

**CARVING AN IDENTITY AND FORGING THE FRONTIER:
THE SELF-RELIANT FEMALE HERO IN WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!***

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ABSTRACT

Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* bridges the gap between gender and heroism. In this regional novel, Cather captures the essence of the heroic pioneer, the noble American spirit taming the West, in a female character. She creates a woman hero who has qualities and actions that make her break the parameters of gender roles. Alexandra Bergson is a female hero who shifts the reader's perceptions of heroism, greatness, and nobility. She is a woman who embodies all the attributes admired in the finest of male characters in the American literary canon when faced with trials only a woman could confront. As a hero of the West, Alexandra breaks the concept of the untamed West and the woman's role in it. She is an intense, indomitable woman who is determined to expand her horizon and to have her own way. She triumphs alone over intractable surroundings and adversity, shaping a world of order and coherence and achieving for herself identity, nobility, and even fame.

The settlement of the American frontier has provided one of the richest themes in the history of the United States. This saga of people fulfilling what was widely believed to be America's manifest destiny has been told and retold in many varied forms. Upon closely examining the history of the American frontier, however, we discover that male-oriented interpretations of the frontier still prevail. Unfortunately, most historians of the frontier have been oblivious to the presence of women in frontier society. When Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his now-famous address "The Significance of American History" to the American Historical Association in 1893, he clearly was talking about a male frontier. Turner stated:

The wilderness masters the colonist. ... It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin ... he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion (Turner 1962: 4).

Nearly three decades later, another historian, George F. Parker, offered a similar definition of frontier settlers to the Mississippi Valley Historical Association when he declared:

I define the American pioneer as the man who ... crossed the mountains from the thin line of Atlantic settlement. ... To me, this man reflects the character of the most effective single human movement in history (Parker 1922: 3).

Male writers who drew upon the frontier and its women for their themes contributed to female stereotyping. One might reasonably say that in much of Western frontier literature, heroism and gender share a very specific association. For example, American literature and its critics tend to practice a type of “male hero worship”. We as readers tend to elevate what is heroic, and when the hero is male, we venerate heroic male attributes and actions. Hero, as used to describe characters in the American nineteenth-century canon, is a gender-specific role based on connotations and assumptions. It is an assumed notion, and perhaps one which is taken for granted, that the self, the American self, is male, so the hero is male and attributes of the hero are also deemed male virtues. The hero of the American canon is defined as a person of great merit, passionate independence, and determined self-motivation. He is round, multi-dimensional, and dignified. He is a far-reaching, forward-looking adventurer who pushed his way into the frontier of the nation, exploring the plains, the sea, and the cities. His range of action is not limited because he is as big as America (and even the world) itself. Whitman’s words in *Salut Au Monde!* proclaim the overpowering limitlessness of the American man: “My spirit has pass’d in compassion and determination/ around the whole earth ... Toward you all in America’s name,/ I raise the perpetual hand, I make the signal” (1982: 296-297). The sphere for the man is the sphere of the globe; he is outside the home and shall remain so by choice. The country, the continent, the Earth are “the haunts and homes of men” according to the speaker in *Salut Au Monde!* (1982: 297).

The literary hero is a significant part of the myth of America: a land of opportunity for the courageous few who look toward the future. In *The American Adam*, Lewis points out that American literature has offered a new hero for the new world:

The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources (Lewis: 1955: 5).

We can assuredly assume that the hero is the Whitman-persona in *Song of Myself* who proclaims: “I too am not a bit tamed ... I too am untranslatable,/ I sound

the barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (1982: 87). Gross in *The heroic ideal in American literature* (1971) suggests that the American hero is known to us by many names: the American Adam, Prometheus, the Rebel-Victim, Faust, the Emersonian hero, the Black hero, the Disenchanted hero, and the Quixotic hero. Hawkeye of *The Deerslayer*, Ishmael of *Moby Dick*, and Huck Finn of *Huckleberry Finn* are only a small number of American heroes who are comprised of the myth of the American landscape. They not only proclaim their heroic existence in American literature, but they also grasp our collective imagination because they are heroes of courage, bravery, and integrity.

Although the term *heroine* is defined much like *hero* (the principal female or male character in a novel, poem, or dramatic presentation), it does not have the same connotations as the term hero. The heroine, who by definition should be equal to the hero, is not. Indeed, she is excluded from the questing, striving and conquering that both form the heroic subject and characterize his actions. There is something more noble about a hero, and there is something less mythic about a heroine. The difference lies in the quality of agency: the hero is a dynamic agent who acts while the heroine is a subtle influence who influences. For most readers or spectators, women in literature have been canonized as monolithic images with characters such as Helen, Penelope, Beatrice, and the Dark Lady of the sonnets (Robinson 1991: 213). With no agency of their own, these female characters spur actions from the male characters. Paris’s desire for Helen caused the Trojan War, Odysseus’s jealousy over Penelope resulted in the slaughter of the suitors, Dante’s adoration of Beatrice inspired the *Divine Comedy*, and lastly, Shakespeare’s speaker’s passion for the dark lady produced the sonnets. These women serve as catalysts for the men’s actions and the plot’s development. Rather than acting as independent agents themselves, these female characters are the objects that cause the male characters to act. As literature repeatedly makes clear, women have symbolic power rather than direct agency, influence rather than control.

The values of nineteenth-century America formed the creations of its literary heroes – the conquering of the wilderness and the developing of a national identity were a gender-specific duty of men’s; the influencing of the family within the domestic sphere was the duty of women. In America of the 1800s there existed two spheres. Women were predominantly the homemakers and nurturers; men were the exploiters and the builders. In *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, Leverenz suggests that: “Manhood begins as a battlefield code, to make men think twice before turning and running, as any sensible man would do. Womanhood begins as a domestic code, centered on childbearing” (1989: 73). These “codes” are actually paradigms within which characters are supposed to operate. Also, in *The hero with a thousand faces*, Campbell (1968), who assumes all heroes are male, explains that the hero is the adventurer, and the

woman is the prize for those adventures: “She is the maiden of innumerable dragon slays, the bride abducted from the jealous father, the virgin rescued from the unholy lover” (1968: 342). The woman is an object, a spoil of war, the warrior’s “fame”. The woman is someone (something) who helps or hinders the adventurer, but she never is the adventurer herself. Still, citing the difference in the treatment of heroes and heroines, Lieberman states in “Sexism and the double standard in literature” that, “[t]he death or suicide of a female character is often more pathetic but less noble than the death of male characters. ... It appears a literary convention exists in which a link is established between pathos and femininity” (1972: 329).

However, these gender roles are tested by the creation of the character of Alexandra Bergson, a woman hero who is the progenitor of the female hero. In *O Pioneers!*, published in 1913, Cather creates a woman hero who has qualities and actions that make her break the parameters of gender roles. Alexandra, the author both tells and shows us as readers, is brave, strong, independent, and beautiful. At the age of twelve, her father turns to her for advice. She becomes the head of the family at his death because she is the most qualified. Risking the small homestead and planning crops unheard of on the Divide, she creates a successful life upon a land that other people believed fallow. Loving Carl unconditionally, she has a relationship with a man other people believed to be weak. It is my contention that Alexandra is an enduring female hero who shifts the reader’s perceptions of heroism, greatness, and nobility. Not the Homeric hero of “extraordinary valor and martial achievements”, Alexandra is a woman who embodies all the attributes admired in the finest of male characters in the literary canon when faced with trials only a woman could confront. Her independence, courage, loyalty, and unconventionality are heroic characteristics that make her unequivocally a hero of the American literary canon. As a female hero, she is not only believable and compelling, but she is also vitally important to feminist literature in establishing a pattern of that creature in American fiction – the woman who triumphs alone over intractable surroundings and adversity, shaping a world of order and coherence and achieving for herself identity, nobility, and even fame.

Cather’s novel *O Pioneers!* bridges the gap between gender and heroism. In this regional novel, Cather, who shows that women could do something important besides giving themselves to men, captures the essence of the heroic pioneer, the noble American spirit taming the West, in a female character. A love of the land is not a gender-specific quality attributed only to men; the land, Cather states, can be loved by anyone who dares to trust in it and to create it anew. As a hero of the West, Alexandra breaks the concept of the untamed West and the woman’s role in it. Traditionally, men were the ones “who forged ahead into the wilderness while the woman came up carrying tablecloths” (Thomas 1990: 62).

There are stereotypes about the women who went West; most stereotypes set women in the traditional roles of nurturer or nest-builder (wife, school mistress) or temptress (whores, saloon girls). Even when women prove themselves equal to the challenge of the frontier, in fiction, they are relegated to characters of little worth:

When female heroism is not condemned, it often is simply ignored. ... An obvious example in American history is the women who homesteaded in the West. These women performed the same heroic feats as men, as well as the tasks designated to women; yet western literature generally portrays them as damsels in distress or as unwilling and inadequate companions and victims of the men who conquered the frontier (Pearson and Pope 1981: 6).

Cather’s female hero fits neither of the two molds set for women in the novels of the West. Indeed, Alexandra transcends stereotypes traditionally defining and limiting women. She resists the dictates and the limitations of the female frontier. She is proud, resolute, self-sufficient, and most important, successful. Her faith in the potential of the wilderness, which it becomes her task to tame after the death of her father, and her indefatigable patience before the demands of her doltish brothers make her a kind of Earth Mother, a spirited custodian of both the wild frontier lands and the lesser creatures who are independent upon her. Although she faces many challenges and potential scandals as a woman farmer who is both unconventional and successful, she manages to emerge from her brush with the societal and familial pressures a more graceful and dignified person in the reader’s eyes. She is an intense, indomitable woman who is determined to expand her horizon and to have her own way. She does what she believes to be right, regardless of the scandal attached to her actions. By doing so, she strips the power away from the very source of scandal. Alexandra is, unquestionably, the novel’s life-affirming principle; she has an infinite capacity for living and loving.

Heroism, greatness, and nobility are not gender-defined. Heroism is a condition of character in which the individual is tested by a great physical, social, or moral challenge. For far too long, critics and readers of the American canon have read literary works against a set of value judgments which refuse to accept anything not within a set of specific (male) requirements. However, it is ludicrous to define heroism according to a list of male-specific attributes and actions, when many of the protagonists in western literature are women. So often in the American literary canon, the female character is reduced to a body because there has not been room for her to play any other role. However, when we shift our definition of a literary hero and adjust our vision of it, we see a new hero emerge in *O Pioneers!*. With a new perception of what a hero is and what heroism entails, we can approach American canonical texts with new eyes be-

cause, "there is no ground to till except what we stand on; only by learning to apply feminist principles in particular instances does one make change occur" (Baym 1988: 245).

With this new "change" in mind, I propose a revisionist reading of *O Pioneers!* – what Rich describes as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (1973: 18). I will be "going back into the text" in the sense that *O Pioneers!* (and more specifically its hero Alexandra Bergson) "is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader (Fish 1980: 25). That is, the very act of reading can bring about new interpretations of American literary texts thought to be critiqued to the point of exhaustion. I will re-read *O Pioneers!* with a focus upon a new perception of what a hero is and what heroism entails. What we will find in *O Pioneers!* is a female hero, equally as brave and good as Huck Finn. The female heroes are in American literature; however, we have to adjust our vision to find them. We also have to remove the lens through which many readers have read heroism. For many years now, literary critics have not seen female characters as heroes because their journeys apparently lacked the components of the traditional (i.e. male) quest – no dragon, no armies, no wilderness. It should be made clear that nobility and endurance in the face of great adversity make a hero, not gender. Alexandra Bergson is a valiant hero who survives and triumphs. She fights her way against every kind of obstacle, maintains autonomous agency throughout her life, and conquers by sheer power of will and character. We admire her for her heroic self-reliance, an extraordinary independence of spirit manifested with increasing force through the novel. We admire her because she is an American hero whose future holds promise.

Interestingly, Cather gives readers a powerful hero who embodies all the finest attributes of the hero: Alexandra is lofty, beautiful, pure, and wise. This female hero possesses all these fine qualities, and yet she also is a woman of the twentieth century, brimming with vitality and strength. Like Hester Prynne and Lily Bart, Alexandra shows calm self-possession and strength despite a dismal present and an uncertain future. She is endowed with vitality and vigor and is able to endure hardship. There is a sense of pride in the young woman. When a drummer comments upon her lovely hair, the young Alexandra scorns him:

She stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip – most unnecessary severity. It gave the little clothing drummer such a start ... His feeble flirtatious instincts had been crushed before, but never so mercilessly
(Cather 1989: 6-7).

This scene shows us that Alexandra is not some silly plaything with whom men can flirt to amuse themselves. The author's use of the word Amazonian conjures

images of powerful warrior women, standing proud awaiting battle. According to Thomas Bulfinch, the Amazons were an ancient race of warlike women, forming a state without (and thus excluding) men. Many Greek heroes had to battle with the Amazons (1979: 882). It is an interesting allusion: Alexandra must do battle with many in the novel – her brothers, society, and the land. However, unlike the Amazons of ancient mythology, Alexandra is the hero and not the villain of the tale.

From the beginning of the novel, Alexandra's strength is contrasted with the defeat of the men around her. The drummer, whom she made feel small, thinks her to be a "fine human creature" (Cather 1989: 7). Alexandra is a "human" creature, not a female or womanly creature. This small word calls attention to itself, for Alexandra, like any other hero (male or female), is a fine human being possessing remarkable qualities, such as vigor and purity. Her father, John Bergson, who is dying, recognizes in his daughter the fine qualities of a hero and the intelligence and strength of his own father: "He had come up from the sea himself, had built up a proud little business with no capital but his own skill and foresight, and had proved himself a man. In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days" (Cather 1989: 19). He, therefore, leaves her in charge of the farm, wishing that one of his sons had her leadership qualities but recognizing that he has no other choice. Like a knight instructed by his king, Alexandra accepts the charge from her lord. Accepting the challenge to proceed forward and fulfil her father's quest, she replies, "We will, father. We will never lose the land" (Cather 1989: 20).

Alexandra herself knows that she is wiser and stronger than the men around her. As Carl puts it so intelligently, it is Alexandra's fate to be always surrounded by little men, himself included. The male figures in the novel, including her father, Frank Shabata, Oscar and Lou, and Carl, lack the pioneer virtues she possesses such as self-reliance, autonomy, and individualism. Unlike Alexandra, they cannot come to grips with the immediate challenges around them. For one, Mr. Bergson loves the land, but he does not understand it. The land remains for him an enigma that he cannot fathom. Frank, on the other hand, fails to evolve a new identity and dies without achieving any kind of spiritual affinity with the land. Of all the male figures in the novel, however, it is preeminently Oscar and Lou, who serve as a foil to Alexandra. Although they are both hard workers, they do not make much headway because "they hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains" (Cather 1989: 34). Another man who considers himself one of the small men surrounding Alexandra is Carl, who neither has the strength nor the resourcefulness to rise to the challenges of the land. So there may very well be all sorts of frontiersmen, but they are not in unison with their environment and do not survive in confronting the obstinate and unyielding land.

Alexandra is the only one who is inextricably connected to the land and is bound up in the land, hill, and meadows around it. She carves a garden out of the unbroken prairie and meets the expectations of the unsubduable and intractable land. She combines intelligence with a new relationship to nature; she is the land's mate rather than its antagonist. In contrast with the men who have seen the land as a wild horse to be tamed, she works it with love and nurturance. The narrator exclaims, "[f]or the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before" (Cather 1989: 50). Alexandra, as Hoffman rightly and perceptively asserts, "undergoes a symbolic courtship with the land" (1949: 182). As a land goddess, she rules the land with nobility, strength, patience, sensitivity, and endurance. She takes a scientific approach to farming, traveling around, talking to farmers and learning what crops are good on the "high land". She feeds the pigs clean food unlike her neighbors who feed them swill; she mortgages her father's farm to buy more land as other farmers sell their farms and return to the cities; and she takes in Ivar and trusts his advice when others (specifically, her brothers who are representative of society) want to send him to an asylum. She makes herself and her brothers wealthy, becoming one of the most respected people in the community: "Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson" (Cather 1989: 63).

The responsibilities involved in the quest to reclaim the vast prairies have toughened Alexandra. To succeed in a man's world of agricultural pursuits, Alexandra had to forego more feminine endeavors. By creating her main character in such a way, Cather makes a keen statement about the pioneer spirit of the frontier woman; this nation was built by the strength and faith of real women like the fictional Alexandra. The land was a challenge to all who dared to farm it, men and women alike. The life of a pioneer is difficult, especially for a young woman. After being accused by her brothers of being unfeminine, Alexandra confronts them with the truth:

I never meant to be hard. Conditions were hard. Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree
(Cather 1989: 128).

Given a charge of keeping the land, the hero faces the challenges and triumphs. In contrast, her two elder brothers were also commissioned by their dying father to "keep this land together and to be guided by your sister ... I want no quarrels

among my children ... there must be one head" (Cather 1989: 20). The sons agree, but later in life, when they are successful and have triumphed over the land (mainly due to their sister's ingenuity), they break their oath when they confront Alexandra and grumble at her unconventional life as an unmarried woman and landowner. Her brothers are the very representatives of the society which fears powerful women like Alexandra Bergson.

Among her remarkable qualities that are worth noting is the fact that Alexandra is pure of spirit. Wiesenthal points out that Alexandra is depicted by Cather as the "epitome of health and wholesomeness" (1990: 50). In this hero, there is a sense of goodness that remains pure and untarnished throughout her journey in the novel. Alexandra, who understands instinctively that love is the most important aspect of life, has two loves: the land and Carl Linstrum. She never falters in the love she carries for both. She never loses faith in the land and sees something of value in the vast prairie's future. Like a beloved, Alexandra unconditionally loves the land:

She had never known before how much the country meant to her . . . She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun
(Cather 1989: 54).

Alexandra also believes in Carl, her childhood friend, and they reunite later in life to make of the wilderness a garden, of the desolate and melancholy landscape a place of refuge, beauty, and fruitfulness. Carl is Alexandra's beloved, and the threat of sexual scandal presents itself the day her brothers, Oscar and Lou, tell her: "It looks bad for him [Carl] to be hanging on to a woman this way. People think you're getting taken in" (Cather 1989: 124). Oscar and Lou fear that Alexandra will marry Carl so that their own children will not inherit her farm. Also, Alexandra's desire to marry Carl reminds her brothers and the rest of the Divide that she is a sexual woman. Alexandra's sexuality, it seems, is what society most fears. Motley states that Alexandra's brothers take their "promptings from a society in which a woman's sexuality, however modestly displayed, betokens her subservience to men" (1986: 154). Alexandra, however, dismisses her brother's notions with a simple declaration: "All that doesn't concern anybody but Carl and me" (Cather 1989: 128). This hero will stand erect and fight for what she knows is right and decent. She trusts her instincts and follows her heart.

Alexandra is unique. She has a tenacious faith which carries her through her heroic journey. When everyone on the young Divide was deserting the land, she stayed. When Carl left and then returned sixteen years later, her love has not diminished. Scandal does not even frighten Alexandra, and yet, her brother Oscar wields the threat of scandal like a weapon: "everybody's laughing to see you get

taken in; at your age, too" (Cather 1989: 128). The brothers will not back down, and here Alexandra, armed only with her own wits against a system that does not recognize the position of women, challenges her brothers to a legal battle:

Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my own property. And I advise you to do what they tell you; for the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again
(Cather 1989: 128).

Alexandra will fight for what is hers. Both the land and Carl are hers by bonds of love. If the Bergson brothers want to fight for the land which they believe "really belongs to the men of the family" (Cather 1989: 120), then they can engage Alexandra in battle in the court. Alexandra is the woman warrior, "the Swedish woman so white and gold ... armored in calm" (Cather 1989: 66) who will fight for what is hers. Clearly, Cather's use of words like "armored" suggests Alexandra's warrior-like ability and her physical as well emotional strength.

For all her courage, Alexandra is not invulnerable; for her strength, she is not beyond emotional fatigue. Only to her youngest brother, her surrogate child, does Alexandra confess her self-doubt. Alexandra, though "hard, like a tree", is capable of love, and she desires to unite both her child and her beloved. She confesses her love for Carl to the embarrassed Emil: "I had hoped you might understand ... But I suppose that's too much to expect. I've had a pretty lonely life, Emil" (Cather 1989: 132). Acceptance of Carl is needed by the hero. Alexandra can present a strong façade to her older brothers, yet underneath the bravery, there is a tender human soul and a nurturer of living things. She has the capacity to care for all the people in her life, if all will let her. Her younger brother, hiding his embarrassment, tells his sister that he and Carl "would always get on. I don't believe any of the things the boys say about him ..." (Cather 1989: 13). Alexandra wants Emil's support because with her family around her, she can face any challenge, be it a legal battle for land or a sea voyage to a new life.

Despite her heroism, after the great tragedy of Emil's death, Alexandra seeks an escape from her worldly suffering. It occurred to Alexandra for the first time that "perhaps she was actually tired of life ... She longed to be free from her own body" (Cather 1989: 210). The loss of her brother Emil and her friend Marie has nearly extinguished her own; she moves woodenly through the gray days reminded constantly of her younger brother, gentle, full of hope, and of her friend, the beautiful, vital Marie Shabata. But Alexandra carries on, and she meets her final trial with the greatest dignity the author could afford her. She is determined to help free the convicted murderer of her brother, one who is more wretched than she, because "Frank was the only one, Alexandra told herself, for whom anything could be done. He had been less in the wrong than any of them, and he

was paying the heaviest penalty" (Cather 1989: 211). She makes a promise to the man who shot her brother and Marie: "I am never going to stop trying until I get you pardoned. I'll never give the Governor any peace. I know I can get you out of this place" (Cather 1989: 221). It is a kind and selfless gesture to the man who murdered her brother, and her only "boy". Despite her personal suffering, this hero reaches out to others more desperate than she is. Even in her reaching out to touch Frank, there is the regenerative, the healing gesture, the symbol of humanity sharing its burden of sin, and the conferring of a sate of grace: "Alexandra held out her hand. 'Frank', she said, her eyes filling suddenly, 'I hope you'll let me be friendly with you. I understand how you did it. I don't feel hard toward you. They were more to blame than you'" (Cather 1989: 218). Alexandra is noble and selfless in the face of her own suffering. Her noble deed must be perceived as valiant rather than charitable. We realize that her deed is not an act of kindness alone; it is an act of a great fictional human being who is free from pride.

Alexandra is independent but not alienated, courageous but not contemptuous of the weak, powerful without dominating others, and rational but not unfeeling. At the end of the hero's path in *O Pioneers!*, Cather yokes Alexandra's life with Carl, who, like her, has been shaped by the timeless tidal rhythms of the land. After her trials, Alexandra finds peace and happiness with Carl. Just as she creates a fulfilling affinity with and a successful life upon a land that other people believed fallow, she unites with Carl in a union that is based on mutual support, affection, and understanding of friendship. Clearly, Alexandra does not accept loneliness as a mode of life, which Ostwalt imputes to her.

Yet, this all-encompassing orientation to the land is not healthy or proper because Alexandra sacrifices her own identity to the goal of taming and subduing the land. This loss of self to the land is tragic because she also loses her chance at meaningful human relationships; she cannot live fully and humanely...
(1990: 65).

Remarkable about Alexandra's way of handling her new life is that she neither forfeits human relationships nor accepts loneliness as her mode of life. She nourishes the land with everything in her personality in the same way that she invests herself in her marriage to Carl. Commenting on her marriage, she says, "When friends marry, they are safe" (Cather 1989: 230). Love for Alexandra is defined by marriage. Now with her friend, she will find peace on the land she loves. Although Alexandra will remain wedded to the land, as pinpointed by Randall (1960), she will also become a wife whose relationship with her husband is very different from that of the nineteenth-century heroine. Alexandra's marriage is a new type of marriage, not usually seen in literature. According to Mayberry, Alexandra and Carl's is "a partnership of equals" (1992: 57). The cir-

cle is complete for the woman hero: the land she loves and the friend she so needs are finally both hers. The joy of this moment is evident in the language Cather employs in the conclusion of the novel:

They [Alexandra and Carl] went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star. Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth
(Cather 1989: 230).

With her eyes scanning the horizon always looking into the future, Alexandra bequeaths her spirit to the country emblemized in its rustling corn and yellow wheat. She finds inner light, acknowledges her needs of the self, and experiences a spiritual rebirth. She achieves as full and healthy a womanhood as anyone can imagine.

Annette Kolodony, in "Dancing through the minefield", writes that for many years literature offered women readers "a painfully personal distress at discovering whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth where we had hoped to discover ourselves" (1991: 97). However, if we shift our definition of the hero and our expectations of the heroic journey (as defined by gender), then within each of these "painfully personal distresses", there may lurk a woman hero. If we free ourselves from an immasculated (Fetterley's 1978 coinage) paradigmatic reading, we see a hero in *O Pioneers!*. As a female hero who is resilient and strong, Alexandra is equally as brave and good as any other male hero in the American literary canon. She depends more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgment and becomes more noble and heroic. She is one example in literature that nobly confronts, challenges, and acts courageously against all the crushing odds against her. In fact, in the character of Alexandra, one is reminded of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in which she writes about Shakespeare's sister who will one day be the "coming angel" of a literary revelation. Although Woolf's refers to a seventeenth-century woman, she closes her famous essay with a speculation that applies to Cather's hero: "The dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born" (1957: 118). Woolf's prophecy comes true in *O Pioneers!*. In the character of Alexandra, a new Hamlet is born.

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