pocket. The man who sat in his offices in Boston was only a powerful machine. Under the activities of that machine the person who, at such moments as this, he felt to be himself, was fading and dying. He remembered how, when he was a little boy and his father called him in the morning, he used to leap from his bed into the full consciousness of himself. That consciousness was Life itself. Whatever took its place, action, reflection, the power of concentrated thought, were only functions of a mechanism

useful to society; things that could be bought in the market. There was only one thing that had an absolute value for each individual, and it was just that original impulse, that internal heat, that feeling of one's self in one's own breast. (28)

Cather describes Alexander remembering his past and walking with a “shadowy companion—not little Hilda Burgoyne, by any means, but some one vastly dearer to him than she had ever been—his own young self, . . . this youth was the most dangerous of companions” (29). After Alexander finally meets Hilda again, the dialogues they have together clearly show that he has no interest in Hilda herself. He is not interested in speaking of the present time, or of what had taken place in their lives after the two had parted. He only wants to talk about memories, “How jolly it was being young” (38). Every time Hilda tries to bring the conversation back to the present, he resists her attempts.

Hilda recognizes what Alexander really wants. When he tries to end their relationship, she sees the conflict going on within him and “read in the deepening lines of his face that youth and Bartley would not much longer struggle together” (57) and when Hilda reflects on the loneliness she would experience if he were to leave she tells him what it meant to her when he returned: “you came back, not caring very much, but it made no difference” (59).

Ultimately, Alexander does not have to end his relationship with either woman. The Moorlock Bridge was a project so huge that he knew it would affect his professional reputation more than anything else he would ever design. He had spent so much time away that there was a great fault in the structure. When Alexander arrives to examine it,

the bridge collapses. Alexander drowns with a letter to his wife in his pocket that explained why he must leave the marriage. Winifred finds the letter soaked and unreadable and both women mourn for him in the end.

Alexander's Bridge is very different from what Cather would publish only a year later. But thematically, it has a significant amount of what she would imply until the end of her career: the importance of maintaining control over one's own self. It is different, however, from her other stories because "the love-plot would generally be an enigmatic absent presence in her texts, always there and not there" (Lindemann xxx). It is difficult to say why Cather later avoided the love theme. Perhaps "To write a love-story was to run the risk of being received as yet another 'lady novelist', the kind of writer she routinely lambasted in her journalistic writings of the 1890s. Of those writings, perhaps none is as revealing as her review of Kate Chopin's scandalous novel of 1899, *The Awakening*" (Lindemann xxviii). Cather commended Chopin's writing style but dismissed the novel: "I shall not attempt to say why Miss Chopin has devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme" (*World and Parish II* 697). Cather felt that that Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* was of the class of women who demand "more romance out of life than God put into it" (698). Yet Bartley seems very similar to Edna. He is in what should be a happy marriage and then, in mid-life, suddenly becomes aware that he is bored and dissatisfied. At the end of Cather's review she stated, "I hope that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible, iridescent style of hers to a better cause" (699). Perhaps Cather realized the resemblance between Bartley Alexander and Edna Pontellier, perhaps she did not. Either way, Cather moved away from the love scene, a characteristic of her writing that critics often point out.

Alexander's Bridge was a good first novel. Even so, Cather was frustrated by the rate of progress she had made since she began writing. She was thirty-eight by the time she wrote *Alexander's Bridge*. She was conscious of her age and knew that she had not yet produced her best work. From the time she left Nebraska, she had been working diligently, not at her writing, but always for a journal, or in a classroom, or on a magazine. After getting the advice from Jewett to completely devote herself to writing, Cather moved in with Edith Lewis in 1908 and worked to save money so that she could resign from McClure's and still support herself while writing full time.

Alexander's Bridge was written in 1911. Soon after the book was published, Cather spent six months in the southwest. It was exactly what she needed to recover "from the conventional editorial point of view" and, apparently, it was exactly what she needed to finally find her own voice (*On Writing* 92). In an essay Cather wrote at the end of her career about Miss Jewett, she states:

It is a common fallacy that a writer, if he is talented enough, can achieve this poignant quality by improving upon his subject-matter, by using his 'imagination' upon it and twisting it to suit his purpose. The truth is that by such a process (which is not imaginative at all!) he can at best produce a brilliant sham, which like a badly built and pretentious house, looks poor and shabby after a few years. If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. (*Not Under Forty* 79-80)

The fallacy that she described is exactly what she had tried to do with *Alexander's Bridge*. She had said that *Alexander's Bridge* was “the result of meeting some interesting people in London” (*On Writing* 91). She was not given to her material. She knew London only casually, but set her novel there because she thought others may find it interesting. When she came back from the Southwest and stayed with the McClung family in Pittsburgh, she wrote about the people and places she loved and finally brought the Nebraska landscape to her work in a very positive way.

Cather said that “Miss Jewett wrote of everyday people who grew out of the soil” (*Not Under Forty* 82). Willa Cather finally understood, and did the same. *O Pioneers!* was written entirely for Cather's own enjoyment. She was finally giving herself absolutely to her material and learning what a difference it made. For years she had been working to achieve her own voice and with *O Pioneers!* she finally found it.

Strong Women and Independent Minds

Willa Cather is often cited for creating unusually strong female characters. The two novels written after *Alexander's Bridge* are most responsible for this reputation. Alexandra, of *O Pioneers!*, and Thea, of *The Song of the Lark*, are both women who are intelligent, who seek individual fulfillment, and who are stronger and more heroic than their male counterparts. These two novels contain women who consciously avoid marriage for individual gain, something that, in reality, rarely occurred in that era. Cather is often labeled a feminist writer because of these two novels.

This label, however, evokes controversy. All critics agree that these novels contain strong female characters that seek individual fulfillment (as opposed to the *selfless* and nurture-giving roles of wife and mother). But Cather's later novels seem to abandon "her female characters to the most conventional and traditional roles" (Lambert 677). When Cather, herself, slights feminism and is critical even of the suffrage movement (Gilbert and Gubar 175), it becomes difficult to classify her in a way she, herself, never would have accepted. As Nealon states: "Feminists and lesbians in particular must face the difficult contradiction of wanting to claim Cather as a literary forebear to the movement while needing to confront Cather's apparent slighting of femininity" (31).

When Cather's "feminist" characters are examined in the context of Cather's own political viewpoints, it becomes apparent that Cather was endorsing individuality more than the feminist movement itself. Cather was apolitical and struggled to "detach fiction from politics" (Lee 328). She did not want to lend herself to any kind of political or literary movement but instead tried to follow her own individual path and reach success

however she could—without the help of a movement or organization and without necessarily challenging the way society was already structured. As Marcus Klein states, “Nothing would have pleased Willa Cather less, certainly, than to have found herself part of a literary movement. Or she would have found the fact irrelevant” (xii). In *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* she created women like herself—women who wanted a high individual accomplishment more than they wanted a husband or a family. When Cather created these women she was endorsing individuality, probably not realizing that female autonomy was also a mark of feminism.

Cather’s idea that women have as much right to individuality as men can be partially credited to the strong female role models she had while growing up and other women she admired in adulthood. Mrs. Stevenson was one such object of admiration. She is described in S. S. McClure’s autobiography, and her description sounds remarkably similar to Alexandra’s and Thea’s.

Though McClure’s autobiography originally carried McClure’s name, Willa Cather did the actual writing. Edith Lewis explains that in 1913 “McClure asked her to help him write his autobiography” (71). McClure would come to her apartment, “talk it to her,” and Cather would write down what he said after he left (71). Cather’s personal copy of the book contained the following inscription from McClure: “With affectionate regard for the real author” (Thacker i). The autobiography carried McClure’s name, but the story was filtered through Cather’s pen. Her style and thoughts can be found throughout it, and her description of Mrs. Stevenson is one such example.

Although it was McClure’s autobiography, Cather takes a very long aside in which she talks about the very admirable Mr. and Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson.

Stevenson was one of Willa Cather's more influential authors. She became interested in him as a student at the University of Nebraska and his work remained important to her until she died. What is interesting, however, is that Cather holds Mrs. Stevenson in even higher regard than her husband:

When Stevenson met her, her exotic beauty was at its height, and with this beauty she had a wealth of experience, a reach of imagination, a sense of humor, which he had never found in any other woman. Mrs. Stevenson had many of the fine qualities that we usually attribute to men rather than to women: a fair-mindedness, a large judgment, a robust, inconsequential philosophy of life, without which she could not have borne, much less shared with a relish equal to his own, his wandering, unsettled life, his vagaries, his gipsy passion for freedom. She had a really creative imagination, which she expressed in living. She always lived with great intensity, had come more into contact with the real world than Stevenson had done at the time when they met, had tried more kinds of life, known more kinds of people. When he married her, he married a woman rich in knowledge of life and the world. Mrs. Stevenson's autobiography would be one of the most interesting books in the world. (198)

Cather viewed Mrs. Stevenson as a strong woman; she had all the qualities that Cather found admirable. The novels she wrote in 1913 and 1915, the year before and the year following McClure's autobiography, contain protagonists very similar to her. *O Pioneers!* portrays a female protagonist who, like Mrs. Stevenson, has all the qualities that Cather most valued: "many of the fine qualities that we usually attribute to men

rather than to women: a fair-mindedness, a large judgment, a robust, inconsequential philosophy of life.” And Cather placed this character, Alexandra, on a farm in Nebraska.

O Pioneers! is Cather’s first fiction which no longer displays ambivalence toward her home state. In her past work she could not escape feelings about the difficulty of being an artist in a small town such as Red Cloud. She showed bitterness toward the harsh landscape and the people’s close-mindedness. After having traveled the Southwest with her brother, she began to see what her background had given her and realized there was a certain beauty in the land and the farmer; she even put him on an equal footing as an artist:

The dichotomy she had felt between the pioneer and the artist—one crucial form of the conflict between mind and Nebraska—began to disappear. The pioneer, it was true, did not often set any value on art, the old grandmothers would not have understood that art had much importance, would have agreed with the Northern Farmer that to stub Thurnaby waste was a prouder achievement than any bit of brainwork. Nevertheless the pioneer and the artist were generically one, they were both intent on creating. Underneath all the distinctions that separated them, and more telling than any, was the impulse they shared to turn from all the tracks of routine and convention to make a track of their own.

(Brown x)

O Pioneers! relates the struggle of an immigrant pioneer family to farm the land near a little town called Hanover. At the beginning of the novel, the Bergson father dies and leaves his daughter, Alexandra, in charge of the farm. The following three years are

especially difficult, the area farmers having to endure drought and failed crops. Many decide to sell their land and move elsewhere. With Alexandra's urging, the family buys more land, survives the difficult climate, and ends up one of the most prosperous families on the Divide. The characters are intricately drawn throughout the novel, each taking on a personality of his/her own. The book, in many ways, is less about the plot of survival, and more about the people who, as Cather referred to in Jewett's writing, "grew out of the soil" (*Not Under Forty* 82). What makes the novel most unique is her female protagonist. Alexandra Bergson has no children and chooses to remain single until she is forty years old. Rather than one of his sons, Alexandra's dying father puts her in charge of his farm.

In accordance with her views on individuality, Cather draws attention to many ways in which Alexandra is different from her neighbors and family. Doing what everybody else does *not* do, is what makes Alexandra's farm so successful. Alexandra's boldness in being different is contrasted many times to her brothers' desire to be the same as everyone else. For example, at the beginning of the novel, after her father's death, when times are so hard that everyone else is selling their land and leaving, Alexandra wants to get a loan and buy more property. She tells her brothers that "the right thing is usually just what everybody don't do" (35). Her brothers, however, think less about the possible fortune they could gain and more about what everybody else would think: "Everybody will say we are crazy," they tell her, "It must be crazy, or everybody would be doing it" (35).

Another example occurs when Alexandra's brothers confront her about her marriage to Carl, she reminds Lou that he cried when they "put in the first big wheat-

planting, and said everybody was laughing at us” (86). When Lou and Oscar are by themselves, he reveals that his desire for Alexandra not to marry isn’t just because he is afraid Carl would take all her money, but because ““If she was going to marry, she ought to done it long ago, and not go making a fool of herself now”” (87). At the end of the novel, Alexandra does marry Carl, having no concern over her brothers’ warnings or for what the rest of the town must think about her age.

Examples such as this continue throughout the book. Ivar is a settler introduced in Part One. He is very different from others. He never wears shoes, won’t allow guns on his property, and has his own religion. He doesn’t farm his land, but rather woks on others’ property during the harvest time and takes care of sick animals whenever he’s called upon. Most settlers assume he is crazy because he is so different from those around him. In Part Two, after he lost his land and Alexandra took him in to do odd jobs on her farm, Ivar talks to her about his concerns that others think he is so different. Ivar tells Alexandra he had heard talk about sending him to an asylum. Ivar says that others don’t tolerate his “odd” ways because ““The way here is for all to do alike”” (47). Alexandra tries to comfort him by saying ““Let people go on talking as they like, and we will go on living as we think best”” (48).

In discussing Alexandra’s strength of character, her financial success, and her seeming non-interest in marriage, many scholars claim that Cather describes Alexandra with mostly masculine characteristics. Discussing a character’s masculinity or femininity, however, can be complicated because these categorizations are purely defined by the surrounding culture. Personal experiences differ greatly from person to person and can affect one’s concept of masculinity or femininity as well. The “masculine” traits or

“feminine” traits that people often view as inborn are actually learned behaviors. Ideas of what types of behavior fit into these two categories can vary between cultures and people.

The gendered division of labor is one example. Women most often are the primary caregivers, so they are considered more nurturing and are seen as “naturally” more adept with young children. Much of their skill, though, may not be an inborn trait, but a result of learned behavior. If childcare is taken on mainly by women, they would have more opportunity (even from a very young age) to learn these skills, but it does not mean they are innately more adept at caring for children. Similarly, farming is seen as “men’s work” in American culture. We assume that men “naturally” know more about farming and can do this work better than women. In American culture, a woman who is “a good farmer” is thought to have a masculine trait. However, if one is raised in an environment in which women regularly do farming, this is not seen as a break from gender norms. Native American populations, for example, considered farming “women’s work.” Also, American frontier families often had women working in the fields along with men. Many gender categorizations are based on culture more than innate sex behavior.

We are all taught (though often unconsciously) how to behave in society. One’s own desire to resist socialization can vary and can affect how “gendered” one’s behavior becomes. Some individuals do not like to challenge public pressure, others routinely try to break out of the mold they feel forced into. Margaret Andersen states:

social expectations about what is properly masculine and feminine are communicated to us through the socialization process. . . . Although probably none of us becomes exactly what the cultural ideal prescribes,

our roles in social institutions are conditioned by the gender relations we learn in our social development. . . . To some extent, we probably all resist the expectations society has of us. Our uniqueness as individuals stems in part from this resistance, as well as from variations in the social experiences we have. (34-35)

Willa Cather tended to resist social expectations more than most. She also was exposed to certain role models that may have blurred gender behavior. For example although the culturally defined categorizations labeled women as passive and submissive, as a young girl in Virginia, she had many female role models that embodied great strength and independence apart from a man. Also, gendered divisions of labor were less stringently defined after she moved west. On the frontier, “‘women’s work’ soon came to mean whatever had to be done” (Gilbert and Gubar 187). When a family was beginning a farm and trying to develop the land so that it would bring in economic return, the women in the household were expected to contribute in any way they were able. At times, as *Ántonia* did, they helped in the fields. Other times, immigrant teenage daughters were hired as domestics and helped the family financially. The more fluidly defined gender roles resulted in greater autonomy for women in the West. As Gerda Lerner states, “on the frontier, the position of women was closer to what it had been in colonial days; their economic contribution was more highly valued, their opportunities were less restricted and their positive participation in the community life was taken for granted” (128). O’Niell also states that “The pioneer woman’s legendary courage and fortitude gave the lie to those innumerable assumptions about women’s inferior

physiology and nervous system that justified their civil disabilities” (206). When women were thought to be frail, Cather grew up surrounded by extraordinarily strong women.

Cather had the experience of seeing women in more varied gender roles. This does not mean, however, that she was immune to gender socialization. She was still aware of what was accepted and scorned in the larger society. O’Niell explains that the pioneer woman had “legendary courage and fortitude” but also states, “This did not, of course, prevent most men from continuing to cherish their prejudices and admire their own superior physical and mental constitutions” (206). The commonly accepted gender definitions, even if Cather consciously tried to defy them, show up in her fiction. Comments from Cather’s characters reveal that gendered divisions of labor and stereotypical masculine or feminine characteristics were quite apparent to her.

Cather had been exposed to women who moved outside the culturally defined norms, but she was also completely aware how society viewed women and what the culturally accepted definitions of femininity were. Popular media and fashion styles were clearly evident to her. Men’s fashions set them apart from women. Degler explains: “Undoubtedly, the insistence upon a sharp distinction in appearance, manner, and psyche between the sexes in the nineteenth century was a measure of men’s anxiety about their own identity. The prevalence of beards and moustaches, which are among the best of such differentiations because they cannot be imitated by women, makes this quite clear” (xxi). In contrast, James McGovern points out that “Generally speaking, women depicted in advertising in or about 1900 are well rounded, have gentle, motherly expressions, soft billowy hair, and delicate hands. They are either sitting down or standing motionless; their facial expressions are immobile as are their corseted figures” (349).

Alexandra, the main character in *O Pioneers!* has many traits that are traditionally thought to be masculine characteristics. Cather describes Alexandra with masculine characteristics from her very first introduction. The first time the reader sees her, she is described as:

a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier). (4)

The first two lines, besides portraying a character with much confidence, do not necessarily give the impression of masculine qualities. It seems interesting that Cather purposely puts her in a man's clothing, suggesting that she felt in order to achieve the strength and independence she wished to portray, her protagonist had to be masculine.

Alexandra's stereotypical masculinity continues throughout the book, most notably in her development as a strong independent individual outside of marriage. Individualism is a very American characteristic. But, at this time, it was only acceptable for men. Women were expected to support a man toward success. Cather, however, not only gives Alexandra permission to remain single and to succeed without the aid of a man, but also makes her goal a traditionally masculine one. As Dana Kinnison states: Alexandra "blur[s] traditional gender expectations by pursuing stereotypically male endeavors" (1). Alexandra's duty in life was to ensure the success of their family farm. Farming was normally considered a male profession. Although the women had responsibilities inside the household, they were not responsible for deciding what to plant, how to plant it, and when to butcher the hogs.

Cather observes the traditional gendered-divisions of brute labor, but ignores them when it comes to power and decision-making. Before Alexandra's father dies, he calls his children to him to give them instructions for after his death. Alexandra's father tells his sons that Alexandra is to make all the decisions dealing with the farm. He tells them, "be guided by your sister" (14). In other words, they would still be doing their traditional men's work, and Alexandra would be giving the orders. This would have been unheard of in Cather's time.

Although Alexandra has the power on the farm, she still abides by the traditional rules of "women's work." Alexandra's father tells his sons that "Alexandra must not work in the fields any more. There is no necessity now. Hire a man when you need help. She can make much more with her eggs and butter than the wages of a man" (15).

Besides not taking part in the brute labor of farming, Alexandra shows traditional "feminine" behavior in that she is a nurturing character. It may be true that the farm's success is for Alexandra's individual well-being, but she also does it for her family. After she works so hard to make the farm successful, she looks at Emil, her favorite and much younger brother and reflects that

Out of her father's children there was one [Emil] who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. She felt well satisfied with her life. (110)

When Alexandra's childhood friend, Carl, comes back she tells him about her road to success and states that when the farm began making money she built her house. She goes

on to say that she “really built it for Emil” (59). In other words, Cather suggests that Alexandra worked hard, not for herself, but for her youngest brother.

For being cited as one of Cather’s most masculine characters, a strong argument can also be made of Alexandra’s stereotypical femininity. Although bold, forthright, and not at all passive, she is certainly nurturing and giving, both traditionally feminine qualities. Also, despite her lack of interest in marriage, she can be considered family-oriented because of her mothering behavior toward Emil, her concern to keep the family together, and her desire to ensure her and her brothers’ success. In her adult years, although she does not feel as fondly toward her older brothers as she does toward Emil, she still has great concern for the lives of her nieces, nephews, and family friends. She does, after all, want to get a piano for Milly (52) and when the family is feuding, Alexandra still ensures that Mrs. Lee (her brother Lou’s immigrant mother-in-law) has her treasured time away from the house (97).

Individualism was important to Cather whether the protagonist was male or female. Marriage is viewed to be as much of a threat toward individuality for her male characters as it is for her female characters. *Alexander’s Bridge* and *The Professor’s House* have male protagonists as equally concerned about individuality as Alexandra. However, marriage and children are strongly linked with the cultural perception of a woman’s “natural” role. Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* when the world was saturated with novels in which women played an absent or minor role. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Red Badge of Courage* are two examples. The women who did appear in literature held supporting roles as wives or mothers. Female protagonists were most often consumed with who and when they would marry. It was quite unique that Cather

allowed her female protagonist to pursue their own goals simply for the sake of achieving their own success.

Cather also cited the historical realities of unfair traditions and concepts. When recognizing that his sons do not possess the intelligence embodied by Alexandra, her father thinks that he “would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons” (13). And when stating his wishes to Alexandra, the father tells her ““Don’t let them get discouraged and go off like Uncle Otto. I want *them* to keep the land.”” In responding, Alexandra includes herself in his instructions when she says, ““*we* won’t, father. *We* will never lose the land”” (14 emphasis added). Later, after Alexandra was solely responsible for the family having *not* sold the farm during hard times, her brothers make a claim on her land saying, ““the property of a family belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible, and because they do the work”” (85). Without fear, Alexandra rebukes her brothers, telling them how she has fair rights to her property.

It is easy to see why *O Pioneers!* is so often described as a feminist novel. Although it may not have been Cather’s intention, an argument can be made that it has just as important a place in feminist literature as Kate Chopin’s book that Cather criticized so severely. Cather endorsed success and individuality for both sexes and allowed women to be interested in endeavors other than a pursuit of love and marriage. This was not a stance shared by Cather’s contemporary society; it was more in line with feminist ideology than with public dogma. The popular opinion when Cather wrote her novels was that marriage was the most suitable (often only) career for a woman. Thinking about one’s own success and accomplishments was not only acceptable, but expected from a man. A woman, on the other hand, was supposed to glean her success

from the lives her husband and sons. If a woman were not passive, modest, and dependent on a man she was seen as pathological (Mencken 55). Cather, however, transferred this “masculine” characteristic to women and, in doing so, suggested that it was acceptable for women to want something other than marriage and a family. Though Cather did not identify with the women’s movement, she put ideas in her novels that she, as an individual, felt worth showing. Even if the intent did not exist, many of her ideas actually supported what the feminist movement was fighting for.

Cather’s next novel uses a very similar female protagonist. In *The Song of the Lark*, however, the protagonist is an artist rather than a farmer. Thea’s individual endeavor is not creating a prosperous farm, but seeking a successful career as an opera singer. The novel begins with Thea as a little girl in Moonstone, Colorado. Thea is shown to be very different from the other people in the small town, very few of whom recognize her talent. Even as a child she knows she is special and has a secret gift. When Thea is seventeen, she is given money that allows her to leave Moonstone. Ray Kennedy, a much older friend, dies while working on the railroad. He leaves her with six hundred dollars which he requests she use to go to Chicago to study music. Thea returns home after her first year in Chicago, and Moonstone proves to be even more stifling than before. As Cather’s experience when she returned from Lincoln, Thea’s time away only makes her differences and inability to fit in even more apparent. The following few years contain fortunate introductions to influential people, a recovery time in the Southwest, a determination to study music in Germany, and ultimate success in New York’s opera house.

This is Cather's most autobiographical work. Edith Lewis states, "certainly the essential theme of that novel, the record of how an artist becomes an artist, has its source in Willa Cather's own experiences during these years before she was twenty" (40). As with *Alexandra*, Cather was writing about a type of person she knew well and understood—individuals who, like herself, strived for something they wanted and who were unlike others around them.

In 1937 toward the end of her career, one of Cather's contemporary critics wrote that "It has always been a personal failure of her talent that prevented her from involving her people in truly dramatic relations with each other. (Her women, for example, always stand in the mother or daughter relation to men; they are never truly lovers.)" (Trilling 155). The critic's mistake, however, is in believing that it is "only in heterosexual relations that narrative becomes 'truly dramatic'" (Nealon 6). There are many critics that cite Cather's avoidance of heterosexual relationships. But that does not mean she excludes meaningful conflict. Her writing is unique in that her main drama is usually a struggle for self awareness or an individual endeavor, not for a specific relationship or marriage.

Throughout her career, Cather understood something that many of her era could not: that the identity of a woman is determined by much more than whom she marries. In *O Pioneers!* Alexandra views Marie with nothing but admiration and friendship. After Marie's husband, Frank, murders her and Emil, Alexandra betrays Marie by sympathizing more with Frank even though the entire town disliked him throughout the novel. Whatever Alexandra's reasons for being so harsh on a close friend, there is a very revealing line which shows how Cather felt about all of her female characters. When

pondering her own possible blame for their deaths, Alexandra admits that she “could in a measure realize that Marie was, after all, Marie; not merely a ‘married woman’” (147). In other words, unlike most of society, Cather was able to see that a woman’s identity is not simply whom she marries. She allowed her characters, both male and female, to seek their own identity; this is the main dilemma her characters must confront in most of her novels.

In how she portrayed her female characters, Cather was ahead of her time. Marriage was an expectation for any woman, just as “the bond of marriage [was] the expected outcome of any woman’s novel” (Nealon 11). Yet Cather defied this both in her life and novels. She created women with a mind of their own. Cather’s women think for themselves and do what they want to, even if it contradicts public thought.

These two novels contain women who have all the traits necessary for success. It is interesting to note, however, that these two women are often described as masculine or androgynous. As previously stated, gender definitions are shaped by culture. Culture categorizes which behaviors are labeled “feminine” and which are labeled “masculine.” What is considered “masculine” behavior is defined as such because it is a cultural ideal, not because males are born with this innate characteristic. Cather knew from experience that women can embody admirable characteristics—for example, strength, independence, boldness—that are most often thought to be masculine. However, when scholars examine her work they do so through a cultural lens. Hermione Lee often comments on her characters’ gender. She states that Alexandra (106), Thea (128), and Jim (153) are “androgynous.” Lee also says that Marie, in *O Pioneers!*, is “destroyed by her traditional femaleness” (114). Nealon states that Cather “admires women who have masculine

tenacity” (31) and claims that Thea is “more boy than girl” (15). Shaw describes *Ántonia* as “the quintessential but paradoxically masculine woman” and Jim as only “nominally masculine” (536). Even critics that are clearly feminist and are careful in their definitions of masculinity and femininity, show that they are still analyzing her work with cultural definitions. Deborah Lambert who criticizes Cather for endorsing patriarchal institutions in her later writing is careful to not describe Cather’s strong women as “masculine.” Lambert instead states that Cather’s early work contained “unusual” and “strong” female protagonists.” But she also states that Cather provided them “with sensitive, even androgynous, males who are supportive of female ambition” (680).

It is easily recognizable that an individual can never completely correspond to a culture’s definition of “masculinity” or “femininity.” People are complex, and it is misleading to say that a certain behavior is only masculine or feminine. A woman will often have traditionally masculine characteristics just as a man will often have traditionally feminine characteristics. However, even though Cather understood this false dichotomy, she was also very aware what the cultural definitions were. She also knew that, as society was structured, one had to have what was normally thought of as masculine characteristics in order to succeed. She was fully aware that feminine characteristics were detrimental, rather than beneficial to one’s success. Gilbert and Gubar state:

Given Cather’s assumption that creativity and femininity are contradictory terms, she suffered from precisely the anxiety of authorship that marked the works of so many of her female precursors. And like those

foremothers who adopted male pseudonyms, Cather attempted to ease that anxiety by erasing or camouflaging her own gender. (176)

Cather understood from an early age that it would be difficult to become a successful female. But just as Alexandra and Thea, she wanted to achieve high *individual* endeavor. The discrepancy between the characteristics she needed to succeed and the characteristics she needed to be “feminine” were in conflict. Rather than battle the world’s gender ideologies and convince society that women should also have a right to individual success, she began to disguise her own gender. In her youth she adopted the practice of “calling herself ‘William Cather Jr’, [and] dressing as a boy” (Lee 10). She cut her hair short when it was considered rebellious. She stopped masquerading as a boy while at the University of Nebraska, but the discomfort with the exclusiveness between the feminine gender and in her ability to succeed continued, as seen in the way she developed her characters. When Alexandra is first introduced to the reader, Cather notes that she is wearing a man’s clothing (4); when Thea throws rocks from a watchtower with a friend, the narrator says “They looked like two boys” (278). Deborah Lambert explains why Cather may have felt uncomfortable trying to mesh femininity with success:

Many, if not all, achieving women face the conflict between the traditional idea of what it is to be a woman and what it is to achieve. Achievement in most fields has been reserved for males; passivity—lack of assertiveness and energy, and consequent loss of possibility of achievement—has been traditionally female. (677)

The same anxiety for success is seen in her views on marriage. Cather knew how difficult it would be for a female artist to achieve personal success while being attached

to a family. She did not believe in “the possibility of combining artistry with female social roles, creativity with marriage” (Gilbert and Gubar 177). As Thea Kronborg says in *The Song of the Lark*, “I don’t see why anybody wants to marry an artist, anyhow. I remember Ray Kennedy used to say he didn’t see how any woman could marry a gambler, for she would only be marrying what the game left” (401). In order to be an artist, Cather believed one had to give himself to his art completely, if one was successful, there would be nothing left for a marriage and family. She clearly knew what would happen if art only got what was left over from life. She had gotten a late start in literature, not publishing a novel until she was thirty-eight precisely because her art got whatever time was left over in life. She had finally worked her way to a point in which she could focus her energy on her writing. Of course she would advise an artist, whether male or female, not to abandon or share his energies on other things, including marriage and family.

Historically speaking, however, it is understandable why Cather felt relationships so threatening to one’s success and individuality, especially for women. Henry Louis Mencken gave Cather’s novels good reviews, including *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* which endorse women’s individuality. Yet in his own cultural commentary, he states his view that the only proper place for a woman is in marriage. In 1922 he confronted “the woman question” with *In Defense of Women*. The book, inappropriately titled, is actually filled with insults toward females. Norman Ross even states that it “so abounds with insults to the unfair sex that when it was first published many women, whether conventional or emancipated, hurled it across the room” (ix). Whether or not Mencken really meant for his book to be a *defense* of women, is not important.

Examining his work, however, is insightful to popular thought at the time since his “influence was immense in the late ‘20’s, especially among college students” (Ross xiii). In 1920 the women’s movement had a strong enough voice to successfully pressure congress to pass the 19th amendment. Yet two years later Mencken published these views on marriage:

marriage offers the best career that the average woman can reasonably aspire to, and, in the case of very many women, the only one that actually offers a livelihood. . . . A woman, save she show a masculine strain that verges upon the pathological, cannot hope to challenge men in [the materialistic society in which men are expert]. . . but it is always open to her to exchange her sexual charm for a lion’s share in the earnings of one man. (55-56)

Mencken then goes on to state that marriage was the best option for women not just because it was the only way for her to obtain financial security, but also because it was expected, and society would look down on a woman who did not get married:

But there are other benefits, too. One of them is that increase in dignity which goes with an obvious success; the woman who has got herself a satisfactory husband, or even a highly imperfect husband, is regarded with respect by other women, and a contemptuous patronage for those who have failed to do likewise. (56)

In other words, according to Mencken, women were responsible for seeking marriage and putting themselves in traditional gender roles. Women pushed other women to seek husbands which would give them a higher social footing. Since he believed that only a

“pathologically masculine” woman could compete in a man’s world, marriage was the only way she could earn a livelihood. To *not* seek marriage was simply not normal.

If marriage was the only option for a woman during Mencken and Cather’s time, what was life like for them? According to Gilbert and Gubar, “the scholarly and literary myths of the frontier” present “an image of women’s misery in the wilderness” (182). They claim that the popular opinion of frontier women was perpetuated by the vast majority of writers (from Alexis de Tocqueville to D. H. Lawrence) who recorded observations that portrayed her as “a tired wife and wretched mother” (Gilbert and Gubar 182). Cather’s contemporary authors said that “the wives of the American farmers fill our insane asylums” and women were “stately as great cows, and grammarless” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 182). Beth Rundstrom describes the status of frontier women as “subservient and secondary to the husband, who directed the farm and disciplined the family” (5). Even though women in western states held greater autonomy than in other areas of the country, their status was still always understood to be below their husband’s.

Cather displays the traditional notion of women as subservient to men in her novels. For example, in *My Ántonia*, Ántonia and Mrs. Shimerda are at the beck and call of Ambrosch. In *O Pioneers!* Alexandra’s brothers make a claim on her land “because the property of a family belongs to the men of the family” (85). *O Pioneers!* includes an interesting line: “Young farmers seldom address their wives by name. It is always ‘you,’ or ‘she’” (57). There is no apparent reason for this line other than to give a cultural practice on the treatment of women—one which somehow steals their identity.

Cather demonstrated how the larger society viewed women, and then stepped beyond those boundaries. When women were seen as “stately as great cows, and

grammarless” she created characters like Alexandra who is not only much more intelligent than both of her older brothers, but is solely responsible for the success of their farm:

Alexandra and Thea are unusual, imaginative creations primarily because they embody autonomy and achievement. In these books, Cather does not transpose her struggle for success to male characters, as women authors often have, but instead risks the creation of unusual female protagonists. (Lambert 680)

When women had not yet won the right to vote and were expected to marry and depend on a man, Willa Cather published *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. They receive much attention from feminist critics because Alexandra and Thea transcend gender roles and choose to remain unmarried until they are over forty. Novels at that time rarely produced strong independent females like Alexandra and Thea. Cather wrote these two novels when being independent and female seemed contradictory. She created women that dwarf the intellect and talent of those around them, both male and female.

These two novels support many feminist ideals. When examining various statements Cather made, however, labeling her as a “feminist” writer becomes complicated. Although female, she ironically stated, “I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable” (*World and Parish I* 276). Her dislike of women’s writing is boldly declared in her stinging comments reviewing one female author’s work:

Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it. . . . and it also contains

some of the most driveling nonsense and mawkish sentimentality and contemptible feminine weakness to be found anywhere. . . . I hate to read them [women's books]. I hate to see the pitiable waste and shameful weaknesses in them. (*World and Parish I* 276)

Cather agreed with George Eliot's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's label of female writers as "Silly Lady Novelists" and a "damned mob of scribbling women" (Gilbert and Gubar 175). With Cather's own distrust in feminism and with her lack of confidence in a woman's ability to write good fiction, how can scholars continue to call her a feminist writer?

Whatever the problems with this label, she is still a very important author who has left a mark on both literature and feminism. As Lambert states, "she accomplished what few women authors have: the creation of strong, even heroic, women as protagonists. Cather succeeded in this because she could imagine women achieving identity and defining their own purposes" (678). Because she was female, Cather was able to identify with all the different types of women she created. Because she did it in her own life, Cather could create women who wanted to succeed in something other than being a wife and mother.

Beyond her writing, Cather's life itself is a testimony toward feminism. Cather succeeded in a world where individual self-fulfillment were considered part of a "man's world." When female authors were thought to be a "damned mob of scribbling women," Cather stepped outside of those boundaries. It is true that she didn't outwardly try to change societal structures that gave men more freedom and opportunity of individual endeavor. She did not support the women's movement or any other movement toward

political change. She instead chose to adopt the characteristics she felt she needed to succeed in society the way it was already structured. (Hence her adolescent masquerades as a boy and her denial of feminism.) But the fact remains that Willa Cather was a woman that succeeded. With her own life, as an individual, she challenged the traditional gender expectations: she remained unmarried, had no children, and actively pushed herself into a “man’s world” until she had a successful career.

Cather was different from others in both her life and in her writing. She was unique in that she did not use “dramatic relations with each other” in the way it had traditionally been done by female novelists. Cather was conscious of the uncommon way in which she produced drama. Especially after all her criticism of other lady writers, she wanted to be individual in her writing:

Cather seems to have experienced a high degree of ambivalence towards the story that novels from *Clarissa* to *Ethan Frome* had revealed in telling. Her ambivalence arose in part from a desire to separate herself from previous generations of women writers who, lacking education and access to the public sphere, were confined to the private realms of sentiment, sexuality, and the family. To write a love-story was to run the risk of being received as yet another ‘lady novelist’, the kind of writer she routinely lambasted in her journalistic writings of the 1890s. (Lindemann xxviii)

O Pioneers! and *The Song of the Lark* have a theme that is actually quite common in literature: the pursuit of a dream. What makes Cather unique is that she allowed a woman to be the pursuer of a dream that wasn’t love or marriage. She believed in setting

goals and grabbing at what one really wanted in life. Even so, Cather was also a realist. As Thea Kronborg reflects, “we don’t get fairy tales in this world” (401), and Cather never told fairy tales to her readers. These two protagonists are often seen as success stories. They set out with a goal and achieve what they want, but even Alexandra and Thea had prices to pay for their decisions. The costs of a strong desire for individuality are most apparent in the novels written after 1922.

***My Ántonia*: Two Representations of Marriage**

Individuality is often overlooked as a theme in *My Ántonia*. It is the only of Cather's novels which ends with the protagonist, Ántonia Shimerda, married, with many children, and still content and fulfilled. The novel is criticized by feminist scholars because Ántonia seems to be a celebration of fertility which encourages women to marry and have children. But when one looks at Ántonia's character more closely, it becomes evident that she embodies the same admirable characteristics as Alexandra and Thea. Cather's views on individuality are also seen in the minor characters of *My Ántonia*.

Though the final image of Ántonia is that of a married woman with many children, the novel is not a quest for love or marriage; it is not a quest at all. It is a celebration of the pioneering spirit. Rather than have various characters move through a well-defined plot, *My Ántonia* is a series of impressions about a group of people living in Nebraska. It paints a portrait of the pioneering landscape, traces its changes, and ends with Ántonia as a symbol of a disappearing era.

Ántonia is based on a friend that Cather had during her childhood in Nebraska and there are many consistencies between Jim's life (the first person narrator) and Cather's. There are so many parallels between the novel and the actual occurrences in Cather's life that some scholars believe Jim is simply a mask for Cather herself. As Cather did, Jim moves from Virginia to Nebraska when he is a child. He lives on a farm for a short while then moves into a town called Black Hawk, which could easily have been Red Cloud. He is aggravated by his neighbors' lack of interest, tolerance, and respect for immigrants. The older Jim gets, he becomes bored and seeks out people who are different. While most of Jim's neighbors recognize the distinctions between the Americans and the

immigrants, Jim enjoys their company more than the Americans and he finds living in town represses individual tastes and allows only a guarded form of existence (140). Like Cather, Jim gives a graduation speech at commencement and enters the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. In *My Ántonia*, one can also see Cather's views on various issues. The novel shows how Cather felt about the pioneering spirit that had already disappeared by 1918, the year she published this novel. And finally, as her other novels, it also demonstrates Cather's views on maintaining and protecting one's individuality.

My Ántonia is the first instance in which Cather experimented with narrative approaches. In her early novels, the narration gives a transcription of events told through a third person omniscient voice. In her previous work the scenes and characters are described as they are; they are not filtered through anyone who may already hold views about the subject. *My Ántonia*, on the other hand, uses a first person narrator, Jim Burden, who recounts his memories to the reader. The main character is Ántonia, but the reader must rely on Jim's memories in order to form an opinion of her. Since the reader is not told Ántonia's actual thoughts but only what had been a child's impression of her, analyzing her character can be complicated, especially since many of Jim's memories occurred when he was only ten years old.

There are many reasons why Cather may have wanted to use Jim as a narrator. She may have wanted to paint a portrait in a more realistic way. Individuals in real life are judged by how their actions reveal their personality. One cannot read people's thoughts, but must instead observe their actions to form an opinion. Cather also may have been taking one step toward what she called "The Novel Demeublé"—the attempt to present a scene "by suggestion rather than by enumeration" (*Not Under Forty* 48). The

use of Jim as a narrator and the novel's lack of form were both very experimental. In reflecting on the book, Edith Lewis recalls, "It is hard, now, to realize how revolutionary in form *My Ántonia* was at that time in America. It seemed to many people to have no form. It had no love story—though the whole book was a sort of love story of the country" (107).

Cather knew the novel lacked a traditional form. The narrator Jim states in his opening, "I didn't take time to arrange it; I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn't any form" (2). Despite its faults, Cather believed "that she had succeeded, more nearly than ever before, in writing the way she wanted to write" (Lewis 107).

There are various ways in which *My Ántonia* shows the importance of having, like Alexandra and Thea, a strong sense of self, an independent mind, and one's own voice. There are two different character types that display these characteristics and Jim admires both but sees them differently. Lena and Ántonia serve as a foil to each other throughout the book: one makes the choice very early to remain single, have no children, and get off the farm; the other gets married, has many children, and stays in Nebraska for the rest of her life.

The first character type is embodied by Lena Lingard. Lena is not put on a pedestal as Ántonia is, but she does play a significant role, especially beginning in the second section after Jim moves into town. Later, when Jim leaves Black Hawk to study at the university, Lena consumes Jim's time. This is a period when Ántonia momentarily disappears from the novel. Lena, like Alexandra and Thea, has an open restraint toward marriage. She is bold, direct, and has no qualms about being different.

There are many similarities Lena has compared to Alexandra and Thea, but scholars most often point out the differences. Although Alexandra has often-overlooked feminine qualities, she is usually described as “masculine.” Lena, on the other hand, is quite feminine. Blanche H. Gelfant even portrays her as dangerously feminine—as a kind of *femme fatale*.

When Cather first introduces Lena to her readers, Jim recalls her poor family. He sees the nice clothes she is wearing when she shows up at *Ántonia*’s employer’s home and then describes how different they are from the rags she used to wear in the field. He remembers that she was always “scantly dressed in tattered clothing” while she was herding cattle (106). To Jim, “her legs and arms, curiously enough, in spite of constant exposure to the sun, kept a miraculous whiteness which somehow made her seem more undressed than other girls who went scantily clad” (106). *Ántonia* is troubled at her visit, worried what her mistress would think of having Lena as a guest because ““She was kind of talked about, out there”” (106). Jim remembers that the rumors revolved around Ole, a married man who took a liking to Lena, and Crazy Mary, his jealous wife, who took her suspicions too far and, on more than one occasion, found Lena while she was herding and chased her with a knife.

Later on, when Jim gets to know Lena, he speaks of a dream he often has of her:

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned

to me with a soft sigh and said, “Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like. (144)

Blanche H. Gelfant uses Jim’s dream of Lena and the reaping hook to display how dangerous Lena’s sexuality is for Jim.

Lena’s voluptuous aspects—her luminous glow of sexual arousal, her flesh bared by a short skirt, her soft sighs and kisses—are displayed against shocks and stubbles, a barren field when the reaping-hook has done its work. (65)

What Gelfant describes as Lena’s dangerous sexuality is in stark contrast to Alexandra’s asexuality. In fact, in *O Pioneers!*, when Marie mentions to Emil that perhaps his sister is in love with Carl, Emil finds the idea completely preposterous and even laughs (78).

He was never able to picture his sister being in love with any man and the possibility that she would want to marry even seems silly to him. It is as though Alexandra is deprived of sexuality.

Lena and Alexandra also differ in the sort of endeavors they choose to pursue. Alexandra makes her living managing a farm—a profession normally reserved for men. Lena, however, makes her living by dressmaking, a stereotypically feminine activity. Her fashionable dress helps to distinguish her as quite feminine throughout her life.

Although Lena’s gendered behavior differs from Alexandra’s and Thea’s, it is important to not forget their similarities. First, all of these characters choose to remain single, but the three women have different reasons for doing so. It is clear that Thea consciously chooses to devote herself exclusively to pursuing art. It seems that Alexandra works so hard on the farm that marriage simply does not interest her until she

is much older. Lena chooses to remain single because she has seen what a drain family can be on a woman. There are multiple times in the book when, in talking to friends, Lena refers to the difficulties their mothers had in coming to a new country, starting a farm, and raising a family. One time, when she repeats her opinion, Jim tries to convince her she will marry eventually, telling her that saying she didn't want to was "nonsense" and she should know better: "Every handsome girl like you marries, of course" (186).

Lena responds very assuredly:

She told me she couldn't remember a time when she was so little that she wasn't lugging a heavy baby about, helping to wash for babies, trying to keep their little chapped hands and faces clean. She remembered home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man and work piling up around a sick woman. (187)

Lena states that she had had enough of family life while she was young and that she wanted to spend her adult life single and working. This does not mean that Cather portrays family life only negatively. The Harlings, the family who hires *Ántonia*, have a home that is held up as an oasis while the father is away. For Jim, the house and all its children is a retreat from the boredom of being an only child living with grandparents. Although she is working and taking care of children, the Harlings are an escape for *Ántonia* from her domineering brother Ambrosch and her proud mother. *Ántonia's* own family, that she has as an adult is also held up as an ideal.

Despite Lena's lack of interest in raising her own children, like Alexandra, she still shows a concern for family and is always looking after her mother and numerous brothers and sisters. In fact, like Alexandra, her family is part of the reason she wants to

succeed. Lena wants to help her family to get on in the world and have a better standard of living. On more than one occasion, she mentions getting her mother a new house and believes that she is the only one in the family that will do it. “I am going to get my mother out of that old sod house where she’s lived so many years,” she says while on a picnic with Jim and the girls, “The men will never do it. Johnnie, that’s my oldest brother, he’s wanting to get married now, and build a house for his girl instead of his mother” (153-154).

For Lena, being single meant having her freedom. The first scene in which Lena is introduced, the Harlings ask her whether it is true that she was going to marry Nick Svendsen. She answers “I don’t want to marry Nick, or any other man. . . . I’ve seen a good deal of married life, and I don’t care for it. I want to be so I can help my mother and the children at home, and not have to ask lief of anybody” (105). On another occasion, speaking with Jim she states that as soon as a woman marries, husbands “turn into cranky old fathers, even the wild ones. They begin to tell you what’s sensible and what’s foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to nobody” (186). To Lena, marriage is “all about being under somebody’s thumb” (187).

Lena finds independence by not marrying. As a young woman in Lincoln, she enjoys friendships and financial freedom. She and Jim spend a considerable amount of time together, but, even with him, she is careful to maintain her independence. She always pays for her own ticket when they go to the theater (174), and although her neighbors are suspicious of Jim, he tells them that “A girl who makes her own living can ask a college boy to supper without being talked about” (183). Jim begins to fall in love

with Lena, but when he tells her that he is moving to the East coast to pursue his studies, Lena tells him again, to his surprise, that she still has no intention of marrying. When Jim sees her twenty years later, she is financially secure and living in San Francisco near a childhood friend from Black Hawk, Tiny Soderball. She had lived the life she chose for herself—one of complete independence. She had enjoyed friendships throughout her life, but was not “under somebody’s thumb” where she feared a family would put her.

My Ántonia was published in 1918. Lena’s character shows many of the changes in women’s manners and morals Cather must have seen emerging at the time. McGovern explains how the period between 1900 and 1920 was very important in shaping how women came to see themselves in relation to their family and neighborhood:

One of the consequences of working and living conditions in the cities, especially as these affected women, was that Americans of the period 1900-1920 had experienced a vast dissolution of moral authority, which formerly had centered in the family and the small community. . . . Magazine articles lamented “The Passing of the Home Daughter” who preferred the blessed anonymity of the city to “dying of asphyxiation at home!” . . . The ensuing decade [1910-1920] was marked by the development of a revolution in manners and morals; its chief embodiment was the flapper who was urban based and came primarily from the middle and upper classes. Young—whether in fact or fancy—assertive, and independent, she experimented with intimate dancing, permissive favors, and casual courtships or affairs. She joined men as comrades, and the differences in behavior of the sexes were narrowed. (347-350)

Although Lena is not originally from the middle or upper class, she sounds strikingly similar to McGovern's description of this new woman, the flapper, that was emerging during the time Cather wrote *My Ántonia*. She is assertive and independent. As a young girl, she and her friends love going to dances with gentlemen companions, and they have casual courtships. As an adult, she lives in San Francisco and enjoys friendships with both male and female companions. Most importantly, she "preferred the blessed anonymity of the city to 'dying of asphyxiation at home!'" Alexandra and Thea were given an androgynous existence as though being feminine would limit their chances for success. Yet Lena's femininity is exaggerated: she wears nice clothes and is attentive to fashion; her sexuality is evident. This is consistent with the style changes taking place among women at this time: "The American woman of 1910, in contrast with her sister of 1900, avidly cultivated beauty of face and form. . . . In her dress as well as her use of cosmetics, the American woman gave evidence that she had abandoned passivity" (McGovern 353). The women in advertising at this time "are depicted as more active figures with more of their activity taking place outside their homes" (349). It is possible that Lena may have been influenced by the changes Cather saw taking place around her. Alexandra and Thea needed, at least to some extent, to be masculine or asexual in order to assert their independence. With Lena, Cather may have found it no longer necessary. There were women serving as examples throughout America's cities that desired individuality outside of their family.

Ántonia is very different from Lena, but she too has her own voice and makes her own decisions. Throughout the majority of the novel, Ántonia serves someone else, is always, as Lena would say, "under somebody's thumb." Not until the last section of the

novel, when Jim sees her amidst all of her children, is she completely free. But despite her difficult predicaments, *Ántonia* still finds some way to assert her individuality throughout the novel. For *Ántonia*, however, doing so is much more difficult than it is for Lena.

At the beginning of the novel, the Shimerda family is involuntarily under the power of *Krajiek* who overcharged them for their homestead and farming supplies and left them with no money. *Krajiek* is partially responsible for their misfortune, but the Shimerdas have to depend on him to communicate with their neighbors. After *Ántonia*'s father dies, she is enthralled to her brother *Ambrosch* who is consistently portrayed as an arrogant and ugly character. Yet even in her entrapment, *Ántonia* finds a way to maintain some amount of independence. When she first arrives, *Ántonia* is allowed to learn English and spends time roaming the countryside with Jim. Jim quickly observes that “*Ántonia* had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known” (22). The following summer, when the Shimerdas begin to build their farm, *Ántonia* says she doesn't care what others think of her: “Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house! . . . I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man” (89).

Eventually, after Jim and his grandparents move to town, they help *Ántonia* get a job cooking and caring for children at a neighbor's house. *Ántonia* finds she likes the work quite well. She likes the family and gets along well with her mistress partially because they are so much alike: “They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people” (116). But even at the Harlings' there is a certain amount of entrapment. *Ántonia* is not seen as

an individual outside of the family. While she works for them, she is known throughout the town as “the Harlings’ Tony” not as *Ántonia* Shimerda (131). When she begins going to the dances, she becomes popular, makes friends, and people take notice of her. When Mr. Harling gives her an ultimatum and makes her choose between continuing the dances or continuing her employment, it shouldn’t seem surprising that *Ántonia* ignores her friends’ advice. She decides to work for the Cutters so she can do what she wants.

When *Ántonia* loses sight of her fight for independence, when she begins to willingly follow another’s lead rather than her own, she gets into trouble. While Jim is away at school, Lena comes to see him. During their conversation, he asks if *Ántonia* is still seeing Larry Donovan. Lena tells him that they are engaged and then adds: “Everybody laughs about it, because she was never a girl to be soft. She won’t hear a word against him. She’s so sort of innocent” (172). *Ántonia*’s attempt to marry Larry Donovan ends up a disaster. *Ántonia* works very hard to prepare for her wedding. She agrees to move to Denver even though she does not want to, saying she is “a country girl” and will have to alter her way of taking care of a family (199). *Ántonia* goes to Denver to meet Donovan and get married, but returns saying that she is pregnant, had not gotten married, that he had abandoned her, and she did not know if he really had the intention of marrying her in the first place. Yet, again, even in the midst of such a disaster, *Ántonia* defies societal expectation. She is not ashamed of her daughter as everyone thinks she should be. When Jim is in town getting pictures taken, he asks about a framed photo of a child. The town photographer, after giving a “constrained, apologetic laugh,” tells Jim that she ““seems proud of the baby”” (195).

The biggest difference between Lena and *Ántonia* is that Lena decides at an early age what she wants and makes good decisions throughout adulthood, *Ántonia* makes poor decisions, but is able to redeem herself in the end. She does so in a way that provides a lifestyle very different from Lena's, but *Ántonia*'s power of spirit over circumstance makes her triumph. If *Ántonia* were weak, if she did not have the independent mind and strong voice that Cather felt so admirable, *Ántonia* never would have been put on a pedestal. She would have ended up like her mother Mrs. Shimerda—jealous of what she did not have. Instead, Cather makes her a symbol of the pioneering spirit that was quickly fading away. She is lauded for her unwillingness to give up and her power to triumph amidst poor circumstances.

Ántonia is the novel's central focus, and, at the end, is married, has many children, and is elevated to an ideal. For this reason, *My Ántonia* is sometimes seen as a turning point in Cather's career. Those who focus on her early works—*O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*—as archetypal feminist writing, point to *My Ántonia* as a transition, saying that after this work, her fiction depicts women only in traditional gender roles. Deborah Lambert, for example, claims that early in her career, Cather was able to envision strong female characters who could succeed in a man's world, but beginning with *My Ántonia* Cather glorified marriage and children as feminine ideals. Lambert's argument is well developed, but it overlooks numerous points in Cather's later writing that still promote individuality for both genders. What Lambert calls Cather's "patriarchal" writing has characteristics that would endorse feminism—most notably the importance of autonomy and individuality for *both* genders. For example, two of Cather's later novels—*A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy*—both caution the dangers of

marriage for women. They show the risk of financial dependence on a man and suggest that marriage, in itself, cannot provide fulfillment. These are the same ideas as those contained in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. The difference, however, is that Alexandra and Thea triumph in the end, and the novels have a positive tone throughout. *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy* are negative because these women learn their lessons too late, when they are already entrapped.

Cather is praised for creating characters like Alexandra and Thea, those in her most “feminist” novels, and then criticized for not having maintained the same style and voice throughout her career. Lambert is very stringent in her criticisms:

What Cather achieved in these early novels she no longer achieved in her later works. Indeed she stopped portraying strong and successful women and began to depict patriarchal institutions and predominantly male characters. Although she wrote ten more novels, in none of them do we find women like Alexandra and Thea. . . . The writer who could envision an Alexandra and a Thea came to be a celebrant of male activity and institutions. (Lambert 680)

Deborah Lambert uses *My Ántonia* to demonstrate how Cather abandons her women to traditional gender roles. She claims that Ántonia

Bearing no resemblance to Cather’s early female heroes, she is honored by Jim and celebrated by Cather as the mother of sons. By the novel’s conclusion, Cather has capitulated to a version of that syndrome in which the unusual, achieving woman recommends to other women as their privilege and destiny that which she herself avoided. (688)

Lambert tries to emphasize a dramatic change in Cather's attitude by claiming that she "undercuts" Lena and Tiny, two female characters that choose to remain unmarried and end up achieving great financial independence later in life:

Autonomy and unconventional destiny are available only to the subordinate characters, Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, two of the hired girls. . . . Both Lena and Tiny are independent and unconventional. . . . these women are initially presented favorably; but, by the end of the novel, Cather simultaneously praises *Ántonia's* role as mother and demeans the value of their independent lives.

. . . Her description of Lena and Tiny undercuts their achievement and portrays them as stereotypical "old maids" who have paid for their refusal of their "natural" function. (688)

Lambert claims one way in which Cather undercuts their achievement was to present them physically distorted. The distortion to which she refers is Tiny's loss of three toes while in the Klondike making her fortunes and Jim's description of Lena as "a trifle too plump, in a hat a trifle too large" (688-689).

However, Cather exalts both Lena and *Ántonia* throughout the novel—*Ántonia* is admired even before she has her children and Lena even when she is, as Lambert says, an "old maid." In fact, the most notable "physical distortion" is *Ántonia's*. It is more undesirable than Lena's: "*Ántonia* came in and stood before me; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled" (213-114). Jim sees that she has lost all of her teeth and looks beyond her years.

Ántonia is a unique character. Although at the end of the novel she is married with many children, she is still a celebrant of strength and independence. In marriage she is able to gain the independence she had struggled to maintain before. Patrick W. Shaw, for example, claims that Ántonia is actually set free in marriage:

Throughout the early parts of the novel she has been in thrall to her father, her sullen brother Ambrosch, the scoundrel Larry Donovan, and even to Jim himself. But in Book V, she has worked herself free, has risen toward the light like one of the rugged prairie sunflowers that are so frequently mentioned. (533)

Both Alexandra and Thea marry quite late in life, when they are about forty years old, and both of them have marriages based on friendship rather than passion. Although Cather has Ántonia marry early in life, the marriage is still very similar to Alexandra's and Thea's—the only kind of marriage that Cather sees as non-threatening. Ántonia is able to become free within a relationship because it is based on friendship. As James Seaton states: “Ántonia's own marriage to Anton Cuzak is secure, because the two are not romantic lovers but live together on ‘terms of easy friendliness, touched with humor’” just like Alexandra “has no ‘fears’ about her own marriage to Carl Linstrum, because it is based on friendship rather than love” (1). Instead of, as Lambert claims, abandoning Ántonia to traditional gender roles to endorse a patriarchal society, perhaps Cather is attempting to highlight the importance of what a “happy” marriage is—one based on friendship.

Moreover, like Alexandra, *Ántonia* is responsible for much of the farm's success, arguably more than her husband. When *Ántonia* sees Jim after the twenty years have passed, she tells him:

The first ten years were a hard struggle. Her husband knew very little about farming and often grew discouraged. "We'd never have got through if I hadn't been so strong. I've always had good health, thank God, and I was able to help him in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came." (220)

And, even though *Ántonia's* is a happy marriage, Cather still uses it to express the same uncertainties that show up in her previous works. *Ántonia* states that she would not be happy unless she was on a farm. Her husband, on the other hand, never thought that he would be so settled. *Ántonia* tells Jim that her husband, Cuzak, was a "city man." "He liked theatres and lighted streets and music and a game of dominoes after the day's work was over. . . . Yet his wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world" (235). Jim talks with Cuzak that evening and observes, "This was a fine life, certainly, but it wasn't the kind of life he had wanted to live. I wondered whether the life that was right for one was ever right for two!" (235). Cuzak tells him that he nearly went crazy with lonesomeness at first, but that *Ántonia* "'got such a warm heart. She always make it as good for me as she could. Now it ain't so bad; I can begin to have some fun with my boys, already!'" (235). Clearly *Ántonia* is much more a symbol of strength and success than her husband.

Ántonia, although different from Alexandra and Thea, is also very similar to them. She is a strong independent individual, just like Alexandra and Thea, but she

serves a different purpose than do Cather's previous two protagonists. Alexandra and Thea both represent the importance of high individual endeavor and the strength it takes to achieve. *Ántonia*, on the other hand, though still displaying the strength of character embodied in Alexandra and Thea, is a celebration of the pioneering spirit—she is a portrait of what Cather knew to be a disappearing way of life. Leaving *Ántonia* on the Nebraska prairie as she is—a married woman surrounded by many children, responsible for running a farm—gives her a sense of permanence, as though if Jim were to return in yet another twenty years, *Ántonia* would still be there, a remnant of times passed.

Ántonia is also similar to Alexandra and Thea in that she transcends gender expectations. In 1918 the pioneering way of life had disappeared; “women’s work” was becoming narrowed to inside the home. Yet *Ántonia* enjoys the unique autonomy women had on the frontier. She is proud of her ability to work in the field and has the rare satisfaction of knowing that she is more responsible for the farm’s success than her husband.

Ántonia and Lena have different desires. Lena states on numerous occasions that she does not want to marry or have children. *Ántonia* does not have clear goals when she is young, but knows she does not want to leave a Nebraska farm. When Jim pays her a visit shortly before she is married, *Ántonia* asks him if he likes big cities and then tells him, “I’d always be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here” (206). The two women had very different desires, and both are happy with their choices in the end. *Ántonia* is proud of her farm and children. Lena is satisfied with her business and friendships. Lena is cheerful when she tells Jim about *Ántonia*’s life but

reiterates that it is not what she wants for herself: “‘Tony has nice children—ten or eleven of them by this time, I guess. I shouldn’t care for a family of that size myself, but somehow it’s just right for Tony. She’d love to show them to you’” (212).

Other minor characters also reveal Cather’s views on marriage and individuality. One of Cather’s strengths, especially in *My Ántonia*, is that even the minor characters are developed beautifully. Although Ántonia’s married life is applauded at the end of the novel, there are minor characters whose lives suggest the danger of marriage. Ole and his wife “Crazy Mary,” is one example. Lena tells Jim that “‘he [Ole] married Mary because he thought she was strong-minded and would keep him straight. He never could keep straight on shore. . . . Mary was a stewardess, and she tried to convert him on the way over. He thought she was just the one to keep him steady’” (181). Rather than “keep him steady,” his wife turns out to be jealous and unpredictable, and he ends up being the one Lena says she feels sorriest for. The relationship seems to be an echo of Dr. Archie’s thoughts in *The Song of the Lark*—“After all, one never knew people to the core” (355). It is a slant on Wilson’s meditation after Bartley Alexander’s death—“No relation is so complete that it can hold absolutely all of a person” (92).

Cather revealed in *O Pioneers!* that a woman’s identity is more than whom she marries. The same idea is repeated in *My Ántonia* with the touching advice Lena gives to her brother Chris. Wanting to buy handkerchiefs for his mother, Chris doesn’t know if he should get them with the letter M for Mother or B for her given name, Berthe. Lena tells him to get them with the B because “‘It will please her for you to think about her name. Nobody ever calls her by it now’” (111).

Also, Jim's thoughts show frustration at the townspeople's lack of individuality. His complaints sound similar to those in "Paul's Case," a short story Cather wrote more than a decade earlier. While walking about town at night, looking for things to distract his boredom, he observes the houses with lighted windows and reflects on them as he walks by: "This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution" (140).

Of all characters, though, it is *Ántonia* who is exalted. There is a reason Cather viewed her so highly. *Ántonia* is a pioneer. Jim and Lena are not. Pioneers work hard and make it possible for the younger generation to move on and succeed more easily. Just as Alexandra encouraged Emil to leave Nebraska and make something larger of his life, *Ántonia* encourages Jim to leave. When they are in Black Hawk, *Ántonia* always watches over him and is very protective. Like a mother, she tells him "Now, don't you go and be a fool like some of these town boys. You're not going to sit around here and whittle store-boxes and tell stories all your life. You are going away to school and make something of yourself. I'm just awful proud of you" (143). *Ántonia* saw no defeat in leaving Nebraska, she even encouraged it. She represents the pioneering epoch and the beauty of creating something larger than one's self. Cather understood and respected both types of people, but she revered *Ántonia* because she was a symbol of the true pioneer.

Before entering law school, Jim returns to Nebraska and sees how dramatically the land has changed:

The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. . . . all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea. (197)

Cather knew the pioneering era had already passed. *Ántonia*, however, was a way for Jim to return to the past. Just as Bartley Alexander futilely seeks his boyhood through Hilda, *Ántonia* recalls to Jim the pioneering spirit. *Ántonia*'s remaining on a farm with Cuzak and all her children provides Jim a comfort, as though simply knowing she is there gives him those better years all over again. Even before Jim leaves Black Hawk, he doesn't see *Ántonia* as she is in the present time, but as how she was on a ranch when he was a child. His images of *Ántonia* are pleasant memories of his boyhood: "sometimes Tony and I were out in the country, sliding down straw-stacks as we used to do; climbing up yellow mountains over and over, and slipping down the smooth sides into soft piles of chaff" (144).

When Jim is an adult and returns to *Ántonia*, his mind is filled not with images of how she currently appears, but the images she recalls to him from his childhood:

In my memory there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: *Ántonia* kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; *Ántonia* in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave

in the snowstorm; *Ántonia* coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. (226)

When Jim visits her before going away for twenty years, he walks away with a similar feeling that Bartley Alexander had while wandering London's streets: "As I went back alone over that familiar road, I could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass" (207). It is what *Ántonia* represents to Jim that makes him adore her so strongly—a pioneering spirit that had already disappeared, the era of his boyhood.

Nebraska had changed dramatically since a young Willa Cather rode her pony to the immigrant sod houses. *My Ántonia* shows those changes taking place—pioneers working hard to give the next generation an easier life, farmers learning to survive in a harsh land, the landscape itself changing into "sweeping lines of fertility" (197). Knowing and remembering *Ántonia* was a way for Jim to conquer change and hold on to the old pioneering way of life. Cather's later novels would show what happens to strong individuals thrown into a world where the pioneering spirit has already disappeared.

The Social Network: Family, Responsibilities, and the Loss of Self

In Cather's only collection of essays, published at the end of her career in 1936, she states that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (v). This is the same year that Cather began writing *A Lost Lady*, and her feelings of estrangement in a new atmosphere are revealed bluntly. A new mindset emerged after World War I. The lands of the West had already been broken up and "tamed" and its people were absorbed in a new culture of consumerism. The pioneering spirit that *Ántonia* represented had disappeared and had given way to those who had never struggled, dared or dreamt anything during its development.

The passing of an epoch caused much discontent for Cather and she began to get discouraged. She felt that everything in the West that had helped her to grow as an artist was disappearing:

she was beginning to feel that estrangement from modern American life that was to grow more acute as she got older. . . . she pointed to tendencies in Nebraska that were contrary to life itself and would surely suffocate art. Democracy was more and more applied as a regime of sameness. . . . The new god was the short cut, dependent on the machine. . . . In art there were no short cuts and, besides, a dead level of sameness would be the end of art. (Brown 226)

People and attitudes were changing dramatically since Cather was a girl growing up in Nebraska. Remembering her childhood, Cather stated that she "knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around [her] home, and they all called out to [her]" (Bohlke 37). The pioneers in Cather's novels have a similar reverence for the land.

Throughout Cather's novels, the pioneers' behavior shows that people, honesty, and beauty are important to them. They have a willingness to take chances to create something, and their power of spirit is seen in their extraordinary accomplishments. As Mr. Forrester of *A Lost Lady* says, they "dreamed the railroads across the mountains" (45). Early in *A Lost Lady*, though, Captain Forrester knows that his is a dying kind. At dinner, he tells the young people at his table, "All these things will be everyday facts to the coming generation, but to us—" (45). The "coming generation" to which Mr. Forrester refers would take things for granted. They would be consumed by harsh economics and no longer see the beauty in the land or the value in honorable work.

The central characters in *A Lost Lady* do not live on a farm. Instead, the novel is a story about the fall of a railroad aristocrat and his wife. Captain Forrester is "a contractor, who had built hundreds of miles of road for the Burlington" (4). He was one who came to the area "to invest money and to 'develop our great West'" (3). To Cather, developers such as the Forresters were as important as the farmers. They built and developed ideas into reality. She had great respect for them. As Brown states, "it was always her view that the men who put through the railroads and organized the settlement of the land were pioneers just as truly as any farmer on the Divide; in both kinds of pioneers she found the imagination and daring and warmth of life that she constantly looked for" (230).

In *A Lost Lady*, the Forresters experience financial ruin and are left with no assets except their house and land. A bank where Mr. Forrester is heavily invested fails. Many laborers had invested money in the bank solely because Mr. Forrester's name was attached to it. "To those men with no capital but their back and their two hands, his name

meant safety” (75-76). To maintain his honor and the laborers’ respect he uses his own money to ensure the depositors get all of their investments back. The other directors do not think refunding the depositors’ money is important. The directors are “young men, bright fellows, well thought of in the community” but they sit there and watch Mr. Forrester “strip himself down to the pledging of his life insurance” (76).

A Lost Lady is told through third person narration, but, as in *My Ántonia*, the reader cannot learn anything about Marian that is not filtered through a young man, in this case, Niel. Niel is introduced in the beginning of the book as a boy who, like everyone else in the town, is fascinated with Mrs. Forrester. He looks up to her greatly. Niel grows into adulthood through the course of the novel and the reader sees how his views about Mrs. Forrester change as she tries to make herself fit into the new culture surrounding her.

When Niel comes back to Sweet Water during a summer vacation from the university, he runs into Ivy Peters, an ugly character both in appearance and personality. The extent of Ivy’s brutality is seen in one of the novel’s first scenes when a young Ivy cruelly blinds a woodpecker and takes pleasure in watching it fly desperately around. On the train back to Sweet Water years later, Ivy Peters tells Niel that he had become a lawyer and was doing some farming on the side, that he had rented the meadow-land on the Forresters’ property, drained it, and put it to wheat.

This stream that wove through their land represents the Forresters’ ability to see value other than economic return. Cather describes it in the first chapter:

This stream traced artless loops and curves through the broad meadows that were half pasture land, half marsh. Any one but Captain Forrester

would have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields. But he had selected this place long ago because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through the pasture, with mint and joint-grass and twinkling willows along its banks.

(5)

Niel knows that “By draining the marsh Ivy had obliterated a few acres of something he hated, though he could not name it, and had asserted his power over” people like the Forresters—the old pioneers (89). Cather’s own bitterness over the change in ideals can be seen in Niel’s thoughts after he is told this information:

The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest. All the way from the Missouri to the mountains this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh. (89-90)

The marsh is an example of how the Forresters showed appreciation and reverence for the land. Its destruction shows the extent to which accepted attitudes had changed. The loss of the Forresters’ financial comfort was devastating, but for Mr. Forrester to lose his

marsh to the type of businessman that had caused him to also lose his money gives a clearer idea of the enormity of his humiliation.

A Lost Lady is Cather's first novel in which she recognized that the old pioneering spirit was gone, and the new consumerism was beginning to dominate. Even if Cather perceived this change sooner, it never affected the protagonist in her fiction. Her first three major novels entailed stories in which the good-hearted prevailed over whatever people or circumstances tried to stand in their way. Alexandra's small-minded brothers could never have prevented her success; Lily Fisher (Thea's childhood competitor for vocal solos in the Christmas concert) could not stand in Thea's way; Wick Cutter could have never impeded *Ántonia's* ultimate triumph. Yet in *A Lost Lady* the central figure is altered beyond Niel's understanding. She loses herself in the struggle to survive in the new world which was ruled by those like Ivy Peters.

Deborah Lambert claims that Cather switched to a more patriarchal stance in her later novels, and *A Lost Lady* is a classic demonstration of why this is a common misunderstanding. Mrs. Forrester is dependent on marriage for economic security; her appearance is depicted as quite feminine; and she is rarely referred to by her first name, being called "Mrs. Forrester" even by her husband. She is weak compared to her female precursors, and in the end she seems to lose her admirable qualities. But her ultimate destruction reflects Cather's own feeling of being adrift in the world; it does not mean that Mrs. Forrester did not have the same desire for individuality as did Alexandra, Thea, *Ántonia*, or Lena.

Cather's previous characters are examples of women who are independent from the start, who know what they want, make the right decisions, and are able to support

themselves financially. *A Lost Lady* demonstrates what Cather felt an outcome of consumerism: marriage as an economic necessity. Mr. Forrester is fiscally responsible for the couple; Marian does not bring money into the marriage. When her husband comes home to tell her how he had lost all their money, she says, “I never question your decisions in business, Mr. Forrester. I know nothing of such things” (74). In fact, Mrs. Forrester is so ignorant with the couple’s financial matters that she does not even know the name of the bank in which he had invested all of their money (74).

Gilbert and Gubar claim that Cather’s fiction during and after 1922 reflects “the inescapable commodification of modern women” (204-205). Cather believed that “the woman who functions like currency will be consumed in the exchange between men” (202) and “that women are victimized by a cash nexus that reduces them to their market value” (205). Marian Forrester plummets even more into Niel’s disfavor when she begins having relations with Ivy Peters, but it is her attempt to secure money that makes her feel as though she needs him.

There are multiple times in the novel when Mrs. Forrester reveals that it is painful and humiliating to humor Ivy. While at the Forresters’ one evening, Niel is disgusted by Ivy’s impudent behavior toward her. When Niel says he wants to confront him over it, Marian speaks with anxiety and tells him “we have to get along with Ivy Peters, we simply have to!” (104). She then adds that he had invested money for her, that the Judge, her former investor, has methods that “don’t work nowadays. He will never get us out of debt, dear man!” (105). She then reveals how desperate she is to leave Sweet Water and go back to California where she would be happy; Marian says that she does not want to give up and grow old in a struggling town because she has much life left in

her. Later on, after Mr. Forrester dies, Ivy begins to spend so much time at her house that the town begins to talk. She tells Niel that it is because Ivy had agreed to help her sell the house to make a large profit. She believes Ivy was the only one who could help her, but she “talked nervously, with exaggerated earnestness, as if she were trying to persuade herself” (132). At a very sad moment, towards the end of the novel, Mrs. Forrester has a dinner party with boys who, in her glory years, would have never been invited past the parlour. It is a pitiful attempt at reliving her old life, but despite her exertion to appear happy and agreeable, she indicates to Niel their uncouthness: “‘Did you notice,’ she whispered to him, ‘how they hold their glasses? What is it they do to a little glass to make it look so vulgar?’” (137).

All of Sweet Water admires Marian Forrester, but after her husband becomes sick, the town’s admiration begins to decline. This is not because Marian lacks the qualities and desires that Alexandra, Thea, and *Ántonia* possess. Like Cather’s early protagonists, Marian is a pioneer. But she differs from them in that she is the first character denied autonomy by the society in which she lives. *Ántonia* is a pioneer that maintains her way of life despite the changing world. Mrs. Forrester is a pioneer that feels forced to learn how to function in the new economy and is destroyed in the process. More than this, she is a woman who is consumed “in the exchange between men.”

Gilbert and Gubar explain that new sex roles came about as the new mercantile economy emerged. For Cather, “the west is a place in which women at least briefly experienced an exhilarating autonomy” (187). Gendered labor roles were not as well defined. Alexandra ran a farm; *Ántonia* worked in the fields. Yet once the land was

developed, the roles became more specifically defined, and women were alienated from culture:

Inevitably, then, first in *O Pioneers!* and then even more definitively in *My Ántonia*, the emergence of a mercantile economy leads to a sexual division of labor. Like Anne Finch, who saw women as “Education’s, more than Nature’s fools,” Cather views sex roles as the result of an education “designed” to alienate her characters from the Divide of Nebraska, which becomes symbolic of a widening divide that separates men from women” (190).

Gendered divisions of labor on the frontier were similar to what they had been in colonial days. Women had a greater variety of responsibilities, and their work was not relegated to the home. Although a man enjoyed a superior status to his wife’s, a woman’s contributions were greatly valued, and she enjoyed a status nearer to equality within a partnership. Eventually women’s work was confined to labors within the home. Men’s work was outside and the only to bring in economic revenue. After this occurred, women’s work became devalued and they needed to depend more on their partner for a financial means to survive. *A Lost Lady* demonstrates what financial dependence does to a woman’s individuality.

This novel also reveals many other cultural expectations and pressures for women that Cather could have observed during her life. The Forresters are an example of a wealthy American couple in which the wife is an ornamental woman. Mrs. Forrester dazzles the contractors and businessmen who come to visit them at their home but does

not serve an economic purpose. Traditionally, this was a position for women to aspire to.

Gerda Lerner states:

As class distinctions sharpened, social attitudes toward women became polarized. The image of “the lady” was elevated to the accepted ideal of femininity toward which all women would strive. . . . It is no accident that the slogan “woman’s place is in the home” took on a certain aggressiveness and shrillness precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women *left* their homes to become factory workers. . . . Idleness, once a disgrace in the eyes of society, had become a status symbol. (127)

A woman of status stayed in the home and her husband provided for the family’s economic needs. This was a situation to which American families wished to aspire. Women’s financial dependence on men was a direct result of this ideology. Sondra Herman points out that towards the end of the nineteenth century a debate developed which asked, “Was American courtship a process of practical love-seeking or was it a marriage market?” (234). There were many in society who had a traditional and conservative view of marriage, saying that it was “the foundation of the whole social order” and “essential to complete the humanity of each man and woman” (234). But an argument also developed during this time which focused on a woman’s economic dependency:

Critics of American marriage . . . believed that marital happiness was deeply influenced by social conditions outside of marriage. They implied by the term “marriage market” that materialistic motives were necessarily

present in most marriage choices. Young ladies presented themselves as merchandise for eager young men to marry. The girls, being dependent, had to do so in order to survive. . . . The harshness of the business world was invading the home itself. Home was no longer a refuge from the cold world, but rather its extension. To correct these conditions, the critics argued, a new social ethic was needed—more independence for women, more freedom to marry outside of one’s class, more freedom to reject marriage altogether. (Herman 235)

Marriage critic Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, writing in 1898 stated that “the present condition of women” forbid the development of their economic ability (7).

Their relationship with men prevented them from obtaining any amount of independence:

In view of these facts, attention is now called to a certain marked and peculiar economic condition affecting the human race, and unparalleled in the organic world. We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex . . . (5)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, also Cather’s contemporary, stated that women’s predicament went much farther than their lack of suffrage and had more to do with marriage. She felt that women’s discontent was more related to their “marital bondage” than their political standing and that this was much more profound to women’s welfare than suffrage (O’Niell 215).

Many double standards are found in *A Lost Lady* because the reader must learn everything about Marian through a male narrator, Niel. Niel has profound admiration for Mrs. Forrester when he is a child, but, by the end of the story, he leaves “with weary contempt for her in his heart” and does not say goodbye (145). Yet, although Niel feels such disdain, the reader feels sadness for her misfortune. Cather spends so much time building up Mrs. Forrester, she did not expect her readers to despise her as much as Niel, especially when Marian’s own husband knows everything (it is insinuated that he is even aware of her affairs) and still “valued her” (122).

Perhaps the reason why Niel is so much angrier than the average reader is because he does not expect Marian to have an identity beyond marriage:

Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester’s wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else. (65)

Niel is angry and disappointed with Mrs. Forrester only when he finds that she has, or desires to have, an identity beyond simply being her husband’s possession.

The contrasts between Niel’s expectations for Marian and his desires for his own life are quite ironic: “Niel, who had been so content with a bachelor’s life, and who had made up his mind that he would never live in a place that was under the control of women” (57). Niel, himself, is unable to see this discrepancy and becomes enraged with Marian’s “selfishness.” When Niel leaves Sweet Water feeling such contempt, he reflects that “It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to

immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms” (145). Mrs. Forrester had a passion for living, arguably as much passion as Alexandra, Thea, or *Ántonia*. In Mrs. Forrester’s case, however, it caused her to lose the respect of others in town.

Mrs. Forrester is perhaps Cather’s most difficult character to analyze because she is treated with so much ambivalence. Niel’s story both elevates Mrs. Forrester and demeans her. According to Shaw, Cather does this on purpose and “is the best we can expect when analyzing human personalities” (534). Just as in *My Ántonia*, Cather creates in *A Lost Lady* “a cluster of impressions” that she uses in an attempt to create a “feeling” rather than “to tell a story” (Shaw 534). Morris Dickstein explains that this is part of the function of the narrator in both *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady* (4). Jim does not completely understand the transformations taking place within himself or *Ántonia*, just as Niel fails to comprehend Marian’s actions. Both Jim and Niel continually waver between being enthralled and angered. Through the narrator, we see reasons why we should both love the protagonist and hate her at the same time.

Many readers forget that an author’s opinion is not necessarily that of the narrator, in this case, Niel. He is angry and disappointed in Mrs. Forrester because he does not think she should be allowed to desire an identity beyond that of marriage. Most readers would see this double standard and would not have the same angry feelings toward her that Niel does. *A Lost Lady* can demonstrate many things about the West and the new emerging spirit. It can show the dilemma of many women of that time—the need to marry in order to be financially secure. It can show an unfair double standard. It can demonstrate that even married women have a need for individuality. It is, after all, this

need for autonomy that drives Mrs. Forrester to do the very things that confounds Niel so terribly.

Mrs. Forrester's individuality and autonomy are the great dilemmas throughout the novel. After Mr. Forrester dies and Niel views her as already "lost," he sees hope for her one night while dining at her home: "Niel felt tonight that the right man could save her, even now. She was still her indomitable self, going through her old part,—but only the stage-hands were left to listen to her" (143). Niel knows she can not save herself and escape the way she wants to; she is trapped into needing someone else to rescue her. Marian accepts that fact as well; her problem is that she seeks help from people who are not "of her kind." She is a strong, bold, independent woman who is lost by marriage and consumerism. She is a woman who married out of necessity and who is involved with Ivy because of her attempt to secure a future and a way out.

Niel hints at recognizing her feelings of entrapment. When Mr. Forrester is sick and Marian is in a hammock relaxing, Niel tries to sneak up on her: "He stepped forward and caught her suspended figure, hammock and all, in his arms. How light and alive she was! Like a bird caught in a net" (92). The image of a bird in a net recalls the opening scene in which Ivy blinds a woodpecker, and it helplessly flies around. Mrs. Forrester is now the bird, entrapped in the new spirit of the West, represented by Ivy Peters.

Even with her sad attempts to find a place in the changing world, Mrs. Forrester is like Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia in many ways. Marian Forrester, despite her "defeat" in the end, maintains a strong bold voice and a lack of fear for doing what is widely unaccepted. Mrs. Forrester tenaciously holds onto her independent mind in circumstances that would seem to imprison others, and she maintains a sense of

individuality despite being married. She does things that are not only seen as controversial, but as outright wrong. When Niel confronts her about the gossip going around town, she stands in defiance of them: “‘I know!’ She tossed her head. . . . it was more like hysterical defiance. ‘I know; they call me the Merry Widow. I rather like it!’” (134). She lives with the consequences of her decisions, making the best out of every situation. In the end, although the tone of the novel is sad, things turn out to be not so bad. She gets out of Sweet Water like she wanted and lives the life others imagined she would want. A man from Sweet Water describes her to Niel:

She was married again—to a rich, cranky old Englishman. . . . they lived on a big stock ranch and had come down in their car for this banquet. . . . People said he was rich, but quarrelsome and rather stingy. She seemed to have everything, though. They traveled in a fine French car, and she had brought her maid along, and he had his valet. She asked about everybody, and said, ‘If you ever meet Niel Herbert Tell him things have turned out well for me. Mr. Collins is the kindest of husbands.’ (148-149)

Cather had a deep understanding of all the different types of characters she created. Niel could not comprehend Mrs. Forrester’s desire to continue living within a changing world, but the novel is constructed in a way that allows the reader to see the various double standards and no-win situations. Mrs. Forrester’s admirable qualities are, many times, presented right beside her desperate behavior. Niel is disappointed in Marian, but readers are able to see her for what she is.

The opening scene entails Ivy Peters blinding a bird, the boys watching it desperately trying to find a branch to perch on, and then Niel trying to rescue it. The

story that follows involves Niel watching Marian struggle to regain her old way of life. She becomes, as Niel observes when he picks her up in the hammock that day, “like a bird caught in a net” (92). The novel is just as its beginning forebodes: Mrs. Forrester’s world vanishes and she struggles to regain her old way of life. And in the end, nobody can “save” her. Her husband has died, his friends have all moved away, those that remain she has already estranged in an attempt to align her life according to the new business style. The end does not arouse anger or resentment toward Mrs. Forrester as it does with Niel, it brings pity and a great sense of tragedy. Mrs. Forrester is an example of a very strong individual like Alexandra or Thea. She serves as a prototype of what could happen to one who is trapped amidst all the changes Cather observed in the world. Perhaps this is why she gives Marian so many admirable qualities—to give readers a greater sense of the tragedy. After all, the more the magnificent the lady, the more tragic her loss.

After recording the loss of Marian Forrester, Cather would move away from the Nebraska scene. Though she would return to it in 1925 when she began writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she stated in an interview that she did not want to be solely associated with one region. “Using one setting all the time is very much like planting a field with corn season after season. I believe in rotation of crops. If the public ties me down to the cornfield too much I’m afraid I’ll leave that scene entirely” (Bohlke 76). Her next novels, for the most part, depart from the West.

The tone of her fiction, however, remained on a steady course. Cather’s protagonists always fight for autonomy, but as her career progressed, their antagonists

became more intimate. Eventually, those who most love her main characters consume them. As Klein states:

After *My Ántonia* there is a gathering darkness of which *My Mortal Enemy* is the crisis, and in each of the novels between those two the enemy is, successively, a more intimate part of the hero. . . . In *A Lost Lady* the enemy is the village, but it is also the modern life that the heroine after all must live. In *The Professor's House* it is the family, and the Professor is put to the altogether impossible choice between his artifice of the past and the wife whom he does love. In *My Mortal Enemy*, then, it is friendship and love, human relationship itself. (xviii-xix)

The Professor's House is like *A Lost Lady* in many ways. Both main characters fight to maintain their sense of autonomy or individuality. *The Professor's House*, like *A Lost Lady*, shows discouragement over the changes Cather saw taking place in the world. Just as Marian Forrester, Godfrey St. Peter feels adrift in the world and does not obtain ultimate triumph as did Alexandra, Thea, and Ántonia. The source of unhappiness, however, is different for these two characters. Marian's source of discontent is the town and the new emerging spirit that overcame the pioneer. The source of St. Peter's dissatisfaction is the family, even though he loves his wife and children dearly. As much as St. Peter enjoyed these relationships, he questions their purpose in his life. He begins to feel that his wife and children have separated him from his true self.

Cather began writing *The Professor's House* in 1924, two years after *A Lost Lady*. *A Lost Lady* shows the dangers of marriage, demonstrating the commodification of modern women. *The Professor's House*, however, has a male protagonist. He is

financially capable of making his own way in the world, but he feels even more smothered by marriage than does Marian Forrester. *The Professor's House* shows that Cather saw marriage and family as a threat to self for both males and females.

The novel begins by describing the success that St. Peter recently achieved. He struggled throughout his adult life, living in a house with many “inconveniences,” trying to divide his energies between a full load of classes at the university, a wife and two daughters, and his work writing an eight volume history. He enjoyed all of them, but after his books become widely recognized and earn him enough money to buy a new house, he finds that he does not want to leave. The rest of the novel describes a psychological process. He ponders the meaning of his family and seeks a way of retrieving the self that he was meant to become.

The Professor's House, although a better book than *Alexander's Bridge*, is very similar to it. Like Bartley Alexander, St. Peter has the same awakening about the freeness of youth and the social bondage of adult responsibilities:

His career, his wife, his family, were not his life at all, but a chain of events which had happened to him. All these things had nothing to do with the person he was in the beginning. . . . One thing led to another and one development brought on another, and the design of his life had been the work of this secondary social man, the lover. It had been shaped by all the penalties and responsibilities of being and having been a lover.

Because there was Lillian, there must be marriage and a salary. Because there was marriage, there were children. Because there were children, and fervour in the blood and brain, books were born as well as daughters. His

histories, he was convinced, had no more to do with his original ego than his daughters had; they were a result of the high pressure of young manhood. (240)

Compare this to Bartley Alexander's thoughts about what happens in adulthood: "You work like the devil and think you're getting on, and suddenly you discover that you've only been getting yourself tied up. A million details drink you dry. Your life keeps going for things you don't want, and all the while you are being built alive into a social structure you don't care a rap about" (10).

There are two significant correlations between *Alexander's Bridge* and *The Professor's House*: the danger of submitting one's self to marriage and family and the futile quest to return to youth. As Bartley Alexander, St. Peter never claims he does not love his wife and children. He loves them even in his discontent. When reflecting on the process of writing *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, he remembers that if the oil in the lamp burned out while he was working, he would have to go downstairs to get more oil, but he would inevitably "become interested in what the children were doing, or in what his wife was doing" (18). He describes the difficulty of completing his work with his family, trying to share his time between the two, but the description is not one of bitterness. After his volumes are finished and he experiences great success, his family enjoys the Christmas holiday in their new house, but St. Peter opts to be alone in the old. He remembers the holidays spent in the old house:

When he was writing his best, he was conscious of pretty little girls in fresh dresses—of flowers and greens in the comfortable, shabby sitting-room—of his wife's good looks and good taste—even of a better dinner

than usual under preparation downstairs. All the while he had been working so fiercely at his eight big volumes, he was not insensible to the domestic drama that went on beneath him. His mind played delightedly with all those incidents. (85)

When he opens the lunch his wife has packed for him, he thinks of how thoughtful she is, yet his mind still wanders back to before he knew her, remembering his time alone in Paris when, although he had little money, he felt free and alive.

Cather does not portray Mrs. St. Peter to be without flaw as she did with Mrs. Alexander, but Cather makes it clear that the St. Peters were very much in love when they married. When they first met, St. Peter was enchanted:

With her radiant charm, she had a very interesting mind. . . . a richly endowed nature that responded strongly to life and art Before his marriage, and for years afterward, Lillian's prejudices, her divinations about people and art (always instinctive and unexplained, but nearly always right), were the most interesting things in St. Peter's life. (38)

Mrs. St. Peter and her daughters, despite Godfrey's love for them, are presented as part of the new consumerist culture Cather was so scornful of. They are absorbed with money. St. Peter is pained by their new riches—both his own and his daughter's. His wife and daughters' shopping trips exhaust him. The jealousies it causes within the family are stifling. His youngest daughter, Kathleen, is envious of his oldest, Rosamond, and claims that all the money Rosamond had inherited from Outland, her dead fiancé, has "ruined her" (71). St. Peter is disappointed that Outland's discovery—his ability to bring a great idea into reality—ends in frivolous material gain.

Cather's resentment toward consumerism shows up other times in the novel as well. St. Peter becomes disappointed in the changes taking place at the university where he works. Through St. Peter, Cather voices her opinion about what the new movement was doing to education. He reflects on how the "new commercialism" was "undermining and vulgarizing education" (120). Cather felt that the need to show results for everything as quickly as possible, to take shortcuts to productivity, was ruining education. St. Peter's university was ignoring cultural studies and placing more value on training men for a specific career, getting them ready to enter the work force directly and begin making money as soon as possible.

Despite Mrs. St. Peter's materialism, even while Godfrey tries to draw away from his family, he does not specifically blame her for his change in attitude. While at the theater, he tells her "'it's been a mistake our having a family and writing histories and getting middle-aged. We should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young'" (78). Later, St. Peter examines his life more closely and searches for "the particular occasion he would have chosen for such a finale. . . . he found the very day, but his wife was not in it" (79).

It is Hilda Burgoyne that awakens Bartley Alexander, making him aware that his life is merely a network of social obligations that have nothing to do with his true self. Godfrey St. Peter has a similar experience, but rather than a mistress, St. Peter's object of awakening is a student, Tom Outland. As St. Peter becomes close friends with Outland, he knows that his wife is becoming jealous. Up until that time, he had no one else besides his wife with whom he could have meaningful "mental companionship" (39) and, though Outland had become part of the family, she was unaccustomed to the intrusion.

Just as Hilda does in *Bartley Alexander*, Outland reminds St. Peter of youth and freedom. This makes him doubt the value of his marriage and family, and he begins to think that such emotional separation is inevitable in marriage:

As he left the house, he was reflecting that people who are intensely in love when they marry, and who go on being in love, always meet with something which suddenly or gradually makes a difference. Sometimes it is the children, or the grubbiness of being poor, sometimes a second infatuation. In their own case, it had been, curiously enough, his pupil, Tom Outland. (38)

In the middle of *The Professor's House* is Tom Outland's own story. It takes place on the mesa with his good friend Rodney Blake. The two discover a cliff city and work diligently to gather artifacts that the Indians used, taking pains to label each one, recording and caring for all their findings. In the end, Outland feels betrayed by Blake who sells the artifacts without consulting him. Blake does so with good intentions—he wants Outland to use the money to go to school. But Outland doesn't forgive him, and Blake leaves Outland forever. Outland spends the following summer alone on the mesa. Despite the sour parting, he describes his time alone as “life in itself” (228).

This small story provides a contrast to St. Peter's present life. The professor is stifled with family affairs within a cluttered household. Then Tom Outland tells his story which is filled with light and freedom. Outland is single and has nothing to tie him down. He has not allowed himself to become smothered in social responsibilities. Because Outland has the freedom Cather associates so strongly with childhood, he represents a sort of eternal youth.

Some scholars look at the friendship in *The Professor's House* as a mask for homosexual feeling. Lee discusses the view “that the novel is a story of ‘private, unconfessed, sublimated’ homosexual love, and that Tom’s loss is a projection of Isabelle’s” (240-241). (Cather had been devastated by Isabelle McClung’s marriage to Jan Habourg in 1916.) However, Cather’s work is much too complicated to simplify it into a mere “encoding of covert, even guilty sexuality” (Lee 11). Reading St. Peter’s and Outland’s friendship simply as a mask for homosexuality ignores many of the more important reasons St. Peter feels trapped in his marriage—the same reasons that keep Thea, Alexandra, and Lena from marrying and what keeps Mrs. Forrester from being happy. Although Lee points out that this is a common interpretation, she also states that the explanation of masked homosexual love does not account for St. Peter’s “sense of spiritual dislocation” (241). St. Peter feels adrift in the world because he has lost his true self. As she had already shown in *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather saw the “true self” as most fully realized in youth. The “‘real’ self is *pre-sexual*” (Lee 241), before one is caught up in all the social responsibilities that come with being a lover and parent.

Outland’s purpose is to make St. Peter aware of his “true self.” To do this, he awakens him to his past youth and the redundancy of his present life with his family: Outland “brought him a kind of second youth. . . . Through Outland’s studies, long after they had ceased to be pupil and master, he had been able to experience afresh things that had grown dull with use” (234). Once St. Peter realizes that he has lost his “true self,” he begins to futilely seek it. St. Peter begins to make references to shadowy companions like those Alexander and Jim refer to. The shadowy companion is not Tom Outland, but what Outland represents to St. Peter—his young self: “He was cultivating a novel mental

dissipation—and enjoying a new friendship. Tom Outland had not come back again through the garden door . . . but another boy had: the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley—the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter” (239).

It is St. Peter’s love and desire for this original self that makes him want to “run away from everything he had intensely cared for” (251) and desperately desire to “avoid meeting his own family” (250). Cather suggests many times that it is only in childhood that we are close to our “true” selves. The theme shows up at the very beginning of her career in *Alexander’s Bridge*, in the middle of it in *My Ántonia*, and then again at the end with *The Professor’s House*.

Godfrey St. Peter’s family estranges him from his true identity. In Cather’s next novel, *My Mortal Enemy*, love itself is responsible for the destruction of an individual. Myra Henshawe is, in many ways, like Cather’s other female protagonists. She is bold, forthright, and admired by others. As with Jim and Niel, Myra is developed through the observations of a third party, Nellie. Nellie wonderfully relates Myra’s complexity when she sees her again after a ten year hiatus: “She looked strong and broken, generous and tyrannical, a witty and rather wicked old woman, who hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its absurdities” (55).

Myra is the only heir to her wealthy uncle, but she gives up her inheritance to marry a man that her uncle wouldn’t approve of. The act of defiance makes her a legend among friends and family. She begins young, energetic, and willing to risk everything for love. She believes in romance and runs away, choosing marriage over money. But after her marriage, Myra’s decision for love over money consumes her. Her husband,

Oswald, dotes on her until her death, but she dies believing he destroyed what she could have become, and she bitterly blames him for her “destruction.” Despite how passionately they once had loved each other, she dies believing he is her mortal enemy.

Cather tells the reader right away that the love affair, despite its passionate beginning, had not made Myra any more satisfied with marriage than she could have been with another man who had not cost her a large fortune. On one of the many occasions that Nellie’s aunt recounts the exciting story, Nellie asks if they have been happy in spite of losing so much money. Aunt Lydia’s answer, ““Oh yes! As happy as most people”” (14), is disheartening for Nellie. With such an electric beginning, and with such a great loss, she feels that they should be happier than most.

Part One of the novel shows Myra Henshawe in what Oswald believes are her happy years. But even during this time, Nellie sees something unusual in her. Her laugh, no matter how gay she tries to make it, always seems angry, and she occasionally reveals to Nellie thoughts that would eventually consume her. While married and living in New York, Oswald explains to Nellie that Myra devotes time and energies toward encouraging young relationships. Myra pretends as though she believes in what she does, but then reveals to Nellie her guilt, saying that as much as the young couple seem to be in love and as much as she likes encouraging them, she knows that ““very likely hell will come of it!”” (26). As for her great financial loss, she pretends to be happy with what she has, but while out with Nellie one night she tells her that ““it’s very nasty, being poor!”” (34), and then she displays overt jealousy of a wealthy woman she sees on the street.

Oswald has a very positive nature and is always catering to his wife, but he too gives clues as to the entrapping nature of their relationship. Nellie observes the

inconsistencies in his life and personality: “I felt that his life had not suited him; that he possessed some kind of courage and force which slept, which in another sort of world might have asserted themselves brilliantly. I thought he ought to have been a soldier or an explorer” (43). In fact, Myra had admitted to Nellie that her husband did not like his work even though he never complained about it. His life had become a series of obligations made necessary through their impulsive marriage: “He doesn’t properly belong in business. We never speak of it, but I’m sure he hates it. He went into an office only because we were young and terribly in love, and had to be married” (32).

This is not the first time Cather warns about the dangers of an impulsive marriage, especially when it is at a young age. Most often it destroys the couple’s lives: Marie in *O Pioneers!*, Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark*, Ole and Crazy Mary in *My Ántonia*, St. Peter in *The Professor’s House* are just a few examples. But never before had the mistake caused such bitter hatred.

Part Two describes the couple after they have fallen into financial ruin. Myra is very ill and Oswald cares for her even more faithfully than he had before. Myra, however, cannot escape the hatred and blame she feels toward her husband, believing both of their lives were ruined because of their impulsive marriage: “Oh, if youth but knew! . . . It’s been the ruin of us both. We’ve destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We’ve thrown our lives away” (62). She never denies having loved him in the beginning, just as St. Peter never denies loving passionately when he married. But Myra also refers to the same “drawing away” that St. Peter found inevitable. St. Peter’s awakening is Outland. Myra’s is simply time spent thinking of all that she had given up for her mediocre life. It leads her not only to feel

estranged from her husband, but she also comes to see him as an enemy: “People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know. We were. . . . A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other” (72).

In a sad twist, although Oswald spends his life caring for Myra throughout her bitter remarks, he too admits that he is set free when she dies. He smiles as he tells Nellie his plans to go to Alaska: “I have always wanted to go, and now there is nothing to hold me” (83). He doesn’t blame Myra for her anger. He understands, in a way, calling her “Molly Driscoll.” The use of her maiden name is important. It is as though Oswald recognizes that, although they were married for so many years, it had not changed who she was inside.

My Mortal Enemy is the piece that most closely achieves Cather’s goal discussed in “The Novel Démeublé.” Myra is developed beautifully, but much about her is implied rather than stated. This form of narration—suggestion rather than stated fact—fits Cather’s perspective on relationships. As St. Peter reflects when thinking of his wife, “the heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one’s own” (78). When reading Cather’s novels, her characters are like the individuals we meet in real life—unique, complex, and sometimes confounding.

Looking Back: A Study in Individuality

Willa Cather was perhaps one of the most individual authors of her time, both in her writing and life. Beginning in Virginia's socially restrictive atmosphere, she moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska when she was nine. The move was heartbreaking for her at the time, but she later learned that it was the best thing that could have happened to her as an artist. She spent her formative years able to roam free amidst the Nebraska country, meeting immigrants and listening to interesting stories that would later become material for her novels.

Although Nebraska gave her the opportunity to assert her independence and individuality, it also made her more aware of her differences from those around her. She sought out the non-conformers, but still found Nebraska more and more stifling as she grew older. By sixteen, she was thankful to leave Red Cloud and begin her studies at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. It was there that she discovered she wanted to become a writer.

Cather began publishing material right away, but she struggled with the need to balance her work responsibilities with her desire to write. Most of her time was spent devoted to the long hours required for newspaper work. The material she produced during this time was very mechanical and committed to accepted forms. For much of it, she consciously tried to mimic authors she admired, most notably, Henry James. It was years before she developed her own voice.

Even this early work, though, is thematically very similar to her great fiction that followed. "Paul's Case," a selection from her first book of prose, *The Troll Garden*, and *Alexander's Bridge*, her first novel, both portray an intense desire for individuality. Paul

shows frustration and defeat in the monotony of his neighborhood. He desires uniqueness and fears becoming like all the other boys on his street. The only way he can escape from commonness is through art. Bartley Alexander finds that in adulthood he has been surrounded by social responsibilities that caused him to forget his original self. Alexander futilely attempts to find it again by trying to return to his boyhood.

Cather was critical of her early work because she felt it was too Jamesian in nature and because she was not writing about what was familiar to her. In Cather's more successful novels she returned to her childhood and the people she had met while growing up. *O Pioneers!* was her first major attempt to write about Nebraska and its immigrant farmers. Her use of the Nebraska setting and immigrant characters was a great strength, and *O Pioneers!* quickly became a widely acclaimed novel. Cather continued to draw from the West and her childhood memories. Her following novels, especially *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* are based, to a large extent, on feelings and characters she knew while growing up.

Cather has a number of themes contained in her novels, but many of them can be better understood when remembering how Cather felt about one's individuality and autonomy. Cather was purposefully elusive in her writing. She stated that it was her goal to create an impression rather than to tell a story. Because of this her characters are as complex as real people. Their actions are understood as well as human behavior can be, but, just as in real life, their purposes are not always explicitly stated. Her characters come alive in her stories, but their elusiveness leaves room for different interpretations. A scholar's interpretation of what Cather may have been trying to say can be very different from what she may have intended.

Many arguments have been presented as to how Cather contributed to feminist literature. But it is important to understand that Cather was apolitical and “had a contempt for anything too much owned or determined by mobs” (Nealon 7). She was very conscious of trying to be individual in her writing and in her life. She would never have written anything simply to support a movement or make a political statement. Cather felt that she “could not use her writing for political ends” (Nealon 11). Perhaps she agreed with some feminist ideals, but her “high individual endeavor” in life was to produce great art, not to change society. And to do so, she felt that she had to be more focused on her art than anything else around her. In an unfinished essay on writing, Cather stated: “unless he [the writer] is more interested in his own little story and his foolish little people than in the Preservation of the Indian or Sex or Tuberculosis, then he ought to be working in a laboratory or a bureau” (*On Writing* 125).

Rather than trying to change society, Cather did what she had to in order to succeed. She knew that, as society was structured, traditionally feminine characteristics were detrimental to success. This may explain why Cather displayed gender-reversed behavior in her youth (like wearing her hair short, calling herself William, and dressing as a boy). Although Cather displayed gender-reversed behavior as a teenager and did not support movements that aimed at giving women a stronger voice (women’s suffrage, for example), she still can be considered a feminist author. She was a successful and financially independent woman, and she allowed her female characters to desire individuality and autonomy outside of marriage.

The ideas of feminism are found throughout Cather’s writing, most notably in her insistence that one seek individuality above all things. Cather allowed both her male and

female protagonists to do this and showed marriage as a threat to self for women as much as men. This was counter to what society felt as women's "proper" role. Cather wrote at a time when women's natural tendency was thought to be selfless and nurturing. Their "purpose" was in the home. Cather may not have supported the women's movement, but it is hard to not consider her writing feminist in nature when she allowed her female characters as much freedom as her male characters, especially when this was inconsistent with society's thoughts about a woman's natural role.

The feminist nature of her work is most notable in two of her early novels: *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. In these two novels the female protagonists are outwardly defiant of expected gender roles and do not pursue typically feminine goals. In *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra is a very successful farmer, and in *The Song of the Lark*, Thea is a world famous opera singer. Both of them avoid marriage until very late in life because it is a threat to their individual success. Their avoidance of marriage and their strong independent nature concur with feminist ideas.

After *The Song of the Lark*, Cather wrote one more novel that celebrated the pioneering spirit of the West—*Antonia* was the last triumphant pioneer Cather created. Although, at the end of the novel, *Antonia* is married with many children, she displays the same strength and independence shown in Alexandra and Thea. She is glorified because, as a true pioneer, she has a power of spirit over circumstance. Despite her difficult beginnings she reaches success—she has a successful farm and has worked herself free from the other characters that tried to stifle her independence. Other characters in *My Antonia* show Cather's insistence of individuality as well. Lena is a

strong, financially independent woman. Cather also uses various comments from minor characters to show the dangers of losing one's independence.

After *My Ántonia*, Cather moved away from the story about individual triumph. The great pioneers that had dreamt the West's development had disappeared and those that overtook it were young men who took advantage of others' hard work. Cather did not like the new attitude that emerged. The world became engulfed in a consumerist culture in which the best businessmen achieved by lying and cheating others. Women in the West began to lose their autonomy and Cather viewed them as becoming more like currency. The theme of individuality remains in her later work, but Cather dramatically changed the way in which she portrayed its importance. Rather than tell a story of a character's rise in stature, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy* are more a psychological struggle to achieve individuality. Her characters, both male and female, are trapped amidst social responsibilities and lose their true selves in the process of building a marriage and family. Rather than final triumphs, these characters experience tragic defeat. Despite the difference in tone of her later work, these novels are thematically very similar to Cather's earlier ones. They recount the tragic outcome close relationships can have on individuality.

There is no simple summary that one can provide to encompass Cather's long career. She is much too elusive and complex. But in examining Cather's own life and choices, it becomes quite clear that she constantly strove to maintain a strong sense of self. It seems understandable that she would make this struggle vital in the lives of her characters as well. Cather achieved the theme of individuality in many ways. One thing, however, is constant—to be truly happy, her characters could not deny their true self.

Cather felt individuality the strongest desire people could have, stronger even than love and companionship.

Although Cather placed tremendous importance on individuality, she also made it clear that there are costs. All of her characters who are highly individualistic lose something in return. Bartley Alexander loses his life; Alexandra and Thea are both exhausted; *Ántonia* loses her physical appeal; Lena becomes cold and distant. Even those protagonists who triumph have to give much of themselves to gain what they seek. However, there is one cost that always shows through even more than the others, perhaps because it is connected so intimately with one's insistence of individuality. Almost all of her characters express some sort of pain or fear of loneliness.

When Alexandra's older brothers hassle her about the "talk" of her getting married, she tries to explain to Emil why Carl is important to her and says "I've had a pretty lonely life, Emil. Besides Marie, Carl is the only friend I have ever had" (89). When Carl finally comes back and they decide to marry she tells him that she is tired and that she has been "very lonely" (159). Thea tells Dr. Archie at the end of the novel that she doesn't have a personal life outside her work (392). *Ántonia* tells Jim that she could not move to a city because she would "die of lonesomeness" (206), and Lena audaciously declares, "I like to be lonesome" (186). Myra Henshawe, although she is married to a man who dotes on her until her death tells Nellie, "I know what it is to be old and lonely and disappointed" (67). For being so individualistic, Cather mentions loneliness quite often in her novels.

One could argue that this is simply a reflection of challenging social norms—that individuals who refuse to conform to expectations are often seen as outsiders. But this

theme seems to be more complex, as demonstrated with Myra, who didn't challenge norms like the other characters, yet still felt lonely. It would be interesting to do further research to see how these two themes interact with each other and how this theme, like individuality, develops and changes throughout her career.

Cather achieved what she sought throughout her life. She maintained her independence and excelled when achievement for a woman was extremely difficult. Despite the challenges, she did not give into societal pressures. Cather often said that as an artist, it was vital to devote herself purely to writing. Her dedication shows through in her work. She achieved a level beyond many male authors of the time and presented new ideas to literature and writing. When reflecting on Willa Cather, it is not just Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia that are admirable, but also Willa Cather's own life. She is a person who desired to devote herself to something larger than herself. She is like a pioneer who lived her life for the idea of something, dreaming the railroads across the West.

Works Cited

- Andersen, Margaret. *Thinking about Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender*. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003.
- Bohlke, L. Brent, ed. *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1990.
- Brown, E. K. and Leon Edel. *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.
- Cather, Willa. *Alexander's Bridge*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- . *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.
- . *O Pioneers*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *A Lost Lady*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *My Ántonia*. Houghton: 1988.
- . *My Mortal Enemy*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *Not Under Forty*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- . *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- . "Paul's Case." *Collected Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *The Professor's House*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . "The Sculptor's Funeral." *Collected Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *The Song of the Lark*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.
- . *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Ed. William M. Curtin. 2 vols. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970.

- Degler, Carl. N. Introduction. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. By Charlotte Perkins Gillman. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Dickstein, Morris. "The Magic of Contradictions: Willa Cather's Lost Lady." *New Criterion* 17.6 (1999). E-mail to the author. 12 Oct. 2003.
- Herman, Sondra R. "Loving Courtship or the Marriage Market? The Ideal and Its Critics, 1871-1911." *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*. Ed. Jean F. Friedman and William G. Shade. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976.
- Gelfant, Blanche H. "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in My *Ántonia*." *American Literature* 43 (1971): 60-82. JSTOR. 1 Oct. 2003.
<<http://www.jstor.org/search>>.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Vol. 2. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. 169-212.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Kinnison, Dana K. "Cather's O Pioneers!" *The Explicator* 58.2 (2000). E-mail to the author. 12 Oct. 2003.
- Klein, Marcus. Introduction. *My Mortal Enemy*. By Willa Cather. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Lambert, Deborah G. "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in My Ántonia."

American Literature 53 (1982): 676-690. JSTOR. 29 Sept. 2003.

<<http://www.jstor.org/search>>.

Lee, Hermione. *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up*. London: Virago, 1997.

Lerner, Gerda. "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age

of Jackson." *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*. Ed.

Jean F. Friedman and William G. Shade. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.,

1976.

Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P,

2000.

Lindemann, Marilee. Introduction. *Alexander's Bridge*. By Willa Cather. New York:

Oxford UP, 1997.

McGovern, James R. "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners

and Morals." *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*. Ed.

Jean F. Friedman and William G. Shade. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.,

1976.

Mencken, H. L. *In Defense of Women*. New York: Time, 1963.

Murphy, John J. Introduction. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. By Edith

Lewis. U. of Nebraska P, 2000.

Nealon, Christopher. "Affect-Genealogy: Feeling and Affiliation in Willa Cather."

American Literature 69 (1997): 5-37. JSTOR. 29 Sept. 2003.

<<http://www.jstor.org/search>>.

- O’Niell, William L. “In the Beginning.” *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*. Ed. Jean F. Friedman and William G. Shade. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976.
- Porter, Katherine Anne. Afterword. *The Troll Garden*. By Willa Cather. New York: Plume, 1971.
- Ross, Norman P. Preface. *In Defense of Women*. By H. L. Mencken. New York: Time, 1963. vii-xvi.
- Rundstrom, Beth. “Harvesting Willa Cather’s Literary Fields.” *The Geographical Review* 85.2 (1995). E-mail to the author. 12 Oct. 2003.
- Scott, Anne Firor. “Women’s Perspectives on the Patriarchy in the 1850’s.” *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*. Ed. Jean F. Friedman and William G. Shade. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976.
- Seaton, James. “The Prosaic Willa Cather.” *American Scholar* 67.1 (1998). E-mail to the author. 12 Oct. 2003.
- Shaw, Patrick W. “My *Antonia*: Emergence and Authorial Revelations.” *American Literature* 56 (1984): 527-540. [JSTOR](http://www.jstor.org/search). 1 Oct. 2003.
<<http://www.jstor.org/search>>.
- Thacker, Robert. Introduction. *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure*. By Willa Cather. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.
- Trilling, Lionel. “Willa Cather.” *Willa Cather and Her Critics*. Ed. James Schroeter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967. 148-155.